

*a novel*

THE COMPANY  
OF DEMONS

MICHAEL JORDAN



GREENLEAF  
BOOK GROUP PRESS

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Published by Greenleaf Book Group Press  
Austin, Texas  
[www.gbgroup.com](http://www.gbgroup.com)

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Design and composition by Greenleaf Book Group  
Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group

Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Print ISBN: 978-1-62634-451-8

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62634-452-5

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

17 18 19 20 21 22 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

*For my parents,  
William Thomas Jordan and  
Luella Jean Wilson Jordan*



# 1

There was never any trouble at the Tam O'Shanter, even on a rocking weekend night, even when one of the Tribe smacked a homer for a go-ahead run. Tim and Karen ran a tight joint, the perfect hideaway to lounge beneath faded posters of '70s rock bands and sip a cold one. So when Karen screamed from the seedy alley behind the bar, our little oasis was shattered. Tim bolted for the back door.

I rushed after him and squinted in the bright sunlight. Tim was cradling his wife in his arms. She stared at me vacantly, then broke away and retched. Huddled over the rough asphalt, in her thin T-shirt and faded jeans, Karen reminded me of a fragile little girl. The wastebasket she'd intended to empty lay near her, paper napkins and discarded receipts fluttering in the humid breeze. Tim waved a hand toward a Dumpster, its top flung open, wedged tight against the crumbling brick wall. "Don't look."

But I did.

The sight of a naked body, sprawled across plastic garbage bags, was impossible to miss. Or part of a body, really, because the head was gone. So was everything below the waist. The hairy torso had been split down the middle, and I didn't need to be a pathologist to know

that someone had scooped out the guts and the lungs and the heart. Flies droned incessantly and, in the summer heat, the stench of rancid meat wafted to me. I backed away.

We headed back into the Tam, none of us saying a word. I dialed 911 on my cell. The Indian's third baseman cracked a triple as I slumped onto a black vinyl bar stool, the announcer's agitated voice echoing from the worn paneled walls and yellowed tin ceiling. His enthusiastic play-by-play was a jarring accompaniment to Karen's quiet sobs. She was hunched over, a couple of stools from me, wiping her mouth with a bar towel. Tim, glancing at me or the walls or the floor, hovered close to his wife, rubbing her shoulders.

The 911 operator's initial skepticism turned to shock as I related what we'd found, and she assured me that a car was on its way. The Tam was in Lakewood, an inner-ring Cleveland suburb, on busy Detroit Avenue. The police wouldn't take long.

My beer tasted warm and bitter, but I took a couple of long swigs. Memories came back in a rush.

Karen turned to me, her face ashen and her lipstick smeared. "You just talked to that magazine about all those killings when we were kids."

"They were running the article whether I talked to 'em or not."

"Not one week ago, and now this?"

Tim scratched his gut just below the orange Browns logo on his pullover and said, "Let it go, Karen."

A couple of unnaturally serene cops soon strolled in, a tableau of belts and guns and badges. Tim filled them in, and the uniformed pair walked toward the back door to the alley, past the vintage Wurlitzer and the pool table wedged into an alcove beneath a hand-lettered sign that read No Gambling. The dark side of me wanted to follow them, to see if they might go off-script when they saw what someone had done to that body in the trash.

I studied my beer and wished that the interview with *Cleveland*

*Magazine* had never taken place. We were quiet for ten long minutes, pretending to watch the game, until the back door swung open and Bernie Salvatore, a detective on the Lakewood force, strode in. We'd played football together at Holy Name, and he dropped in at the Tam for the occasional beer. He was a burly man, a couple of inches taller than my six feet, with a nose that looked like it had been jackhammered to his face. Yet he went right to Karen and was surprisingly tender as he reached out and touched her shoulder. "You okay? Boys said you found him."

She looked up at him. "I'll never forget that."

Bernie shrugged, looking every inch like the classic dick from late-night detective shows. Tan slacks, a white button-down dress shirt, wrinkled gray sport coat. An Armani model he was not. "I can get somebody to talk to you, if you want."

"It's just like before, what the Butcher did to those people."

"No shortage on psychos, sad to say."

"Oh, God . . ." Karen crossed herself. "Don't let it happen again."

"There was a pair of pants folded up, real neat, under the body. Still had the wallet in it, cash, credit cards." Bernie's eyes roved over the three of us. "There's no easy way to tell you. It's Oyster. I knew from one look at his license."

I had raised my mug, but lowered it back to the bar without taking a sip. Oyster was another regular at the Tam, a guy who was always willing to grin and bullshit and make people believe, even after just one beer, that they had a friend. He'd roll those bulging eyes of his when I got all cranked up and bitched about the Indians. He was called Oyster on account of those eyes. Gelatinous—like plump shellfish, glistening on a bed of shaved ice.

Tim slapped the bar hard, loud as a shot.

"Why the fuck would somebody do that? Oyster never hurt anybody." He was visibly shaking. "Cut off his fucking head."

"Take it easy, Tim," Bernie said. "We'll get this son of a bitch."

“Right. That’s what they said about the Butcher. Or that guy before him, killed all those people.” Tim raised a hand and fluttered his fingers. “The . . . fuck.”

I filled it in for him. “The Torso Murderer.” I was too young to have been around for those brutal killings in the forties—at least a dozen victims disemboweled—but I remembered all too well when the Butcher had struck, one generation later, and paralyzed the city.

“It’s not the same. We’ve got better labs now, forensics.”

“Bernie’s right.” I leaned back and nodded. “Don’t blow this out of proportion, okay? We—”

“I was six when the Butcher left that body on the East Side, naked and strung up on a playground fence.” Karen took a deep breath and leaned toward me. “Jesus Christ, I just found Oyster in the trash!”

She kept her face fixed on mine, and I had no response. The tension was broken when Bernie said, “We gotta ask some questions, Karen. Let me take care of . . . outside, and I’ll come back later, okay?”

She shuddered and crossed her arms, drew them tight. Bernie looked at me. “John, can I have a word?”

It wasn’t really a question. I followed him into the side room with the pool table and a whiff of stale beer. The Tam was a holdover from the old days, when saloons with lax ID policies lined Detroit Avenue and we’d carouse all night, giddy on misspent youth and shots of cheap tequila. Although a dive now, the bar had become my fond refuge from encroaching micropubs, coffee houses, and gluten-free bullshit places. Well, at least until I’d seen Oyster’s corpse mixed in with the trash.

“You okay?” Bernie narrowed his eyes. “I mean, that article, now this . . .”

“Somehow, I thought that reporter would be more sympathetic. ‘The Price of Failure.’ Nice title.” And to think that I’d viewed my old man as a hero when they’d put him in charge of finding the Butcher. Thank God Bernie had been around when everything had happened; he’d stuck up for me when the other kids had ridden my ass.



“All those reporters, pricks. Fuck ’em. C’mon, go home and spend a nice Sunday afternoon with Cathy and your kid. Give ’em a hug for me. Let’s get coffee tomorrow. I’ll call.”

We walked out of the alcove and Bernie turned, disappearing through the back door. I returned to my stool and examined the face that stared at me from the mirrored bar back: wrinkles around blue eyes, dark hair flecked with gray, soft flesh encircling my neck. I reached for the beer.

The silence was pounding, and Tim must have felt that something needed to be said. “Oyster was the nicest damn guy in the world. They’d better find this son of a bitch and cut off his fuckin’ balls.”

“Yeah, Oyster deserves at least that.” But I’d been a lawyer long enough to know that there probably wouldn’t be any righteous ending like Tim was demanding, even assuming that lopping off somebody’s nuts as payback for cutting off a guy’s head would be fair. Despite all the blather we’d told Karen, odds were that Oyster would be just one more unsolved murder.

I didn’t want to be there when the press barged in; I needed to go home to Cathy. She’d be nervous as hell about the possibility that a serial killer might be on the prowl again. And I needed some time to think. It wasn’t just a nagging guilt that my blabbing to a magazine had somehow sparked Oyster’s demise. A dark fragment of my past still hounded me. Oyster had known nothing about what had happened, but I could never forget.

# 2

Cathy held up the front page of the *Plain Dealer*. A blurry photo of Oyster stared back at me. “You were right about his eyes. They do look odd.”

In my faded gray sweats, I sat across the round kitchen table from her and inhaled the steam rising from my mug of coffee, black and strong. We’d watched the news reports the night before and had known that the story would be splashed all over the front page of the morning paper. I’d had a few too many after we put our daughter, Molly, to bed, and that meant for one rugged Monday. Even my eyeballs ached.

Cathy, her dark hair catching the morning light that filtered through the window, reached over an arrangement of artificial flowers to hand me the paper. “They may not have mentioned you on the news last night, but . . .”

The newspaper article more than mentioned me. The reporter found it an odd twist that I had been at the Tam, the *son of the detective who was relieved from duty due to his failure to apprehend the Butcher*. I stared at Oyster’s face for a moment. The caption, of course, used his real name, but *Wilbur Frederickson* seemed foreign to me. I folded the paper and dropped it on the table.

“Just so you know, it’s all in there, about your dad.”

“I’ll finish it later.” Everybody I ran into was going to haul up the past, fix me with their sympathetic stares, and speak in hushed tones.

“Says that Oyster was a widower, two grown children. Another daughter predeceased him.”

I took a sip of coffee. Oyster’s late daughter was not a subject I wanted to dwell on. “I didn’t know much about his family.”

“You weren’t that close, then?”

“Like I said last night, I’d shoot the breeze with him at the bar. A good guy, but . . .” I shifted on the padded chair and pulled the foil top from a container of strawberry yogurt that Cathy had set out. I didn’t really enjoy fermented milk, but that and the occasional jog helped keep the weight down. “Do you think Molly will be okay with this?”

Cathy didn’t answer right away but tugged on the sleeve of her faded blue robe. Then she said, “You just went over the magazine story with her, so I think so.”

“I never should have talked to that damn rag.”

“You’d have been in the article anyway.”

She was right about that. I remembered hiding in the library stacks to avoid the callous playground barbs. *Hey, Coleman, is that your old man? Detective Fuck-Up?* I took a swig of coffee and cringed at the thought that some jerk kid would try the same crap with Molly, even though it would be about a dead grandfather whom she had never even met.

“We’ll need to keep an eye on her, John. If there’s a problem at school, you know Little Miss Stoic’s not going to tell us.”

“I’ll talk to her when she comes down.” We had adopted Molly after she’d bounced around the foster care network for all of her four years. The day we’d brought her home, she’d warily eyed the pink floral wallpaper in her bedroom, the toys and dolls from Walmart, then asked matter-of-factly how long she could stay before they came to take her away.

Cathy ran a hand along her forearm, where the sleeve of her robe ended. She reached up and rubbed her earlobe, which I’d seen her do

hundreds of times. She was anxious. “I didn’t bring this up with Molly, but . . . what if it’s happening again?”

“Let the cops do their job before you start to worry, Cathy.”

“Back then, my mom wouldn’t even let us walk to school alone. You remember.”

“Better than anyone. I’m just sayin’ we should find out the facts before you jump to any conclusions.” I reached for the remote. “Let’s see what the talking heads have to say.”

“I don’t want you getting upset either, John.”

“I’m gonna hear about this all day as it is, so we might as well find out what everyone is being told.” I’d have to read the whole damn *PD* story as well.

The news came on and cut to a recorded clip of the Lakewood chief of police, a rangy guy with a bushy mustache and unblinking eyes that bored into the camera. The media was peppering him with questions about the Torso Murderer and the Butcher. It only took a minute before the chief began blinking and pulled out a hanky to wipe beads of perspiration from his forehead.

“He’s not looking too happy.”

“Can’t blame him. There’s been one murder, and the press is already dredging up crap that happened a long time ago.”

I topped off my coffee and watched as Vanessa Edwards, a gorgeous black reporter, posed a question. I’d spoken with her once, years ago, when she had been covering a lawsuit over an estate and I had represented a minor beneficiary. She asked the chief if there was any possibility that the Butcher had resurfaced.

Cathy concentrated on the screen, her brow furrowed.

The chief scoffed at the notion and surmised that a copycat killer, perhaps inspired by the recent magazine article, was much more likely. He noted the prevalence of security cameras, improved police procedure, and better forensic labs. Then he confidently predicted that they would find Oyster’s killer.

“I remember my dad saying the same thing about the Butcher.”

At least until the day he'd been taken off the case. Then he became accustomed to the refuge of his tattered beige easy chair and the comfort of Four Roses whiskey.

"Morning." Molly bounded down the steps and into the kitchen, clad in her favorite jeans and a loose-fitting yellow top with a demure neckline—my wife's strict upbringing would influence the attire of at least one more generation. Petite Molly, with her reddish-brown hair and pale skin, bore a remarkably close resemblance to Cathy.

"Morning, pretty girl." Too pretty, as a matter of fact. To my dismay, she was developing curves that hadn't been there a month ago.

She breezed past the table, sliding on her socks across a white tile floor that needed replacing, and popped open the door to the side-by-side Kenmore.

"Listen, honey, Mom said you read about this murder. Well, I was there when they found him."

She turned with a plastic orange juice container in hand, her eyes wide. "Jeez . . ."

"Yeah, it was terrible. And my name's in the paper this morning. They wrote about me, my dad, and all those old murders we told you about. You might have some knuckleheads saying something."

"No one said much after the magazine. They know I'll stick up for myself."

Molly, a natural athlete, was probably the best step dancer in her age group at the Irish American Club, and she was definitely the cutest in her poodle socks and ghillies. But we knew that she only danced to please us. Her real passion was sports, and she proudly toted around a bright pink skateboard—a color, I expected, that she chose to send a message to the boys when she blew by them.

"Don't go looking for trouble, Molly. And I'm dropping you off at school today."

"Oh, Mom!"

"Watch your tone. It's just until they catch this guy, that's all." Cathy walked to the sink and rinsed her mug.

“I’ve got plans later. Skateboarding.” She had mastered every half-pipe and mini-ramp—I made an effort to learn the lingo—at Lakewood Park.

Cathy turned to me. “I’ve got a committee meeting after school.”

I shrugged and looked at my little girl as she brushed strands of silky hair away from her face and munched on an apple. “I’ll pick you up, out front near the bike racks. We can hit the park, then head home for dinner.”

Molly said nothing, obviously copping an attitude about her mother driving her to school.

“Good. That’s settled.” Cathy tousled my hair as she passed by, toward the stairs. “I need to get dressed.”

Molly watched her head up the steps, and then set the half-eaten apple on the table. “I’m glad you came home when you did. Mom was scared.”

I nodded slightly. “She worries, you know.”

“Oh, believe me, I know.” Grinning, she reached for the apple and took a nibble.

I stood, kissed her on the forehead, and trotted up the frayed chestnut-colored stair runner. When I entered our tight bedroom, Cathy was shimmying into a gray skirt. She hadn’t donned her blouse yet; she stood there in a white bra. I’d first seen her in panties and a bra nearly thirty years ago, after our engagement, months after we’d met at a St. Patrick’s Day party.

In the wall mirror mounted above the dresser, she watched me approach across the brown pile carpet. Even though I couldn’t read her face, I took her by the shoulders and nuzzled the delicate skin on her neck. “I wish there were time . . .”

“Maybe this weekend, okay?”

I nodded, but no part of me wanted to wait until the weekend to have sex. Oyster’s death made me burn to take Cathy right on the carpet, to feel alive and breathing and coming.

She turned and rested her hand on my cheek. “Don’t get mad at me for asking, but are you going to be all right?”

“I can deal with it.”

“You drank too much last night.” She dropped her hand but continued to face me.

“After Molly was in bed. The thing with Oyster . . .”

“I get it, but you were pretty bombed.”

“Christ, Cathy, if you’d seen that body, you’d understand.”

“You still drink too much sometimes.”

“Curse of the Irish.” I smiled broadly.

“I’m serious.”

“C’mon, you know I’ve cut back. I catch a game at the Tam a couple times a week. Maybe a few after work, a nightcap when she’s in bed.”

“I’m not looking for a fight, John. I just worry. First the magazine article, now you find a dead man. It’s just . . . it’s been a long time since you’ve had to see a therapist.”

“You don’t need to worry, Cathy.”

She sighed and shut her eyes for a moment, and then said, “You’ll tell me, won’t you, if you’re having problems?”

“Cathy . . . I promise.” I wasn’t looking for a fight either; I knew that her heart was in the right place. I gently squeezed her shoulder.

“Sometimes you’re impossible.”

“What about sexy, handsome . . .”

“Not even close, not last night.” She picked up a pearly blouse from the dresser and slipped it on. “What about a session with Father McGraw next Sunday?”

I stopped dead, halfway to the bathroom. “Really, Cathy? I’m fine. We all are.”

“You just found the body yesterday, John. Shouldn’t we get ahead of the game, especially for Molly? I just want her to understand what you went through and how to deal with any problems at school.”

“I think it’s premature.”

“You know he saved our marriage.”

“But this is different.” The leaden counseling sessions with our priest had helped us, no question, but dragging Molly into the equation just didn’t seem necessary. “Can we talk about this later?”

Cathy nodded, tight-lipped, and I headed toward the bathroom. She called good-bye to me as I lathered in the shower, letting my skin grow soft beneath the spray of hot water. I finally emerged, towed off, and walked directly to my oaken bureau. The envelope would be there, tucked beneath the folded woolen sweaters. I crouched, naked, and slid open the bottom drawer.

I’d shown the letter to the police after it had arrived, all those years ago. They had kept the original but given me a copy. I’d shown it to Cathy after we were married, and she had wrapped me in her arms while I wept. Sometimes, nearly always beyond drunk, I’d pull the worn paper out and examine every marking, right down to the stains caused by my tears. That hadn’t happened for years now, which was fine by me.

The paper unfolded, but it would not lie flat against the carpet. The stiff creases resisted, as though the writing did not wish to be read. On the original, cutout letters had been fastidiously glued to white stationery.

*Dear John Coleman:*

*I am so sorry about your father. He was such fun. So earnest, so intense, so desperate. The ridicule when he failed to stop me, the public outcry and scorn. Then losing his position, how embarrassing! So difficult for you to have a laughingstock for a father.*

*And the papers said that you found him! I can imagine the mess, and you, just a high school boy. He counts as one of mine, you know. I killed him as surely as if I’d taken his liver, his lungs, and his heart.*

*I’ll be watching you, young man.*

Bold black capital letters spelled THE BUTCHER.



I had come home after football practice. My mother had been at her Altar and Rosary Society meeting, and our modest bungalow had been quiet. I went to use the bathroom, and he was slouched against the tile wall near the toilet, the bone white porcelain spattered with red. Blood and brains were everywhere, and part of me cried aloud for the man I remembered, wishing that he were playing a macabre costume game with ketchup and cottage cheese. But another voice, deep within me, mouthed a prayer of thanks that the beast he'd become was dead forever.

On the morning of his funeral, I'd stolen into my parents' bedroom, taken his thick leather belt, and flung that stinging memory in the trash.

On my drive into the office, along the Shoreway, Lake Erie was as calm as the proverbial millpond, and the few skyscrapers that framed Cleveland's skyline were awash in the glow of morning sunlight. Recreational boaters dotted the blue water as they pattered away from Edgewater Marina, and in the distance, a freighter lazed northwest to Detroit. The lake wasn't always so tranquil, of course; fifteen-foot waves would hurl against the meandering shore whenever a gale swept in from Canada. On those days, sailors huddled in port, and adventurous surfers, sheathed in black wetsuits, defied the churning green-gray swell.

My office was in the Singer Building, a once prestigious location but now just a site where even small-timers like me could afford the rent. Marilyn, my perky, divorced, forty-five-year-old secretary—or “assistant,” as the PC folks would say—was ensconced behind her cherry veneer reception desk when I arrived.

She was evidently between boyfriends because, once again, she had altered the color of her eye shadow, and her jet black hair was sleeked back in a new style. I shut the door behind me. “New 'do. Looking good.”

“Just once, I’m waiting for you to tell me I look like shit.” Marilyn had worked with me for ten years or, as she would say, a decade too long.

“So you’d walk out? Who’d convince pissed-off clients that I’m a saint? Or tell opposing counsel they can kiss my ass?”

“Yeah, yeah.” She crossed her arms and leaned onto her desk. Marilyn was thin and bony, but her stare had the intensity of the nun who’d caught some buddies and me passing around a *Playboy* in eighth grade. “I saw the news. You okay with all this?”

We kept a coffee pot in a narrow alcove across from her desk; I poured a cup. “It’ll pass. But if the press wants to talk, I have no comment. I’m done with those bastards.”

“Can’t blame you. And you’ve already had some calls. I sent you an email.” Marilyn fiddled with a long earring, copper and silver strands that shimmered in the light.

“Go ahead, beat me up for not checking the cell. I figured anything could wait until I got here. Something urgent?”

“No, but one sounds like new business, handling an estate.”

“Worried about getting paid?” Big-firm lawyers can bank steady checks from corporate clients. Not me—a little estate work here, a little business stuff there, whatever I can get in the door.

“Never. I know where you live.”

“Don’t be smart. It’s too early.”

“By the way, the bloodshot eye thing? Nice.”

I flashed a mock grin and walked into my utilitarian office. The faux oak paneling looked tired, the requisite degrees needed reframing, and the worn office furniture nearly screamed that it had once been marked-down inventory at a discount place on Euclid Avenue. No plaques commemorated my leadership in civic organizations; no photographs bore witness to my connections with celebrities or politicians.

The phone message was from a Jennifer Browning. The name was unfamiliar, but I sipped my coffee and dialed the number. Odds