
TAMI HOAG

A
THIN
DARK
LINE



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"Could I Be Your Girl"
Written by Jann Arden Richards
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This book is dedicated to the many victims who wait for justice, and to the law enforcement professionals who pursue that justice with dogged determination.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A Thin Dark Line takes place in a setting my longtime readers know is a favorite of mine—Louisiana's French Triangle. It is a place like no other in this country—ecologically, sociologically, culturally, linguistically. I have done my best to bring some of the rich flavor of the region to you, in part with the occasional use of Cajun French, a patois as unique to Louisiana as gumbo. You will find a glossary for these words and phrases in the back of the book. My sources include *A Dictionary of the Cajun Language* by Rev. Msgr. Jules O. Daigle and *Conversational Cajun French* by Randall P. Whatley and Harry Jannise.

My sincere thanks and appreciation to Sheriff Charles A. Fuselier of St. Martin Parish, Louisiana, for your generosity with both your time and your knowledge; for giving me the real tour of bayou country and a lesson in Lou'siana politics. The stories were great, the food was even better. *Merci!* Thanks also to Deputy Barry Reburn, my in-family consultant on police procedure. Any mistakes made or liberties taken in the name of fiction are my own.

Thanks to Kathryn Moe, Coldwell Banker Real Estate, Rochester, Minnesota, for unwittingly planting the seed of a gruesome idea when you offered to wait for the furnace inspection guy. Hope it

doesn't give you nightmares. And thanks once again to Diva Dreyer for the trauma lingo.

Thank you, Rat Boy, wherever you are.

And finally, my most special thanks to Dan for never minding that I'm always on deadline.

Hide your heart under the bed and lock your secret drawer
Wash the angels from your head, won't need them anymore.

Love is a demon and you're the one he's coming for.

Oh my Lord.

—“Could I Be Your Girl”

Jann Arden Richards

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PROLOGUE

"Red is the color of violent death. Red is the color of strong feelings—love, passion, greed, anger, hatred.

Emotions—better not to have them.

Luckier not to have them.

Love,

Passion,

Greed,

Anger,

Hatred.

The feelings pull one another in a circle. Faster, harder, blurring into violence. I had no power over it.

Love,

Passion,

Greed,

Anger,

Hatred.

The words pulsed in my head every time I plunged the knife into her body.

Hatred,

Anger,

Greed,

Passion,

Love,

The line between them is thin and red.”

Her body lay on the floor. Her slender arms outflung, palms up. Death. Cold and brutal, strangely intimate.

The people rose in unison as the judge emerged from his chambers. The Honorable Franklin Monahan. The figurehead of justice. The decision would be his.

Black pools of blood in the silver moonlight. Her life drained from her to puddle on the hard cypress floor.

Richard Kudrow, the defense attorney. Thin, gray, and stoop-shouldered, as if the fervor for justice had burned away all excess within him and had begun to consume muscle mass. Sharp eyes and the strength of his voice belied the image of frailty.

Her naked body inscribed with the point of a knife. A work of violent art.

Smith Pritchett, the district attorney. Sturdy and aristocratic. The gold of his cuff links catching the light as he raised his hands in supplication.

Gries for mercy smothered by the cold shadow of death.

Chaos and outrage rolled through the crowd in a wave of sound as Monahan pronounced his ruling. The small amethyst ring had not been listed on the search warrant of the defendant's home and was, therefore, beyond the scope of the warrant and not legally subject to seizure.

Pamela Bichon, thirty-seven, separated, mother of a nine-year-old girl. Brutally murdered. Eviscerated. Her naked body found in a vacant house on Pony Bayou, spikes driven through the palms of her hands into the wood floor; her sightless eyes staring up at nothing through the slits of a feather Mardi Gras mask.

Case dismissed.

The crowd spilled from the Partout Parish Courthouse, past the thick Doric columns and down the broad steps, a buzzing swarm of humanity centering on the key figures of the drama that had played out in Judge Monahan's courtroom.

Smith Pritchett focused his narrow gaze on the navy blue Lincoln that awaited him at the curb and snapped off a staccato line of "no comments" to the frenzied press. Richard Kudrow, however, stopped his descent dead center on the steps.

Trouble was the word that came immediately to Annie Broussard as

the press began to circle the defense attorney and his client. Like every other deputy in the sheriff's office, she had hoped against hope that Kudrow would fail in his attempt to get the ring thrown out as evidence. They had all hoped Smith Pritchett would be the one crowing on the courthouse steps.

Sergeant Hooker's voice crackled over the portable radio. "Savoy, Mullen, Prejean, Broussard, move in front of those goddamn reporters. Establish some distance between the crowd and Kudrow and Renard before this turns into a goddamn cluster fuck."

Annie edged her way between bodies, her hand resting on the butt of her baton, her eyes on Marcus Renard as Kudrow began to speak. He stood beside his attorney, looking uncomfortable with the attention being focused on him. He wasn't a man to draw notice. Quiet, unassuming, an architect in the firm of Bowen & Briggs. Not ugly, not handsome. Thinning brown hair neatly combed and hazel eyes that seemed a little too big for their sockets. He stood with his shoulders stooped and his chest sunken, a younger shadow of his attorney. His mother stood on the step above him, a thin woman with a startled expression and a mouth as tight and straight as a hyphen.

"Some people will call this ruling a travesty of justice," Kudrow said loudly. "The only travesty of justice here has been perpetrated by the Partout Parish Sheriff's Department. Their *investigation* of my client has been nothing short of harassment. Two prior searches of Mr. Renard's home produced nothing that might tie him to the murder of Pamela Bichon."

"Are you suggesting the sheriff's department manipulated evidence?" a reporter called out.

"Mr. Renard has been the victim of a narrow and fanatical investigation led by Detective Nick Fourcade. Y'all are aware of Fourcade's record with the New Orleans Police Department, of the reputation he brought with him to this parish. Detective Fourcade *allegedly* found that ring in my client's home. Draw your own conclusions."

As she elbowed past a television cameraman, Annie could see Fourcade turning around, half a dozen steps down from Kudrow. The cameras focused on him hastily. His expression was a stone mask, his eyes hidden by a pair of mirrored sunglasses. A cigarette smoldered between his lips. His temper was a thing of legend. Rumors abounded throughout the department that he was not quite sane.

He said nothing in answer to Kudrow's insinuation, and yet the air

between them seemed to thicken. Anticipation held the crowd's breath. Fourcade pulled the cigarette from his mouth and flung it down, exhaling smoke through his nostrils. Annie took a half step toward Kudrow, her fingers curling around the grip of her baton. In the next heartbeat Fourcade was bounding up the steps—straight at Renard, shouting, "NO!"

"He'll kill him!" someone shrieked.

"Fourcade!" Hooker's voice boomed as the fat sergeant lunged after him, grabbing at and missing the back of his shirt.

"You killed her! You killed my baby girl!"

The anguished shouts tore from the throat of Hunter Davidson, Pamela Bichon's father, as he hurled himself down the steps at Renard, his eyes rolling, one arm swinging wildly, the other hand clutching a .45.

Fourcade knocked Renard aside with a beefy shoulder, grabbed Davidson's wrist, and shoved it skyward as the .45 barked out a shot and screams went up all around. Annie hit Davidson from the right side, her much smaller body colliding with his just as Fourcade threw his weight against the man from the left. Davidson's knees buckled and they all went down in a tangle of arms and legs, grunting and shouting, bouncing hard down the steps, Annie at the bottom of the heap. Her breath was pounded out of her as she hit the concrete steps with four hundred pounds of men on top of her.

"He killed her!" Hunter Davidson sobbed, his big body going limp. "He butchered my girl!"

Annie wriggled out from under him and sat up, grimacing. All she could think was that no physical pain could compare with what this man must have been enduring.

Swiping back the strands of dark hair that had pulled loose from her ponytail, she gingerly brushed over the throbbing knot on the back of her head. Her fingertips came away sticky with blood.

"Take this," Fourcade ordered in a low voice, thrusting Davidson's gun at Annie butt-first. Frowning, he leaned down over Davidson and put a hand on the man's shoulder even as Prejean snapped the cuffs on him. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I wish I coulda let you kill him."

Annie pushed to her feet and tried to straighten the bulletproof vest she wore beneath her shirt. Hunter Davidson was a good man.

An honest, hardworking planter who had put his daughter through college and walked her down the aisle the day she married Donnie Bichon. Her murder had shattered him, and the subsequent lack of justice had driven him to this desperate edge. And tonight Hunter Davidson would be the man sitting in jail while Marcus Renard slept in his own bed.

"Broussard!" Hooker snapped irritably, suddenly looming over her, porcine and ugly. "Gimme that gun. Don't just stand there gawking. Get down to that cruiser and open the goddamn doors."

"Yes, sir." Not quite steady on her feet, she started around the back side of the crowd.

With the danger past, the press was in full cry again, more frenzied than before. Renard's entourage had been hustled off the steps. The focus was on Davidson now. Cameramen jostled one another for shots of the despondent father. Microphones were thrust at Smith Pritchett.

"Will you file charges, Mr. Pritchett?"

"Will charges be filed, Mr. Pritchett?"

"Mr. Pritchett, what kind of charges will you file?"

Pritchett glared at them. "That remains to be seen. Please back away and let the officers do their job."

"Davidson couldn't get justice in court, so he sought to take it himself. Do you feel responsible, Mr. Pritchett?"

"We did the best we could with the evidence we had."

"Tainted evidence?"

"I didn't gather it," he snapped, starting back up the steps toward the courthouse, his face as pink as a new sunburn.

Limping, Annie descended the last of the steps and opened the back door of the blue and white cruiser sitting at the curb. Fourcade escorted the sobbing Davidson to the car, with Savoy and Hooker just behind them, and Mullen and Prejean flanking them. The crowd rushed along behind them and beside them like guests at a wedding seeing off the happy couple.

"You gonna book him in, Fourcade?" Hooker asked as Davidson disappeared into the backseat.

"The hell," Fourcade growled, slamming the door. "He didn't commit the worst crime here today. Not even if he'd'a killed the son of a bitch. Book him yourself."

The belligerence brought a rise of color to Hooker's face, but he

said nothing as Fourcade crossed the street to a battered black Ford 4X4, climbed in, and drove off in the opposite direction of the parish jail.

The sheriff would chew his ass later, Annie thought as she headed for her own radio car. But then a breach in procedure was the least of Fourcade's worries, and, if anything Richard Kudrow had said was true, the least of his sins.

“He’s guilty,” Nick declared. Ignoring the chair he had been offered, he prowled the cramped confines of the sheriff’s office, adrenaline burning inside him like a blue gas flame.

“Then why don’t we have squat on him, Nick?”

Sheriff August F. Noblier kept his seat behind his desk. Raw-boned and rough-edged, he was working hard to affect an air of calm and rationality, even though the concepts seemed to bounce right off Fourcade. Gus Noblier had ruled Partout Parish off and on for fifteen of his fifty-three years—three consecutive terms, one election lost to the vote hauling and assorted skullduggery of Duwayne Kenner, then a fourth victory. He loved the job. He was good at the job. Only in the last six months—since hiring Fourcade—had he found a sudden yen for antacid tablets.

“We had the damn ring,” Fourcade snapped, slicking his black hair back with one hand.

“You knew it wasn’t on the warrant. You had to know it’d get thrown out.”