

BOUND BY BLOOD

Rick Nelson

CHAPTER 1

Everyone in New Orleans knows that when you crack open a crab shell and a pungent ammonia odor smacks you in the face, the crab hit the boiling pot already dead. But the acrid air blasting my nostrils as I entered the squad room wasn't a sign of something foul. The cleaning crew at Second District had washed down the linoleum early Monday morning. But I was about to rip open something that, unlike a putrid crab, I couldn't toss away.

As I sat at my desk, the phone rang. I reached for it with one hand and wiped the water from my eyes with the other.

"Jack Brenner."

"This is Neil Gross." The nasal voice belonged to a public defender whose father, a successful attorney, generously supplemented his son's income rather than let him join his firm.

"It's a little early in the day for you," I said.

I heard his Porsche accelerate. "I have an arraignment before a judge with a ten o'clock tee time. I'm on my cell phone sitting in traffic."

It was July and a hundred percent humidity, but I had no doubt Neil had the top down. "So whose case are you pleading out today?"

"I'm the poor schmuck who got stuck defending Emmett Floyd Graves."

"Who the hell is Emmett Floyd Graves?" I asked.

"A redneck scumbag."

"All your clients are scum, Neil. What's he up for?"

"I pled him on drug dealing, but he stabbed an officer to death trying to get off the bus to Angola."

"So now you have a death penalty case. What makes this guy special?"

"He was in Bon Terre when your cousin David was killed."

Hearing my cousin's name burned my lungs even more than the caustic air. My face flushed with the heat of July 1972, when I last saw David. The ear piece crackled in my ear.

"Jack? We don't have such a good connection. Hope this damn cell phone isn't futzing out on me."

I clenched the receiver. "What's your client got to do with David?"

"Oh, good. You . . . there. I . . . recharged the damn . . . Graves . . . he can —"

A dull hiss replaced the sputtering on the line. I returned the receiver to the hook.

"It smells like cat pee in here." My partner, Ferrell Arceneaux, walked up wiggling his nostrils with his thumb and forefinger. He'd just returned from his regular session with the psychologist on contract to the New Orleans Police Department. "That goddamn Lavinsky's the only woman in the world who can sit for more than five minutes without talking."

My hand rested on the phone. "The idea of therapy is you're supposed to talk."

A few months earlier, Arceneaux was shot and nearly killed as we tried to apprehend the killer of a former district attorney running for Mayor. I was working with a temporary partner until Arceneaux was released for full duty.

Arceneaux sat at the desk across from me and twitched his nose. I looked past him into another decade, my mind rapidly scanning through dark childhood images.

“You seem kinda moody,” he said. “Maybe you oughta start seeing her again yourself.”

My eyes refocused on Arceneaux. “Maybe I should. She has the best legs I’ve ever seen.”

“For true. I keep worrying she’ll catch me looking.” He glanced at my hand still on the receiver. “What’s eating you?”

“You know a guy named Emmett Floyd Graves?” I asked.

Arceneaux cringed. “He’s an animal. I ran into him in when I was a uniformed in Lafayette. Why?”

“Neil Gross is defending him for slicing up a guard trying to escape during transport to the Farm after a drug conviction.”

“Ain’t the first time he’s used a shiv,” Arceneaux said. “One time I responded to a disturbance call at a bar on the Vermilion River south of Lafayette. In those parts, it damn near takes a war to qualify as a disturbance. By the time I pulled his sorry ass out at gun point, he’d cut enough arteries to paint every stuffed alligator and Dixie Beer sign on the wall red. Why are you asking about that asshole, anyway? He figure in some case you and Keisha been working on?”

“Neil Gross called. He says Graves was in Bon Terre when my cousin David was doing civil rights work there.”

Arceneaux pulled his lower lip. “David’s the one they named the chapel for at your temple, ain’t he?”

“The library.”

“What the fuck could Graves have to do with your cousin?”

“I don’t know.” I watched the fans spinning from the high ceiling. “What if he knows something about his murder?”

“Did he tell Gross that?”

I turned up my palms. “Neil’s cell phone went dead before he could finish.”

Arceneaux drummed his knuckles on the blotter. “Whatever it is, don’t get involved with Graves. Let me tell you what my sergeant told me about him after we locked him up.”

I leaned back in my chair

“Emmett Graves comes from the red clay country up around Monroe,” Arceneaux said. “Lot of those guys came down after the war my daddy fought in to lay pipelines or work on oil rigs in the Gulf. He got a job digging trenches for a natural gas line near the Atchafalaya.”

Arceneaux smiled and shook his head. “It was middle of summer. I guarantee the basin was boiling like a schoolhouse furnace. Anyway, he was slapping at mosquitoes and dragonflies in a ditch filling up with water almost as fast as the crew could sling out the mud. The working conditions didn’t bother Graves, but the black boy along side of him did.

“He complained —” Arceneaux looked around, then leaned across the desk and hushed his voice. “He complained to the foreman about having to work with a nigger. The foreman told him nigger work was all Graves was fit for, so Graves cursed the man and walked off the job.

“The black kid didn’t show for work the next day neither. Someone cut off half his hand the night before.” Arceneaux drew a finger across his palm.

“That afternoon, the parish sheriff found Graves sitting without a shirt on the bank of a bayou. He was holding a cane pole with a line in the water, eating a cheese sandwich. There was a whiskey bottle and a brown paper sack next to him. One deputy lifted him up by the armpits and another grabbed the rod from Graves’ hands and pulled the line up. They say the bait on the hook looked like a burnt piece of pork sausage with a dull, hard covering at one end. When the deputy reached down and picked up the sack, he saw four black fingers in it and he spewed his lunch into the bayou.”

Air whistled through my teeth.

“Then Graves says, ‘Can’t catch nothing with this bait. Don’t even a gar eat nigger meat.’” Arceneaux sat upright and resumed a normal tone. “An all-white jury agreed to convict Graves of simple assault. Nine months later, he was out, doing odd jobs and driving stolen cars to Texas.”

“This isn’t a whimsy of your Cajun lore, is it?” I asked.

“Whim-what?” Arceneaux’s eyes rolled up to search his limited lexicon. “I ain’t sure what that is, but I’ll tell you for true. Don’t mess with Emmett Graves.”

The phone rang and I quickly grabbed it. “Brenner.”

“Jack? You there?” Neil Gross’s voice was as astringent as the ammonia searing my nostrils.

“What’s this about Emmett Graves and my cousin?”

“Sorry we lost contact,” he said.

“Neil. What do you have to tell me about Emmett Graves?”

“Yeah.” He revved the Porsche’s engine. “He says if you visit him at Angola, he’ll help you find who killed David.”

The skin tightened across my forehead. The plastic phone receiver felt slick and hard. “Give him my number.”

“He’ll only talk to you in person.”

“What’s he told you?”

“Not a damn thing except what a sorry lawyer I am.”

I heard a horn blare. No doubt Neil had cut someone off. “He’s right.”

“Funny. See if I invite you to Mark’s bar mitzvah. I’ll set you up to see Graves.”

My mind’s eye continued to search through old photographs. I slowly exhaled. “I’m not sure I want to.”

“Make up your mind quick. I can’t plead the guard’s murder. Graves isn’t long for this world.”

I heard the Porsche downshift and the tires squeal around a corner.

“That Gross?” Arceneaux asked as I hung up.

I nodded.

“What did he say?”

“Neil says Graves has information about David’s death. But he’ll only talk in person.”

“That don’t mean nothing. Cons always say they have information. He’s jerking your chain. Or Gross is trying to use you to muddy the waters at trial.”

“Neil isn’t that smart,” I said. “And he doesn’t care about his clients.”

“Like we do?”

I wasn’t as hard-line as Arceneaux, but most people we dealt with were well past rehabilitation.

“Leave it alone, Jack,” Arceneaux said. “If Graves is up for killing a guard, they’ll put

his lights out. Believe me, his execution is a win-lose situation and we win.”

“What if he really does have information?”

“No disrespect to the dead, but that was thirty years ago. Whaddaya think you’re gonna do about it now?” My partner’s voice trailed off.

I was twelve when I finally beat David at fifty yards in the summer of 1972, but he was a distance runner. He’d set a Tulane school record in the three-mile run a month earlier and barely missed qualifying for the NCAA nationals. His senior year was still ahead of him.

We jogged from his house to the high school track. Our bare chests glistened as we loped along the asphalt steaming from the showers that rush across New Orleans every summer afternoon. The musty smell of wet oyster shells rose from driveways and the shoulders of the road.

The crushed brick running surface had a sun-baked firmness and the earthy musk I always associated with David. It would eventually be replaced by the rubber odor of synthetic tracks. I dug small holes in the red clay for footholds. He took a standing start and dug just one.

David let me call the starter’s signals and I thrust my arm and leg forward, keeping low, as he’d trained me. The yellow post at fifty yards grew closer. Our feet made rapid crunching sounds as they tore into the track. He’d taught me to look straight ahead, that I couldn’t keep a stronger competitor from overtaking me, that my only purpose was to direct my own potential to the finish, to hope it was enough, and be satisfied if it was not.

I heard him breathing hard beside me as I began to lean. The line I’d drawn across the crushed brick passed beneath me and I turned my head to see him crossing just behind me.

“I did it! I did it!” I skipped twice, then stumbled forward, bending over to relieve my burning lungs.

“It was just a matter of time.” David trotted past me, his breathing returned to normal. “I’ll give you ten minutes rest and we’ll race a quarter.”

“No way!”

“Okay. But next time we do a hundred.” He smiled, reached down, and ruffled my hair.

We jogged back home. Sitting on his front porch, we watched kids play in the street as dry lightning flickered in the darkening sky like lavender fireflies. We drank from half-gallon jars filled with sun tea and hunks of ice and we mopped our faces with the cool condensation. I loved him more than a brother.

“Jack.” Arceneaux stretched forward. “Whaddaya think you’re gonna do?”

“What he’s gonna do is get that fine looking butt of his out to the car. We gotta meet with the ADA before we get on the stand and put Frank Marino away.” My temporary partner, Keisha Lundy, stood over us like a five-foot ten sculpture of polished obsidian.

Arceneaux looked up at her with fretful eyes. “Sorry. I didn’t mean nothing by sitting at your desk here.”

“It’s your desk, Ferrell,” she said.

“It don’t look like it.” Arceneaux scanned the gleaming white blotter, always hidden by files, loose sheets of paper, and Styrofoam cups when he worked there.

“You’ll get your desk and your partner back in a few weeks I’m glad to hear,” Keisha said “What you won’t get back is them finger nail clippings you left in the bottom drawer.”

Arceneaux stood, catching his heel on one of chair wheels. A thin red line formed around the edges of his collar. “I gotta get back to work. Guidry’s got me so’s I can use the computer

now.”

“The desk work’s been tough on him,” I said to Keisha as Arceneaux shuffled up the aisle.

“Better than the alternative,” she said.

“Yeah.” I followed her toward the door. “Thanks for coming to get me. I got distracted.”

She turned to me with one raised brow. “Tell me on the way if you want.” Keisha pinched her nose, then snorted. “I’m glad we got somewhere else to go. It smells like someone in here pissed in his pants.”

I finished telling Keisha about my conversation with Neil Gross as she pulled into the courthouse garage. When I stepped out of the car, an electric arc shot up my right leg. I placed my hand on the fender and grimaced. Keisha looked up at me through the windshield.

She got out and shut her door. “Hurting again, huh?”

I massaged the small of my back. “Sciatic nerve. I think it’s from favoring the other leg.” I’d torn the tendon in my left calf chasing the man who shot Arceneaux.

“Therapy ain’t helping?” she asked.

“No. But I go anyway. I like sitting in the hot tub.”

Keisha kept the pace slow as we walked into the building.

“Look,” she said. “If Graves is as bad as Arceneaux says, it’s a good thing Gross is his lawyer. No chance he’ll get off.”

I nodded. “I wonder if Graves really has anything related to my cousin’s murder. From what I was told, there weren’t any arrests in David’s case.” I pushed the elevator button. “Maybe I should leave it alone.”

Keisha dropped her eyes. “Some things don’t get finished.” Then she turned and looked directly at me. “But if there’s a chance, why not take it?”

“Like I can handle more than I already have. Utley has us working double shifts a couple of times a week and —”

Keisha held up her hands. “Hate to tell you, but the Lieutenant caught me in the station on my way to get you.”

“Oh no. Not tonight.”

“Yeah.”

I jabbed the elevator button several times with my thumb. “I’m supposed to take Alexis to Emeril’s. She’s going to be pissed.”

“It ain’t your fault,” she said.

“With her, it’s always my fault.”

The door finally opened. “I don’t mind the OT,” Keisha said inside the elevator after the doors closed. “I don’t have anyone at home to disappoint.”

“I’ve always had plenty of people to disappoint.” A mechanical voice called out each floor we passed. “This damn overtime is another reason I’m hesitant about going to Angola to talk to Graves. I was hoping things would improve with Alexis and me while the kids were away at summer camp, but we haven’t had much quality time.”

“David was family,” Keisha said, as the doors opened. “She’ll understand.”

“You’d think.” I rolled my eyes. “Better call home.”

At the pay phone, I took a deep breath and dialed my number. I closed my eyes and let the air drift from my nostrils, hoping to hear the recording. I got lucky.

“It’s me.” I tried to sound regretful rather than worried. “The Lieutenant stuck us with a double shift again. I’ll be home late tonight. I’m real sorry. I’ll cancel the reservations.” I started to replace the receiver, then drew it back. “Love you.”

I hung up and walked back toward Keisha and saw her talking to someone in a wheelchair. My jaw grew taut and my hands felt numb. It was the way I felt when last winter’s first cold front forced its way across Lake Ponchartrain into the city. The last time I saw Mary Evans.

“Hi, Jack.” Mary looked up at me with familiar, molten sapphire eyes. “Nice to see you. It’s been awhile.”

I turned to Keisha. “When did they put a second prosecutor on the Marino case?”

Mary tugged at my coat sleeve. “We won’t be working together on this one. I just happened to run into Keisha while you were calling home. She tells me the job’s spoiled your evening plans.”

I stuffed my hands in my pockets and shrugged. “Didn’t know you two knew each other.”

“We’re both in LEPIK,” Mary said.

I threw my partner a puzzled look.

“Law Enforcement Professionals Investing in Kids,” Keisha said. “It’s a child protection organization.”

Mary grabbed the controls of her electric wheelchair. “Gotta go, guys. Knock ‘em dead.”

“It’s not a capital case,” I said.

“Lighten up Jack. It’s just an expression.” Mary smiled and furrowed her brows as she turned her chair. “Good to see you again.”

“Same.” I watched her vanish among a group of empanelled jurors who’d just been turned loose from a courtroom.

Keisha moved next to me. “I feel like I just turned the TV on in the middle of a movie.”

“What do you mean?”

“Honey, there was something going on there besides idle courthouse chit-chat.”

“We worked together on the Wilson case. That’s all.”

“That ain’t all. I know Mary worked that case. I helped y’all too, if you remember. I also know she looked at you with a woman’s eyes, not a lawyer’s.”

“I didn’t notice.” I started down the hallway.

“Brenner.” Keisha’s voice stabbed me from behind. “The sorry thing is, you probably didn’t.”

Keisha and I spent the rest of the day at the courthouse. When we weren’t meeting with the prosecutor or giving testimony, I thought about my cousin David and Emmett Graves. I also thought about Mary.

“We nailed Frank Marino,” Keisha said, as we drove back to the station.

I watched water from the late afternoon showers trickle into the gutters along the curb.

“Hello-o-o Jack.”

“Sorry. I was just thinking about what you said.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Some things don’t get finished.”

“You talking about your cousin or something else?” Keisha asked, an impish glint in her

eyes.

“My cousin,” I said.

“Uh-huh.”

“Wish I had more information than recollections from when I was twelve. And I don’t want to talk to my Aunt Joyce.”

Keisha glanced at me. “Aunt Joyce?”

“David’s mother,” I said. “She’s in poor health and my uncle died several years ago. I’d hate to bring up bad memories for her.”

“How about your friend at the television station?”

“Odell Harris?”

“Sure,” she said. “He helped you on the Wilson case.”

I chuckled softly. “In exchange for exclusive information. I don’t have anything to offer this time.”

She lifted her right hand from the wheel and held up her palm. “New millennium cop solves thirty-year old crime. Sounds like high ratings to me.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. He’ll push me into something I don’t want to do.”

Keisha slapped me on the arm with the back of her hand. “And when was the last time that happened?”

The sun burst from behind the thunderheads moving over the lake. I put on my sunglasses and leaned against the window. My eyes tracked the transient wisps of steam rising from the concrete. “Maybe I can catch Harris after the five o’clock news.”

I ran into Odell Harris returning to his office from the set.

“Detective Brenner!” Odell’s eyes gleamed when he saw me standing at his door. His salt-and-pepper hair was mostly salt.

He opened the door and gestured for me to enter. “Have a seat.”

He removed his navy blue suit coat and placed it carefully on a wooden valet. He glanced at three flickering monitors on the opposite wall, then sat behind his desk. “What brings you by? Not another high profile murder, I hope.”

I took a visitor’s chair. “Not a recent one.”

Odell narrowed his eyes and slid a thumb between his black leather suspenders and ecru pinpoint shirt. “Go ahead.”

“I need your help. You’ve been around a long time and —”

He raised his brows. “Please. Don’t remind me.”

“Do you remember the young civil rights workers who were killed in Bon Terre in 1972?” I asked.

“Yes, of course. One white boy and one black boy. I was with the newspaper then. I reported the story.”

“The white boy was my cousin.”

“My gosh.” Odell’s sharp brown eyes briefly softened. “David Brenner. I never made the connection. You must have been about —”

“Twelve.”

“His death must have been hard on you.”

I swallowed and thought about the day the police told us David was missing. “I want to see if you can dig up some old news articles and anything else you can about the murders.”

“I probably can. Should be able to find my notes as well.”

My eyes widened. “You still have notes from a thirty-year-old story?”

“It’s a compulsion of mine,” Odell said. “I never throw away notes. You never know when an old story might shed light on a new one. I have one bedroom and half an attic full of files. Not as well ordered as I’d like, unfortunately.”

“I can’t imagine you being unorganized.”

He lifted his chin slightly. “What’s caused your interest in your cousin’s murder now?”

I told him about my conversation with Neil Gross and Arceneaux’s account of Emmett Graves. Odell kept his elbows on his desk, hands clasped, his chin resting on them.

He rested back in his chair when I finished. “Surely you know what’s running through my mind.”

“Keisha said you’d be eager to boost your ratings with a story like this.”

“Who’s Keisha?”

“Keisha Lundy. She’s my temporary partner ‘till Arceneaux’s ready for the street again. You met her the night he was shot.”

“Tall black woman?”

I nodded.

Odell whistled silently. “A sight more pleasant looking than Arceneaux.”

I laughed. “That’s not saying much. She’s an outstanding cop, but I’m looking forward to Ferrell’s return.”

Odell’s eyes focused briefly on the monitors behind me, then met mine. “Of course I’m interested in the story. And I think I can help you.”

“What’s it going to cost me?” I asked.

Odell raised his palms. “Just the usual quid pro quo.”

“There may not be a quo. I’m not sure I’m going to do anything. And I don’t want any publicity on this unless Graves gives me information and I decide to act on it.”

“Nothing will come from me without your say-so.”

I leaned back and rubbed my chin. I’d come to know Odell Harris as a straight shooter, but I had the same uneasiness about doing business with a reporter that most people have about being around cops.

“I must warn you,” Odell said. “You don’t know who else Neil Gross or Emmett Graves will talk to. Either one may have already talked to the press. You can’t control that.”

I recalled the media jam I was in during the Wilson case. “As I’ve learned from experience.”

Odell placed his hands on his desk. “The sooner you talk to Graves, the sooner you have some chance of influencing who else he talks to.”

“And the sooner you get a story,” I said.

Odell smiled. “I’m only offering advice. I’ve seen what happens when sources start broadcasting their stories to anyone who’ll listen.”

“Call me when you’ve found your notes,” I said. “Then I’ll decide. I’ve got people on giving me advice in both directions.”

Later that evening, Keisha and I sat at our desks in the squad room catching up on paperwork. The faint scent of ammonia still rose from the vinyl tiles. It was less than an hour from the end of our shift when I looked at my watch.

“Been a quiet night,” I said.

“It ain’t over.” Keisha stared over my shoulder.

“Brenner. Lundy.” I recognized the voice of Mack Breaux. He’d been the evening supervisor at Second District since I first made detective.

“Oh, oh. The Vampire Lestat,” I said.

Breaux earned this nickname because he was an accomplished jewelry artist who always worked the four-to-twelve shift so he could practice his craft in the early morning hours and sleep during the day.

Keisha flitted her eyes toward me. “What’d I say?”

“Black male DOA.” Lestat repeated the phrase I heard almost weekly.

I spun around in my chair to face him. “Where?”

Breaux read from a steno pad. “Napoleon and LaSalle outside a convenience store.”

“Robbery?” I asked.

“Drive by. He was at a pay phone.”

“Drugs.” Keisha and I spoke in unison.

“That’s for me to assign and you to find out.” Breaux looked down at me. “I’ve about finished the bracelets for your girls.”

“Thanks. They won’t be home from camp for three weeks.” I pushed my chair back and rose.

Breaux closed his pad with a flip of his hand. “Sorry y’all got stuck here tonight. Utley’s really put the mean in lean.”

“He’s got his sights on the Superintendent’s job,” I said. “He can tell you exactly how many days the man has left to retirement. Maybe you should put your name in the hat.”

Breaux shook his head. “I don’t do daylight jobs.”

Keisha locked her desk drawer and stood. “This’ll take ‘till O-dark-thirty, Jack.”

I started to reach for the phone, then realized Alexis would still be awake. I grabbed my sports coat from the cloak tree and waved goodnight to Lestat.