

Chapter One
The Fool
New Orleans, Louisiana
July 26, 1990

Walking with her luggage rattling along beside her, August Cannon crossed the automatic glass door threshold of New Orleans International Airport. She left the air conditioned sanctuary of baggage claim, entering the immense steam room which is the South during summertime.

The blouse under her suit gave its best instant saran wrap impersonation upon her body. She resisted the impulse to take off her coat because it would expose the Beretta nine millimeter pistol resting in her left shoulder holster.

August closed her mind to her sweaty discomfort while looking around for the person they said would be there to pick her up. Standing six feet and one inch, with a runner's build, and only twenty-one years spent on the planet, she looked more like a successful young model than a woman armed with a concealed weapon.

A uniformed policeman was leaning against one of the concrete pillars thirty feet to August's left. At first she dismissed him as one of the traffic cops with the tedious task of making sure vehicles kept flowing through the pick-up area of the airport. This opinion quickly shifted as he gave her a beaming smile when she looked his way. He seemed completely unconcerned with the hubbub of auto activity around them. They stood staring at each

other for a few moments before August finally marched up to him.

“Are you my ride?” she inquired.

He responded in the kind of Southern Cajun drawl that makes words feel like they’ve been smothered in honey.

“Only if you’ve been naughty, darlin’.”

“Excuse me? Aren’t you here to pick me up?”

“Aggressive. I like that. Well, I can’t play right now, gotta pick up some old stiff from Washington, DC for a big case we’re working on. Maybe later we can get together-”

The cop’s speech stopped cold as August pulled out her wallet and showed her FBI credentials to him.

“Well, I’ll be a gator’s cousin. You’re August Cannon? I thought you’d be some old man in a boring suit and not the future mother of my children.”

“Don’t flatter your self,” her eyes drifted to his name badge, “Officer Drake.”

“Please, call me Gareth.”

“What would please me most is if you kept your remarks to me in a professional context. Can we get going? I have work, to do.”

“Alright, alright, my apologies, ma’am,” Gareth stood up straight and gave her a short bow like an old world gentleman. He leaned forward and picked up her suitcase. “Right this way.”

Gareth took her to his squad car, parked illegally, a short distance from them. He radioed dispatch while walking, to report that he had made contact with Special Agent Cannon.

August sized him up at about 5'9", with the stocky build of a football player. His face still possessed a boyish exuberance which only age or experience would erase. She put him at maybe a year or two older than she was. He probably joined The Force out of college. If Officer Gareth Drake had as much athletic talent as he did charisma and confidence, August imagined that whatever university he got his undergraduate degree from paid for his education. His smile and swagger spoke of a man who scored as well off the field as on. She looked at his hands. Encircling his right ring finger was a gold band with Greek letters on the front. Yep, a fraternity ring, that confirmed it. Only a man a few years out of college, or someone really obsessed with their early adult years, would still wear one of those rings.

Officer Drake walked ahead of her with a graceful stride and opened the car door for her, again, flashing his brilliant teeth in a welcoming smile. August gave him a withering look, but said nothing as she accepted his embarrassing chivalry and got into the police cruiser.

He slid into the driver's seat and fired up the engine. "Now sunshine, do you wanna get settled in at your hotel, or if you're hungry I know a place we can g-"

"Take me directly to the Martel home, Officer Drake."

"Yes, Special Agent Cannon, right away." He gave another eye-twinkling gaze, put the car in gear, and hit the gas.

Soon they were exiting the airport and getting onto Interstate Highway – Sixty-One, heading east towards the heart of New Orleans.

The car's air conditioning provided a much needed respite from the summer heat. August barely took in the cloudy skies and lush vegetation around them before she put her briefcase on her lap, opened it, and pulled out a large manila case folder.

She scanned the police report which had been faxed to the FBI's D.C. office. They were traveling towards 1205 Philip St., located in the famous Garden District. She scanned the New Orleans fact sheet that her handler had prepared.

The area had been laid out by New Orleans architect, planner, & surveyor, Barthelemy Lafon, and was developed during the years of 1832-1900. Declared a National Historical Landmark in 1974, the Garden District had the best preserved collection of Southern mansions in the United States. The upscale residential area was known more for its splendid late Victorian architecture than actual gardens. However, the tropical climate did have a way of transforming any receptive surface into a botanic bonanza.

August could barely keep her excitement contained, every fact, no matter how minute, seemed like a possibly precious piece of information that could make all the difference during her investigation. Not only was this her inaugural mission in the field, it was her first foray into the notorious Big Easy.

Gareth Drake was having a hard time concentrating on the task at hand, driving, because his eyes kept straying to gaze upon his passenger rather than the road. After a few swerves and one particular hard slam on the brakes,

Gareth redoubled his efforts to navigate the vehicle properly. The woman next to him was as intoxicating as a late night in the Quarter. It felt as compulsory to hit on her as it did to breathe.

“If you don’t mind my asking, aren’t you a little young to be a Special Agent? I thought the minimum age was twenty-three?”

“They made an exception for me. I got my B.S. in Criminal Justice at seventeen years old.”

“Oh you’re some kind of kid genius, is that it?”

August’s memory flashed to when she was six years old and the astonished look on her parent’s faces when they walked in on the middle of an interrogation session. She was tenaciously grilling Teddy Bear regarding the repeated burglaries at Barbie’s Dream House. Before her parents could react, young August confounded them further by quickly ushering them out of her bedroom. All the while quietly whispering to them, so Teddy could not hear, that ‘The Bear is about to break.’ She assured them she only needed five more minutes to get a confession out of him and the case would be closed.

August purposely blanked out her mind’s eye, shoving that memory as far away as she could; for fear that it’d make her laugh. It was already proving difficult to get this guy to be serious and focus on the case instead of earning another notch on his belt.

Gareth glanced at her and saw a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “Why does a beautiful young woman like you want to chase after the scary bad guys?”

“What did I say about being professional? I think you

need to be more concerned with your driving than you do my motivations for law enforcement.”

“Sorry ma’am.”

“Officer Drake, you were the first person on the scene, correct?”

“Yes ma’am, that’s why the brass sent me to get you. The Lieutenant said the incident had sparked the Fed’s interest, and I was to collect the Special Agent they were sending from the airport. I am ordered to assist you in any way I can. So, why is the Federal Government so concerned with a suicide victim?”

“Alleged suicide; we still have not ruled out other possibilities.”

“I can see that. Dispatch had me thinkin’ I was walkin’ into a murder scene, but when I got there-” he broke off. A grim look hardened his features. His memory once more haunted him with a flash of walking into the master bedroom of the Martel house.

“What is it?” August inquired.

Gareth sighed. “Someone would have to be completely nuts to slit their own throat like that.”

“It says here that Morgan Martel, the seven year old daughter, was a possible witness?”

He briefly looked over at August before turning his attention back on the road. If she was disturbed at all by the content of their conversation, he could not see it on her face. She either had ice water running through her veins, or the best game face he’d ever seen. “Yes ma’am. However, it was Edison Martel, the father, who found Morgan hugging her mother’s corpse. He says she was

whispering to her mother, but when he pulled her away from the body, she clammed up. She has not uttered another word since.”

“What was she whispering?”

“Mr. Martel said he couldn’t understand what she was saying. He got irate with me for even questioning him. He yelled for a bit, burst into tears, then started apologizing up a storm.”

“The body is still untouched, in the morgue, correct?”

“Yes ma’am, we’ve got her on ice. The family wants to cremate it once we finish our investigation.”

Officer Drake took the Carondelet exit off of the freeway, and they soon found themselves on St. Charles Avenue.

August paused in her questioning to take in a bit of this mysterious city. Urban Arboretum was the first phrase which jumped into her mind as the whole area seemed to be permeated with lush green vegetation. There were two one way roads flanking the tracks and the overhead electrical lines. Every block seemed to be populated by down home cookin’ restaurants, ivy entangled houses, and alternately, a liquor store or a bar. A trolley rumbled by their squad car as they slowed for mid-day traffic. It was dark green with rust colored trim and filled with all sorts of people. She could smell the distinctive ozone odor of the electrical juice fueling the trolley car.

They traveled about half a mile west on St. Charles Avenue before taking a left on Josephine Street. As they wound through the beautiful neighborhood, August took a deep slow breath and focused on the task at hand. It

had been less than seventy-two hours since Gwendolyn Martel had allegedly taken her own life, possibly in front of her daughter. August analyzed the probable scenarios they were about to enter at the Martel household.

Gareth's gravelly drawl interrupted her musings.

"Now I don't know how much experience you've had with grieving families, and all due respect to you out ranking me and all, but I don't know how kindly Mr. Martel or the folks helpin' him out are gonna feel about us waltzing in on their grief. If I knew why the big boys at the Bureau were so interested in an artist's crazy wife, I could give you the answers you're lookin' for. Then, we wouldn't have to bother these nice people."

"I appreciate your sensitivity to the trauma this family is experiencing and your willingness to assist me, Officer Drake. Rest assured that it is imperative I conduct my own investigation, the details of which I am not at liberty to discuss with you at this time."

August wrote a note in her case file and inquired quietly, "Are you always so protective of witnesses being interviewed?"

"Yes, I am when they are young girls who have lost their mother. Look, I'm a team player, and the more I know, the more I can help out. If a crime other than the taking of one's own life has been committed here, I want to know."

They pulled up in front of the Martel home. A clutch of large trees obscured the house until they were practically on top of it. The style of it was Italianate Victorian, popular a century ago. It had been incredibly

well maintained over the years, giving the home a venerable vitality. Half a dozen white pillars stood as imposing sentries on the front of the three story structure. The white mammoths supported a gorgeous balcony on the second floor and a relaxing porch on the first. A fresh looking coat of white paint with neutral colored accents, a generous lawn, and flower beds dressed up the exterior of the building nicely.

On the right side of the house there was a driveway which led to an unattached two car garage covered in ivy. Resting in the driveway was a beat up old blue Ford pickup truck. Next to it was a late 70's burgundy BMW 733i. Sitting next to each other, they looked like the prom queen and the auto shop kid out on a date together.

Gareth cut the engine, still waiting for some kind of reply from this beautiful, enigmatic, and not a little frustrating woman. He watched her study the house for a few moments. Then she turned and looked at him in such a penetrating way it made him blush. August smiled at Gareth for the first time, and his breath caught. He forgot all about the little political power struggle he was trying to pull with her. Gareth's stomach did a flip-flop as he got a lightning bolt education in magnetic attraction.

His initial flirting with her had stemmed from a lengthy lothario lifestyle, where all he was looking for from any woman was some easy lovin'. In that moment everything got completely serious, much to his shock, like a switch he didn't even know he possessed had been flipped inside of his heart. He almost didn't hear her when she said, "Shall we?" while opening the passenger side door to get out of

his cruiser. Gareth made sure the volume was off on his radio, not wanting it to squawk inappropriately.

As they approached the large white double front doors they could hear and practically feel the drum, bass, and guitar crescendo from the end of a bluesy song. Once August reached the front door, she paused and cocked her head to one side, listening. The next song came on, a slow deep bass line. Barely three notes in, August grunted with mirth, “Appropriate.”

“What?” Gareth said. He recognized the song as familiar, but didn’t immediately place it, until the guitar line wound in and Robert Plant’s muffled voice could be heard singing, “Been dazed and confused for so long it’s not true...”

“I’d get the Led out too, if I were them.” August murmured, as she rang the door bell. Gareth would have laughed, but he was too surprised to respond. He didn’t know what confounded him more, her quick identification of the song or that she just cracked a joke right before entering what was sure to be an awkward situation.

They waited a few moments. No one answered the door. August rang the bell again. They could hear the two-note ding-dong over the music, but apparently, no one else could. Gareth knocked loudly on the door. “Hello? Mr. Martel?”

No response. Gareth was about to bang away again, but before he could let loose, August grabbed and turned the door handle. It opened, and they were met with an unleashed cacophony of Led Zeppelin.

Their shoulders collided as each attempted to take the

initiative entering the Martel house. August shot Gareth an authoritative look and he yielded, letting the lady go before him.

The lovely foyer was lit by the amber afternoon sun. The high ceilings with crown molding, bright bay windows, and the dark mahogany staircase were all typical to ornate New Orleans architectural style. The room was dominated by a six foot marble statue of a muscular man doing a one-armed hand stand. This centerpiece was beautifully illuminated by both natural and track lighting. It was framed by the staircase winding up to the second floor. The artwork was a feat of balance in itself, since it had to have its weight perfectly proportioned like the man it embodied, or else it would simply not be able to stay upright.

“Hello?” They could barely hear their own voices over the musical racket originating from the back of the house.

Apparently in no hurry to search the premises for its occupants, August walked around the gorgeous statue. She marveled that the sculptor had perfectly captured the requisite look of intense concentration on his model’s face. The plaque at the bottom of it read:

Upside Down Eddie

Remy LeTour

The front room off of the foyer was a den and clear of any people. It was a tidy sitting room with red velvet couches facing each other, a mahogany coffee table in between, and a fireplace with a large antique mirror

hanging over the mantle.

Following the music into the hallway, a row of gargoyle masks mounted on the walls, leered at them. They passed a small bathroom, and came upon two fifteen foot dark wooden ajar doors. The Led Zeppelin concert was obviously coming from the next room.

August peered inside, and then pushed the door open. It led into a spacious studio which looked like a renovated greenhouse, because it had more windows than walls. Inside they saw two handsome men, each with dark hair and powerful physiques. People probably assumed they were brothers. Their only major physical difference was that one of the men was about a head taller and much more broadly built than the other. They were both covered with paint and clay, and each wearing shorts which must have been khaki at some point, although now it was almost too difficult to discern.

Neither of them noticed August or Gareth's entrance. They were too busy dancing around a six foot block of wet clay, taking turns punching, kicking, or simply hurling their selves into it for a big bear hug.

Furnishing the room were two ten foot work benches littered with beer, Southern Comfort, and wine bottles all covered with clay hand prints. Paint tubes, chisels, palettes, hammers, paint brushes, empty Chinese food containers, pizza boxes and a multitude of other debris were scattered about the room in a haphazard fashion. The whole mess urged a compulsive desire in August to find a garbage bag and clean up.

A giant ten foot by fifteen foot canvas was mounted at

the back of the workshop/studio. She could smell the wet paint underneath the earthy wet clay odor permeating the room and see the fresh strokes still glistening in the light as they dried. It must have been an earlier violent artistic venture by the two men. The canvas was an explosion of sadness, rage, and passion. Jackson Pollock would have approved of it.

In the back right corner of the studio there was a ten foot sculpture entirely covered with pillows and cushions. August's inner child grew incredibly jealous when she realized what it truly was: A kid-scale enormous pillow fort complete with a bead curtain front door. Perched in the second level window of the fort was a young girl with a mop of curly red hair, clutching a blanket and watching the scene with rapt attention.

The little girl, who August guessed was Morgan, made brief eye contact with August, and immediately dropped her eyes to a patch of well worn fabric clutched in her small left hand. It looked like a threadbare piece of her baby blanket. Morgan slid back, her face disappearing deeper into her pillow fort, until only her tiny fist full of fabric was still in sight.

The larger of the two men noticed them first. The smile playing on his face evaporated into a stern, foreboding countenance upon discovering the intruders. He got the attention of his companion who immediately went to the record player and turned down the music.

August stepped forward and extended her hand to the shorter man. "Sorry for barging in. I'm Special Agent August Cannon and this is Officer Gareth Drake, whom I

believe you've met before. Edison Martel I presume?"

"Please, call me Eddie." He made a move to shake her hand, but realized his own was filthy and withdrew it with a sheepish smile.

Meanwhile the much taller man, who August guessed must be the sculptor and best friend, Remy LeTour, did not come over to greet them. Instead, he opted to forage for a beverage in the cooler underneath the work bench furthest away.

"My sincerest condolences for your loss, I can't begin to fathom what you and your loved ones are going through right now. I wouldn't be here unless it was imperative I speak with you for a few minutes privately."

"He's not going anywhere with you today, lady. If you want to question the grieving husband you're going to have to wait until tomorrow." The sculptor barked while cracking open an ice cold beer and taking a deep slug from it.

"Its okay, Remy, I can handle this. They look like nice enough people. Forgive my manners, would you like a drink?"

"No, thank you," August replied.

"Hey Eddie, we were working, remember?"

Eddie looked at him and shrugged helplessly.

"At least help me wrap this up," grumbled Remy.

Remy traded his beer for a couple of sponges from a near by water bucket and slathered the liquid on their work.

Eddie joined his creative partner in moisturizing the large sculpture. Then, they meticulously covered it in

Saran Wrap and heavy plastic sheets.

August and Gareth stood off to the side, quietly watching their progress. The low voices of the two artists could be heard in escalating whispers, with it becoming increasingly obvious Remy's disdain for their unwanted guests was growing. This was confirmed by a not so quiet aside to Eddie, "Why are these pigs even here? They should respect our privacy. How can they possibly help us now?"

When they finished Remy immediately reunited with his beer. He walked by and shouldered checked Gareth, smearing a variety of art supplies from his bare skin to the Peace Officer's uniform.

"What the hell, man? Why don't you lighten up?" Gareth blurted out.

"Why didn't you call before busting in here, uninvited, into a house of mourning, asshole?"

Both men threw each other menacing stares. Before they could square off with each other, August stepped in.

"Gentlemen, please. Calm yourselves." Remy didn't even look at August. He sulked over to his cooler, finishing off his beer en route.

August glared at Gareth and turned to Mr. Martel. "Gentlemen please forgive our intrusion at this dark time. Mr. Martel, Eddie, I flew in from D.C. specifically to speak with you and your daughter but I'm sure we can--"

"C'mon, baby shots, Eddie. Baby shot? I think it's time." Remy held up the bottle of Southern Comfort enticingly. He scooped up a couple of shot glasses and filled them halfway, beckoning Eddie to join him.

Eddie giggled at Remy's offer, and August could finally tell just how hammered these guys were. At least all the alcohol was fueling a creative frenzy, which was probably the best coping method anyone could hope for under the circumstances.

Eddie met Remy halfway, took the shot, clinked glasses with him, and knocked it back. Gareth turned to August with a pointed I-told-you-so look on his face which Eddie caught as he rejoined them.

"He's right. I'm in no shape to have a coherent conversation with you right now. We started early. Can you come back tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir, we can. How about we-" August's speech broke off as the little girl from the pillow fort tower quietly appeared at her father's side.

Eddie noticed his daughter as August did and immediately crouched down to gather her into his arms. He picked her up during the hug. "Hi honey, are you okay? Can Daddy get anything for you?"

He stroked her hair, looking at her with concern when she did not verbally respond. Morgan simply stared at him with wide eyes. She held up the green plaid scrap of fabric still clutched in her hand and offered it to her father. "Thanks honey, but you hold on to your Blankie."

Eddie sighed and rested his forehead on her diminutive shoulder as an overwhelming tide of grief came crashing in. He could feel her little arms wrap around his head as the tears burned down his face. Eventually, he pulled himself together and put her back down, but still held on to one of her hands.

Remy had walked up to him during this and put a hand on his shoulder for support. Eddie looked over at him appreciatively. Then an anguished grimace crossed his features, and he dropped his head.

Morgan regarded August with eyes more suited for an old wise woman. The girl held her gaze steadily, stoically. August got a sinking feeling in her stomach like she'd hit the first drop on a rollercoaster. A wave of nausea followed, her knees weakened, and darkness clouded her vision. August lost consciousness before she even hit the ground.