

Chapter One

The bum wore pink. A prom dress, really. Torso to kneecaps swathed in bubble gum taffeta. His spidery limbs, black with grime and hair, jutted out in wrong angles. The bum was face-down in the basin of a puddle in the middle of MLK Drive, and lay undiscovered until 3:16a.m.

Andre Banks (age 28) and his pug Moira (age 3) were out for a stroll. Andre was walking off his insomnia. His parents were coming to visit and that never ever boded well. Andre and Moira normally kept only to Lincoln Street, the dimly-lit cul-de-sac in which they lived, but the young man had a lot more anxiety than usual to walk off. Moira made sure to baptize every hydrant on their path, and was christening her eleventh when Andre spotted the bum in the road.

Even in Atlanta, January meant freezing temperatures. The city's homeless did not nap out in the middle of MLK Drive in January, certainly not in brand-new prom dresses. The bum was almost perfectly centered inside the milky oval of a nearby streetlight's humming glow. Andre stared through the fog of his breath at the man in the road and then Moira, finished with her ritual, saw him too, and barked.

Prodded by his loud little dog, Andre left the sidewalk and approached the face-down man. He didn't bother checking for traffic. 1. It was 3:16 in the morning. 2. This

stretch of MLK Drive was cordoned at either end by wooden barricades due to (unapparent) DOT construction.

Moira skittered a few feet ahead of him, tensing at her leash, impatient to reach the mysterious pink shape. She barked again, and hopped up, giddy. The shape didn't budge. As they entered the circle of electric-powered light, Andre wondered what circumstances led the bum to end up here, (and dressed like that!). Had the man once been successful? Did he have a family? Had his family kicked him out? Maybe the prom dress was his daughter's and she was dead and wearing it helped the man remember her. Maybe the bum was a transvestite, and that's why his family had kicked him out. The sins of a stubborn family, mused Andre, never forgetting that his own parents, bastions of disappointment, would be landing at Hartsfield-Jackson in 10 hours and—

Moira pounced on top of the bum's taffeta back and licked at his neck.

"Hey!" Andre tugged on the leather leash. "Bad dog."

With a petulant whine, Moira fought back. She lapped again at the bum's neck, savoring the salt mine she'd discovered. Andre yanked his pug off the man, and then realized the bum in the road hadn't reacted, hadn't even groaned, hadn't even *breathed*.

"Fuck," Andre concluded, and at 3:18a.m. (according to his cell phone) he dialed the police.

They didn't arrive for twenty minutes. This cordoned-off stretch of MLK Drive was not popular. The strip malls and chain stores which populated MLK down by the Georgia Dome tapered off west of Techwood, and Andre's neighborhood was far, far west of Techwood. The grass in the local park, fifty feet from the bum's corpse, was

rusted, as if neglect had soured it to old metal. One hundred feet away, bordering the park, loomed a three-story mortar slab called Hosea Williams Elementary School. Its windows were shingled with iron bars. Andre taught physical education at Hosea Williams. His parents didn't approve of the job, and they certainly didn't approve of the area. No one did.

Since the police didn't arrive for twenty minutes, Andre finished walking his dog. He knew he'd have time, and Moira was restless. He led her down the block, past the Atlanta Food Shop (boarded shut) and the red brick Holy Life Baptist Church (gated shut). But by then Andre heard the siren. He reached the dead body around the same time the squad car circumvented the construction barricade.

Two cops emerged, scented of French fries. They clicked off the siren but left on their red-and-blues to sweep and bounce in careful rhythm over the block. To Moira, essentially color blind, the lights were meaningless, but to Andre, the colored lights painted his neighborhood at 3:40a.m. into a discotheque. That just reminded him of his age, and his misbegotten teenage years, and how much his life had changed in so short a—

"You called it in?" asked Officer Appleby, arms crossed. He was the black one. Officer Harper, the white one, knelt beside the body. The cops who served this neighborhood always showed up in this demographic: one black, one white. In fact, some of Andre's more clever students referred to them not as *pigs* but *zebras*. Yo, zebras on patrol today, watch out.

"I was taking my dog for a walk," said Andre. He exhaled warmth onto his hands and rubbed them together. Even though he wore a fleece coat over his sweats, winter

was still winter. “We just found him lying there.”

Officer Appleby frowned, uncrossed his arms, and crossed them again. His stomach was bothering him. “Did you know the deceased?”

“No, sir.”

Down by the corpse, Officer Harper did a rudimentary investigation of the bum’s hairy, muddy limbs for frostbite. In a few minutes they’d call it in and the case would belong to the detectives and medical examiner but until then, if he was careful, if he didn’t disturb the body or the scene, he could do some actual police work. Let Appleby chat up the witness, predictable waste of time that would be. In the meantime, Harper would work the case. Find a clue. Share it with the cavalry when they arrived and when his name came up for promotion, they’d remember him for this and he’d be free of this beat patrol graveyard shift bullshit forever.

Moira nudged against his ass with her nose. Harper scowled down at the pug. God, he hated dogs. They slobbered and chewed up nearly anything of value. They constantly needed attention. The county taxed you for their tags, the pet store taxed you for their food, the vet taxed you for their shots. Dogs. God.

Moira nudged again against his ass and Harper slapped her away. He glanced over at his partner and the witness. Neither of them had noticed his violent outburst. Good. The last thing he needed was yet another pissed-off civilian lodging a valueless complaint.

Andre felt Moira rub up against his sneakers. Out of habit he reached down and scruffed her behind her ears. She probably wanted to go home. It was almost 4a.m. She would have no trouble sleeping.

“Now, Mr. Banks, are you usually out this late?” Appleby coughed into his fist, shifted his weight from his right foot to his left. “You and your dog?”

“Insomnia,” replied Andre.

Appleby offered a sympathetic nod. The witness didn’t seem too disturbed by the dead body, but this was Atlanta. This was MLK Drive. Death had long ago put up residence here. Appleby had worked this beat for ten years. If every person in this neighborhood was gathered together, the stories they could tell. After all, as an officer of the law, he only dealt with what was reported. What went unreported – those were the crimes that gave him nightmares.

“Well, Mr. Banks, we’ll need to get an official statement, but it probably doesn’t have to be—“

The glass bulbs atop the police cruiser exploded in a crescendo of noise. All four of them – Andre, Moira, Appleby, and Harper – glanced at the ground, now covered in shards, then at the roof of the car, then at each other. Moira cocked her head in thought.

“Someone must’ve thrown a baseball or something,” said Appleby.

Harper had his gun out. “Show yourselves, you little pricks!”

With the discotheque lights gone, the only illumination left was the milky oval of the streetlight, and that enabled them to see each other, but not whoever had shattered the glass. Harper cocked his gun, and Appleby reached for his. They relied on their ears to detect the vandal, but could only hear their own heartbeats in the cold night air.

Then Harper didn’t even hear that, because a bullet passed through his brainpan and he was dead. He collapsed like a string-less marionette, not three feet from the

body of the bum.

Appleby opened his mouth to speak, scream, something, but a second bullet took care of that, and he joined his partner on the grey pavement. The blood from their wounds dripped out of their bodies and co-mingled, like holding hands.

A minute passed.

Andre didn't move.

Moira trotted over to Appleby's body and poked at his cheek with one of her front paws. She looked back at her master and whimpered.

Slowly, Andre took a step toward the squad car. He would be safe inside the squad car. They were bulletproof, right?

"Moira," he whispered. "Come here, girl."

She followed him as he inched away from the carnage. The car was twenty feet away. Presumably, the doors were unlocked. He would get inside and radio for help and he'd be safe. He and Moira would be OK.

Fifteen feet away, they reached the pool of glass. Moira skirted around it. She and Andre were almost out of the arc of the streetlight. Ten feet away, and Andre decided that going slow made no sense - he wasn't walking a tightrope. He took a deep breath (as he taught his students to do at Hosea Williams) and prepared to sprint.

The third bullet dropped him before he had a chance.

And the fourth bullet took care of the dog.

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Clouds shifted. The streetlight hummed. At 4:25a.m., the squad car's radio squawked to life. Dispatch wanted a 10-4 on their whereabouts, over. By 4:40a.m., Dispatch got antsy and sent out Pennington and O'Daye to investigate. Pennington and O'Daye arrived at five to six. Dawn was just a commercial break away.

Pennington got out first, while O'Daye shifted the car into park. They both saw the car, then the bodies. O'Daye called it in, tried to remain calm, but her voice trembled like a plucked string:

"Dispatch, this is Baker-82. We're at the scene. We have four bodies, repeat four bodies. Officers Harper and Appleby are down. Request immediate back-up. Over."

Gabe Pennington scanned the area with his hazel eyes. His prescription lenses fogged up from the cold, and with frustration and panic he lifted a gloved hand and wiped them clean. No doubt about it – that was Roy Appleby. Ever since his divorce, Pennington had played poker at the bastard's house every Saturday night. Appleby was a lousy poker player but he loved the game. Pennington hated the game, but craved the companionship. He was living out of a motel room off I75. It was Appleby who'd reached out to him. Now the man was leaking blood on MLK Drive. Damn it.

"Copy Baker-82," Dispatch responded with the same authority as always, "Back-up is on the way. Dispatch out."

Officer O'Daye stared through the windshield. "Maybe they're still alive."

Pennington glanced down at her, then back at the bodies in the milky oval. Indeed, his first instinct had been to rush out to them and check for pulses. Perform CPR. But they didn't know the scope of the scenario, and until you knew the scope of

the scenario, you played it safe. Safe may not have worked for his marriage, but it had kept him clean of serious injury for fourteen years on the force. O'Daye was young. She would learn.

As he rejoined her in the car, Melissa O'Daye checked the time on her wristwatch. Six a.m. Soon the block would be awake. Parents would be walking their kids, all bundled up in their woolies, across the street to Hosea Williams. The corner boys would be out soon too, and the early-bird alcoholics. None of them had to see this. No one should have to see this. She shouldn't have had to see this. She should've been in bed. She didn't need the overtime. What was she trying to—

The dog moaned.

O'Daye and Pennington popped to attention.

The little dog was half in the light and half out. They'd just assumed she wasn't breathing, just like the others, but she moaned again, breathy, tenuous.

"Christ Jesus," O'Daye muttered.

She opened her door.

"Wait." Pennington held up a hand. "There's nothing you can do."

"Nothing I can...? That dog's alive!"

"Are you a vet? No. So sit tight. Back-up will be here momentarily."

"We can't just—"

"It's not cowardice," he explained. "It's procedure."

She closed her door.

They waited.

The dog, Moira, age 3, wept. She was dying and she knew it and just wanted to

pull herself to a dark and quiet place, away from her master. But she couldn't move. All she could do was fill the January air with her requiem sobs.

When back-up arrived, they showed in droves. Three squad cars and two additional unmarked vehicles pulled up to the crime scene. Officers were down – their brothers and sisters in blue were damn sure going to avenge their deaths. Their sirens crashed through the neighborhood like an aural hurricane. Parents and children sat up in their beds and pondered the end of the world. Some peered out their windows. Some bolted shut their doors. Even the sun peeked out over the skyscrapers to catch a glimpse of the ruckus.

Lead officer on scene was Deputy Chief Perry Roman. He was division commander over Zone 4. Appleby and Harper were his men. He climbed out of his beige station wagon, left his microsuede unbuttoned (and his paint-spattered Police Academy sweatshirt exposed), and quickly assigned roles:

“O'Daye & Pennington: tape off the area and assist in crowd control. Halloway & Cruise, Jaymon & DeWright: canvass the area. Williams, Kayless, Ogleby : take statements, someone must've seen something. Detectives, homicides don't get plainer than this. You know what to do.”

Officer O'Daye wanted to check on the dog. She couldn't hear her keening anymore – there was too much chatter now in the air – but she needed to know if the dog was still alive. It's not that she had dogs of her own...she didn't have any pets at all. She lived alone in her apartment. Is that why she worked the overtime? And now she was pining away for an animal (and not for any of the four human beings!). Foolish. She shuffled her neuroses to the niches of her mind, just as her therapist had taught her

to do. When Pennington (who was a coward – everyone knew it) grabbed a thick roll of yellow tape from the trunk of their cruiser, she didn't go for the dog. She went for the tape, and helped her cowardly older partner zip up the perimeter.

The deputy chief remained on the sidewalk, hands on his hips, and surveyed. Eleven cops working the scene - it would be so easy to contaminate evidence. The last thing any of them needed at this hour, for these fallen soldiers, was an example of negligence (or worse, incompetence) the shooter's defense attorney could attack in court. And Perry Roman had no doubt they would catch the shooter. The morning shift came on in two hours. By 9 a.m. every street corner in southwest Atlanta would have a shield working the case. Two of their own were dead. Roman made a note to himself to warn his men, when they found the shooter, not to mortally wound the motherfucker. This was going to be a clean, by-the-book operation. The dead deserved nothing less (even if Harper was a lazy prick).

Perry fixed his gaze on the two homicide detectives. Not his most perceptive team, but they'd suffice, at least for two hours. Some administrators, he knew, would see this tragedy as a chance to piggybank to a promotion. Perry Roman just wanted to get the job done. Perry Roman was a church-going man, went every Sunday with his wife and three kids. If the Good Lord saw fit to reward him with a promotion, so be it. In the meantime, he'd just be the best man he could be.

He felt the rising sun tickle the back of his head. The milky oval on the pavement was fading away like a dream. Perry stared past the violence to the unkempt park on the north side of the street, and to the elementary school on the other side of the park.

The sniper, on the roof of the elementary school, stared past the violence to

Perry Roman. The dawn provided adequate illumination for all sorts of misbehavior. He tracked his rifle to the two gesticulating detectives; to the old cop with the yellow tape and his young female sidekick, the one who kept looking at the dog. He adjusted his scope for the day's new brightness and fingered his gentle trigger. Yep. All sorts of misbehavior.