

## Chapter One

# The Killer In The Mirror

The man with the knife was a stranger. I never saw him before he tried to kill me.

I was in the Whitney Library when it happened, about seven miles from my hometown of Spring Hill. I'd been there for about forty-five minutes. I had come with a plan – a plan to clear my name, to get free, to get home to my family and out of danger. Now I had to leave. It wasn't safe for me to stay in any one place for very long.

I was in the main research room on the library's second floor. I went down the hall and pushed into the men's room. I took off my black fleece and hung it on the door of one of the stalls. Then, wearing just my jeans and black t-shirt, I stood at the sink and splashed cold water on my face.

I was tired – way tired. I had been on the road – on the run – I don't know – several weeks – a long time. I had to fight to stay alert. If I didn't stay alert, I wouldn't stay alive.

I dried myself off with a couple of paper towels. I looked at myself in the mirror. The guy looking back at me was six

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feet tall. Thin but with broad shoulders, good muscles, still in good shape. I had a lean, kind of solemn face with a mop of brown hair flopping over the forehead. Brown eyes – serious eyes – probably too serious for a guy who was only eighteen – but honest and straightforward. At least, I always thought they were . . .

I shook my head. *Snap out of it.* This was no time to doubt myself. I had to keep my spirits up, keep going. *Never give in.*

It was hard sometimes. I have to admit it. With the bad guys after me, and even the good guys – the police – after me too. It was hard not to get discouraged. Lonely. I missed my home. I missed my friends. I missed my mom and dad. I even missed my sister, who could be very annoying, believe me. Imagine sitting down to watch your absolutely favorite television show and just as it's about to begin, a nuclear explosion wipes out all of civilization as we know it – that's how annoying my sister could be. But I missed her anyway.

I missed just being a regular guy, just going to school and church and hanging out and doing regular things.

But it was no good thinking about that now. I had to keep going. I had to do what I'd come here to do. I'd promised myself I wouldn't stop trying. I'd promised God too. And I wouldn't stop. Not ever.

I turned away from the mirror. I took the fleece down from the stall door. I'd bought it at a thrift shop a few days ago. Something to keep me warm now that winter was coming. I tapped it to feel the papers folded up in the inside

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pocket. That's what I'd come to the library to find. I had what I wanted. It was time to go.

I slipped the fleece over my head, working my arms into the long sleeves.

It was just then – just as I got the fleece on – that the man came in.

He was a little older than I was – in his twenties maybe. A bit taller and a bit bigger around the waist and shoulders. He was wearing black jeans and a red windbreaker. He had a round, clean, pleasant face. Blond hair, blue eyes. He looked like a nice guy. He gave me a quick nod as he entered and I nodded back. Then he moved past me, heading toward the urinals at the far end of the room.

I took a step away from him, toward the door, ready to leave. As I went, I glanced over at the mirror to check myself one last time. I lifted my fist to my reflection by way of encouragement. *Never give in.*

And, as I did that, I caught a glimpse of the man behind me. I saw *his* reflection too, out of the corner of my eye. Strangely, he had stopped walking toward the urinals. He had pivoted around, back toward me.

Suddenly, without any warning at all, he had a knife in his hand. It was a killer's knife, a combat knife. A seven-inch blade of black steel.

At the very moment I spotted him in the mirror, he tried to plunge the blade into my spine.

A jolt of terror went through me, an electric panic that gave me almost supernatural speed. I leapt to my left, turning

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sideways. The blade lanced past my midsection, so close I felt its motion through the fleece. My years of karate training kicked in. I reacted without thinking, smacking his elbow with my left palm to push the knife hand away.

But I was moving so fast, in so much fear, I stumbled, tripped over my own feet and staggered back deeper into the bathroom.

That saved my life. Because the man with the knife was well trained. He knew how to fight. He was already slashing backwards at my face. If I hadn't stumbled away from him, he'd have cut my throat right there.

I let out a grunt, bending away from the blade. I still didn't have my feet under me, and the movement sent me even further off balance. I fell, tumbling down to the floor.

It was the end of me. I was sure of it.

You have to understand: a trained man with a knife is as deadly as anything, even more dangerous in some ways than a man with a gun. You might grab a gun. You might wrestle it away. But you can't get hold of a knife without getting cut. And if the knife man knows what he's doing, he can carve you up with a blade just as fast as a bullet.

And this guy knew what he was doing all right. All the karate training in the world wasn't going to save me if I didn't act fast and act smart. If I fell and he came down on top of me, I'd be dead in seconds.

I knew it even as I was falling. The panic raced through my belly. The thoughts raced through my head: *I have to do something.*

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I hit the tiled floor and kept rolling, fast, away from the oncoming killer. I rolled and leapt up, gaining my feet in the back of the bathroom, pressed up against the far wall, the urinals on either side of me.

Before I could even think, he was there, he was on me, driving the knife toward my gut, the black blade glinting in the light.

A cry escaped me in my desperation. I only just managed to leap out of the way, to grab his wrist with my two hands.

But I couldn't hold him. He yanked the knife back and if I hadn't let go, he would've slashed my fingers off. Immediately, he came at me again. His round, clean face was now a mask of fury. His blue eyes were full of death.

I was losing this fight. I knew it. It was only a matter of time before the knife slipped home. There was no way to overpower a trained assassin like this. No way to outfight him.

There was only one chance. I had to out-think him. Somehow, in my terror, in my panic, with murder hanging over me like a sword, I had to figure a way out.

The killer kept coming at me, the blade weaving before me like the head of a cobra. He kept the point in my eyes so I couldn't see it clearly, couldn't gauge the distance. He was forcing me toward the middle of the room, to where I'd be hemmed in between the stalls and the sinks with nowhere to move. I stepped backwards quickly, waiting for the fatal strike.

Then, with snakelike swiftness, the strike came – and at the same time, there came a desperate thought.

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As the blade lanced toward me, I spun away, shouldering through one of the stall doors. He tried to come in after me. I grabbed hold of the door and slammed it on him, catching his arm for a second. He pulled free – and before he could force his way in, I slammed the door shut and shot the bolt.

This had to be fast – lightning fast. The door was light, the lock was flimsy. He would break through in an instant.

I didn't wait for him. I dropped to the floor. I ducked under the gap between the stalls.

There was an enormous crash as the knife man kicked his way in to the locked stall – the one I'd just left.

I flew out the door of the other stall and in a split second, I was behind him.

The killer already realized he'd been tricked. He was starting to turn from the empty stall, to turn toward me.

Too bad, brother, one mistake is all you get. I punched him fast and hard in the nose. His head flew backward, blood bursting from his nostrils. I didn't let him recover. I grabbed hold of his wrist – the wrist of his knife hand – so he couldn't cut me. With my other hand, I grabbed his hair and bent him forward.

I dragged him out of the stall, turning my body to give me momentum. I slammed him face first into the hard edge of the sink.

His knees buckled and he crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

I stood over him, gasping for breath, amazed that I was still alive.

## Chapter Two

# Surrounded

I knelt down beside the fallen killer.

He didn't move. His upper lip was all smashed up and there was dark blood smearing his mouth. His mouth was open and I could see the blood staining his teeth too.

I began to search his clothes. I knew I had to hurry. Someone could come into the bathroom at any moment and see me kneeling over his body. They would call for help and then I'd have the police after me again.

Quickly, I went through the pockets of his windbreaker first. They were empty. Then, one by one, I went through the pockets of his jeans. In the left front pocket, I found a single key on a chain. The key was unmarked, but the chain said, 'Harley-Davidson Motorcycles.' I slipped the key into my pocket. I figured that would slow the guy down at least.

I went on searching. In his right front pocket, I found a silver money clip with about two hundred dollars in it. Yes, I know the Ten Commandments and yes, I know you're not

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supposed to steal. But this didn't feel like stealing. The guy was a killer, after all – *my* killer, if he'd had his way. I figured he owed me at least this much. I stuffed the cash into the same pocket as the key.

Just then, the killer groaned and shifted. I tensed, watching him. His hand lifted from the floor and groped weakly at the air. His eyelids fluttered. His bloody mouth moved, his lips parting. He was starting to come around.

I was running out of time. I had to get out of here.

I scooped up the knife from the floor. I slipped the brutal blade under my belt so that it went into my pocket. I pulled down my fleece so that it hid the handle. That's when I noticed the blood on my hands. It was the killer's blood, plus some of my own from my bruised knuckles. I turned on the faucet, let the cold water run over my fingers. It stung like crazy, but I forced myself to keep my hands there as the blood washed off. I watched as the red streaks stained the water and swirled with it down the drain.

Finally, I splashed cold water on my face again, just as I had before the killer came in. Just as I had then, I pulled a couple of paper towels out of the dispenser and dried myself off quickly.

And just as I had before, I looked into the mirror. I looked at my own reflection.

I was pale now. My cheeks were a weird gray, the color of concrete, only with spots here and there of frantic red. A line of sweat ran down my temple.

But my eyes were determined.

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The killer gave another low groan. He shifted on the floor as he continued to wake up.

I swiped the line of sweat off my face. It was time to go.

I moved to the door and pushed through. I walked down the little hallway that led into the main part of the library's second floor.

It was pretty much your usual library here: one expansive room filled with shelves of books. There were some long reading tables in front of the shelves. There were people sitting at the tables, poring over open books and writing in notebooks. There was an information desk to my right with a librarian sitting on a high stool behind it. The walls were all of steel-framed glass, big windows looking out at the sky and the buildings of downtown Whitney and Main Street below.

It seemed strange to me that everything should be normal here, everything quiet and peaceful, the way a library ought to be. I would've thought the whole room would've heard me fighting with the killer in the bathroom. But in fact, the fight had happened with hardly a sound. No one suspected.

I glanced at the exits. There were two of them. There was one staircase down to the main floor on my left and another to my right, just beside the information desk. I was about to head for the staircase on my left.

But I stopped before I even took a step.

There was a man loitering there. A small, wiry, olive-skinned man with a thin moustache. He was wearing khaki slacks and a brown windbreaker. He was leaning against a shelf, idly turning the pages of a dictionary.

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I turned to the other stairway. I saw another man – a man sitting at a reading desk near the head of the stairs. He was a short guy too, but thick and muscular and mean looking. He had a block-shaped head with short hair and rough skin on his cheeks. He was staring down at a newspaper that lay open on the desk in front of him.

I looked back at the moustache man near the left staircase. Back at the blockheaded man to my right.

They were Homelanders. I knew it the moment I saw them.

They had both exits blocked. I was surrounded.