

UNDER A CLOUD OF RAIN

by A.R. Baumann

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

CHAPTER 1

That summer of 1970, Houston baked in the sun like Mama's biscuits in the oven. Detective Nick Noelle felt as miserable as the weather. It was only two months since his wife Sally had kicked him out of the cottage he bought for them; the home he thought would bring them peace. Sally had recently showed up at his crummy boarding house flat looking whipped as a dog and needing nothing from him but money. She was hooking again, but it wasn't going well for her. Between that and the goddamn heat, he was going crazy. That morning, he called in to his precinct, and told them he'd be in late.

He decided to take a drive to Galveston to clear out the trash talk in his head. A short while later Noelle was standing and staring out over muddy waters at the Sixty First Street Pier in Galveston. The beach town was dead and the peaceful view over the Gulf was now reflecting dark clouds and the ill wind stirred by his thoughts. A foreboding storm was brewing and the sky grew darker. He observed the still water gently lapping at the pier's pillars and he contemplated how those steady gentle waves over time were ravaging and eating away at the core of the pier's foundation. He preferred to think about this instead of Sally or obsessing over his urge to play poker at Sam's House of Cards. One cloud overhead started leaking small drops of rain. He lifted his face so the water would hit him square on.

There was not a big enough downpour to wash away his crazy thinking about Sally. He'd been nutty to fall in love with her, even more of a lunatic to marry her – a cop who thought he could rescue a hooker. What a chump, he was.

He had to stop believing that maybe she'd loved him. He was nothing but a crusty Cajun cop, old and worn out like the pier beneath him. A vet of the Korean War whose medal for courage never wiped out the memory of a young boy, a child, he shot during one of the bloodiest battles of his service. Switching back to thoughts of Sally, he knew he had to stop giving her money; it only fueled his delusions.

The sky swelled with black clouds and whole barrels of toxic rain began to pour over him. He let the rain soak his clothes as he ogled the muddy churning bay. He could end it all, right here, right now. He could climb over the railing and just disappear. That's what his old man had done. His father, a big bruiser who talked with his fists, abandoned him and his Mom. His old man was a drunk and a coward took a final dunk in the Mississippi. Like father, like son.

Fuck no, no way; why now after spending his whole lifetime fighting to make it right.

He drove back to Houston with the windshield wipers fighting the rain. Once at the station he saw that nothing much was going on. For days it had been too damned hot for even criminals to work. He imagined all the thieves, rapists and murderers in Huston holed up next to air conditioners or open refrigerator doors, too sluggish to move. The light in the squad room was dim and gray filing cabinets, gray metal desks, and black plastic telephones added more gloom. The fluorescent lights buzzed, off and on and half a dozen detectives sat at their desks pretending to be busy. Beyond the squad room, their supervisor, Detective Donnelly, a pudgy Lieutenant in a cheap suit was in his office eating a Hershey bar.

Opposite his desk, Noelle's new partner, Lopez, sat reading a Bible. Noelle did his best to stifle his snort of disgust.

Lopez was a rookie with little experience. Well at least this kid was fresh and a real good looker. It might give them an edge when interrogating female witnesses. Lopez had deep brown eyes and a full head of jet back hair unlike the thin grey strands that framed Noelle's still handsome yet worn rugged features. Lopez resembled a modern day Aztec God, the kind you'd see on those colorful calendars at all the Mexican Restaurants in Texas-- the classic Latin image, depicting a handsome Aztec warrior carrying a beautiful Latin Goddess in his arms toward the volcano. Noelle still couldn't figure how Lopez, made detective. He hated the way he followed every single rule, even the ones that contradicted each other. He thought Donnelly was playing some kind of practical joke --assigning him a guy who would never smoke, drink or sleep with hookers. Or maybe Donnelly was trying to save Noelle's soul by partnering him with a religious fanatic?

"Boss," Lopez called. "Where were you? I've been here waiting since nine this morning."

"Well, at least you put the time to good use," Noelle said sarcastically, nodding at the Bible. His sarcasm was lost on Lopez.

"I was just taking a break, looking something up for my daughter. I worry about her, you know, being a teenager these days, with all the craziness loose in the world."

"Yeah, sure." Noelle wasn't really listening. Lopez wasn't a kid; they were actually closer in age than they looked. Unlike him, Lopez had a normal life, a house, a wife and a daughter. Even Noelle had to admit there was something sincere about Lopez, something refreshing. Of course, Lopez smiled a lot. Those clean white teeth made Noelle self conscious about his being chipped and yellowed with nicotine. It was probably a good thing Noelle thought that he wasn't a Yes-man like Lopez; no one could have stomached a smiling Noelle.

He sat down at his own desk and flipped through his messages; nothing important, only a call from Sally. The air conditioners hummed loudly. It was only a little cooler now, with the rain. The phone on Noelle's desk rang. He picked it up. "Yeah?"

Who is this?"

"I'm Miss Davis, and live next door to the Ima Hogg house, Bayou Bend." I've reported to the gardener over there and he never did a damn thing about it. Could you have a look-see down there?"

Noelle grasps the keys to the Plymouth, "Lopez, let's take a ride down to the Bayou Bend Mansion to check out this old bity's complaint. We got nothing better to do."

Chapter 2

The traffic was light as rainfall streamed the roads and highways, flowing into mini rivers, swelling gutters, and washing leaves and bits of trash into drains. They reached the Ima Hogg mansion just as the skies began to clear.

The place was surrounded with sprawling lawns and gardens and behind the gardens lay thick pinewoods, and beyond them, the bayou. Noelle had been there a few times when he was younger, usually when a girl he was dating wanted to do something "romantic."

At the gate Noelle flashed his badge and asked to speak to the gardener. The guard told them to pull over while they called, the head gardener, Angel Perez. Within a few minutes the gardener, Perez, with the body of prize fighter but was obviously middle aged walked toward the gate like he owned the place.

Noelle got out of the car. Angel Perez gave his name and asked how he could help them. Perez said, "I have worked in all of the most cherished gardens in Houston for decades. I can answer any questions you might have about the grounds here.

Noelle replied, we just want to know why you haven't responded to the complaint by your neighbor about the smell coming from your grounds.

Perez tightened and said, "Officer it's probably just the bayou stinking because of all this rain. Besides I don't have time to go down there. My work keeps me busy. But you are welcome to go down and look around yourselves. Perez pointed to the asphalt road beside. "There's the pathway."

The bayou steamed in the heat. Beneath the stench of swamp and rotting plants Noelle picked up another scent, a recognizable smell that always twisted his gut; dead body. A murder

case always started out this way; a feeling like he was about to face something he had to deal with, in order to get over an even bigger feeling. The underlying thought behind every other thought he ever had, be it in work or in love was the question of being worthy. His greatest fear was that he was just a fraud who could never live up to the responsibility his job required of him.

He held very still and listened. He followed his nose to the shed with rotting cabinets and empty Lone Star crates. He listened again and this time he heard Lopez murmuring a prayer as they both saw a poodle of blood oozing from a large trash bag. He yanked and pulled the bag out from under the shack.

“Boss, shouldn’t we call it in first?”

“Just whip your skinny ass over here and help me.”

“But the book says....”

“This isn’t about the book. This is about a human being.”

He didn’t give a rat’s ass about the mud and crap falling on his suit. Even though he hoped he could rescue the victim beneath those crates, in his heart he knew it was too late. The stench of the very dead rose up to choke him, but he kept at. He puts his cloves on and opened the trash bag, finding only parts of what was once a female body now swarming with maggots. When he reached in, Lopez saw the face of the victim. He staggered away and retched. “Oh, Jesus! Oh, Madre Maria!”

Large rusted nails had been driven through her feet and just above her left foot; a diamond anklet glinted in the sun. Noelle leaned in closer to inspect the tiny pendant and saw a gold heart with a ruby cross inside it. He could barely make out the engraved initials J.B.

He backed away with his spastic colon was on fire. “CALL BACK UP NOW!” he shouted to Lopez.

It seemed like hours before the coroner’s wagon got there to haul the body parts away. Cops swarmed all over the shed and a log nearby, where they found splattered bits and pieces of dried blood. They dusted for fingerprints, searched for more blood or strands of hair or fiber. There wasn’t much of anything, thanks to the rain. He trudged the path leading into the woods and spotted a cigar butt on the ground. Had the killer purposefully killed as the storm approached, knowing the rain would wash away evidence? Or was that just dumb luck?

He couldn’t keep the frustration and anguish out of his voice. “Why?”

Lopez had no answers and Noelle didn’t expect one.