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**A DAVE ROBICHEAUX NOVEL**

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# CLETE

A DAVE ROBICHEAUX NOVEL

**JAMES LEE  
BURKE**



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*To Nils and Amy Lofgren*

*Thanks for your years of support and the beauty of your music and the spirituality I believe you brought with you from the spheres.*

*Keep it in that old-time E-Street E major. We don't care what people say, rock and roll is here to stay.*

*Your friend forever,*

*James Lee Burke*

# CHAPTER ONE

This story about Louisiana happened in the late nineties, before Katrina and before the Towers, when my podjo Dave Robicheaux and I were splitting our time between New Orleans and New Iberia, down on the Gulf, in the heart of Dixie, where it's seventy-two degrees on Christmas Day.

Southern Louisiana is heaven, as long as you keep one eye closed and don't dwell on the corruption that's a way of life here. Louisiana is a state of mind, more like the Baths of Caracalla without the moral restraint. One of our politicians said we should put the Exxon flag on the capitol building. I don't know one person who thought that unreasonable. Our politicians are modeled more on the leaders of Guatemala than on Thomas Jefferson. Dave Robicheaux said a love affair with Louisiana is like falling in love with the Great Whore of Babylon. I said, yeah, but what a party.

Dave definitely did not like that remark, calling it crude and simplistic. Dave should have been a priest instead of a cop, and as a result he has made a mess of his life, and people like me have had to protect him from himself.

But I don't mind. I love Dave and I don't care who knows it. We were both in Shitsville and joined the NOPD at the same time and as rookies walked a beat together on Canal and in the French Quarter, bouncing our batons on the curb, the warm smell of Lake Pontchartrain in the wind, the clouds as pink as flamingos in a blue sky. By 10:00 p.m. we would end up at the Café Du Monde, across from Jackson Square, drinking café au lait and eating a sack of beignets, never talking about Shitsville.

We didn't have to. We had the same nightmares. When you come home from a war, you don't get a free pass. The same images hide in your head until you go to sleep. Here's the strip of film that gets loose behind your eyes: A column strung out on a night trail, the rain pattering on everybody's poncho and steel pot, the foliage dripping, green and dark and hot, heat



lightning racing through the clouds without sound, then somebody on point snaps a trip wire and detonates a 105 dud. The explosion is like a sliver of glass in your eardrum. Somebody is yelling his guts out on the ground, and somebody else is yelling for a corpsman. Then you hear the droning of helicopters or the malarial buzzing of mosquitoes in your blood or the Gatling guns rattling or a door gunner strafing a rice paddy in a free-fire zone, all these things at once, all the sounds interchangeable, and when you awake you go immediately to the icebox, your hand shaking on the first bottle you can pull out.

But enough with Sir Charles and the NVA and memories of Shitsville. Dave's and my histories with NOPD turned out dramatically different. Dave never dishonored his badge, and I did. I took juice from the Mob and accidentally popped a federal witness and had to blow the Big Sleazy and join up with the leftists in El Sal. I also worked for the greaseballs in Las Vegas and Reno and up in Montana, where they tried to build a couple of Nevada-style casinos on Flathead Lake, which would have turned their state into a toilet.

Regarding the latter, an airplane packed with wiseguys crashed into the side of a mountain not far from the lake. Their remains had to be combed out of the trees with garden rakes. Then somebody spread a rumor there was sand in the fuel tanks. I thought it was a good opportunity to take a cruise up to Alaska and maybe later open a PI business back in the Big Sleazy.

So that's what I did. But as I write these words, I want you to understand something. The subculture of law enforcement and parole and probation and bail bondsmen and shyster lawyers and private investigators is a sewer, one where the pervs outnumber the normals. Actually, I don't know if the normals exist. I live with a slapjack, a .38 Special snub, and a badge holder on my kitchen counter. What that signifies is I blew my career as a real cop and became a lush and developed ulcers and a liver that probably looks like an eggplant. I also worked for people who turned my stomach. I also had a difficult relationship with the cops I once called friends at NOPD. I couldn't blame them, but I have to say it hurt.

This story starts at a car wash, can you believe that?

###

When I had the money, I always drove a Caddy convertible with fins and a rolled-leather interior. Of course, I didn't make a great deal of money, so I usually ended up with a junker I rebuilt. Then I got a real deal on a 1959 lavender-pink Eldorado with a starched top, one that had a few holes in it. I repaired the dings and repainted the body and redid the interior and bought a secondhand top that I turned into a starched-white beauty, and then I installed a stereo and loaded up my glove box with jazz and R&B and rock and roll tapes, and I left it at a car wash called Eddy's across the river in Algiers.

I'm talking about Eddy Durbin, who I grew up with in the old Irish Channel, when it was still a clean neighborhood where everybody got along, except for the turf beefs we had with the Italians, the kind of rumbles that went full blast in an alley or under a streetlight, with no adults paying any attention, with shanks and chains and chunks of steel pipe, a bonnet screwed on the end. That's how I got this scar through one eyebrow.

Eddy was a real Mick. Both of his parents were from Dublin and supporters of the IRA. Eddy had done back-to-back nickels in Angola but had stayed straight for seven years and had made a success of his car wash. I always liked Eddy and thought he got a bad deal by the system, but I have tried to stop judging about those things. It was Dave Robicheaux who got me out of El Sal, thirty pounds down with dysentery, jungle ulcers on my calves, zoned on weed and coke that could put you on the other side of Mars, the mosquitoes singing inside my head all night long.

I picked up my Caddy four days late because I had to chase down a dancer on Bourbon Street for a bondsman in Biloxi. I'll tell you more about that later. In the meantime, don't let anyone tell you that the life of a PI has anything to do with professionalism. Most PIs are just like me. They took juice or they drank it. For a cop, that one never leaves the blackboard.

###

I lived just two blocks from Jackson Square and St. Louis Cathedral and Pirate's Alley, which was full of tourists and drunks, so I always parked inside my courtyard, which had a piked gate I kept locked.

On a Sunday morning, two days after I picked up my Eldorado Caddy at Eddy's Car Wash, I heard a clanging sound that I thought was the Angelus ringing at the cathedral. No such luck. I heard voices inside the courtyard, like people arguing about something. I put on my bathrobe and fluffy slippers that had rabbit ears and plastic eyes sewed on them and went down the back stairs. For many years now after my wife dumped me, I've owned a pale-yellow two-story stucco house in which I live upstairs and run my PI office downstairs. It has a brick courtyard and a wishing well and flower beds full of banana plants and elephant ears and caladiums that make me think of pink hearts. My two balconies are hung with bougainvillea, as red as blood, and they bloom all winter. It has always been a special place for me.

My Eldorado Caddy was still parked by the wishing well and my barbells and weight set, but all four doors were open. A guy with ink all over him, to the degree that I couldn't tell his race, and two white guys were ripping the Caddy's insides out. Most of the rolled leather was lying on the bricks. The windmill palms and banana fronds were so thick around the stairs I didn't have a clear view of the courtyard, and I had to rub my eyes at what I was watching.

"What are you guys doin'?" I said.

The guy with the ink had a crowbar hanging from his right hand. He wore tennis shoes without socks and sweatshorts hitched tight around his buns and a leather vest with no shirt, a washboard for an abdomen; his skin looked like it had been painted with brown lacquer on top of his tats, like he was in a paint store when it got hit by a tornado.

"Who are you, Bluto?" he said.

"The guy who owns the Caddy you're destroying."

"Beat feet back to the shack, Jack," he said. "Don't be making any phone calls, either."

My .38 was in my bathrobe. There are lots of ways to confront lowlifes.

But the last way is with a gun. Once it's in your hand, you will probably use it.

"How did you get in?" I said.

"Your lock was open."

"It was not," I said.

I looked at the two white guys. They were unshaved and dirty. One wore cargo pants buttoned below his navel. The other wore a T-shirt that read 6 MILLION ARE NOT ENOUGH. His hair was thick and greasy and uncut and hung in his eyes, but it didn't seem to bother him; his face looked like curdled milk, with pits in it. Like it wasn't skin.

"I'm going upstairs," I said. "Don't touch my automobile while I'm gone."

"Listen, asshole," said the man in the leather vest. "You left your wheels too long at the service. It got mixed up with another car. So we're straightening things out. We're giving you a break."

"Are you out of your mind?" I said.

"So far we haven't found our goods," the same guy said. "That means maybe you already took them. That's gonna be a big problem, rabbit guy."

"Rabbit guy?" I said. I looked at my slippers. The sun was just breaking over the roof; my eyes were starting to water. I felt a rubber band about to pop inside my head. "Where's Eddy?"

"In church," he said. "It's Sunday."

"You're going to pay for the damage you've done to my car," I said. "And you're going to pay for it now."

"Maybe later you can call State Farm," the guy in the vest said. "But right now I want to inspect the inside of your house."

"*You want to what?*" I said.

"There's three of us and one of you. I see that sag in your robe. Don't think about it. We can hurt you, Bluto. Or is it Blimpo?"

He flipped the crowbar and caught it.

I looked at the two other guys. I knew most of the lowlifes in Orleans and St. Bernard Parishes, but I had never seen these two. In the subculture I'm talking about, there's psychosis and neurosis; then there's evil. Most

recidivists are lazy and stupid and can't function on their own. Most of them aren't half bad. Prison is a safe place. Like casinos. There are no clocks and no mirrors. These three guys were the kind the average convict doesn't want to cell with. The one with the 6 MILLION T-shirt bothered me the most.

"Where'd you get your threads?" I asked.

"I cain't remember," he replied. This man was not from New Orleans. New Orleans is Flatbush South because it was settled with Micks and Sicilians. This guy was a five-star peckerwood, like he had Q-tips shoved up his nostrils. "You're talking about my shirt, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "The six million are the Jews who died in Nazi extermination camps?"

He put a piece of gum in his mouth. "Yeah, I'd say that's a correct interpretation."

"Why would you want to say something like that?"

"I don't like them," he said, chewing while he smiled.

I nodded and looked at the bougainvillea hanging from my rear balcony, right next to a chain of yellow flowers called bugle vine. The sun felt hot on my forehead. A drop of sweat ran out of my hairline, even though the sun wasn't that warm. I could smell the spearmint that grew between the bricks in the shade, and the pools of water left over from last night's rain. That's the way the French Quarter used to smell in the early morning, with boxes of fruit on the sidewalk in front of the little grocery stores. Sometimes in the early morning I bought some beignets and ate them on a stone bench under the live oaks behind the cathedral, right there on Pirate's Alley. William Faulkner lived in what is now a bookstore there. Tennessee Williams lived not far away.

"You drifting off, pal?" said the guy with the T-shirt that was really starting to bother me.

"Y'all get down on your faces," I said.

"You got it backwards, Blimpo," the man in the vest said. "*You* get down. Not us. *You* get on your knees. Maybe with luck I won't piss in your mouth. Maybe if—"

That was as far as he got. Dave Robicheaux and I have a lot in common. My father was a milkman who came home with booze on his breath every afternoon and sometimes made me kneel all night on rice grains and hit me with his razor strop. Dave's father was an illiterate Cajun who wiped out Antlers Pool Room in Lafayette, and a half dozen other places, with a pool cue for fun, and died on the monkeyboard of an oil well in a blowout in the Gulf. He bailed on the Geronimo wire just before the flames swallowed the top of the rig and was never seen again.

I mowed lawns and dug leaves out of rain gutters in the Garden District, and usually got paid at the back door. I couldn't use the restroom inside their houses, either. Dave was a Cajun who couldn't speak English when he first got on the school bus. The same day, he washed his hands in the school toilet bowl because he had never seen an indoor bathroom. His mother worked in a laundry for twenty cents an hour and later let a pimp turn her out in a Breaux Bridge nightclub. Neither of us went to Shitsville for patriotic reasons. We went there to get even.

I broke the nose of the guy with the full-body tats. I caved in the stomach of the guy whose dirty cargo pants hung below his navel, and I ripped the T-shirt off the antisemite and stuffed it in his mouth and tried to kick him in the face but missed. I didn't touch my .38, but I used my sap, which I had also put in my robe. Then I got careless. I turned my back too long on the guy with the full-body tats. He caught me on the side of the head with the crowbar. I tripped across my set of weights and hit the bricks hard and didn't wake up until one of my cats curled up on my chest, his tail flipping in my face.

## CHAPTER TWO

I called 911, but only because my automobile insurance required it of me. Even in the Garden District a car break-in got a three-hour response time. Plus, few NOPD cops liked me. But I told myself that was their problem. I told them I hoped their wives sprinkled kryptonite on their food.

I rented a car on a Saturday afternoon and drove across the bridge to Algiers and pulled into Eddy's Car Wash only two blocks from the river. Even though I was born in Orleans Parish, I've never gotten over the width of the Mississippi. It makes you dizzy, particularly in the spring. Farther down the river, back in the swamps where it starts to dump into the Gulf of Mexico, there are remnants of Confederate batteries and also the bones of British soldiers from the War of 1812. It's all right there, sticking out of the ground, or at least it used to be. Dave Robicheaux saw a column of graybacks walk through a brick wall and disappear in the mist. I believe him. Louisiana is a necropolis. If you don't believe me, walk through the cemeteries on Basin Street or Esplanade (make sure you're in company).

When I turned into the car wash, Eddy Durbin took one look at me, got into a car his employees were hand-drying, and drove away, right through a stop sign.

That wasn't like Eddy. I told you he did two nickels back-to-back. But I didn't tell you he did them straight up—no conjugal visits, no work release, no good time applied against his sentence. Ten solid years of prison, where you hear either the yelling of men or the clanging of steel twenty-four hours a day. The steady sounds are ultimately deafening, and not to be undervalued in terms of your sanity.

Eddy was a marginal criminal, the kind you find in New Orleans or Southie in Boston. Theft was a way of life with my friends in the Channel. Maybe it had something to do with the Irish and the coffin ships and the

welcome they received when they landed in America. Eddy and his kid brother and some grifters out of New Jersey were laundering counterfeit and stolen money at the tracks and casinos all over Louisiana and Florida. Except one of the Jersey guys was a snitch, actually a plant, and he testified against the whole gang when they went down. Eddy lied and said his little brother, Andy, had nothing to do with the grift of over three hundred thousand dollars, and did the time for Andy.

In other words, Eddy was a stand-up guy. So why was he running away from me now? I hated to think about it.

###

He looked in the rearview mirror several times, then gave it up and pulled into a city park in a poor section of Algiers. Families were roasting wieners and kids throwing Frisbees and playing softball. I got out of my rental and went to the passenger side of Eddy's car and climbed inside without permission. Eddy had a round face and a small, pursed mouth, like a fish, and never smiled.

"You want to tell me why my Eldorado got ripped apart by three creeps who are evidently connected with your car wash?" I said.

"I'm sorry about that."

"'Sorry' doesn't flush, Eddy."

"Another Eldorado was holding some stuff a guy was supposed to pick up. There was some confusion,"

"I've already heard that, Eddy. That's not a viable excuse. What was the 'stuff'?"

"I get the sense it was some heavy shit."

"What kind of heavy shit?"

"I don't know. Andy got in with some bad guys. I didn't know anything about it."

"Then why don't you find out?"

"Andy took off."



“I’m shocked,” I said. “All he did in the past was roll over and give you an extra five-spot in Angola. Your little brother should have a telephone pole kicked up his ass. Where are these guys from?”

“I think they’re Dixie Mafia.”

“Dog shit. The guys who believe in the Dixie Mafia couldn’t find Gettysburg if you tattooed a map on their stomachs. What are you hiding, Eddy?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re starting to make me mad, Eddy.”

“You have personal feelings on the matter,” he replied.

“Skag?”

“Could be,” he said.

“But it’s not?”

“Probably not.”

“So what is it?”

“I’m just guessing. Andy is not even sure.”

“I am about to hit you in the side of the head, Eddy. Then you can have thirteen stiches in your scalp, just like me.”

“Fentanyl,” he said.

I felt my hands ball on top of my thighs. I looked through the windshield. Some children were playing badminton now; others were eating hot dogs and ice cream; and some were turning somersaults in the grass. Their laughter was like a song.

“I know what you’re feeling, Purcel. I just want to—”

“No, you don’t know what I’m feeling. Not at all. So don’t say you do.”

“I apologize,” he said.

“Don’t tell me you apologize, either. My grandniece is dead because of that shit your brother is helping get on the street. Now, where is he?”

“I don’t know. And if I did, I wouldn’t give him up. So fuck you.”

I stared into space and scratched my cheek idly with four fingers. Then I got out of Eddy’s car and closed the door and leaned down on the window. “Think it over, Eddy,” I said. “Don’t end up on the wrong side of things. You

never hurt anybody. The guys who visited me are mean. They hurt people for free.”

His head was cricked to one side, like his neck was broken, his arms resting inside in the steering wheel, no expression in his face.

“Did you hear me?” I asked.

“Yeah, I did,” he said. “Fuck you twice. And get your hands off my car. I just had it washed.”

I walked away, then stopped. I couldn’t take what he’d just said. I walked back to his passenger window and stooped down.

“Here’s what it is, Eddy. I got another reason I want to see these guys in a cage. Maybe one you don’t understand.”

“Yeah? Then tell me about it.”

“Maybe when I’m in a better mood. In the meantime, be thankful I don’t walk you in the public restroom and pour the soap dispenser down your mouth.”

“You had a badge and you blew it,” he said. “Now you take it out on your own kind. Who’s the real loser, Purcel? I feel sorry for you.”

“Good try, Eddy. But I paid my dues. Don’t ever talk to me like that again.” And I pointed my finger in his face.

###

Before all this happened, Dave Robicheaux was fishing for green trout down by the Barataria Preserve. He had asked me to go with him, but I’d been working on the Caddy, and now I was in a mess. What kind of mess? The three creeps knew who I was and where I lived, and I knew nothing about them. So I called Dave on his cell phone and told him everything. Dave was a good cop because he was a good listener.

When I finished talking, he said, “You’re at the house?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I’ll be there in two hours. Don’t go anywhere, and don’t talk to anyone.”

“Who would I talk to?” I asked.

He didn’t try to answer that one.

###

One hour and thirteen minutes later he pulled his pickup truck and boat trailer into my courtyard.

“What kept you?” I said.

He looked at the bandage on the side of my head and the abrasions on my face. “Who are these bastards, Clete?”

“You got me, big mon.”

We went upstairs and I gave him a Dr Pepper and cracked a beer for myself, which always made me feel guilty in front of Dave, because he had done real well with the program, except with a slip here and there over the years. His home group in New Orleans was just off the Quarter. It was the Work the Steps or Die Motherfucker meeting.

“Eddy got righteous about his brother?” he said.

“You can call it that. What’s the word? ‘Disingenuous’?”

“He has brain damage, doesn’t he?” Dave asked.

“Yeah, he came out the wrong way. But what does that have to do with stealing, lying, and letting other people stack your time? He’s pretty sharp at it.”

Dave was standing at the sink, drinking his Dr Pepper, looking out the window. The shadows were sinking across the courtyard. Dave was a meditative and handsome guy, six foot one, his shoulders square, his skin tanned, a patch of white in his black hair. Other cops nicknamed him Streak. They didn’t know he got his white patch from malnutrition as a child.

“You told Eddy you had a special reason for wanting to take these guys down?”

“Yeah. And I put it in his face. Fentanyl is the new killer on the streets. I kind of get a little unhinged when I talk about it.”

Dave leaned on his arms and nodded. He was wearing a purple shirt with white fleur-de-lis emblems stamped on it and sharply pressed gray slacks and shined loafers, and I knew he was going out later, but not just because it was Saturday evening. He had lost multiple wives but mourned in a peculiar

fashion. He stayed mostly celibate and walked by himself at sunset in the graveyards where they were buried. It was kind of spooky. A priest friend of his on the bayou in Jeanerette tried to help him, but Dave Robicheaux never had a door to his soul, even with his wives, all of whom he loved. I guess you could say he was the loneliest man I ever knew.

Hey, when it came to pain, Streak did his time in the Garden of Gethsemane. Fucking A. That said, he carried his own canteen, and respected people's privacy and didn't misuse his power or degrade the lowlifes, and that was why he said nothing about the creep wearing the 6 MILLION ARE NOT ENOUGH T-shirt and a photo I tore from a magazine and had been carrying in my wallet for at least two decades.

It showed a Jewish woman walking to the showers at Auschwitz with her three children following her. She was trying to keep the children together. They probably had no idea what was about to happen to them, but I think the mother knew. Her resolution and sorrow seemed to rise right out of the magazine. I have never gotten free of this photo. I don't think anyone can until we purge the earth of those who were responsible for the fate of this woman and her children. That's how I feel. I will never stop.

I am not going to say any more. Navy psychiatrists and therapists tried to treat me when I came back from Shitsville. They were good guys. But there is no pair of tongs you can use to lift certain images from your head. You're stuck, Mac, and neither the sugar shack nor four inches of Black Jack with a beer back will set you free. I know. I tried everything short of fragging myself.

"Clete?" Dave said.

"Yeah?"

"Nobody puts the slide on the Bobbsey Twins from Homicide," he said, and winked.

"I was just thinking the same, noble mon. But right now let's go have some fried oysters and maybe a catfish po'boy with mayonnaise and sliced tomatoes and sauce piquante on the side."

"I can't think of a better activity," he said.