

## Prologue

*Summer 2002*

*Hall Mills Creek*

The Alabama heat enveloped her. Sweat crawled down her back, her lungs gasped for air, her muscles screamed. She knew she had to keep moving forward. So close now — not even fifty feet to the water's edge.

The sun had begun to set, casting an eerie red hue across the skyline. The mosquitoes were feasting on her exposed skin like frenzied little vampires. Her hands were clutched painfully around the edge of the tarp concealing her cargo, but she refused to release her grip. *Just hold on a little longer.* She continued to fight through the unforgiving foliage of the Northern Prickly Ash bushes, with their razor-sharp thorns gnashing at her ankles. *Just keep going, almost there,* she kept telling herself, praying the thorns wouldn't tear through the tarp.

She felt grateful for all those extra hours at the gym over the last few months. Refusing to be the weakest link at her basic training that was soon approaching. She never thought of herself as a military plebe, but she would do just about anything to free herself from that God-forsaken town, from her wretched life. She would give anything for a fresh start, a clean slate — a place where no one knew her name and she could leave the past behind.

As the water's edge drew near, she allowed her grip to release. Her hands would hardly obey, locked claw-like from fatigue. She shook them out and rubbed them against her blood-soaked shorts. She pulled open the tarp and was shocked at the image before her. A miserable, mangled mess of a so-called man. She wasn't sure how she'd feel in this moment — shame, anguish, guilt, fear? But she felt none of those, quite the opposite in fact. She felt strangely free. She couldn't help but laugh. It was a laugh she'd never heard before, but there it was spilling out of her, echoing out into the dusk. It was suddenly so comical to think of how many times she'd cowered in fear

because of this man, how many times his hands had bloodied her face, or his boot had blackened her sides.

She pulled a spring knife from her back pocket and pushed her thumb into the stud, releasing the sharpened 5-inch blade. He was already gone — the rigor mortis had begun to set in, but part of her wanted to see every last drop of blood spill from his veins. She knelt next to him and could see the crack in his skull where she'd struck him with the cast-iron skillet in their kitchen. His hands had been wrapped around her mother's throat even though she was lifeless, still choking her, as if he was trying to kill her soul too. She grabbed the skillet she'd used so many mornings to fry up eggs, and when they had the extra money, a little bacon. She grabbed it and swung with all her strength, slamming the iron down, connecting just behind his temple. His grip had released, and his body slumped to the ground. The crack seemed deafening. Still, she swung twice more... crack, crack. That was it — all those years of abuse were over in a matter of seconds.

Her blade slid across his throat and blood poured from his jugular, pooling up just below his Adam's apple. His heart had stopped pumping, so the blood didn't gush — it collected there, then streaked down his shoulders and chest. It was almost serene, poetic even. *Dying is an art, like everything else*, she thought.

She grabbed the tarp's edge once more and heaved, rolling him into the murky water. His body hugged the bank, floating in his own sea of red.

She wasn't concerned about the mess. She also knew the history of the place. Northern Alabama had been largely gator-free until 1979 when Fish and Wildlife relocated about 50 alligators from Louisiana to the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge along the Tennessee River. This was an effort to expand their then-dwindling population and reduce the beaver problem disrupting waterways. The blend of fresh and brackish water provided the perfect ecosystem for these apex predators to thrive. American alligators can bite with a force of over 2,000 pounds per square inch — enough to crush a human skull. The large ones have even been known to drag adults into the depths, and children who carelessly frolicked near the water's edge often disappeared without a trace.

Within minutes of her father's body hitting the water she heard faint distant splashes. Ever so slight, but unmistakable. The smell of blood had already reached them. Gators could smell blood up to four miles away, and she knew they'd come. Part of her wanted to stick around to watch the feast, but she had to go. There was still much to do.

## 10 YEARS LATER

### Chapter 1

Saturday, March 10, 2012

*Sofia*

**D**etective Sofia Rodriguez was enjoying a much-needed day off. She'd slept in until almost 9 a.m., something she hadn't done in years, and didn't feel an ounce of guilt. She'd carefully planned out her morning, starting with a run on the Morris Williams Track. While the scenery was a bit dreary, the synthetic running surface was forgiving on the knees. Despite the crispness of the March air, she loved running outside. She'd never warmed up to the idea of a treadmill — it made her feel like a mouse on an exercise wheel. After a few miles, she'd hit up her favorite café for some tea and the rare splurge of a fresh-baked croissant. Then the moment she looked forward to the most: a front-row seat at her son's basketball game. It would be the first she'd be attending for the season, which had begun three months ago, and although he wouldn't admit it, Sofia knew Miguel was excited to have her courtside.

Miguel had become quite the ball player. He was dominating the other kids on the court. Despite being only twelve years old, his ball-handling skills were so advanced the high school varsity coach himself had come out to see him on a few occasions. Sofia was relieved Miguel had found basketball — it kept him busy and out of trouble. He spent hours shooting hoops in the driveway or playing pickup games at Hillside Park. Durham, North Carolina, was a decent place to raise a child. It had become quite gentrified, and it was safe enough for kids to venture out on their own. But Sofia knew that the situation could change quickly. On one street there were million-dollar homes, and a few blocks down you could find yourself in the midst of housing projects and gang wars. You had to know where to go, but more importantly, you had to know where not to.

Sofia stretched out her arms, slid her feet into her slippers, and headed for the kitchen feeling well-rested, but ready for her caffeine kick. She whipped together a matcha latte and settled onto a seat at her breakfast nook. Soon after, Miguel sauntered in, still in his pajamas and his curly hair resembling a bit of a rat's nest. On a Saturday, 9 a.m. was early for a preteen who could easily sleep until noon if she didn't wake him. A fatigue triggered by hormonal surges, evident by the slight crack in his voice.

"Morning, Miggy," Sofia called out. He replied with a grunt, his face buried in his iPad. "That thing's rotting your brain," she chided, genuinely concerned at the way she could completely lose him to that screen. His mind being shaped by unknown forces in some algorithm-driven void of endless data.

"Mom, you know I hate it when you call me that. I'm not a little kid anymore," Miguel complained, his eyes never leaving the screen.

Sofia glanced at her son, knowing only too well that he was growing up fast. Wisps of hair had appeared in his armpits, and chest muscles curved out from under his shirt. But he was still her baby.

*Time is such a thief,* she thought.

"You want to come for a run with me this morning? Think you could keep up with this old lady?"

With this Miguel looked up for a moment and grinned. She knew he loved a challenge, and although he hadn't outrun her yet, he was getting close. Sofia was an avid runner, and had often competed in local half marathons, even having come close to winning the Bull City Race last year. She was narrowly beaten by a twenty-two-year-old track star from Duke but still managed to stay right on her tail despite being twelve years her senior.

She could see him mulling it over. "My quad's been bothering me, I can't risk it before the game. I'll gladly smoke you on the track another day though," he snickered.

“Oh, you’re gonna smoke me, are ya?” Sofia asked as she crept toward him, her hands out at the ready.

“What are you doing? Don’t even think about it — I’m way too old for tickle torture,” he protested, crunching down to protect his sides.

Sofia lunged, poking him wherever she found an opening. Miguel’s body jerked around as he tried to defend his flank, throwing a few little jabs of his own. In the end they were both out of breath in spastic laughter. A precious break in the seriousness of maturing.

The moment was interrupted by a loud, agitating alarm. Sofia’s eyes went to her cell phone sitting on the kitchen counter. It was vibrating and chirping so intently she thought it might slide right off onto the floor, and she had half a mind to let it. She knew the ringtone too well — the one signaling an incoming call from the command center. This was supposed to be her day off, a day to decompress and spend time with her son. Anxiety rose in her chest; she could hear her own heartbeat pounding away in her ears.

Sofia answered the phone, already looking apologetically toward Miguel.

“Good morning, this is Detective Rodriguez.”

She listened, and her heart sank. “Okay, lieutenant, I’ll be right there.” As the words left her mouth she watched for Miguel’s reaction, secretly praying he would understand. But instead, his eyes glassed over, his bottom lip began to quiver, and he quickly darted away. He ran out of the kitchen and up the stairs, his feet stomped overhead, then came the slam of his bedroom door. It was clear Sofia wouldn’t be courtside today.

Sofia was the youngest detective to ever make it into the Durham Police Department’s Homicide Division, and the only female on the team. An achievement she was proud of considering over 90% of homicide detectives were men. It was her first year on the squad, and she knew it would

be tough being the rookie all over again. She'd spent ten years on the street, the last three investigating domestic violence cases. Now she was the "young buck" again, thrown in with salty veterans who weren't yet too sure about her. She knew the question on everyone's lips was the classic, "Wonder what she did to get here?"

It was mostly rhetorical but of course meant to insinuate that the only way a young, attractive, female detective could be inducted into the elite unit was on her knees. Never mind the hundred and fifty arrests she had under her belt, her medals, or her stellar record of conduct. No, no one ever thinks that, not at first anyway.

She knew she would be working long hours, given the crap assignments, and any requests for a day off would be laughed at. All the normal knocks that come with being the newbie. She could handle it, but she hated that her son was so affected by it. It was hard enough being a single mom, but to be a detective and a single mom was a challenge she was having a hard time balancing. The bottom line was simple: The job calls, you answer. It's the price that's paid for serving. Or perhaps the price paid for the selfishness of choosing a job you love.

Sofia found Miguel in his room and gave him a hug along with the usual litany of apologies.

"I'm so sorry, Miggy. You know I have to go, it's my job. I don't have a choice."

But of course, she knew there was a choice, there always was. She felt the pangs of guilt as she walked out of his room and shut the door. She knew she could take an early retirement, find a quieter career behind a desk somewhere, and be there every time Miguel came home from school, be at every game rooting him on, hell... maybe even join the PTA. The thoughts came and went. That idea was as realistic to her as sprouting wings and flying to Neverland. She was a detective and a damn good one, and it was time to go to work.

Thirty minutes later, Sofia rolled her black unmarked Impala into the parking lot of the Duke Manor Apartment Complex. She saw the typical scene: police cars with their turret lights illuminated and police tape roping off the area, boldly marked "Police: Do Not Cross." She noticed her lieutenant standing by a beat-up white van branded "Faherty Plumbing." He was talking to

Detective Jones, and Sofia groaned. *Not him*, she thought. Detective Jones was as salty as they came. He'd been on the job for over twenty-five years and in Homicide for over ten, a duration which was basically unheard of. Few people could stomach that kind of work for a decade. Jones was decorated, a legend even, but he liked working alone. He was known for being, old school, blunt, and always with a Marlboro Red hanging from his lips.

People both revered him and avoided him. Seeing Jones standing there talking to the lieutenant meant one thing: He was being assigned to this case, and so was she. Jones himself had perhaps come to the same conclusion as he watched her park her car. She saw his eyebrows raise and his head whip around toward the lieutenant, making no effort to conceal his protests. The lieutenant raised his hand, as if to say "enough," as Jones threw his arms up in the air and walked off. *Great start*, Sofia said to herself as she exited her vehicle.

"Morning, LT. What do we got?" Sofia asked as she approached, taking in the scene. People from the neighborhood had started to gather, forming cliques, some covering their mouths in shock. The parking lot was mostly roped off, but the crime scene seemed to be centered on the white van. The lieutenant waived her over to the driver-side door, which was open and had a small privacy tarp hanging over it to obstruct the public's view.

He put out his hand, gesturing toward the van. "See for yourself."

*Okay then, I guess he's a man of few words*, she thought.

Sofia lifted the tarp and stepped inside. Part of her was hoping this case would be something simple, a drug deal gone wrong perhaps. *Maybe I could make the game after all...*

As her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, she took note of the musty air surrounding her that smelled of stale sweat and dirt. Then it hit her — the metallic tang on her tongue from the blood spatter, as if all the iron from the victim's body was airborne and settling into her sinuses and coating her tastebuds. The body hadn't been there long, and she was grateful for that; the stench of death had not yet set in. The tarp covered the driver's window and part of the windshield, making the space

around her murky. But the sun pouring in through the passenger side provided enough light to take in the scene. A man was laid back in the driver's seat, his blue eyes bloodshot, cast toward the sky. His seat was reclined backward and a large laceration ran from ear to ear across his throat. There, in the center of the gash, protruding from what she guessed was his trachea, was a small bouquet of blood-spattered flowers. They all seemed to be of the same varietal, with gold petals and black pistils — black-eyed Susans, she guessed.

“What in the hell?” she asked aloud.

The victim's mouth was slightly open, and blood had pooled up until it had spilled out over his yellow stained teeth. The arterial blood sprays from his throat left a pattern. The first sprays reaching the dash and steering wheel, then tapering down to his belly and chest. Sofia involuntarily pictured it play out in her mind — the blood pressure initially causing the wider spray radius, then each spray after that dying down, coinciding with his weakened pulse, until it eventually ceased. His hands were crossed in his lap with his palms facing upward. They too were caked in blood. He'd most likely had his hands up around his throat, making the notorious “choking” sign, and then they slumped down onto his lap as his life left him. Cradled in his bloodied palms was a white piece of laminated paper with the words:

***“Out of the ash I rise with my red hair and I eat men like air.”***

The text was printed in the center, in a bold typeface. Below the quote there was an image of a black phoenix with its wings spread out, as if about to take flight.