

# ***Big Easy***

## **Chapter One**

Torrential rains had moved in from the North, cooling afternoon heat twelve degrees in less than fifteen minutes. As I sat in Bertram Picou's bar, on Chartres Street in the French Quarter, shucking oysters from a pile of seafood laid out on newspaper spread across a table in back, I could still read the headline through the oily stains: ***STRANGLER CLAIMS VICTIM NEAR LEE CIRCLE.***

The headline did not surprise me. The Big Easy is a violent city, a fact usually kept hidden from tourists that had once again started swelling the population following the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This murder had touched me personally because the victim was my high school English teacher.

Something, maybe the bottle or perhaps hundreds of unmotivated students, had driven Sally to madness. She had disappeared for a while, finally surfacing on St. Charles Avenue, pushing a grocery cart she'd stolen from a nearby grocery store. No one seemed to care. Rain gusted through the door, freeing my thoughts from the disturbing murder of Miss Sally Gerant.

The drop in temperature provided a welcome respite to Bertram's overworked air conditioning – an added bonus to the few lucky customers enjoying the aromatic mixture of fresh rain and spicy seafood. Junior Picou, Bertram's little brother, had taken his flat-bottomed skiff out at dawn, into the splay channels beyond Yscloskey. Following Katrina, the area, like the rest of New Orleans, was in the flux of ongoing recovery.

Junior had returned before noon with a wealth of shrimp, oysters, and redfish. What Bertram had not used in his pot of gumbo simmering in the kitchen, he'd boiled up and spread on the table as complimentary appetizers for his customers to enjoy. Who said there was no such thing as a free lunch?

Despite the enticement, the bar remained nearly empty, except for a few mostly out-of-work regulars. Everyone, especially Bertram's female customers, turned their heads when the front door opened and a good-looking, middle-aged man entered. After spotting me by the table, he smiled and crossed the room in my direction. An expensive raincoat draped his elbow. Despite afternoon moisture that raised the humidity through the roof, he still wore his tweed sports coat, and had not bothered to loosen his tie.

"That you, Wyatt Thomas?" he said. "Remember me, Beau Kaplan?"

Of course, I remembered him. Captain of the LSU football team and student voted most likely to succeed. How could anyone forget handsome Beau Kaplan, big man on campus? He needn't have worried about his popularity as Bertram's women regulars and a table of local legal secretaries stared goggle-eyed at him from across the room. He palmed my hand with the secret fraternity handshake I had almost forgotten.

"How are you doing, Beau? Help yourself to some of Bertram's grub."

Beau's big grin vanished and he said, "Ate already. Can we talk?"

"Sure. There is a booth in back."

"No, I mean somewhere else, like over in Jackson Square."

"You bet," I said, taking one more quick bite of the

shrimp po'boy constructed from last night's French bread.

Not knowing why Beau had bothered looking me up after all these years, or the reason for all the secrecy, I wiped hot sauce off my mouth with a bar rag and followed him out the door. We found the sidewalk almost deserted. Rain had moved south toward the Gulf. Dark clouds hung directly overhead, weighing heavily on already thick humid air. It was too hot for most tourists. They were probably visiting the Aquarium of the Americas, or the endless miles of air-conditioned shops that began where Canal Street intersects the River. Many others were in the Lower 9th Ward, viewing what remained of Katrina's destruction. Only a white-faced mime and a few persistent portrait artists occupied the Square when we reached it.

Beau led me through the wrought iron gate to a secluded bench beside a golden mass of flowering hibernias. His manner was somber as I joined him on the bench.

Beau's physical appearance had barely changed since I had seen him last. Just a little gray rimmed his full head of curly-black hair and added a note of dignity - possibly not deserved. Even his few facial wrinkles imparted an aura of royalty. One of New Orleans' leading neurosurgeons, Beau had only added to his family's already extraordinary wealth. He and his wife Kammi had a mansion near Pontchartrain that ranked as one of the City's most impressive.

After a moment, Beau's big grin returned and his mood became reflective. "Seeing you again has really brought back memories."

I knew what he meant. My sudden recollection of Kammi had already sent a wave of melancholy nostalgia cresting across my bow.

"Those days at LSU were the best of my life," he said. "Remember the frat parties down by the river with the bonfires, barbecue, and kegs of ice cold beer? Those hot young things all loved you, Wyatt."

"Are you kidding me, Beau? When it came to women, you were the pro. I was just an amateur."

"Kammi didn't think so. She never gave me the time of day until you had that fight at the Old South Party. When you broke up, she gravitated to me. On the rebound, I guess."

Kammi and I were a number for a while. Now I couldn't remember why we had argued but I hadn't forgotten her big green eyes. Not long after breaking up with Kammi I took a real job and moved out of the frat house. Sometime after that, I had married Mimsy, my ex, and lost touch with the frat crowd.

"What's bothering you? You didn't look me up to talk about old times."

Beau stared at the sky as a gull, winging toward Pontchartrain, disappeared into the clouds. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

"It's Kammi. She's trying to kill me."

I waited for the punch line but Beau's reflective frown and bowed head told me there wouldn't be one. "You're kidding me?"

"It's true. You will understand when I explain why I can't go to the cops. You handle this kind of work. I'll pay you to help me."

Beau's insinuation that I would only help an old friend for cash stung me, even though I had experienced a sustained dry spell with few clients and fewer payments. Still, I could tell he was serious and I was in no position not to hear him out.

"If what you say is true, you should report it to the

police."

"They'd never believe me."

"I'm finding it hard to believe myself. Why would Kammi want to kill you?"

Beau sank back against the bench and squeezed the raincoat still draped over his arm. "Cause I got a girlfriend," he said, averting his eyes. "Well, more than a girlfriend, a mistress, really. Kammi must have found out about Sheila and now she's trying to even the score."

Beau's admission failed to surprise me. Beautiful women had always flocked around him, ready to console the moody young man. I could not believe Kammi wasn't aware of her husband's wandering ways, or that she was capable of sustaining any destructive emotion other than mild anger.

"What did she do? Threaten you with a gun or knife?"

"She went to some witch doctor one of her girl friends told her about. I know because Sandi, another of her girl friends, confided as much to me at the Country Club barbecue last Saturday."

I could only imagine the confiding scene at the Country Club with Sandi and Beau.

"What are you talking about, witch doctor?"

"Voodoo, Wyatt. It is real around here and you know it. Kammi found some voodoo witch doctor to cast a spell on me. Pretty soon I'll be dead and with no one the wiser."

"I don't believe that for a minute and neither should you. How is this spell affecting you?"

"It's bad, Wyatt. I wake up in a cold lather, my head pounding, and bones aching. I'm so nervous I can hardly do my job down at the hospital."

Beau grew silent as heat lightning pulsed across the horizon behind St. Louis Cathedral. Another clap

of thunder followed quickly, frightening the pigeons on Andy Jackson's statue. The white-faced mime had gone, the few remaining artists busy packing their brushes and easels and hurrying off toward Pirate's Alley. I waited for Beau to continue his wild tale.

"One thing though. All this malarkey with Kammi has made me realize the one I really love is Sheila. You know, Wyatt, what is truly odd? I never felt this way about Sheila before and never thought of her as anything except a mistress. Don't mean a thing, though. When I get this situation behind me I'm going to divorce Kammi and marry her."

"Why wait?"

"Cause I got to break the spell first. That's why I need you."

"I'm no voodoo expert," I said, half in jest.

"I bet you know someone that is because you know everybody. Always did. Can you help me, Wyatt?"

Warm rain began falling in deserted Jackson Square and a clap of thunder almost masked my reply.