

LOVER BETRAYED CHAPTER ONE

The oppressive heat was unavoidable, omnipotent, like the man in the casket. We followed dutifully behind, our steps out of time with the rhythmic clops of the black hearse horses. White lilies hugged the casket, quivering to the drum roll of a jazz band's lively rendition of "When the Saints Go Marching In," an absurd funeral favourite. Tourists in waist pouches and flip-flops, unsure of the show, whispered behind finger curtains and stole glances under furrowed brows and baseball caps. I understood their uncertainty. The father I'd loved and loathed died without warning, too soon to recognize his mistakes, let alone fix them.

"This is a goddamn freak show," I said. "I'd never have agreed to it if it wasn't spelled out in his will."

"But it was," Sandra said. "You and your father may have had your differences, but you're a good son, Jackson."

"Was. I *was* a good son."

"You always will be," Sandra said. My wife's fingers felt cool in my hand, despite the heat. She looked up at me, her blue eyes hidden behind sunglasses and a loop of black

netting that covered her face. I eased the pressure off her hand with an apology, ignoring the bead of sweat that crawled down my spine.

It took thirty minutes for my father's slow funeral procession, wafting the cloying scent of flowers, to wind through the streets of New Orleans. We'd walked an unpleasant mile behind the coffin before passing under the iron arch of the cemetery. Like a shrimp trawler with its net out, our parade snagged tourists and curiosity-seekers in its wake.

The music took on a sombre tenor only when we mounted the slight rise, which housed the Delaney tomb. The last time I'd seen the tomb open was fifteen years ago when we'd laid my mother to rest. Following long tradition, her coffin had been discarded and her remains dumped into the bone heap below to make way for the new arrival. One day, my coffin would displace my father's in a similar ritual. Would I also succumb to a stroke before I'd finished living my life?

I was a teenager when my mother died. There were times now when I had to see her picture to remember her face, but I had no trouble remembering her love. She'd bathed me in it, cooking my favourite crawfish boil, which my father hated, and baking pecan pies he wouldn't touch. She liked that I'd inherited her hazel eyes. Dad had said she coddled me, or at least that's the excuse he used to justify his tough-love approach to parenting. I doubted I'd ever need a photograph of my father to remember him.

The priest raised his voice over the crowd while photojournalists captured video of the mourners. Tomorrow, they would justify the intrusion in the name of news. Equally unwelcome tourists snapped cellphone photos they'd later show their friends at home in some macabre recollection of their good fortune in stumbling upon a genuine City of the Dead funeral.

I looked out over the perspiring faces. Tourists aside, my father would have been pleased to see the calibre of mourners who'd braved the August heat to pay their last respects. Top-echelon politicians and business people mopped their brows and donned sombre expressions, hopeful that the priest was nearing the end of the ritual. Half of the men gathered were better candidates for a casket. My father wasn't yet sixty. It shouldn't have been his time.

After the casket was laid in place, I bid him a final farewell and then nodded to the cemetery workmen, who kept their wheelbarrows at a respectful distance. As soon as they moved in to seal the tomb, the mourners began to scatter.

Jimmy Marchant was the first to approach. Sweat was beading on his red face and dribbling down ample jowls that melted into a thick neck. His jacket was soaked through, but he hadn't loosened his tie. He'd be a proper southern gentleman for my father one last time if it killed him.

He pecked Sandra on the cheek before offering me his hand. "Sorry for your loss, buddy. Your father's left a big hole on half the boards in Louisiana." Jimmy was born and raised in New Orleans. He spoke with a Yat accent, pronouncing "boards" with a barely perceptible *r* and "Louisiana" as "Loo-ziana."

"Thanks, Jimmy." In his younger years, Jimmy could have passed for John Goodman's brother. My father respected Jimmy Marchant for his legal counsel and even more for his discretion. Jimmy understood my father's definition of doing business. It entertained him, and earned his firm a lot of money, especially when my father bent the law. I was in Jimmy's debt for making sure no one knew how often that had happened. "I hope you'll join us at the Omni tonight. Let Dad buy you one last drink."

"Wouldn't miss it. Matthew Delaney knew how to throw a party and I intend to honour my promise: your

father's wake will be one to remember." He leaned close. "And well lubricated," he added with a conspiratorial wink.

I forced a smile and shook Jimmy's hand. One final spectacle to endure.

Dad had made a good and loyal friend in Jimmy. I'd known Jimmy all my life and had my own reasons for liking the man. It was through him that I'd met my wife, Alexandra, or Sandra, as she preferred to be called. Like Jimmy, her father was a lawyer, and Redmond Moss was well connected. After Katrina, Redmond used those connections to generate funds to help rebuild. Sandra Moss distributed her father's funding out of Jimmy's donated office space. When Jimmy recruited my father's development expertise, I was the lucky son of a bitch who got to work with her.

I took Sandra's elbow and turned toward the first in a long line of idling limos.

"Kyle, Anthony, you'll ride with us, of course," Sandra said, addressing my old Stanford classmates who'd flown in for the funeral. Kyle Murphy lived in Dallas so knew enough to wear a light coloured suit. Anthony Dimarco was New York through and through. His navy Brooks Brothers was a choice I suspected he now regretted.

The driver opened Sandra's door, and we followed her into the blessed air conditioning.

"Jackman—how the hell do you live in this heat?" Anthony said, using my college nickname as he mopped the sweat from his brow with a limp pocket square. He tugged his tie loose.

"Northerners," Kyle quipped.

The driver pulled out, leading the train of limos to the hotel.

"I'm serious," Anthony said, supplementing his pocket square with several tissues he'd yanked from the limo's complimentary supply.

“You get used to it,” I said, sparing a glance at Sandra. She’d smoothed her hair into some complicated knot the heat didn’t seem to touch.

“Will you be staying long?” Sandra asked.

“Only if you dump that lousy husband of yours,” Kyle said with a lecherous smile. Anthony swatted him. “What? We all know she’s out of his league.”

“Oh, and you think she’s in yours?” Anthony said, raising his eyebrows.

Sandra looked down at her folded hands, fighting a smile. They’d met her on our wedding day. The last-minute introduction had been unavoidable, but Kyle and Anthony had taken the piss out of me about it. They insisted she would have chosen either of them over me if they’d been introduced earlier. The truth was, if Sandra and I hadn’t wed quickly, and quietly, her family would have tried to stop us. It wasn’t just that she came from old money and I came from new—it was that her father didn’t approve of the way my father had amassed his fortune. Redmond Moss was not a religious man, but he was a judgmental bastard who held firmly to the belief that the sins of the father should be visited upon the son. Thankfully, Sandra had a mind of her own.

The driver pulled up in front of the Omni hotel, where a black-capped doorman hurried to open Sandra’s door. The limo’s cool air dissipated in a suffocating wave of heat. We hurried inside.

“We’re going to freshen up,” Sandra said, removing her sunglasses. “We’ll see you in an hour or so?”

“For sure,” Kyle said. Anthony already had his jacket off and his tie in hand.

Sandra took my arm and we headed to the elevators. Back in our suite, she kicked off her shoes. “That went well, don’t you think?” she said.

I removed my jacket and flopped on the sofa. “A few more hours and it’ll be over.”

“Don’t wish it away too fast.” She stood in front of a mirror untangling the netted hat from her hair. “After all, the Delaney board will be there and so will most of the city’s politicians, not to mention the governor.”

“And your father?”

“He’ll be there. Mom as well. Etiquette dictates, as you know.” Etiquette and old money went hand in hand. Sandra should know; she’d been raised on both.

“Have you told them about my plans for Delaney & Son?”

She dropped her hat on the coffee table and sat beside me. “No. I want them to hear it from you.”

After the initial shock of Dad’s death had worn off, Sandra and I talked through the night about what came next. I didn’t keep secrets from Sandra—her discretion was impeccable, so she knew about Dad’s *strategic donations*, as he’d referred to them, and his propensity to *eavesdrop* when he thought it would win him an advantage. I was ashamed of that. I told her I wanted to be a better man, to behave respectably and with honour. To do things right.

“Cleaning up Delaney’s reputation will take a long time. Years probably.”

She turned in her seat. “The fact that you want to is what matters. And soon you’ll be the one making the decisions, not your father. Dad will see the difference. He’ll come around.”

I took her hand and brushed my thumb against her wedding band. “I hope it’s not a mistake. My father may have been short on scruples, but he knew how to make money.”

“And so do you, but you know how to do it without compromising your integrity.”

I lifted my head in a flash of annoyance. “My father had plenty of integrity.”

She stiffened. “Of course. That was careless of me to say.”

I dropped her hand and stood. "I'm going to shower."

"I'm sorry."

"I know. It's been a tough week." I squeezed her shoulder in passing. "We'll get through it."

After changing into fresh clothes, we took the elevator back down to the ballroom. The scent of flowers nearly knocked me over. I doubted there was a lily in Louisiana outside of this room. Was this the measure of a man? Personally, I'd never understood the flowers. A man had died. He'd lived and breathed business, not flowers. Flowers were something his guilt trotted out on Valentine's Day. Why not a genuine tribute to the man when he was still alive? A fine bottle of bourbon? Midfield seats at a Saints game? A favour he didn't have to pay for?

My arrival dimmed the raucous laughter. Jimmy, finally free of his jacket, raised his glass in a silent toast from across the room, and held it aloft. One by one, everyone in the ballroom did the same. Say what you want about my old man, he made an impression. A rocks glass landed in my hand. I stared at the amber liquid and fought the lump at the back of my throat.

Slowly, I raised my glass. "To Matthew Delaney," I said. "A formidable businessman, a generous benefactor, and my father. May he rest in peace." A collective shout rang out and then bubbled away.

Conversations resumed, backs were turned and bursts of laughter rose above the ambient noise. Sandra stroked the back of my arm. "That was lovely."

Lovely? Anger crawled up my chest, prickling my neck. I scanned the crowd. Every gluttonous supplier, every slippery politician, every Barbie Doll wife, and every major charity bold enough to send a representative had benefited from my father's acumen and generosity. They still were, sloshing back the best the bar had to offer. What had Dad gotten? Flowers he would hate and a toast from a son who couldn't even say he loved him. He'd taught me everything

he knew, and it wasn't enough. My love for him was rough around the edges. In time, it may have softened, but we had no more time.

I quaffed my drink and another magically appeared. Condolences flowed, abundant as the liquor, and one after another, Dad's impressive circle of influencers, friends and rivals approached me to pay their respects. Marcel Cadieu, a Louisiana senator and early convert to my father's way of doing business, was one of the first to slither up.

"My wife, Claudette," he said, making an unnecessary introduction. "Please accept our sympathies, Jackson. Louisiana has lost a great man." Marcel hid his animosity behind a politician's smile. He'd never figured out how my father had learned of his affair with a sandy-haired gentleman half his age. Marcel had been so careful; he and his lover had never acknowledged one another in public, not so much as a wayward glance. They'd checked into separate but adjoining rooms on the forty-second floor of the Sheraton in New Orleans. Yet my father knew the sandy-haired gentleman had spilled his flute of Cristal out on the balcony that fateful night. Dad had a photograph to prove it. And if he knew that detail, then he knew everything.

Marcel immediately became a staunch supporter of Delaney & Son. But while he championed Dad's development projects, he quietly initiated and then backed the strongest anti-drone legislation in the country. If only he knew that a drone had not been necessary.

Carl Prudhomme, also a convert, waddled up with a hearty handshake. He was head of Industrial Rod and Steel in Lafayette. My father had ensured his loyalty and a favourable pricing structure after Carl heard a recording my father played for him. Apparently Carl and two other major steel suppliers had taken a midnight trail ride into the wilds of Carl's eight-hundred-acre ranch outside of Vidalia in Concordia Parish to discuss their new pricing scheme. My father had been eager to point out that collusion in any

form would likely be frowned upon in Louisiana's legislative circles. Carl had had little choice but to tip his hat, but soon afterwards, he fired his ranch hands and hired new security. Not that any of that would be an obstacle to one of our kind.

With Sandra on one side and Jimmy on the other, we received the mourners. They dropped their smiles to shake my hand, and offer condolences. Sandra's father, Redmond, and her mother, Diana made their obligatory appearance and soon after disappeared. But not all the guests wore fake smiles. My father was a generous man who loved a good party and treated his friends well.

The line of grieverers marched on and my father's acquaintances crawled by, kissing my wife and patting me on the shoulder. I grew tired of repeating what felt like my mantra: "Yes, I am proud of my father's legacy." And to those few who needed to hear it, I added, "Yes, I look forward to taking Delaney & Son in a fresh, new direction."

After the handshakes and back pats subsided, Jimmy headed to the bar and Sandra excused herself. I searched the room for Kyle and Anthony. They had been welcomed into Jimmy's clutch of insiders at the bar, many of whom were Dad's closest friends. I joined them and we put a dent or two in some of the finer bottles on offer and listened to my father's friends tell ribald stories of Dad's exploits.

My father had chosen to lead a public life, and some of the tales were ones he'd leaked himself. He'd manipulated the media as handily as the men he'd kept markers on, cashing them in when it suited his game. And it didn't suit his game to have the public know his other persona: the man who grieved when my mother died; the man who stayed by my side until I conquered my deadly fear of heights; the man who helped me bury Razz, short for Razzmatazz, the crazy black lab he'd bought me for my fifth birthday. Sadly, his tender moments had been as rare and fleeting as a *loup-garou* sighting in the bayou.

This game he played ensured that, to his face at least, people referred to him as a maverick, a shrewd negotiator, a visionary. But in the backrooms and bars, they called him manipulative, contemptible and crooked. That was my legacy. I was the *£ Son* of Delaney & Son, and now I had to clean up the mess.

Standing in the midst of the huddle of men at the end of the bar, I watched Sandra work her way through the mourners. She clasped a hand here, stroked a shoulder there, smiled a blessing with a nod of her head. She charmed every man in the room and befriended every woman, and she was mine, my oasis in the quagmire of grief and guilt my father's death had stirred.

A little after midnight, Sandra approached the table where Jimmy had been reminiscing about Dad and the early days, when it was still just Delaney Developments. He'd been developing strip malls back then and married to his first wife. I loved those stories best. Dad hadn't yet felt the sting of betrayal or learned to like the feel of dirt on his hands.

The wake was just warming up and wouldn't end until dawn. Sandra offered the men a shy smile and then leaned down to my ear. "I think we've done our part, Jackson. Let's go."

Her sweet vanilla scent pulled me out of my chair. It always put me in mind of my mother's bread pudding, something else I could never resist. My father once told me Sandra was too good for me. His callous comment had angered me at the time, but not because he was right. He considered her a feather in the Delaney cap, but he never once acknowledged it was me, the *& Son*, who'd won her.

I excused myself and followed her to our suite, freeing the mourners to drain the bar and speculate about what would happen to the dirt Dad had on most of them.