

PRESTON
& CHILD

PENDERGAST
THE BEGINNING



An Aries Book

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PROLOGUE

Grosse Tete, Louisiana

1989

IT WAS A SWELTERING October morning when Austin Landry and the rest of the crew drove through the gates of Savior's Rest Cemetery, the rust-black of the wrought iron spikes almost invisible under a coating of lichen and moss. The cemetery wasn't large, and Landry could see, ahead and to the right, the burial party: a black-clad cluster of people, heads down, bowed either in grief or by the relentless sun.

He steered the van left, off the cobbled lane and down a dirt path, so he could approach the ceremony from the rear. "You boys ready?" he asked.

Various murmurings and mutterings from the passengers. Landry glanced over at them. "Heaven's sakes, will you tidy up? All y'all look like the Three Stooges."

As he watched from the corner of his eye, the others—Stanley Trahan, Ned Fontenot, Martego Unpronounceable-Last-Name—made half-assed attempts to straighten their ties, tuck in their shirts, and in general make themselves as presentable as the cheap black suits would allow.

This wasn't Landry's full-time job, thank the Lord. He and his acquaintances only got called by Albert Kroker—director of Kroker Brothers Funeral Home—when the bereaved couldn't assemble a group of their own pallbearers to carry the coffin. Kroker didn't mind *that*, of course: it gave him another line item for the bill he'd

present the grieving family once the proceedings were over. Eight men, \$150 each. Except Kroker just hired the four of them, paid them seventy-five dollars apiece, and knew that in the general trauma the difference in manpower would go unnoticed.

Unnoticed—except by Landry and the other three, who had to heft the coffin from hearse to grave with a semblance of dignity.

As the van came around the rear side of the cemetery, he got a better view of things through the shimmering curtains of heat. Hearse; escort car for the priest; flower van; Kroker's six-door black Caddy for the grieving family at three hundred dollars an hour. The group of mourners was relatively small, about a dozen—a family named Montcalm, mostly white-haired and balancing on walkers, and a couple of younger men who'd probably been fellow workers. The family had chosen Parson Jessup to officiate: he liked the long, old-fashioned rites, though Landry suspected even the stringy, bad-tempered man of God would hurry things up today, with the humidity hovering around 100 percent. He could see the cemetery workers had already prepared the grave site, metal supports in place on both sides and a granite headstone set into the earth. Granite, must have cost some bucks. Clearly, the family wasn't hard up for cash... and the funeral director would have taken full advantage of the fact.

Landry wound down his window just enough to hear what the parson was intoning.

Man, that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery...

Wasn't that the truth. Shoot, they were further into the proceedings than he'd expected. Leaving the window open and nodding to the others, he turned off the engine. All four got out and gathered behind the van, out of view, making final adjustments to the Woolworth's-grade suits Kroker had provided them with. Landry looked them over one last time. Fontenot's eyes were red and sunken, and he swayed ever so slightly. Up close, he stank of beer.

"Goddamn it, Ned—drink your breakfast again?"

Fontenot looked away, mumbled something. Landry glared at him another moment, then took a deep breath. "All right. Let's get this over with."

"What kind of coffin they using?" Stanley asked.

"How should I know?"

"That last one was so heavy, my back hurt for a week."

"Don't worry about it. Thirty minutes and we'll be gone. Fontenot, you'd better keep it together."

They made their way in a funereal line toward the open-backed hearse. As they walked, heads bent in simulated solemnity, Landry tried to recall the details of this particular burial. Not that it made any difference, but he remembered the deceased was young, about his own age. The guy had worked in construction, crushed his head when he'd slipped off a girder and fell half a dozen stories. That meant a closed coffin—too bad for Kroker, who could make a lot more dough fixing up faces with superglue, Nair for the nostrils, and tampons in the mouth to wick away moisture. Not that Landry felt bad for the funeral director—he had a dozen other ways, legal or otherwise, to aid the bereaved in parting with their money along with their loved one.

Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts . . .

The four approached the hearse and took up their positions, two on each side of the open rear doors. Landry raised his head and, like a general preparing strategy, took in the field: about ten feet from the hearse to the grave, on good level ground. No problem.

Then, glancing back at the coffin for the first time, his heart sank. It lay in the shadow of the hearse, but he could nevertheless see the mourners had chosen the heaviest of Kroker's offerings: the Mahogany Requiem, with SlumberSafe brass appointments. It figured: Kroker always did his best to push this particular coffin onto families in no condition to think sensibly about such details. In the Viewing

Room, where the various coffins were laid out under soft light and piped-in organ music, the Mahogany Requiem was always the shiniest of the lot. Kroker had made damn sure the top and sides were heavy as hell, so the bereaved knew they were getting their money's worth. Of course, nobody ever asked to look *under* the coffin, where the mahogany stopped and the plywood began.

A muttered curse from Fontenot: he'd noticed the coffin, too.

Landry looked back at the graveside and the small assembly surrounding it. Kroker was giving him a surreptitious stink-eye, warning him to do a creditable job. Next to him was Kroker's assistant director, three months on the job, youthful and radiating a lot more life than the rest of the group. Seeing Landry, he gave a sympathetic nod. Unlike Kroker, the assistant was a friendly, stand-up guy: Landry hadn't spoken to him much, but he knew the man didn't care for the way Kroker took shortcuts, bilked customers, and ignored the rules. He'd once heard an argument between Kroker and the assistant in which the younger man had warned the funeral director that, with all the new environmental regulations President Reagan was pushing through in his second term, he'd better get his act together. It was no longer okay to just dump formaldehyde, phenol, and a boatload of other carcinogens straight from the embalming room into the Atchafalaya River and then downstream into Bayou Chene. The assistant meant well, but Landry knew Kroker was too old and cheap to change his ways.

The parson raised his arms over the empty grave, and his voice rose: that was the signal. Landry and the others lined up along the back of the hearse, another cursing as he, too, recognized the casket. With Landry murmuring instructions, they grasped the brass handles, gently pulled the coffin forward—Jesus, it was even heavier than he remembered—and, with a few gasps and additional curses, balanced it on the rear lip of the hearse. All eyes swiveled toward them: showtime.

"On three," Landry said.

They lifted the coffin free of the hearse and began moving—front bearers stepping first, rear bearers after—in the shuffle-procession

they'd learned was the easiest way to lug a dead person toward an open grave.

"Shit fire," Trahan muttered through gritted teeth. "I thought this stiff was fit. He must weigh three hundred pounds."

"Save your breath." Landry was concentrating on the job—one step ahead; wait for the rear guard to move; then the other foot forward. The coffin did seem even heavier than usual. He guessed Kroker had begun installing extra-thick lids so he could jack up prices still further.

They were halfway to the grave when Landry heard a cracking sound.

He was struggling with the weight and, at first, wasn't sure where it came from. But then he heard another: *snap*, like a pistol shot. It was coming from the underside of the coffin.

Oh Jesus—had Kroker replaced the plywood base with frigging balsa wood? Speaking of the funeral director, his face had suddenly gone gray.

No time to worry about it now—another step, and they'd have the coffin positioned over the framework of metal poles that paralleled the grave, with heavy green lowering straps extending across the deep hole in the earth. They'd lay the coffin on the straps, transfer the weight to them, then crank both the straps and the casket down into the earth—and when it was all over, he'd have a few words with Mr. Kroker.

We commend the soul of our brother departed, and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...

Just as they were placing the casket onto the straps, and Landry was preparing to expel a breath he'd held too long already, he saw something that made his insides turn to ice despite the heat: the front left strap assembly, the one used to crank the coffin down into the grave, wasn't seated properly. The cemetery workers hadn't fixed the strap securely to its banding clip. As Landry grunted with effort, straining to get a better look around the edge of the coffin, he realized that,

if they set the casket down, the straps would slip right through their fairings, drop into the grave...and the whole mess would give way completely.

Sweet mother of God...

If they had the normal eight pallbearers, or if the casket wasn't so heavy, he could briefly one-hand the coffin and secure the strap into position. But the four of them were struggling as it was. How the hell was he going to fix this?

He glanced at Kroker, but the funeral director seemed to have seized up—as if that cracking sound was still echoing in his brain. It probably was. *Cheap-ass skinflint son of a bitch...*

"Lower it!" Fontenot, who could not see the problem, gasped.

"Hold on!" Landry overruled him. Could they move the coffin back to the hearse, fix the lowering framework? A quick look at his three associates, purple-faced with effort, told him they couldn't.

A third crack sounded, louder than the first two, causing even Parson Jessup to pause mid-intonation. It was the unmistakable sound of wood giving way.

"I can't hold it!" Fontenot half spoke, half gurgled.

"Wait!" said Landry. "Wait—!"

The next set of events came in quick succession. Fontenot let his portion of the load slip down onto the framework. The other three, finding their own loads now intolerable, had no choice but to do the same. As the friends of the deceased, realizing the situation, prepared to lend a hand, Landry grasped for the lowering strap, praying he could fix it in position...but with the sudden introduction of hundreds of pounds it slipped immediately from its axle and curled down into darkness like a thick, flat snake. The coffin tilted; righted; tilted farther, and then—with another cracking noise, this time accompanied by a groan of metal and a rising gasp from the onlookers—fell into the open grave.

Landry stared, paralyzed by horrified fascination.

The head of the coffin slammed into the base of the freshly dug hole with a terrible thud, shivering the entire casing. At the same time

the bottom of the casket gave way, splitting into several pieces and allowing the body within to flop out. Gasps and curses rose as the deceased was exposed: crushed head, strips of hospital tape holding the bits of jaw in place; corpse nude from the waist down and already an eggplant purple; body cavity seals popping loose from the impact, followed by a gush of fluids.

Shrieks erupted around Landry. Parson Jessup was calling for order and praying at the same time. The funeral director was, quite suddenly, nowhere to be found.

As the scene grew increasingly chaotic, Landry suddenly heard a scream, louder than the others, and an elderly woman collapsed to his left. A few seconds later, he heard a chorus of dismayed cries, followed by the sound of retching. Another person collapsed on the far side of the grave, fainting dead away and falling prostrate over the remains of the metal scaffolding, already badly askew.

Distantly, as he stared down into the open grave—shocked by how quickly things had gone from normal to nightmare—he wondered what had caused the fainting and delayed screams. The worst imaginable had *already* happened—a coffin had accidentally been dropped into its grave, and the ill-prepared remains dumped unceremoniously from beneath it—what could be any more awful than that?

And then—as he stared down into the hole yawning before his feet—he saw . . . and understood.