

Chapter 1

The dead man's mother lived in a battered gray house on Castlewood Street surrounded by a mean echo of No Trespassing signs.

My partner for the day, Special Agent John Breit took one look at the place and said, "Good luck in there."

I didn't believe in luck. For one thing it was Monday, the Fourth of July, and the heat index refused to observe the holiday. The morning temperature was nudging one-hundred degrees. When I climbed out of John's air-conditioned Cadillac, the humidity hit me like a wall, a sticky southern heat that did nothing to shorten my walk to the front door, nor did the expression on the woman's face who suddenly appeared in the doorway. Dark eyes hard as anthracite, she watched me pick my way down the cracked concrete path.

I introduced myself—Raleigh Harmon, special agent with the FBI.

She turned without response.

I followed her inside, closing the door behind me. The living room smelled of grape juice and stale cigarettes and in the kitchen a woman named Bernadette Holmes sat at a gray Formica table. The mother of the dead man.

"Mama," the younger woman said. "FBI's here."

Mrs. Holmes looked at me, the Official Investigator. Her brown skin was salt stained. "What happened to my boy?" she sobbed. "What'd they do to my boy?"

A sleeveless cotton housedress exposed her heavy black arms. A delta of stretch-marks flowed in sandy estuaries to her elbows.

"My good, good boy -- he's gone!"

Two days ago, on Saturday, her son Hamal Holmes fell from a factory rooftop. Another man also fell, Detective Michael Falcon of the Richmond Police Department. The seventy-foot drop to the sidewalk killed both men on impact, but exactly how they fell—and why they were on the roof—was anyone's guess. No witnesses had come forward, although the police had begun floating a theory that had enraged half the city. Mr. Holmes was black; the detective was white; the police claimed assault on the officer. Yesterday, the Richmond mayor called the Bureau, demanding a civil rights investigation. And now, here I was. The only available agent on a holiday. Me and John. Who stayed in the car.

Lighting a cigarette, the girl with the anthracite eyes lifted her face, catching a mild draft that blew from an air conditioning unit hoisted to the small window above the kitchen sink. I sat at the small table, next to Mrs. Holmes. I offered her my card—she didn't take it—before expressing my condolences for her loss. Even when I meant the words they sounded lame.

Finally I explained how this civil rights case will work:

"I'll be looking into the circumstances surrounding your son's death. I'll need to ask you a lot of questions. Some of them might be difficult to answer."

Tears welling, Mrs. Holmes stared at me. "Hamal's body. It's all broken up, ain't it? My baby, is he in pieces?"

Since the Bureau wasn't called right away, I missed the autopsy. But everybody knew rock crushes bone. When I didn't answer, her sobbing grew louder. I waited, feeling the usual awkwardness. With the grieving I could usually offer only silence, followed by impertinent questions. I opened my notebook.

"Mrs. Holmes," I said, when she had gathered herself, "do you know why was your son was on that roof?"

"Why?" Her voice turned molten with rage. "Why--because that policeman done chased him up there, that's why. He chased my Hamal to the roof, then throwed him off! God forgive me, but I'm not sorry that policeman's dead. No, I'm not. That man deserved to die. Killing my boy like that."

The police department, naturally, had a different theory. As a young man, Hamal Holmes built a record of breaking and entering. Though he changed his ways in recent years, the cops trotted out the claims, using them to insinuate Holmes broke into the abandoned factory Saturday morning. Since the detective was working nearby, he must have spotted him, then pursued him to the roof, where their struggle ensued. The only thing everyone could agree on was that both men lost the fight.

But when I mentioned that theory, the dead man's mother scoffed.

"Hamal didn't need to go breaking into that old factory. Ain't nothin' in there. Place's been closed for years. My son was a businessman, you check it out. Real good businessman -- paid all my bills."

I glanced at the girl. She returned my gaze and flicked ash into the porcelain sink.

"Are you his sister?" I asked.

"Wife. And my husband didn't do nothin' wrong." She pointed her cigarette at my notebook. "Put that in your little book."

I didn't move.

"You deaf? He was innocent. Write it down."

"I know this is a difficult time for you and your family but when—"

"You don't know nothin'."

Actually, that was true. I turned back to the mother, once more sliding my card toward her. "Mrs. Holmes, I'm the agent in charge of the civil rights investigation. Please feel free to call me anytime, day or night. Any questions or concerns, let me know. And please call if you hear of anything that might help our investigation."

But she wasn't looking at me. She was staring across the table to a small television. The sound was muted. Closed captioning ran across the bottom of the screen. Finally she said, "That policeman killed my son."

"When all the evidence is—"

The widow took four steps forward. Barefoot, she held the cigarette like a javelin, poised for throwing. "We done seen the evidence," she said. "It's in the morgue. My husband, he's dead. Dead! Dead!"

Mrs. Holmes released another wail and somewhere beyond the kitchen, children started yelling. I could hear their voices through the walls. But the widow raised her head and hollered for silence; they obeyed.

She turned back to me. "You came here to help the cops. We know how it works."

"That's not how it works. This is a civil right investigation. The FBI is investigating the police for possible violations. They are completely separate from our work."

"You're still one of them. I can smell it."

I glanced at Mrs. Holmes, still staring at a small television. Montel, the talk show host, was pawing his bald head with one hand, swinging the microphone with the other. The text announced Today's Topic: "I can't trust you!"

"Mrs. Holmes, who told you what happened on the roof?"

"I don't remember."

"Do you recall what was said?"

She shook her head.

"Did anyone tell you why Hamal was on the roof?"

"They told me Hamal was dead. After that my mind was gone."

Montel batted the air with the microphone, like a wasp was loose in the studio. The camera panned to the audience. They applauded wildly and when I glanced back at the widow, her deep reserves of anger had compressed even further, all the hate-fueled anthracite hardening with time and heat and pressure.

"How did you hear about your husband's death?"

"I heard, that's all." She took one last drag off her cigarette and tossed it into the sink where it sizzled. "And it's time for you to go."

I said good-bye to Mrs. Holmes, told her we would be in touch. She nodded absently.

I followed the widow to the front door. She held it open wearing the same expression as when I arrived. But as I passed by, she wished me good luck. Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

And there seemed no point telling her: Luck didn't exist.