

INSTANT NATIONAL BESTSELLER

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MORBID:
A TRUE CRIME
PODCAST



**THE
BUTCHER
AND
THE WREN**

A NOVEL

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AND THE
WREN**

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zando
NEW YORK



The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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For Mom and Dad, who are not required to read this book. You certainly didn't inspire the events (can you imagine?), but you inspired the act of writing. You got a weird kid, and you somehow knew what to do. Forever in awe of that.

For John, who gives me the confidence to create. I adore you more with each passing year. Never stop singing nineties R&B ballads at inopportune times.

For my three wonderful babies, who write better books and have better hair than I ever will. You can't read this book. Put it down now.

PART

ONE

CHAPTER 1

JEREMY HEARS THE SCREAMING THROUGH the vents. Hears it but doesn't react. His nighttime routine is essential. The mundane, everyday tasks that he engages in make him more himself. The simple act of wrenching on the ancient faucet on his tidy bathroom vanity grounds and centers him. His night usually ends standing in front of this mirror. He is freshly showered, and, normally, he follows it with a close, leisurely shave. He likes to crawl into bed with a clean body and mind. He takes the time to ensure these preparations happen nightly, regardless of any outside disruption.

Tonight, a particularly loud screech pulls him from his routine. He stares into the mirror, feeling rage entangle itself into his senses. He can feel it rising like an invasive rot. He can't think with the almost rhythmic screaming now rising from the basement. For as long as he can remember, he has hated loud noises. As a child he would feel his surroundings close in on him like a vise whenever he was amid the sounds of a crowded place. Now, the only noises he craves are those of the bayou. Its symphony of creatures soothes him like a warm blanket. Nature always makes the best soundtrack.

He tries to block out the screaming. This routine is sacred. He sighs, pushing a piece of blond hair that has fallen lightly against his forehead back into place and flicking on the radio next to the sink. The only other time he can find solace in sound is when he listens to music. As he prepares for relief, "Hotline Bling" by Drake blares through the speakers, and he flicks it off immediately. Sometimes he feels like he was born in the wrong generation.

He slowly washes away the blood and grime from his hands, trying not to concern himself with the muffled, agonized moans that loudly escape through the heating vents. He looks hard at his face in the mirror. Each year, he feels as though his cheekbones have risen slightly and become more prominent. It is an oddly satisfying consequence that aging has thrust upon him, and he feels blessed for it. A lot of well-adjusted people admire a well-sculpted skull. Most of them don't even understand how primitively ominous that particular fixation is. Most people don't allow themselves to see the savage side of a psyche that was crafted millions of years ago out of their ancestors' often brutal need to survive. These are the traits that evolution deemed to be useful. People are just too dumb to understand that their own predilections are suggestive of a gene pool that is rooted in brutality.

He doesn't necessarily look like someone entangled in depravity. He appears innocuous, and, at times, could look downright wholesome. That's why it all works. There is a plant called *Amorphophallus titanum* that is colloquially referred to as the corpse flower. It's large, beautiful, and without any outward mechanism that would suggest it is dangerous. Yet, when it blooms, every ten years or so, it releases an odor that resembles rotting flesh. It survives though. It thrives. He is not so different from the corpse flower. People flock to this curious plant, and it has cultivated a base of admiration despite its quirks.

Tomorrow is Thursday. Thursdays are his Friday, but he truly hates when people say things like that. Regardless, he has enjoyed the luxury of taking Fridays off work since he started his second year at Tulane University School of Medicine. Even though he has some classes to slog through, Fridays are the beginning of his weekend. His weekends are when he gets the most work done. He is particularly excited because he has real plans for his current houseguests this upcoming weekend. Of course, executing those plans to their full potential relies on his ability to add one more to their group.

Emily would indeed be joining them. It had been weeks of analysis after first initiating their partnership in Biology lab, and he is now sure

that she would bring the challenge he is craving. Emily jogs a few times a week and doesn't seem to fill her body with trash, so she likely has stamina. She lives with two roommates in Ponchatoula, where they rent a large old home together off campus. Aside from her willingness to reveal too much about herself to her new lab partner, she is competent, self-reliant, and intelligent, all of which would serve her well during his game. Her cohorts would also bring their own value, but he imagines after their extended stay at his home, they won't be up for the entire weekend of activities that he has planned for them.

His other two guests endured a bit of poking and prodding since they arrived the previous Saturday night. At Buchanan's, he managed to engage with them without any prior preparation. Usually, he took time to get to know his potential guests as he did with Emily, but these two fell into his hands. It's like the universe was asking him to take out its trash. Of course, he obliged.

Katie and Matt are painfully generic. They lack any sense of unique thought and were all too eager to follow some good bone structure home with merely the promise of drugs. Katie and Matt know now that they made a poor choice. Again, he hears an anguished moan escape the heating vent, and finds himself losing patience.

He abandons his bedtime ritual and hurries down the stairs to the basement where his guests are staying. He can immediately hear Katie's low moans turn to fearful yelps, and her petite frame physically recoils as he approaches her.

"You need to be cognizant of the fact that you are staying in someone else's home," he says, looking her straight in her muddy brown eyes.

She is hopelessly unremarkable. Brown, lifeless hair sticks to her neck with old blood like crude glue. Her aesthetic is entirely trailer park, though she's desperately tried to hide it. The slightly mouselike aspect to her teeth could be considered charming if she wasn't such an unimaginable twit. When he approached her in the bar, she was regaling Matt with an anecdote about her high school cheerleading days—a pathetic tale that seemed far-fetched considering the shape

she is in now. He adjusts the ligatures that hold her to her chair and checks that the IV bag is properly hydrating her system. No kinks in the line, and the bag is still almost full.

“Matt is being respectful. Be more like Matt, Katie.” He smiles wide and gestures to Matt’s silent and motionless body slumped in the chair beside her.

They both know he passed out, likely from shock, during Jeremy’s previous visit down here. Katie begins to weep loudly, and he rolls his eyes. She is testing his gentility, and he is becoming significantly more disgusted by her desperation. He stands quietly in the dark by her side, pressing play on the portable speaker between the two chairs. “A Girl Like You” by Edwyn Collins fills the space. He grins to himself. Finally, a decent sound.

“Ah, that’s more like it.” He sways to the music, and he gives Katie the opportunity to collect herself.

By the end of the first chorus, she starts wailing. Without hesitation, he grabs the pliers behind her chair, and with one swift motion rips the putridly pink nail clean off her left thumb. He pulls her screaming face to touch his own.

“Another sound out of you, and I start pulling out teeth. Understood?” he threatens.

All she manages is a nod, and he tosses the pliers in the corner. With a wink, he makes his way upstairs.

He didn’t grow up with a lot of mercy. He didn’t grow up with a lot of anything at all. His father was a tough man but a fair one, expecting a certain level of submission in his home from both wife and son. If Jeremy caught him at just the right time, he learned lasting skills and lessons through his father’s careful instruction. As an aircraft machinist in the city, Jeremy’s father maintained various pieces of aerospace equipment. Although it didn’t require formal education, Jeremy was always proud that his father worked with planes and eager for a glimpse into one of mankind’s most significant inventions. But at the wrong time, he was met instead with cruel degradation.

Despite his father’s volatility, Jeremy looked forward to his arrival home from work every day. They didn’t do much together, but that’s

what he appreciated. After spending all day with his mother, he would relish the comfortable silence hanging between them as they watched something on television before bed. His days were mostly filled with a heavy dose of neglect sprinkled with some overly attentive moments from his mother, as if she couldn't regulate her affection. She was always far too much or far too little.

A steady respite from the unpredictable whims of his parents, books always held Jeremy's focus. By age seven, he hadn't entered school yet. As neglectful as she could be, every few days, his mother would bring him to a library off St. Charles Avenue. They always went on weekdays, while his father was working. Jeremy didn't understand at the time that his mother was dragging her only child to a library so she could carry on an affair with one of the librarians, but he did absorb the lessons in deception that these trips afforded. He learned early on to never tell his father that his mother left him alone to wander the stacks while she retreated to a back room with Mr. Carraway. More importantly, he taught himself to steal. He brought home books in his coat or backpack, never relying on his mother to check them out. Jeremy is fairly certain now that the employees had simply looked the other way out of pity, but at the time he felt like he was pulling off a weekly heist.

Now and then, Miss Knox, one of the librarians, would attempt conversation with him. One day, daring to ask directly if everything was okay at home, her voice trembled with concern. He hadn't responded and instead asked her for a book about lobotomies. He had recently become entranced with this archaic medical procedure and its most ardent practitioner, Dr. Walter Freeman. Over the weekend, his father had been watching a rerun episode of *Frontline* called "Broken Minds." It was a brutal look into the mental health system and highlighted a method of lobotomizing patients diagnosed with any number of ailments, especially schizophrenia, by severing the presumed circuit or network of circuits that they believed to be responsible for the patient's atypical behavior.

Dr. Freeman's prefrontal lobotomy captivated him the most. The nickname "ice pick lobotomy" was an exceptionally provocative

moniker. It conjured up images of an immaculate surgeon, twisted with the desire to explore the mentally ill mind. Later in 1992, when he heard the term carelessly tossed around in the news as a method serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer was using to subdue his victims, he was disgusted. Dahmer was so feebleminded that he thought he could make his own zombies by injecting cleaning products and acids into his victim's brains. He was imbecilic. To call what he was doing a "lobotomy" is like calling what Ted Bundy was doing "dating." Jeremy could practically hear Dr. Freeman rolling over in his grave.

Jeremy was a kid who craved knowledge. And chronically understimulated, he fed his own hunger by experimentation. His father's early advice echoed in his mind over the years.

"You want to learn about something, son? You have to open it up."