

# Heaven's Prisoners (Dave Robicheaux)

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James Lee Burke's second Robicheaux novel takes the detective out of New Orleans and into the bayou as he seeks a quieter life.

Vietnam vet Dave Robicheaux has turned in his detective's badge, is winning his battle against booze, and has left New Orleans with his wife for the tranquil beauty of Louisiana's bayous. But a plane crash on the Gulf brings a young girl into his life-and with her comes a netherworld of murder, deception, and homegrown crime. Suddenly Robicheaux is confronting Bubba Rocque, a brutal hood he's known since childhood; Rocque's hungry Cajun wife; and a Federal agent with more guts than sense. In a backwater world where a swagger and a gun go further than the law, Robicheaux and those he loves are caught on a tide of violence far bigger than them all..

James Lee Burke is a New York Times bestselling author, two-time winner of the Edgar Award, and the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts in Fiction. He's authored thirty-seven novels and two short story collections. He lives in Missoula, Montana.  
Chapter One

I was just off Southwest Pass, between Pecan and Marsh islands, with the green, whitecapping water of the Gulf Stream to the south and the long, flat expanse of the Louisiana coastline behind me -- which is really not a coastline at all but instead a huge wetlands area of sawgrass, dead cypress strung with wisps of moss, and a maze of canals and bayous that are choked with Japanese water lilies whose purple flowers audibly pop in the morning and whose root systems can wind around your propeller shaft like cable wire. It was May and the breeze was warm and smelled of salt spray and schools of feeding white trout, and high above me pelicans floated on the warm air currents, their extended wings gilded in the sunlight, until suddenly one would drop from the sky like a bomb from its rack, its wings cocked back against its sides, and explode against the water's surface and then rise dripping with a menhaden or a mullet flapping from its pouched beak.

But the sky had been streaked with red at dawn, and I knew that by afternoon thunderheads would roll out of the south, the temperature would suddenly drop twenty degrees, as though all the air had suddenly been sucked out from under an enormous dark bowl, and the blackened sky would tremble with trees of lightning.

I had always loved the Gulf, no matter if it was torn with storms or if the surf was actually frozen with green ridges of ice. Even when I was a police officer in New Orleans, I had lived in a houseboat on Lake Pontchartrain and spent my off days fishing down in Lafourche Parish and Barataria Bay, and even though I was in homicide I sometimes worked deals through the boys in vice so I could go along on the Coast Guard cutter when they went after the dope runners out on the salt.

Now I owned a bait and boat-rental business on the bayou south of New Iberia, and twice a week my wife, Annie, and I headed out Southwest Pass in my converted jug boat and trawled for shrimp. It was called a "jug boat" because years ago it had been designed by an oil company for retrieving the long, thick, rubber-coated cables and seismic instruments used in marine oil exploration; it was long, narrow, and flat, with a big Chrysler engine, two screws, and the pilot's cab flush against the stern. Annie and I had outfitted it with ice bins,

a bait well, winches for the nets, a small galley, fishing and scuba gear boxes welded to the gunnels, and even a big, canvas Cinzano umbrella that I could open up over a bridge table and folding chairs.

On mornings like this we'd trawl in a big circle through the Pass, the bow almost out of the water with the bursting weight of the net, then we'd load the ice bins full with pink-blue shrimp, set out the rods for gafftop catfish, and fix lunch in the galley while the boat drifted against the anchor rope in the warm wind. On this morning Annie had boiled a pot of shrimp and bluepoint crabs and was cleaning the shrimp in a bowl to mix with a pan of dirty rice we had brought from home. I had to smile as I watched her; she was my Mennonite-Kansas girl, with curly gold hair that lifted on the nape of her neck in the breeze, and eyes that were the most electric blue I had ever seen. She wore a man's faded denim shirt with the tails hanging over her white ducks, and canvas shoes with no socks; she had learned to clean fish and shrimp and handle a boat in a gale as well as if she had been born in the bayou country, but she would always remain my Kansas girl, sewn together from bluebonnets and sunflowers, tilting awkwardly on high heels, always awed by cultural difference and what she called "weirdness" in other people, although she came from a background of wheat-farmer pacifists that was so pervasively eccentric that she couldn't recognize normality when she saw it.

She had a tan even in winter, and the smoothest skin I had ever touched. Small lights played in her eyes when you looked into them. She saw me smiling at her, set down the bowl of shrimp, and walked past me as though she were going to check the rods, then I felt her behind me, felt her breasts touch the back of my head, then her hands collapsed my hair like a tangle of black snakes in my eyes, and her fingers traced my face, my brush mustache, my shoulders, the pungi-stick scar on my stomach that looked like a flattened, gray worm, until her innocent love made me feel that all my years, my love handles, my damaged liver were not important at all. Maybe I had grown foolish, or perhaps fond is a better word, in the way that an aging animal doesn't question its seduction by youth. But her love wasn't a seduction; it was unrelenting and always there, even after a year of marriage, and she gave it eagerly and without condition. She had a strawberry birthmark high up on her right breast, and when she made love her heart filled it with blood until it became a dark red. She moved around the chair, sat on my lap, rubbed her hand across the thin film of sweat on my chest, and touched her curly hair against my cheek. She shifted her weight in my lap, felt me under her, looked knowingly into my eyes, and whispered as though we could be heard, "Let's get the air mattress out of the locker."

"What are you going to do if the Coast Guard plane goes over?"

"Wave."

"What if one of the reels goes out?"

"I'll try to keep your mind on something else."

I looked away from her toward the southern horizon.

"Dave?"

"It's a plane."

"How often do you get propositioned by your own wife? Don't let opportunity pass, skipper." Her blue eyes were merry and full of light.

"No, look. He's in trouble."

It was a bright yellow, two-engine job, and a long trail of thick black smoke blew from behind the cabin all the way across the sky to the horizon. The pilot was trying hard to gain altitude, gunning both engines, but the wingtips wobbled from side to side and wouldn't stabilize and the water was coming up fast. He went past us and I could see faces in the glass windows. The smoke twisted out of a ragged hole just in front of the tail.

"Oh, Dave, I thought I saw a child," Annie said.

The pilot must have been trying to make Pecan Island so he could pancake into the salt grass, but suddenly pieces of the rudder shredded away like strips of wet cardboard and the plane dipped violently to port and turned in a half-circle, both engines stalling now, the smoke curling as thick and black as smoke from an oil fire, and went down hard on one wing against the water's surface, flipped over in the air like a stick toy, and landed upside-down in a huge spray of green and white water and floating seaweed.

The water boiled and danced on the overheated engine housings, and the hole in back actually seemed to create and suck a river deep inside the plane. In seconds the bright yellow underside of the plane was dimming in the low waves that slid across it. I couldn't see the doors, but I kept waiting for somebody in a life preserver to break through the surface. Instead, big balloons of air rose from the cabin, and a dirty slick of oil and gasoline was already obscuring the sun's winking refraction off the wings.

Annie was on the shortwave to the Coast Guard. I pulled the anchor free of the mud, threw it rattling into the bow, turned the big Chrysler engine over, heard the exhausts cough below the waterline, and hit it full throttle for the wreck. The wind and spray were like a cool slap in my face. But all I could see of the plane now were small gold lights in the floating blue-green stain of oil and gas leaking from broken fuel lines.

"Take the wheel," I said.

I saw her thoughts gathering in her face.

"We didn't refill the air tanks last time," she said.

"There's still some in there. It's not more than twenty-five feet here, anyway. If they haven't settled into the silt, I can get the doors open."

"Dave, it's deeper than twenty-five feet. You know it is. There's a trench right through the Pass."

I got the two air tanks out of the gear box and looked at the gauges. They both showed almost empty. I stripped down to my skivvies, hooked on a weight belt, put on one air tank and a mask, and slipped the canvas straps of the other tank over my arm. I picked up a crowbar out of the gear box.

"Anchor outside so one of them doesn't come up under the boat," I said.

"Leave the other tank. I'm going down, too." She had cut back the throttle, and the boat was pitching in its own wake. The side of her tanned face was wet with spray, and her hair was stuck to it.

"We need you up here, babe." I said, and went over the side.

"Damn you, Dave," I heard her say just as I plummeted with a clank of metal tanks through the water's surface.

The bottom of the Gulf was a museum of nautical history. Snorkel and scuba diving over the years, I had found clusters of Spanish cannonballs welded together with coral, U.S. Navy practice torpedoes, and the flattened hull of a Nazi submarine that had been depth-charged in 1942, a cigarette boat that dope runners had opened the cocks on before the Coast Guard had nailed them, and even the collapsed and twisted wreckage of the offshore oil rig on which my father drowned over twenty years ago. It lay on its side in the murk in eighty feet of water, and the day I swam down to it the steel cables whipped and sang against the stanchions like hammers ringing against an enormous saw blade.

The plane had settled upside down on the edge of the trench, its propellers dug deep in the gray sand. Strings of bubbles rose from the wings and windows. I felt the water grow colder as I went deeper, and now I could see crabs and jewfish moving quickly across the bottom and puffs of sand from the wings of stingrays that undulated and glided like shadows down the sides of the trench.

I got down to the pilot's door, slipped the spare tank off my arm, and looked through the window. He stared back at me upside down, his blond hair waving in the current, his sightless green eyes like hard, watery marbles. A short, thick-bodied woman with long black hair was strapped into the seat next to him, and her arms floated back and forth in front of her face as though she were still trying to push away that terrible recognition that her life was about to end. I had seen drowning victims before, and their faces had had the same startled, poached expression as the faces of people I had seen killed by shell bursts in Vietnam. I just hoped that these two had not suffered long.

I was kicking up clouds of sand from the bottom, and in the murky green-yellow light I could barely see through the window of the back door. I held myself out flat, holding on to the

door handle for balance, and pressed my mask to the window again. I could make out a big, dark man in a pink shirt with pockets and cloth loops all over it, and a woman next to him who had floated free from her seatbelt. She was squat, with a square, leathery face, like the woman in front, and her flowered dress floated up around her head. Then, just as my air went, I realized with a terrible quickening of my heart that somebody was alive in the cabin.

I could see her small, bare legs kicking like scissors, her head and mouth turned upward like a guppy's into an air pocket at the rear of the cabin. I dumped the empty tank off my back and jerked on the door handle, but the door's edge was wedged into the silt. I pulled again, enough to separate the door a half-inch from the jamb, got a crowbar inside, and pried the metal back until I felt a hinge go and the door scrape back over the sand. But my lungs were bursting now, my teeth gritted against my own exhalation of breath, my ribs like knives inside my chest.

I dropped the crowbar, picked up the other tank, slapped the valve open, and got the hose in my mouth. The air went down inside me with the coolness of wind blowing across melting snow. Then I took a half-dozen deep hits, shut the valve again, blew my mask clear, and went in after her.

But the dead man in the pink shirt was in my way. I popped loose his seatbelt buckle and tried to pull him free from the seat by his shirt. His neck must have been broken because his head revolved on his shoulders as though it were attached to a flower stem. Then his shirt tore loose in my hands, and I saw a green and red snake tattooed above his right nipple and something in my mind, like the flick of a camera shutter, went back to Vietnam. I grabbed his belt, pushed under his arm, and shoved him forward toward the cockpit. He rolled in a slow arc and settled between the pilot and the front passenger seat, with his mouth open and his head resting on the pilot's knee, like a supplicant jester.

I had to get her out and up fast. I could see the wobbling balloon of air she was breathing out of, and there wasn't room for me to come up inside of it and explain what we were going to do. Also, she could not have been more than five years old, and I doubted that she spoke English. I held her small waist lightly between my hands and paused, praying that she would sense what I had to do, then dragged her kicking down through the water and out the door.

For just an instant I saw her face. She was drowning. Her mouth was open and swallowing water; her eyes were hysterical with terror. Her close-cropped black hair floated from her head like duck down, and there were pale, bloodless spots in her tan cheeks. I thought about trying to get the air hose in her mouth, but I knew I wouldn't be able to clear the blockage in her throat and she would strangle before I could get her to the top. I unhooked my weight belt, felt it sink into the swirling cloud of sand under me, locked my arms under her chest, and shoved us both hard toward the surface.

I could see the black, shimmering outline of the jug boat overhead. Annie had cut the engine, and the boat was swinging in the current against the anchor rope. I had gone

without air for almost two minutes, and my lungs felt as though they had been filled with acid. I kept my feet out straight, kicking hard, the bubbles leaking through my teeth, the closure in my throat about to break and suck in a torrent of water that would fill my chest like concrete. Then I could see the sunlight become brighter on the surface, like a yellow flame dancing on the chop and glazing the flat slicks, feel the layers of current suddenly become tepid, touch the red-brown wreaths of seaweed that turned under the waves, then we burst into the air, into the hot wind, into a dome of blue skies and white clouds and brown pelicans sailing over us like welcoming sentinels.

I grabbed the bottom of the deck rail with one hand and held the little girl up to Annie's arms. She felt as though she had the hollow bones of a bird. Annie pulled her up on deck and stroked her head and face while the little girl sobbed and vomited into Annie's lap. I was too weak to climb out of the water right away. Instead, I simply stared at the red handprints on the child's trembling thighs where the mother had held her up into the pocket of air while she herself lost her life, and I wished that those who handed out medals for heroism in war had a more encompassing vision about the nature of valor.

I knew that people who took water into their lungs sometimes developed pneumonia later, so Annie and I drove the little girl to the Catholic hospital in New Iberia, the small sugar town on Bayou Teche where I had grown up. The hospital was a gray stone building set back in Spanish oaks on the bayou, and purple wisteria grew on the trellises above the walkways and the lawn was filled with yellow and red hibiscus and flaming azalea. We went inside, and Annie carried the little girl back to the emerge...

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