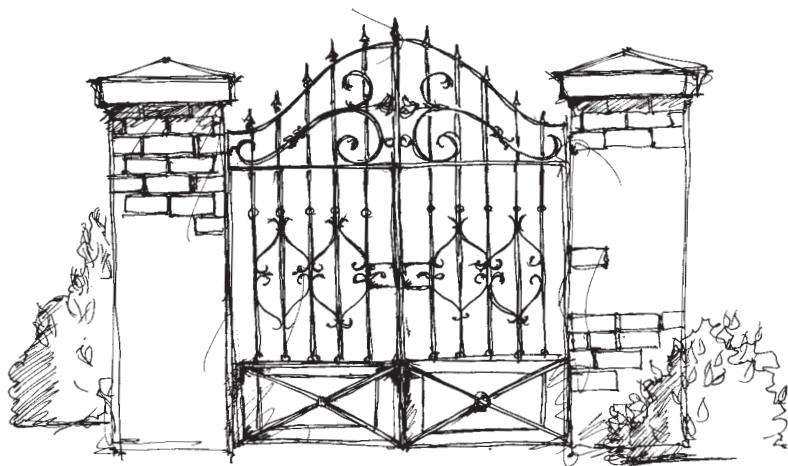


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BETH MOORE

the
UNDOING
of
SAINT SILVANUS
a novel





The UNDOING of SAINT SILVANUS





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UNDOING
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SAINT SILVANUS



BETH MOORE



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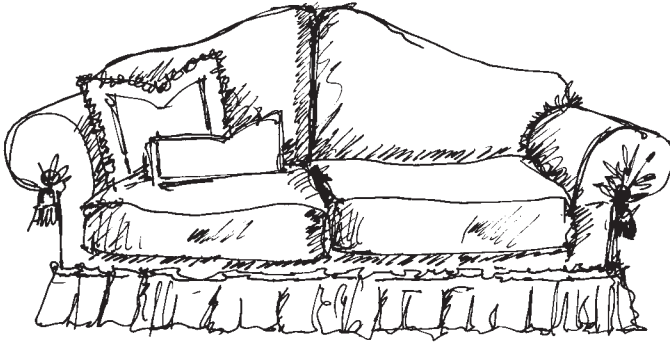
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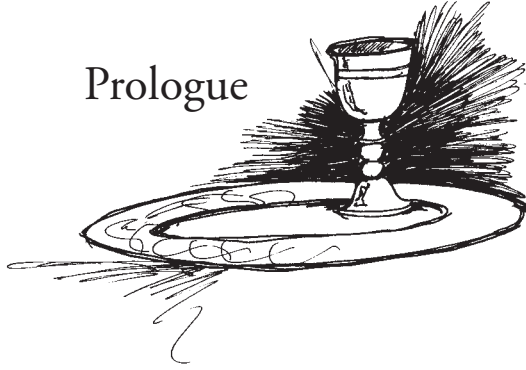


*To my dear friend and co-laborer Evangeline Williams,
a gorgeous gem washed onto Houston shores
by the horrors of Hurricane Katrina.
God knew we wouldn't have wanted to miss you
for anything in this world.*

*This book is the fruit of your prayers, your faith, your hugs,
and your constant encouragement.*

I love you.

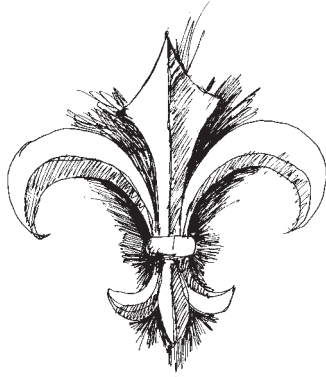
Prologue



CHRISTMAS EVE 1921

REVEREND R. J. BRASHEAR dipped the bread into the wine.
He lifted his chin and stared at the stained-glass image of Jesus,
the rocking boat, and the daring disciple. Then he took the bread.
Not a single ear was open when the gun went off.





CHAPTER I

PRESENT DAY

SERGEANT CAL DACOSTA GLANCED at the digits on his dashboard as he threw the car into park. “Sheesh. Eighty-four degrees and barely daylight. That body’s going to be ripe.” Several patrol cars were already at the scene, zigzagged all over the pavement. The lights were flashing but they’d saved themselves the sirens. As he shut the door and walked toward the small circle of officers, he took a few seconds to absorb how odd the ordinariness of it was. Only a handful of spectators were lurking. The few people on their way to work at this hour took the other side of the street to avoid the inconvenience. This was the nocturnal side of town, where the night was as the day. The patrol officers seemed almost as detached, chugging down weak coffee from a convenience store and eating something unidentifiable out of clear wrappers.

Sure enough, he got hit by a whiff of the body from twenty feet. “How do you guys do that?”

“Morning, Sarge. How do we do what?”

“How do you eat with that smell? Can’t you taste it?”

One of them mumbled as he stuffed the last bite of a sticky bun into his cavernous mouth. When the man licked his fingers, Cal decided he’d pass on breakfast.

The odor radiating from the sidewalk wasn’t so much the smell of death. Not yet anyway. It was the smell of filth, blown his way by a hot, humid gust that seemed to belch from the underworld. Frank Lamonte, Cal’s closest friend and former partner, said what all of them were thinking. “Finally drank himself to death.”

Cal imagined those five words etched beneath his own last name on a granite marker. At least half a dozen family members on his daddy’s side were vying for the same epitaph. He’d considered going to a couple of meetings to try to dodge the family fate, but opening up to people wasn’t exactly his strong suit. Anyway, his alcoholism wasn’t in a glass. He was scared it was in his blood.

“Any chance we’ve got a name?”

Frank took off his hat and tried to rub out the permanent dent it had made in his forehead. “No, but I’ve seen him around here enough to tell you that this was his corner. He held that old cardboard sign over there and sat right here with his back against these bricks.”

Cal glanced over at the sign and saw the usual scrawl with a black permanent marker. *Out of work. Hungry. God bless!* The words *need a job* had been scratched out with a blue ballpoint.

Another officer joined them, out of breath. “Hey, guys. Sorry I’m late. The light’s out at Canal.”

Frank nodded at him and continued. “To tell you the truth, I’ve seen him passed out in that alley as many times as I’ve seen him awake. I’m not sure how anybody could tell he was dead.”

But he was dead alright. He'd probably been dead a long time. His lungs were just the last to know. He had that look a person gets when he's tried too long to make friends with the sun and enemies of his organs. Concrete made a poor cushion no matter how drunk you got. Cal squatted down beside the crumpled corpse, gave a firm grip to the right shoulder, and turned him faceup. The eyes were half-open and the teeth were almost as dark as a rotted pumpkin.

The late-arriving officer suddenly heaved and coughed until everybody still on their feet scattered like mice. Why Bully couldn't do them the courtesy of turning away when he pulled that stunt was a mystery to Cal. He said it was because he never actually vomited—he just had a weak gag reflex.

Bully was a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound anomaly. He had the sensitivity and the stomach of a nine-year-old girl. All of them had seen him cry on the job at least once. This was first on the list of top-ten reasons Billy Bob La Bauve was the most picked-on member of the NOPD. And, some would say, the favorite. For Cal, it depended on what day it was. It wasn't today. Honestly, if he started sniffing, Cal was going to send him home.

Once they recovered, Frank bent over toward Cal and the corpse. "You've seen him before, haven't you? I've threatened to haul him in a few times for harassing people for money, but these days there are so many just like him, who knows where to start? The old rules don't hold near as well this side of the levees." Frank forgot every now and then that Cal had joined the force after the hurricane. This was the only New Orleans he knew from behind a badge.

To Cal, cops didn't get much better than Frank. He'd never once caught him in a lie. He didn't have a foul mouth about women. He had a wife he apparently liked going home to. He worked with Midnight Basketball for kids at risk and was the closest thing some of them had to a father. He'd told Cal recently that he was studying

up on soccer because the YMCA had asked him to coach a team. He'd never played, but no one else would volunteer. Frank actually had a life outside the force.

Cal answered Frank's question. "Yeah. I've seen him around here. How old a man do you think he is?"

Bully had pulled himself together by now. "Well, he looks a hunerd."

"He's not nearly as old as he looks. He's only gray at the temples and beard." The thick mop of matted hair looked out of proportion on the body's slight frame. Only God knew what color the man's hair was naturally, but the sun had turned it some faded shade of auburn. He was wearing a pair of black sweatpants and an old plaid Western shirt with snaps on the pockets. No shoes.

"We've got everything we need here. Y'all want to let us at him or do you want to carry him to the morgue yourself?"

The officers stepped aside and watched the coroner's team lift him onto a stretcher like he was a five-pound sack of Idaho potatoes. Cal was particularly impressed that one of the heavy lifters was a woman. He knew a lot of faces on the response teams since they were destined to gather at the same scenes, but names were another story.

Cal's big brother, a politician from diaperhood, had tried to teach him how to make name associations at a barbecue one Sunday. It was particularly humiliating because he'd had to go around the picnic table and practice associating the names of a few of their family members with memorable images. Maybe it was his imagination, but his aunt on his dad's side had acted cold ever since the word *horse* popped out when he got around to her. It was the dentures, his mom explained later. Either they were a size too big for her or the front teeth needed filing down.

"Sarge, anything else you want done here?" Bully wanted to know.

“Yeah. You and Sanchez ask around and see if you can get a few of the others who hang here to tell you anything about him once we’ve cleared out. They usually network. Maybe we’ll get lucky and his prints will turn up a name pretty quickly. I’ll head back in and handle the paperwork.”

Some days Cal would almost rather shoot off his little toe than fill out forms. At least he’d be indoors with the AC. He and the rest of them already had sweat rings halfway to their belts and it wasn’t even midmorning. With all the talk about cutbacks and financial woes in the department, he was glad no one had cut back on the air-conditioning. Raw meat would keep for a solid week on his desk. AC was something to be thankful for in a triple-digit June, and lest people forget, the cantankerous unit would freeze up and shut down at least two or three times a summer. It was no mystery to Cal why crime spiked in the sweltering summer. Heat sometimes made him want to haul off and hit somebody too.