

# PROLOGUE

**CODY'S LUNGS BURNED** with each frenetic breath as he made his escape toward the gated entrance of the old cemetery. He ran past rows of tombstones and lost his footing several times, whimpering in fear as he picked himself up. His blood curdled from a distant scream. A loud explosion of thunder startled him as he checked over his shoulder and slipped, collapsing onto the wet, muddy ground. He pushed himself backward, his hands frantically splashing in puddles of muddied water. The darkness of the cemetery made it impossible to see anything more than a shadow, but Cody knew what stalked him. He knew the evil coming.

He screamed and jumped back to his feet. He ran as fast as he could on the slippery ground. Another loud crash of thunder followed a bright flash of lightning. He was so close, so close to the entrance to the cemetery, but the rain, stronger than before, hammered down upon him. He splashed through puddles of water, flinching from the sheets of rain slapping his face. He struggled to increase his speed, his tears blending in with the rain. Four bicycles lay scattered on the ground near the entrance of the cemetery. Cody yanked his bicycle upright off the ground and checked behind him,

but there wasn't anything there. He hesitated, his heart breaking at the sight of his friends' bikes lying next to his.

"I'm so sorry," he cried before mounting his own bike.

The mud, caked onto the soles of his shoes, caused his feet to slip on the wet pedals. He peered into the dark depths of the cemetery again and found the familiar shadow creeping towards him. Whimpering again, Cody reached down to scrape the mud off with his bare hands, and then pedaled a mile to his home in the heavy rain.

Rain-drenched, Cody jumped the curb in front of his house and dropped his bicycle on the lawn. He ran to his open bedroom window, stumbled through it, and fell onto the floor. His bedroom curtains flapped inward as rain splashed onto the hardwood floor. Picture frames on the walls rattled as Cody grabbed his bedroom window and pulled down on it several times until it slammed shut. He dropped to the floor and wept below the window with his head lowered and arms wrapped around his legs, tucking them close to his chest.

Cody lifted his head when the bedroom light came on. Two adults stood in the doorway. His mother rushed inside the room while his stepfather Tony placed a hand on the door frame, his jaw clenched and eyes narrowed.

"What in hell's wrong with ya, boy?" Tony said in a deep southern drawl. His eyes dropped to Cody's wet shoes and the muddied floor. "And why in hell ya soakin' wet? Goddamn it, boy, ya sneaked out again, didn't ya? And where in the hell is—?"

"What's wrong, honey?" Cody's mother broke in, noticing her son trembling. "Are you—?"

"He's in deep shit, that's what! Told ya we couldn't trust this little bastard." Tony pointed a stern finger at Cody and warned, "Ya pull this shit again and I'm gonna bust yer ass! Now get yer ass up and—"

The lights flickered and went dark.

"Goddammit!" Cody's stepfather yelled. "Piece a shit electricity always goes out when it rains." He grabbed his wife's arm. "Carol,

get me the goddamn flashlight. And a mop so this little shit can clean up his mess."

A flash of bright light shot through the curtains as Carol stepped towards the hallway. Cody's eyes grew wide. He scooted backwards, mumbling and whimpering.

"What in hell's yer problem?" Tony said.

Cody's face whitened. Tears flowed from his eyes. He whimpered "No" repeatedly as he scooted further away, only to find himself trapped in a corner of the dark bedroom.

Heavy rain poured outside as a web of lightning scattered across the sky. Intense thunder muffled the screams and breaking glass. A moment later, all was quiet. The rain stopped, the lightning dissipated, and the thunder grew faint in the distance.

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# SOLE SURVIVOR

**I ARRIVED AT THE CRIME SCENE** at seven-thirty on Monday morning and parked my black '81 Corvette Stingray behind a police car that had the left rear door hanging open. A young boy with sandy blond hair sat in the back, staring at the seat in front of him. Emergency vehicles packed the street in front of the house. Police officers, crime scene investigators, and paramedics performed their jobs while reporters yelled out questions to anyone within earshot.

A mob of reporters barked a barrage of questions at me, but I ignored them and ducked under the police tape, making my way to the front porch. A bloodstained curtain hung out of a broken window to the right of the front entrance. The shattered bay window to left of the entrance had pieces of the frame bent towards the interior of the house.

The highest-ranking officer of the Austin Police Department, and an old friend of mine of many years, exited the home just as I stepped onto the front porch. I shook his hand.

"So, what've we got here, Chief?"

"It's bad, Aaron. *Tenemos dos víctimas.*"

Chief David Hernandez spoke perfect English, and without much of an accent, but that didn't stop him from throwing in a little bit of Spanish for my benefit. It was the chief's not-so-subtle way of trying to mold me into a bilingual detective, which of course is useful in Texas. I still couldn't speak the language, but, thanks to the chief, I could at least understand it.

"So, who are our two vics?"

"Carol and Tony Scoletti. Whoever killed them must have been really pissed."

"Yeah, that's usually the case" I bobbed my head in agreement. Murderers do tend to have slight anger issues. "So, we have a double-homicide. Doesn't happen here much, but what's so unusual?"

"You haven't seen the bodies... or what's left of them, that is."

"Okay." I lowered my brow. "Now you have my attention. Just what exactly are we dealing with?"

"Follow me," he said, and led me to the living room.

The body of a decapitated Caucasian woman lay mangled on top of a shattered glass coffee table. Her left arm hung from her shoulder, attached only by tendons. Intestines spilled onto the floor from her torn stomach. She also had three large gashes across her breasts and several more on her bare legs.

"Jesus! You weren't kidding. What the hell did this guy come at her with, a chainsaw?"

"You haven't seen anything yet," Chief Hernandez answered, and then headed down the hallway towards the bedrooms.

I followed him inside the first bedroom. Blood and gore painted the walls and ceiling. Only the torso of what used to be a body lay in the middle of the room in a pool of blood, guts and ripped flesh. Pieces of bloody flesh hung from the ceiling fan. There was a severed arm on a blood-soaked pillow on the bed and a detached leg protruding out from underneath it. Where was the rest of the body?

"This is the kid's bedroom," he said.