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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *RAZORBLADE TEARS*

A NOVEL

ALL THE SINNERS BLEED

**ALL THE
SINNERS
BLEED**

S. A. COSBY



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To my brother, Darrell Cosby. What we know only
we could ever know.

The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not
necessary; men alone are quite capable of every
wickedness.

—JOSEPH CONRAD

Behold, I make all things new.

—REVELATION 21:5

Charon County

Charon County was founded in bloodshed and darkness.

Literally and figuratively.

Even the name is enveloped in shadows and morbidity. Legend has it the name of the county was supposed to be Charlotte or Charles County, but the town elders waited too late and those names were already taken by the time they decided to incorporate their fledgling encampment. As the story goes, they just moved their finger down the list of names until they settled on Charon. Those men, weathered as whiteleather with hands like splitting mauls, bestowed the name on their new town with no regard to its macabre nature. Or perhaps they just liked the name because a river flowed through the county and emptied into the Chesapeake like the River Styx.

Who knows? Who could know the thoughts of those long-dead men?

What is known is that in 1805 in the dead of night a group of white landowners, chafing at the limits of their own manifest destiny, set fire to the last remaining indigenous village on the teardrop-shaped peninsula that would become Charon County.

Those who escaped the flames were brought down by muskets with no regard to age, gender, or infirmity. That was the first of many tragedies in the history of Charon. The cannibalism of the winter of 1853. The malaria outbreak of 1901. The United Daughters of the Confederacy picnic poisoning of 1935. The Danforth family murder-suicide of 1957. The tent revival baptismal drownings of 1968, and on and on. The soil of Charon County, like most towns and counties in the South, was sown with generations of tears. They were places where violence and mayhem were celebrated as the pillars of a pioneering spirit every Founders' Day in the county square.

Blood and tears. Violence and mayhem. Love and hate. These were the rocks upon which the South was built. They were the foundation upon which Charon County stood.

If you had an occasion to ask some of the citizens of Charon, most of them would tell you those things were in the past. That they had been washed away by the river of time that flows ever forward. They might even say those things should be forgotten and left to the ages.

But if you had asked Sheriff Titus Crown, he would have said that anyone who believed that was a fool or a liar. Or both. And if you had an occasion to speak with him after that long October, he would have told you that maybe the foundation of Charon was rotten and fetid and full of corruption, not only corruption of the flesh but of the soul. That maybe the rocks the South was built upon were shifting and splitting like the stone Moses struck with his staff. But instead of water, only blood and ichor would come pouring forth.

He might touch the scars on his face or his chest absentmindedly and lock eyes with you and say in that harsh whisper that was now his speaking voice:

"The South doesn't change. You can try to hide the past, but it comes back in ways worse than the way it was before. Terrible ways."

He might sigh and look away and say:

"The South doesn't change ... just the names and the dates and the faces. And sometimes even those don't change, not really. Sometimes it's the same day and the same faces waiting for

you when you close your eyes.

“Waiting for you in the dark...”

ONE

Titus woke up five minutes before his alarm went off at 7:00 A.M. and made himself a cup of coffee in the Keurig Darlene had gotten him last Christmas. At the time she'd given it to him he'd thought it was an expensive gift for a relationship that was barely four months old. These days, Titus had to admit it was a damn good gift that he was grateful to have.

He'd gotten her a bottle of perfume.

He almost winced thinking back on it. If knowing your lover was a competition, Darlene was a gold medalist. Titus didn't even qualify for the bronze. Over the last ten months he'd forced himself to get exponentially better in the gift-giving department.

Titus sipped his coffee.

His last girlfriend before Darlene had said he was a great boyfriend but was awful at relationships. He didn't dispute that assessment.

Titus took another sip.

He heard the stairs creak as his father made his way down to the kitchen. That mournful cry of ancient wood had gotten him and Marquis in trouble on more than one late Friday night until Titus stopped staying out late and Marquis stopped coming home.

"Hey, while you standing there in your boxers, make me one of them there fancy cups out that machine," Albert Crown said. Titus watched his father limp over to the kitchen table and ease himself down into one of their vinyl-covered metal chairs that would drive a hipster interior designer mad with nouveau retro euphoria. It had been a year since his father's hip replacement and Albert still walked with a studied caution. He stubbornly refused to use a cane, but Titus saw the way his smooth brown face twisted into tight Gordian knots when a rainstorm blew in off the bay or when the temperature started to drop like a lead sinker.

Albert Crown had made his living on that bay for forty years, hauling in crab pots six days a week, fourteen hours a day off the shore of Piney Island on boats owned by folks who barely saw him as a man. No insurance, no 401(k), but all those backbreaking days and the frugality of Titus's mother had allowed them to build a three-bedroom house on Preach Neck Road. They were the only family, Black or white, that had a house on an actual foundation. Envy had crossed the color lines and united their neighbors as the house rose from the forest of mobile homes that surrounded it like a rose among weeds.

"When we retire, we can sit on the front step in matching rocking chairs and wave to Patsy Jones as she drives by rolling her eyes," Titus's mother Helen had told his father at the kitchen table one night during one of those rare weekends his father wasn't out gallivanting down at the Watering Hole or Grace's Place.

Titus put a cup in the Keurig, slid a pod in the filter, and set the timer.

But, like so many things in life, his mother's gently petty retirement plan was not meant to be. She died long before she could ever retire from the Cunningham Flag Factory. Patsy Jones was still driving by and rolling her eyes, though.

"Which one you put in there?" Albert asked. He opened the newspaper and started running his finger over the pages. Titus could see his lips move ever so slightly. His mother had been the more adventurous reader, but his father never let the sun set on the day without going through the newspaper.

"Hazelnut. The only one you like," Titus said.

Albert chuckled. "Don't you tell that girl that. She got us that value pack. That was nice of her." He licked his finger and turned the page. As soon as he did, he sucked his teeth and grunted.

"Them rebbish boys don't never let up, do they? Now they gonna have a goddamn parade for that statue. Them boys just mad somebody finally had the nerve to tell them they murdering traitor of a granddaddy won't shit," Albert spat.

"Ricky Sours and them Sons of the Confederacy boys been knocking down the door of my office for the past two weeks," Titus said. He took another sip.

"What for?" Albert asked.

"They wanna make sure the sheriff's office will 'fulfill its duties and

maintain crowd control' in case any protesters show up. You know, since Ricky is Caucasian, I'm biased against them because of my 'cultural background,'" Titus said. He kept his voice flat and even, the way he'd learned in the Bureau, but he caught his father's eyes over the top of the newspaper.

Albert shook his head. "That Sours boy wouldn't have said that to Ward Bennings. Hell, Ward would've probably marched with 'em with his star on his chest. 'Cultural background.' Shit. He means cuz you a Black man and he a racist. Lord, son, I don't know how you do it sometimes," Albert said.

"Easy. I just imagine Sherman kicking their murderous traitorous great-granddaddies in the teeth. That's my Zen," Titus said. His voice stayed flat, but Albert burst out laughing.

"Down at the store last Friday, Linwood Lassiter asked one of the boys with the sticker on his truck why don't they put a statue to ... what's that boy name? The one with them eggs?" Albert said.

"Benedict Arnold?" Titus offered.

"Yeah, build a statue to that boy, since they like traitors so goddamn much. That boy said something about heritage and history and Linwood said all right, how about a statue to Nat Turner? That boy got in his truck and spun tires and rolled coal on us. But he didn't have an answer," Albert said.

Titus narrowed his eyes. "You get a license plate number? What the truck look like?"

"Nah, we was too busy laughing. It looks like every truck them kind of boys drive. Jacked up to the sky and not a lick of dirt in the bed. They do them trucks just like some of them fellas that come up on the bay in them big fancy boats but don't never catch no fish. Use a workingman's tools for toys," Albert said.

Titus finished his coffee. He rinsed out the cup and set it in the sink.

"They don't care about Benedict Arnold, Pop. He didn't hate the same people they do. I'm gonna go get dressed. I'm on till nine. There's still some beef stew left from Sunday in the refrigerator. You can have that for supper," Titus said.

"Boy, I ain't so old I can't make my own supper. Who taught you how to cook anyway?" Albert asked.

Titus felt a tight smile work its way across his face. "You did," he said.

But, Titus thought, not until Mama had been in the ground and you'd finally found Jesus.

"Damn right. I mean, I'll probably eat the stew, but I can still turn up something in the kitchen," Albert said with a wink. Titus shook his head and headed for the stairs.

"Maybe I'll get some oysters and we can put some fire to that old grill this weekend. Get your trifling brother to come over," Albert said as Titus put his foot on the first step. Titus stiffened for a moment before continuing up the stairs. Marquis wasn't coming over this or any other weekend. The fact that his father still clung to the idea was at various times depressing and infuriating. Marquis worked for himself as a self-taught carpenter. He stayed on the other side of the county in the Windy River Trailer Park, but he might as well have been in Nepal. Even though he made his own hours, they could go months without seeing him. In a place as small as Charon County, that was a dubious achievement.

Titus went into his bedroom and opened his closet. His everyday clothes were on wire hangers on the left. His uniforms were on wooden hangers on the right. He didn't refer to his everyday clothes as his "civilian" wardrobe. That gave his uniforms a level of militarization he didn't like. His everyday clothes were color-coordinated and hung in alphabetical order. Blacks first, then blues, then reds, then so on. Darlene had once commented that he was the most organized man she'd ever met. His shoes were ordered in the exact same manner. Kellie, his former girlfriend from his time in Indiana, used to rearrange his clothes whenever she spent the night. She said she did it for his own good.

"Gotta loosen you up, Virginia. You're wound too tight, one day you're gonna snap. I'm trying to help you with your mental health," she'd say.

Titus thought she did it because she knew he hated it. She knew they would argue about it and she also knew they'd make up, furiously.

He let out a sigh.

Kellie was the past. Darlene was his present. And despite what Faulkner said, that part of his life was done. Best to leave it where he'd left it.

He pushed his regular clothes to the left. His uniforms were all on the right side of the closet. They were all the same color. Deep brown shirt, lighter tan brown pants with a dark brown stripe down the leg. He had two

bulletproof vests that hung at the far right of the closet. Two pairs of black leather shoes sat on the floor. A brown tricorne hat sat on a shelf. Darlene called it his “Smokey the Bear” hat.

“Because you’re my big ol’ bear,” she’d said one night as she lay across his chest. Her fingers playing across the scar on his chest like a pianist playing the scales. The scar was a gift, of sorts, from Red DeCrain, white supremacist, Christian nationalist, militia leader, and for seven minutes a wannabe martyr.

Those seven minutes had changed all their lives. Titus’s, Red’s, and those of Red’s wife and his three sons, who all had been outfitted with grenade vests. The youngest boy had only been seven years old. His vest had hung loose on his shoulders like a hoodie he’d borrowed from one of his brothers. When he’d pulled that pin his face had been as blank as a sheet of notebook paper.

Then it had—

“Stop it,” he said out loud to no one. He rubbed his face with both hands. The shrapnel from the explosions had left that question-mark-shaped burn scar on his belly. The scars on his soul were not visible but were no less horrific.

Titus put on his uniform in an oft-practiced ritual that calmed him. First he put on the vest and strapped it in place. Then he grabbed his shirt. Then a brown necktie that hung next to its two brothers on a hook on the inside of the closet door. Next were his pants, then his shoes. He went to his nightstand, opened the drawer, and grabbed his service belt. He cinched it tight before grabbing the key from the nightstand and carefully dropping to his haunches. A sheriff couldn’t be seen in his county with wrinkled pants. A Black sheriff had to have an extra pair of pants in his office just in case.

He pulled a metal box from under the bed, unlocked the box, and retrieved his service pistol. The county would only pay for a Smith & Wesson nine-millimeter. Titus wanted something with more stopping power. He’d purchased the SIG Sauer P320 out of his own pocket. It was the same sidearm the Virginia State Police used. He checked the clip and the chamber before sliding it in the holster. There were two pairs of mirrored sunglasses on top of the nightstand. Titus grabbed one pair and slipped them in his shirt pocket. His radio was on top of the nightstand next to the sunglasses. He picked it up and clipped the transponder to his

belt and the mic to his collar.

Lastly, he reached in the drawer and grabbed his badge. He pinned it to his shirt above his left pocket and headed down the stairs.

Albert was still sitting at the table, but now the newspaper was gone. In its place was an envelope bearing Titus's name.

"What's that?" Titus asked, even though he was pretty sure he already knew.

"It's been one year. Reverend Jackson said last Sunday it was still a miracle worth praising. Who knew Ward Bennings getting hit by a logging truck would mean the first Black sheriff of Charon County would win the special election?" Albert said.

Titus picked up the envelope. He tore it open with his thumbnail. A greeting card with a comical penguin holding a devilish pitchfork was on the front. On the inside, an inscription read:

GUESS HELL REALLY FROZE OVER, YOU TWO ARE STILL TOGETHER! HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

Titus raised his eyebrows.

"Walmart didn't have a card for being proud of your son for being the first Black sheriff this county ever had. But I am proud. My boy back home and changing things. You don't know how much seeing you in that uniform means to people, Titus. If you mama was here, she'd be proud too," Albert said, his voice breaking around the edges. Titus's mother had been gone for twenty-three years and yet the mere mention of her still wrung heartache from his father like water from a washcloth.

Would she be so proud if she knew what had happened in Northern Indiana at the DeCrain compound? I don't think so, Titus thought. No, I don't think she'd be proud at all.

"Not all our people are proud. But thanks for the card, Pop," Titus said.

"You talking about that Addison boy over at the New Wave church? *Pssh*, ain't nobody thinking about that boy. He thinks Jesus wears blue jeans," Albert said. It was the worst insult his Pentecostal Baptist father who wore his best suit every Sunday could utter in reference to the dreadlocked New Age minister.

"He's doing good work over at that church, Pop," Titus said.

"You call that place a church? It sounds like a juke joint when you drive past," Albert said.

"You don't? Anyway, Jamal Addison ain't the only person who thinks

I'm an Uncle Tom," Titus said with a rueful smile.

"Well, Reverend Jackson always preaching about being aware of false prophets," Albert said.

Titus thought that was ironic but didn't say anything.

"You know, it would be nice if you came to a service once in a while. Don't nobody at church think you no damn Uncle Tom," Albert said. "They worked hard for you, Titus. I'm just saying." The amount and depth of his gratitude to Emmanuel Baptist Church for their support of his surprise campaign was a conversation his father kept trying to have and Titus kept trying to avoid. Not because he wasn't grateful. He was well aware it was the support of congregations like Emmanuel that propelled him to the sheriff's office. Along with an influx of liberal-minded latter-day hippies and good ol' boys and girls who hated Ward Bennings's son Cooter more than they distrusted the former football hero and FBI agent. A rare coalition that wouldn't come together again for a generation. But now everyone had their hands out. His father's church was no different. He knew that the support of his father's congregation came with conditions that he wasn't inclined to meet. Never mind the fact that he hadn't attended an actual church service since he was fifteen. He'd stopped going about the same time his father had started. Two years after his mother had died.

"I'll let you know, Pop. It's the week before Fall Fest. You know that's gonna be busy for me," Titus lied. Fall Fest was mainly an excuse for the citizens of Charon County to get drunk and dance in the street before slipping off to some dark corner of the courthouse green for a whiskey-soaked kiss from a lover. Either theirs or someone else's.

Albert was about to press his case further when Titus's radio crackled to life.

"Titus, come in!"

The voice on the radio was his dispatcher, Cam Trowder. Cam worked the morning shift and the other dispatcher, Kathy Miller, worked at night. Cam was one of the few holdovers from the previous administration.

He was an Iraq War vet who was calm under pressure, who also possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of every road and dirt lane in the county. Despite those impressive credentials, Cam's most important attribute was proximity. He lived less than a mile from the sheriff's office. He never missed a day, come rain or shine. His all-terrain electric

wheelchair could get up to twenty miles per hour. Cam had souped it up himself with help from a YouTube video and some PDFs he'd downloaded off the internet. The man was nothing if not determined.

That was why the sheer hopelessness that seeped from his voice and came spilling out of the radio set Titus's nerves on edge.

"Go ahead for Titus," he said after he depressed the talk button.

"Titus ... there's an active shooter at the high school. Titus, I'm getting a hundred calls a minute here. I think ... I ... think ... Titus, my nephew's there," Cam said. He sounded strange. Titus realized he was crying.

"Cam, call all units. Have them converge on the high school!" Titus shouted into his mic.

"My nephew is there," Cam said.

"Call all units! Do it now!"

Cam groaned, but when his voice came through the speaker this time it was smooth and resolute.

"Got it, Chief. Calling all units. Active shooter at Jefferson Davis High School. Repeat, active shooter at Jefferson Davis High School."

Titus dropped the greeting card and sprinted for the door.

"What's going on?" Albert called after him as he barreled out the back door.

But the only answer he got was the sound of the screen door slamming against the jamb as the autumn wind caught it in its chilly grip.

Titus was already gone.

TWO

There is a sense of chaos that can seem to move with its own order. When a chaotic situation becomes rote, there are certain patterns that emerge from the repetition.

As Titus came screaming into the parking lot of Jefferson Davis High on two wheels, he observed these distinct behaviors as they unfolded like an origami sculpture moving in reverse.

Students and teachers were pouring out from every point of egress of the huge brick building. They were running out the front door. They were slipping out the side doors. They were jumping from the windows. Some had slipped out the back through a metal roll-up door that was the exit and entrance for Mr. Herndon's auto mechanics class. The tide of students and teachers poured past and around his car like a river passing over and around a stone. Their faces were etchings from a Francis Bacon painting, shadowed by a memory that ten years from now would make them burst into tears at a baby shower, in the middle of the grocery store, after watching a commercial for an exercise bike.

This was the first part of the chaos of this particular type of event. The unrelenting atavistic panic that sprang forth from the deep recesses of the animal part of our brains. Fight or flight went from an abstract concept in health class to a necessary component of survival.

Titus hopped out of his SUV with his gun drawn. The screams of the children were like a storm cloud moving east to west. Their cries were thunderclaps that shook him down to his heels. He looked to his left and saw two of his deputies drive over a shallow ditch that ran parallel to the front lawn of the school. Davy Hildebrandt was driving one patrol car and Roger Simmons was in the other. Carla Ortiz was just seconds behind them in the D.A.R.E. van she drove to the middle and elementary schools. Roger hopped out carrying a riot gun. Davy had his sidearm drawn. Carla

had hers as well. Roger was running toward the crowd of teenagers. He was holding the gun by the stock with the barrel pointing toward the sea of bodies coming toward him like a rogue wave.

“Roger, gun up! Gun up!” Titus yelled. Roger stopped and stared at him. He blinked hard, then looked down at his hands. Titus saw him tremble like he’d taken a shot of whiskey, then he raised the gun so the shortened barrel was pointing up in the air.

“Davy! Get everyone across the road! Across the road!” Titus screamed. Davy holstered his gun and started waving to the kids and the teachers and began herding them across the road into a pasture that belonged to Oakfield Farms. A few Angus cows grazed haphazardly in the field. They seemed nonplussed despite the screams of terror echoing through the crisp early morning air.

“What do we do, boss?” Carla asked. She’d sliced her way through the crowd and was standing at Titus’s side. Titus saw a red pickup truck with an emergency light attached to the roof come flying into the parking lot. Tom Sadler was in the truck. He was off today but must have heard the call on his scanner. There were only a few more members of the Charon County Sheriff’s Office that weren’t here today.

Titus prayed they wouldn’t need them. He prayed the shooter didn’t have an AR-15 or an AK-47 or some other machine designed to deal out death in bunches like a spreader tossing seeds.

“We move in and clear the building,” Titus said. He grabbed his mic. “Davy, get Tom to watch the crowd. You come on back and help us clear the scene. You got your vest on?”

The radio crackled when Davy responded. “Sure do. I’ll get Tom.”

“Come on with it, Davy,” Titus said. He motioned for Carla to follow him as he began to move through the stragglers and headed for the school.

“He shot Mr. Spearman!” a slight blond girl said. Titus registered she was Daisy Matthews’s daughter. He’d graduated with Daisy. Her name was ...

“Lisa, get across the road!” Carla yelled.

“Who shot Mr. Spearman? What does he look like, Lisa?” Titus asked.

Lisa turned her head and gazed at him like she’d just noticed his six-foot-two frame had appeared. “I ... I ... don’t know. He was wearing a mask. He shot him in the face. Oh my God, he shot Mr. Spearman!” Lisa’s eyes were as wide as tractor wheels. She wasn’t crying, but her face was

pulsatingly red. Titus knew the tears would come later. Either tears or screams in the night.

“Was he tall? Taller than me? What about his clothes? What was he wearing?” Titus said.

Lisa closed her eyes and fell against Carla. “I don’t know!” she screamed into Carla’s shoulder.

Titus took a breath. He realized he had been yelling. A deep-voiced police officer yelling in your face never produced pertinent information. He knew this, preached about this to his deputies, and yet he’d done it anyway.

Titus touched his mic.

“Suspect is wearing a mask. That’s all we got. Let’s move in,” Titus said.

“Honey, I’m gonna need you to go across the road, okay?” Carla said as gently as she could. Lisa didn’t respond but took off for the pasture like a startled gazelle.

“Okay. Let’s go,” Titus said.

This was the other half of the tradition born from chaos that resembles order. Guns drawn, men and women walking toward a man, it’s almost always a man, with his own gun drawn, the barrel still hot from spraying a classroom or a theater or an office full of cubicles with chunks of lead in steel jackets moving at twenty-six hundred feet per second.

Titus felt his stomach tighten so hard and so fast it was like a cramp. His breath was slow and steady, but his head was pounding. The wind picked up and cooled the sweat wicking into his collar. Rays of sunlight reflecting off the windows were muted by his sunglasses as he moved forward. His feet crunched across the asphalt. The sound was polyphonic in his ears. To his right Carla was taking deep sharp breaths. To his left Davy was emitting a sort of keening noise like a bleating lamb. Roger was taking point. Titus could see the muscles in his thick shoulders knotted up like coils of deck rope.

In the past fifteen years Charon County had notched exactly two murders. One was solved in fifteen minutes when Alice Lowney confessed to stabbing her husband, Walter, with a pitchfork after she’d caught him sleeping with their next-door neighbor Ezra Collins, Pip’s cousin. The other one was unsolved, and if Ward Bennings’s file notes were to be believed it would remain that way for time immemorial. The victim had

been a white male, age twenty-one to forty-five, found sliced in neat sections inside a suitcase that had washed up on Fiddler's Beach. Conventional wisdom said the remains had come in from the Chesapeake Bay on a strange tide that wouldn't come again. Folks liked to say Charon wasn't a place where terrible things like that happened with any regularity.

Titus thought folks had short memories.

Charon's recent history was indeed relatively quiet, but the past held horrors and terrors that had moved into the realm of legend. His father would sometimes share a quote from one of Reverend Jackson's fire-and-brimstone sermons and say that Charon was long overdue for a season of pain. Titus didn't think Gideon had the gift of prescience, but he did believe in the rise and fall of time. That what had happened before would happen again. The wheel spins and spins and eventually it lands on the same number it landed on twenty, thirty, forty years ago. No matter what they found inside the school, the season of peace had passed. Now the season of pain had returned, on his watch.

They were about fifty feet from the front steps of the school when the doors opened and a man carrying a leather mask with a wolf's snout in his left hand and cradling a .30-30 like a newborn in the crook of his right arm walked out onto the top step. The man wore a weathered black peacoat buttoned in the middle and dirty blue jeans. His hair was twisted into fuzzy cornrows that needed to be redone. His mouth was frozen in a grimace that seemed to take over his whole face.

For a moment the world was calm again. The sounds of the crowd were snatched out of the air by the breeze. It was just the morning sun, the blue sky, and this man that Titus recognized peering down at them.

"Latrell, put down the gun!" Titus roared. The time for the inside voice had passed. Latrell turned his head toward Titus. The fact that five police officers had five guns pointed at him didn't seem to disturb him at all. His smooth brown face was eerily calm despite a golf-ball-sized bruise on his right cheek. Pupils the size of pinpricks assessed Titus with a profound impassiveness. Titus figured it was the effect of either Oxy or heroin. Both were plentiful in Charon despite his best efforts. Latrell was here and not here. He looked like a toddler who had escaped the watchful eyes of his parents and who did not yet know he was in fact lost.

Titus knew Latrell's parents. Calvin and Dorothy Macdonald. He'd gone to school with Calvin. He and Calvin and Patrick Tines and Big