

## PROLOGUE

THE BOY OPENED his eyes and turned to the window. It was late, and the screen door to the back of the house had just slammed shut.

Thunder rumbled and raindrops struck the glass in loud, maddening beats. He clutched the wool army blanket that reeked of urine, and brought it closer to his body; then, wide-eyed, watched the downpour through his tiny bedroom window.

A burst of lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the branches and the Spanish moss that clung to them. As quickly as it arrived, the beam disappeared, and the world grew pitch black.

A branch from the giant oak outside scraped the dingy glass, and the screen door to the back of the house banged shut a second time. A restless energy filled him. Something wasn't right, and it wasn't the door *or* the storm.

His small room, not much larger than a closet, always smelled of mildewed wood. When it stormed, the nasty odor grew thicker, more menacing. Gulping musty air, he reluctantly crawled out of bed and tiptoed down the hallway. He stood outside his mother's bedroom door, listening for her usual drunken snores. All he heard was the ticking of her wind-up alarm clock.

Something was smeared against the door jam.  
Blood.

His heart skipped a beat as he gazed down at the floor. There, too, was blood. An image of his mother's torn body filled his mind, and he smiled.

Grim faced, he moved past her bedroom to the tiny kitchen, the scarred linoleum cool and bloody beneath his bare feet. He stood at the window and watched the storm. The weeping willows leaned, overpowered by the screaming wind. He looked out at the moonless night and tried to remember if he'd flipped the *piroque*, the small boat they kept out back.

Earlier that afternoon, his baby sister, Allie, had followed him to the pond. Her small eyes had been teeny, mischievous. She wasn't supposed to wander past the small yard, and he'd been too worried about convincing her to follow him back to the house to even consider the small boat. But he worried now. If Mother saw it filled with rainwater, there'd be trouble.

They usually didn't lock the house, but he now flipped the latch on the screen door. He grimaced, imagining his mother in the morning, her thin mouth angry, set in a stiff line, furious about the slamming door that had kept her up at all hours of the night, whether it did so or not.

He couldn't risk it.

Lightning struck again, illuminating the rusted Buick that for all of his nine years, had sat snoozing on top of concrete blocks next to the old, splintering shed. The night became dark again, and in the blackness, he sensed something move. A moment later, he saw it again.

He flipped on the porch light, bathing the yard in a dull yellow haze, and had to blink twice before he believed what lay before his eyes.

Trembling, he backed away from the window.

His mother, naked and standing in the yard, stared up at him through a tangle of rain-soaked hair, her eyes wild. As he bolted from the window, he could hear her calling out to him.

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