

Chapter One

Evan Michael Thomas grew up in New Orleans—the 7th Ward, home of jazz, to be precise. And while it was no longer what it once was, there was something about this place that was magic to the people from there. Growing up in the 90s, Evan was surrounded by a symphony of sounds that nurtured the soul—jazz, rhythm and blues, and gospel music. It was here that he birthed the pious dream of becoming a Catholic priest.

For being a thirty-two year old pastor at his own parish, life for Evan was infinitely good. The nuances of life were never a cause for worry; his faith in the Lord was worn like armor. So when Vera Du Bois blew into his parish on that beautiful, tranquil Sunday morning, he realized just how truly unprepared for a storm he was. His faith was immediately rattled.

That day he stood in front of his congregation at St. James Church, the three-hundred member strong church he oversaw. The landmark church sat right next to Jackson Square and faced the Mississippi River in the heart of New Orleans. Boy, his church had history! St. James was small, but historic in New Orleans, and one of the oldest in the United States. Despite the history and the notoriety that goes along with having such status, St. James was big enough to contain its multi-racial congregation and small enough for a priest to know his parishioners individually.

“Please be seated,” he commanded in his deep baritone voice from behind the lectern.

He opened up his Bible to the Gospel from Matthew, 5:16 and read the passage, although he knew it quite by heart. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good work and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.” His eyes scanned the thoughtful faces of his parishioners and then he announced, “Today’s readings have been focused on good deeds.” And from there, he began to share his sermon for that Sunday.

Twenty minutes in, he paused and faced his congregation, his cornflower blue eyes perusing the devoted that had come out to worship that morning, a warm smile on his ruggedly handsome face. “So, Church, do you know why Noah was the best businessman in the Bible?”

The eyes of his congregation were on him, everyone pondering the answer.

After the right contemplative pause he replied. “He floated his stock while everyone else was being liquidated.”

Everyone burst into laughter and he finished his sermon, thankful for the opportunity to drive the point home in a humorous way. Then his eyes went to the back right corner and he saw her. She appeared to be black Creole and in that sea of faces, her beauty stood out and even though he was a priest, he could not ignore it.

He continued on with Mass and when it was time for Eucharist he noticed that she stood up to join the line to receive the sacrament. She was tall, in her heels just a few inches shorter than his 6’2” frame. Her straight hair was dark and fell around her shoulders. She had an oval face with high cheekbones. She possessed mocha colored skin and pronounced curves that held his attention. The young woman looked up at him briefly and stuck out her tongue to receive communion and her dark brown eyes were both soulful and sincere. As he benevolently placed the cracker in her mouth, he silently expelled the breath he had been holding from the moment he saw her. She turned and walked back to her pew, but he couldn’t get her out of his mind. Her eyes were captivating to be sure; but was there some other reason? As he placed a wafer on the final parishioner’s tongue, he decided that whatever power she held over him would have to be contemplated another time, as it was time to finish up Mass.

When he was done, Evan stayed behind to fellowship, as he always did after Mass. This connection with his members was important, as it afforded him an opportunity to know them better and for them to ask him any questions they may have of him.

He glanced to his right and saw the woman approaching him slowly.

“Hello, Reverend Father,” she said softly. It was nearly like a whisper.

She had a mole on the side of her upper lip that he hadn’t taken note of earlier. He studied her surreptitiously, not wanting to be obvious in his curiosity.

He cleared his dry throat and greeted her. “Good morning to *you*. How are you today?”

“I’m well, thank you,” she answered with a modest smile.

“You’re new to St. James,” he stated, drinking in her features and committing them to memory.

“I am,” she replied, sending him another smile.

He stared at her lovely face and bright white smile.

“Are you from around here?” he asked.

“Born and raised here, Father, but I’ve been living in Texas,” she said. Despite her confident tone there was something about her that seemed incredibly fragile to Evan.

“Ah...Well, welcome back. I hope you were blessed after today’s Mass,” he said, wondering if she would be open to discussion.

“Yes.” She said no more. Standing there with her on the bottom of the church steps, the tantalizing aroma of fried onions and Cajun seasonings from the burger joint across the street invaded his senses. He gazed longingly at the door.

“If you don’t mind, what’s your name?” he asked, realizing the burger would have to wait. He cocked his head to the side, his eyes narrowing on hers.

“Vera Du Bois.”

“Creole?”

She nodded and then shared some of her story. She was new to the 7th Ward. Though originally from New Orleans, she had grown up in Jefferson Parish and had recently moved back after living in Texas with her late husband. She was now living with her Nana, who was getting on in years and needed her.

“A most thoughtful and gracious gesture,” Evan had said to her. “If you ever need assistance...” His words trailed off as he found himself uncomfortably enamored with the dark haired beauty that stood before him. She seemed weighted down by her burdens and the kindness in heart didn’t go unnoticed. She wore the expression on her face, as well.

“How long has it been?” he asked.

She sighed and looked at him with wide, vulnerable eyes. “A year since I lost him.” Her voice sounded convincing despite the consistently demure tone.

“May I offer you prayer?” he asked.

Just then a parishioner came up to exchange some words and when they left, Evan apologized and suggested that they perhaps walk if she was comfortable with that, as it would allow them privacy.

Walking with her, Evan prayed that she would find the strength to soldier through her loss. His desire to nurture those in anguish surfaced and it was so intense that it was almost foreign to him, despite his caring for all his parishioners in need.

She shrugged her small shoulders and looked away after the prayer was through. “I don’t know, Father...It’s just been...rough.” Then she shook those shoulders and said, “I just need to stay busy. I’m a pretty good cook and baker. I love making homemade cookies and pastries. So I was thinking, if I could make cookies for the orphanage down the road, I could bring smiles to the children while I help myself. Or perhaps I could teach some Catechism classes. Even though I’m going through the fire right now, I’ve never wavered in my beliefs.”

Evan understood how the young woman was feeling completely. She needed to learn to live with the way things were now. “Based on what you’ve told me, you’re still grieving your husband. I think working to help others is a wonderful thing, but I also counsel those in need of it. Would you be interested in grief counseling, Vera? Maybe I can help you work through it.”

After a long pause she said, “That might be something I could use. Counseling, that is.” She looked away again.

He placed a gentle hand to her lower back. “Good. Grief counseling sessions meet every Monday evening.”

Pensively she responded, “I believe I can make that. And about my idea? What do you think, Father? I’d work strictly as a volunteer, I wouldn’t ask for pay.” She suddenly looked very embarrassed. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean that. You have to forgive me. Sometimes I tend to talk too much. Especially when I’m nervous.”

“There’s no reason to be nervous. There are only friends here,” he assured her. “And of your wish to serve, I believe we can make that happen.” The woman needed comfort badly. He longed to hold her close and stroke her long black hair, assuring her everything would be okay.

She nodded, the relief on her face obvious. “Thank you, Reverend,” she said appreciatively.

“You’re most welcome,” Evan replied and smiled into her face.

With that, she nodded and walked on to meet her grandmother, who was waiting for her surrounded by some members of the congregation by the side of an SUV.

So, she's Carol's granddaughter, Evan thought. He watched Vera walk over to her grandmother, the feminine sway of her hips in her black pencil skirt, giving rise to inappropriate thoughts, among other things. Feeling a stirring in his loins that rattled his cool, he turned to make his way to the sidewalk and around the corner to the rectory, his home.

Evan's life was content and happy. His service to his Church and its members fulfilled him on many levels. When he did have free time, he enjoyed reading and familiarizing himself with the vast amount of information and resources that were online. He loved reading articles on psychology, politics, and sociology. And he learned to design websites and make 2-D graphics on his computer.

One day a few years back, a fellow priest had asked him an odd question about this. *"Is your thirst for knowledge of the Lord as strong as your thirst to understand politics and psychology?"*

He'd been shocked and a bit annoyed. How dare another priest question his desire for knowledge. It was not his place to have to explain, and really, he didn't know how he could in just a few simple words. His childhood had influenced the man he'd become in every way.

Growing up in the 7th Ward, he was passionate about two things, church and knowledge and was grateful for his mother's hard work that had allowed him to attend St. Mark Catholic high school. Always encouraged on by his mother, he excelled at school, graduating at the top of his class. He enjoyed debating in the school chapel with the debate club, discussing everything under the heavens. It had all been rewarding and stimulating to him and had molded his outlook on life. It had given him a broader perspective on issues, which he considered a benefit in serving others. His steadfastness had been enough that he'd been given St. James, the old established parish at the age of thirty, something that was indeed an honor. It was a beautiful house to teach God's message in.

Several months earlier, a parishioner by the name of Robert Jones had come in for a counseling session. Bob, as he was known, was a top salesman in the pharmaceutical company where he worked. Things had been going fine until his wife was diagnosed with an advanced stage of cervical cancer. He had spent almost all his life savings on her treatment to no avail. After some time, he started stealing drugs from his supply. Sadly, he lost his wife to the disease. During a particularly difficult period of mourning, his conscience wouldn't let him rest. He went to Father Thomas for counsel on what to do. Evan was torn by the moral dilemma of the man's situation.

Would he just pronounce God's forgiveness and not sock Bob with the truth? He could relate to his loss. He'd lost his own father to cancer. He could also understand the desperation behind the theft. After offering the man a word of forgiveness on God's behalf, he gently counseled him to come clean and open up to his superiors at work. That was a hard thing to advise, but when Bob came back to see him three weeks later, he was all smiles. He hadn't been fired or turned over to the police. His employers had him pay back the money for the drugs he had stolen, the amount to be taken directly from his paycheck.

As a priest, Evan was grateful to be able to guide his people along the path of the truth. This was of particular importance in the confessional, where he sat every Saturday. Surprisingly, though, this was also one of the most challenging parts of his role, often leaving him with mixed feelings. The problems and temptations so many had in the world were foreign to him, and he was grateful for that. Temptations of adultery, theft, and the wavering of faith at critical times were things foreign to him. However, he always felt privileged and honored to be able to grant forgiveness and penance to his people, cleansing their hearts and renewing their spirits. And although they were on the other side of a black screen, he often knew who was there by the sound of their voice.

The next Saturday came and Evan heard a voice he'd already memorized on the other side of the confessional. Although he couldn't see her, he was excited to feel her presence.

As she confessed, her whispery soft voice quivered and he sensed her pain. “Father, I am a sinner... I confess to the sin of doubt and worry. I have not trusted God enough. I worry about myself and my grandmother.”

“Is that all, dearly beloved of the Lord?” he asked in quiet authority.

“I worry about the uncertainties of the future.”

“Hear me, beloved.” He answered her. “As long as you strive to have faith, the Lord will understand your intent.” He assured her of God’s love for her and His forgiveness. He then pronounced God’s forgiveness. “I absolve you of all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

She thanked him and lingered a while before he heard her slip out of the booth, and the next person entered.

Despite giving his best efforts to the other parishioner’s needs, he found his mind growing distracted with Vera. She seemed to be such an innocent soul.

He confirmed this observation as she came in for confessions week after week. Over time, her visits to the confession booth became regular and Evan began to look forward to her appearance on Saturdays. On Sundays, they would make sure to make eye contact and exchange greetings after Mass, talking a bit before she’d leave.

As he got to know her better, she opened up more and he understood her grief. She had lost her husband Ricky to the war in Iraq. He had been part of the American troops that invaded Iraq in 2003, overthrowing the Iraqi-Ba’athist government and then occupying the territory. Ricky was killed in December of 2004 during the second battle of Fallujah, the bloodiest battle of the Iraqi War. She’d struggled greatly trying to recover and it hadn’t been easy. So when her aged grandmother had fallen ill, she took advantage of the opportunity to move back to New Orleans to be with her. The church had recently helped her in securing a job as a teacher in a private school.

He didn’t want to admit it or allow the idea to be declared, but Evan was growing uncomfortable with the obvious closeness between Vera and himself. It was not that there was anything wrong in being friends with a parishioner, but Evan felt he was beginning to develop feelings for her. This was cemented on a particular Sunday afternoon when he accepted a dinner invitation to Vera’s home.

Vera's grandmother, Carol, greeted him at the door. "Father, it's nice to see you. Come in," she said stepping aside for him to enter.

"Thank you," he said, and his eyes immediately began to look for the face he had longed to see.

"We're honored to have you," Carol said. "You can go right into the dining room, Vera has everything ready." Her light brown eyes twinkled brightly. He could tell she was proud.

"I finally get to enjoy some of the food that I've heard others brag about so openly," Evan said, looking forward to not only the food, but the woman, as well.

He walked into a dining room that had an exquisite, perfectly placed setting. The only thing that was missing was Vera. And that all changed as she came through the swinging door with a bright smile on her face that carried into her eyes. It was, not to be cliché, heavenly.

