

CALLING THE DEAD

by
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CHAPTER ONE

Save my baby.” Noel Benko sounded frantic just before she disappeared into the brown, murky water. “Please, Sept,” she pled again when her head popped up briefly, farther away, before the flood swallowed her, leaving no trace of her or her five-year-old daughter Sophie.

A few feet away Sept gulped air before plunging under again, trying desperately to find them both. The water had started out clear, so she could see Noel flailing against the current, her movements panicked, like she was fighting to get her head above the surface. Knowing her sister Noel had never learned to swim, Sept struggled harder to get to her. Only Sophie and her safety would have made Noel jump in at all.

No matter how hard Sept kicked, she couldn’t get any closer, and her lungs felt tight from being submerged so long. She kicked for the surface, and as she sucked in a breath she heard Sophie’s voice in the direction opposite from where Noel had disappeared.

“Come get me, Aunt Sept,” Sophie screamed, her little hands slapping the surface of the water. “I’m scared. Please, come get me.”

“Hold on, Sophie,” Sept said as loud as she could. She felt like she’d been treading water for hours, but she wasn’t any closer to Noel or Sophie.

“We’re here, Sept,” Noel said. Her voice sounded weak. “Why won’t you help us? I can’t do this by myself.”

Sept dove, trying to forget the ache in her chest, and finally almost reached her loved ones. They were floating peacefully, holding hands and smiling at her. They didn’t need to fight anymore, but Sept kept swimming so she could touch them.

Noel shook her head and lifted her free hand—not to stop her, but to wave good-bye. Just before Sept reached them, the serene picture of mother and child changed into one of grotesque bloated bodies that stared at her in disgust before they vanished into the water that had killed them.

Lieutenant Sept Savoie woke up in a sweat, bile in the back of her throat. The recurring nightmare was no easier to accept with time. Almost four months had passed since Noel and Sophie had died during Hurricane Katrina, but the pain of losing them was still fresh and heavy in her chest.

“Fuck,” Sept said as she poured two fingers of vodka from the bottle she kept in her freezer. She’d fallen asleep on the couch again, thinking the change of scenery would change her nightly sojourns to hell. The nightmare’s only reality was that Sophie and Noel had died alone, and no wishes or dreams would change that fact.

The smooth liquor left a warm trail from her throat to her stomach. She poured a splash more before she returned the bottle, not wanting to endure another lecture from her mama about how Grey Goose wasn’t a cure-all.

“You drinking yourself to death ain’t going to bring her back,” Sept said, imitating Camille Savoie. She finger-combed her white hair back impatiently, noting that she needed to get it cut.

The red numbers on the clock in her bedroom changed to 5:00 when she dropped her gun, badge, and cuffs on the bed. She tossed her shirt and pants into the hamper in the closet before she stepped into the shower. She wouldn’t be able to sleep. Work was the only place she could escape the dreams.

She ignored the suits that hung on the left side of the closet. The dress code had relaxed since *that day*, and because no one had said anything about her khakis and leather jacket, she pulled the next pair of pressed pants off the hanger.

Most New Orleanians referred to August twenty-ninth as *that day*, probably to keep from cursing or crying—depending on what they’d lost, or who. Hurricane Katrina had changed everything, from the old neighborhoods to the people whose lives she’d wrecked when the levees broke. As Sept drove through the French Quarter, she likened it to ordering gumbo and being served hot water. Katrina had scattered the ingredients that made New Orleans unique.

Some characters were already out at this hour. It'd take time before the Big Easy shook off her beating and returned to the business of being simply New Orleans.

"What the hell you doing back here already?" Royce Belanger, French Quarter Bureau Chief of Detectives, asked Sept as she dropped into her office chair. A twenty-two-year veteran of the force, he displayed the stress of the job in his hair and his waistline. The small potbelly had more to do with his love of food than beer, and his light brown hair now resembled a laurel wreath, but Royce's smile hadn't changed much.

"Couldn't sleep." She flipped through her messages, sorting them into two piles. "What's your excuse?"

"I got tired of my wife bitchin' about the mold on the walls I haven't gotten around to ripping out yet." Royce sat down next to her desk and scratched his stomach. "It's not like I've fucking forgotten there's mold on the walls. Hell, some of it's so colorful I think I'll leave it as a conversation piece."

"You ought to get the place gutted as soon as possible." Sept finished categorizing her messages and sat back. "If you have to live in that FEMA trailer too much longer, one of you isn't going to make it."

"I complain a lot about my wife, but I wouldn't lay a hand on her."

"Who the hell said anything about you? My money's on her," Sept said, and laughed. Royce looked at her with what she'd describe as nostalgia. Laughing wasn't something she did much anymore.

"Sept, heads up, you got a visitor," the cop at the desk yelled. Their precinct house was one of the few not working out of a trailer, so nothing much had changed except that the equipment wasn't all up and running, including the intercom system. The place hadn't flooded, but the old roof had let a lot of rainwater redecorate the walls and the wiring.

Sept pressed her fingernails into her palm, her habitual reaction whenever she saw Damien Benko now.

She had attended the academy with Damien, and after a year of riding a beat with more seasoned cops, they'd even partnered together. Not long after that she'd taken him home for Sunday dinner because her family wanted to meet her partner, so Sept had finally given in.

Damien hadn't noticed Sept's mama's cooking as much as her sister Noel, with her easy charm. After that he became a fixture at the

Savoie table on more than just Sunday afternoons. He kept coming around until Noel agreed to marry him, continuing a Savoie family tradition of either becoming a cop or marrying one.

When Sept got her gold shield, she left Damien behind, but that was okay with him. He was happy patrolling the streets and going home to Noel and Sophie every afternoon. He had decided for Noel and Sophie not to evacuate. He'd told them to stay put so he wouldn't worry about them, using the same rationale that so many in the city had.

"Our house didn't flood during Betsy," Sept could hear him saying when she asked where he'd sent Noel to ride out the storm. Hurricane Betsy—the storm that had hit New Orleans in the mid-sixties—had forever become the marker for so many, including a lot who weren't even alive when Betsy came ashore. The false assumption that if a house hadn't flooded then it wouldn't flood now had caused the tragedy the rest of the country watched on television.

Damien's decision had cost them all dearly. The day the levees broke, Sept and her brothers Gustave and Joel made it to their sister's house by boat and discovered only the hole that Noel had cut so she and Sophie could climb out of the attic and onto the roof. When they didn't find them, they thought a more zealous rescuer had beaten them there. Their sense of dread blossomed when they spotted the neighbors huddled together on the next roof.

The man who had gotten his family to safety on his rooftop told them that, after sitting next to her mother for hours, Sophie had wandered to the edge, and their shouts had woken Noel from the light sleep she had succumbed to. Noel and her neighbor had jumped in after Sophie, but he lost both of them in the strong current of the floodwaters.

Sept and her family didn't blame Damien for what happened, but he tested Sept's patience every time she had to see or deal with him. She hadn't yet forgiven him as fully as her parents had. Her head knew Damien would change what had happened if he could, but the loss of her sister had left a void in her heart, and for that she fully blamed Damien.

The door into the bullpen buzzed, and Damien shambled around and moved slowly toward her desk. His once-handsome face appeared haggard and wan, and his clothes and hair were disheveled. As Sept stared at him she thought about the lecture Noel would have given him for appearing in public like this.

“What you doing out this early?” Royce asked him.

“Just walking,” Damien said, so low they had to strain to hear him. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“You’re not taking the pills the doctor sent you?” Sept asked.

“I start taking pills and they won’t let me go back to work,” he said, louder. “And I want to come back. If I have to stare at the walls of that trailer much longer, I’m going to lose it.”

Sept and Royce glanced at each other briefly but kept quiet. It’d be a while before Damien would be cleared for duty. The house, his wife, and his daughter were gone, and no amount of gutting and cleaning were going to make his life whole again. When Sept and her brothers had gotten back from the flooded house without Noel and Sophie, Damien had snapped.

After that he had been on leave until he could demonstrate some level of stability. Everyone handled grief differently, and while Sept had thrown herself into work to forget, Damien had locked himself away in the trailer the government had given him and stared at the hole in his roof for hours on end. These rare visits occurred when he could no longer take the loneliness.

“If you want to get out more, that means you’re getting better,” Sept finally said. She wanted to avoid him, but thought about what Noel would’ve wanted. “Why don’t you accept the department’s counseling offer? Talking about it can only speed up the process.”

“You think the guys would ever take me seriously again if I go see some shrink?”

“Most of the guys on duty are in counseling, and they’ve just lost their houses. You’ve got a bigger load than that.” Sept’s words only made him shake his head, and she didn’t see any sense in pushing him and making it worse. “Come on then, let me take you home.”

“I don’t need your help,” Damien said, sounding frustrated. “Sorry, didn’t mean to yell. I just wanted to stop by, but I want to walk some more.”

“Let me drive you. You know Mama wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’ll walk.” Damien got up and bunched his coat together in front and lifted his hand in a brief wave before he hurried out, as if he was afraid Sept would try to stop him.

“He’s not getting any better,” Royce said.

“He refuses any help from any of us no matter how often we try, and my mama’s tried harder than anyone.”

“Camille’s a good woman,” Royce said, and pointed to the picture on Sept’s desk. The Savoies were almost legendary. “That’s the way she’s wired. She can’t help but worry and want to help—you and your dad and brothers have made it so.”

Their history had begun with Eulin Savoie patrolling the streets in the 1940s, when he was kept busy with organized crime and the less classy remnants of the famous red-light district of Storyville with its multitude of brothels.

His son Sebastian followed him into a patrol car in the 1960s, when the city was electrified with the hunt for John F. Kennedy’s assassin. Sebastian married into another cop family, and he and Camille Falgout raised their seven children while Sebastian’s career in the police department took off until he became the chief of detectives.

With five sons and their youngest daughter, Sept, on the job, Camille had plenty to worry about. The only one who hadn’t gone into law enforcement was Noel, but she’d married a cop and followed her mother’s path.

“Mama just needs something to take her mind off all the stuff she doesn’t want to face,” Sept said. “She can’t fix Damien or what happened with a pot of gumbo, but she tries, bless her heart, so she doesn’t have to think about how empty her kitchen is now that Noel’s no longer around.”

“Are you sure she isn’t the only one who doesn’t want to forget about what happened?” Royce asked. “Why don’t you take the advice you gave Damien?”

“You saying I need therapy?” Sept laughed at the absurd notion. “What I need is a new partner.”

“Just think about it.” Royce stood and put his hand on her shoulder. “And I’ve got a lead on a partner. Your pop reassigned some kid named Nathan Blackman off patrol. Sebastian thought he’s got potential and you’d be a good trainer.”

“I’m getting someone green?”

“I’m green, but I’m eager,” Nathan said from the door, then flashed a smile that Sept figured most women fell for, when you added his blond hair and green eyes into the mix. “Everyone has to start somewhere, right?”

Royce laughed but Sept didn't crack a smile. The storm had driven a lot of cops, including her old partner, to quit for a multitude of reasons. He'd turned in his badge for a sledgehammer and started a business gutting houses.

Sept's phone rang and she started taking notes as she listened to the person on the other end. "Okay, just make sure you rope off the area until we get there."

"Catch something?" Royce asked.

"Patrol found some guy laid out behind the Dumpster at Blanchard's bleeding from a few holes in his chest. The order came from downtown for us to take it."

"Take Blackman with you," Royce said, and rapped his knuckles on her desk before he stood up. "No time like now to get used to each other. Keep me in the loop. The chief is riding our ass about preventing crime, since the world's watching us. And if they've already gotten word on this, they'll want it wrapped up by noon."

"No pressure, then," Sept said.