

## Chapter One

### Alpha and Omega

*Sunday, February 1, 2015 – 1:47 a.m.*

Twenty-plus years with the Orleans Parish Coroner's Office taught Jonathan Gray to expect the unexpected. But Washington Square Park had always been a tranquil haven on the fringe of the French Quarter. So crime-scene tape draping the square's wrought-iron fence presented the visual equivalent of fingernails on a chalkboard. Moonlight filtering through stately live oaks cast eerie—almost funereal—shadows, adding to the dissonance.

Fluttering in the nippy midwinter breeze, the neon-yellow ribbon communicated a mute warning. On this side, normalcy. On the other, insanity. Stepping into the dysfunction never got easier. Regardless, turning back wasn't an option. As if speaking the incantation aloud would immunize him against the unfolding drama, he repeated his trite pre-crime scene mantra: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." His breath lingered in the frosty air before evaporating.

After checking in with the uniformed officer monitoring access, Jonathan angled toward floodlights illuminating a temporary canopy above the city's AIDS memorial. More tape—red as opposed to yellow—identified the innermost "Do Not Cross" perimeter. Crime scene technicians in white Tyvek protective suits busied themselves measuring and photographing what must be the reason he'd been summoned. A male corpse sitting upright on the ground—its arms and legs twisted at seemingly impossible angles—leaned against the memorial's circular cut-glass and steel panels surrounded by a pool of thick, dark-crimson liquid.

A curved, nearly rectangular piece of wood with brass edges—most likely a knife handle—protruded from under the right side of the dead man's rib cage. A portion of his intestines spilled out of the wound. A second knife—its handle and part of its blade visible—had been thrust downward into the soft tissue between the left collarbone and neck.

Cause of death seemed too obvious to require someone of Jonathan's seniority. A first-year med student could have made the call. But markings carved into the dead man's forehead and chest hinted at something more sinister. No wonder Mitch Broussard from NOPD had called him in the middle of the night. The man's heavy flannel shirt lay open, exposing his chest and a series of capital letters etched into his skin. The letters—G I D I A I D I V—made no sense, at least not in English. A folded piece of paper with similar letters and other symbols, not quite readable from that distance, lay under the man's left hand. Lack of blood covering the letters in the chest signaled they had been added *postmortem*. Jonathan focused on two marks in the man's forehead. An uppercase "A" and what looked like an upside-down horseshoe—the Greek letter Omega—apparently cut while the victim was still alive.

It couldn't have been two years already. But there it was. Alpha and Omega. Jonathan bit his lip and cursed under his breath. Then, a silent prayer. Looked like the nightmare was about to begin—again.

One of the CSTs stood and raised her clear face shield. "Hey, Doc. Welcome to Funsville."