

PROLOGUE

Holman Correctional Facility, Escambia County, Alabama

Randal Korn had waited for this moment for four long years.

He stood in the death chamber, arms folded, staring at the chair. It was almost one hundred years old. Constructed from mahogany and then painted bright yellow with highway-line paint borrowed from the State Highway Department, just down a ways from Holman Correctional. They called the chair Yellow Mama.

One hundred and forty-nine people had sat in that chair, never to stand again.

The digital clock on the wall read 23:45.

It was almost time. He exited the brick chamber and found himself in a cinderblock hallway. Unpainted. A door to the left led to the control room for the chair – the hot box. He didn't go inside, instead he went straight to the enclave at the end of the hall. Two couches faced each other. On one sat a priest, on the other were the execution team. Four corrections officers, trained to get the prisoner from his death cell to the chair, and strap him in, all in under two minutes.

Korn waved a hand at the death team, and the lead officer nodded back. He ignored the priest. Beyond the couches, a narrow corridor broke left. At the end of that corridor a small, barred cell and inside it, sitting on the cot, watching TV, was Darius Robinson. He'd eaten his last meal – chicken-fried steak, cornbread and a Pepsi. The last rites had been given by the priest. His head and left calf had been freshly shaved. One man stood between Darius and Yellow Mama.

His name was Cody Warren.

Cody was outside the cell, using the phone fixed to the wall. Korn knew exactly what Cody was doing. He was on the phone

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to the Governor's Office, waiting while Governor Chris Patchett looked over the papers Cody had sent through appealing for a stay of execution. As a defense lawyer with experience of death-penalty cases in Alabama, Cody was the one person who could persuade the governor to save his client's life.

Korn stood very still. A tall, thin man with little musculature over his frame and no body fat. Not that he kept in shape. He ate little and it showed. High cheekbones that could slice a New York strip. No age lines visible, anywhere. Some said his face was that of a peculiar porcelain doll. With his dark hair parted to one side, his wire-rimmed glasses perched carefully on his nose, he looked like a much older man who had stolen a younger body to inhabit. Korn had small, black eyes that were hooded by his brow, as if to conceal his gaze. His mouth was just a dark slit in his face. That six-foot-seven-inch tall body could have been an advantage if it had ever taken up sports, but instead it stayed inside, in the dark, reading, learning and thinking. Like an old spider, spinning a web that only it could see.

Darius Robinson, twenty-five years old, had been convicted of murder four years ago, and sentenced to death. His appeals were quickly exhausted. The victim was a used-car salesman who'd been shot in the chest during a robbery. A man named Porter shot the salesman while relieving him of five grand in cash. Robinson had driven Porter to the lot and driven him away after the robbery. He maintained that he hadn't known Porter was armed, and all he was doing was giving him a ride to the lot to pick up a new car. Porter had been shot dead by police twenty-four hours after the robbery. Robinson told the jury he hadn't been armed, he hadn't even set foot on the lot, he was in the car the whole time and hadn't known Porter intended to rob anyone until he heard the shot. He even said that Porter threatened to shoot him if he didn't drive him away from the scene after the robbery.

That didn't matter in Sunville County. Randal Korn, the district attorney for the county, convinced the jury Robinson was in on the robbery and he had known Porter was armed. Under party laws, that was enough to put Robinson on death row and treat him as if

he had been the one who fired the gun. All executions in Alabama are carried out at Holman, in Escambia County, the next county over from Sunville.

Korn knew that because Porter had been the one who actually pulled the trigger, there was always a very good chance Darius could have his death penalty commuted.

Cody was older than Korn and wore every year of his sixty-three on his face. Deep lines creased his forehead. Crow's feet crowded his eyes, but they remained bright – hopeful. His suit jacket lay on the painted concrete floor, along with his tie. He rubbed sweat off his forehead into his gray hair, then pressed the phone back to his ear. Cody Warren was a good lawyer, and he was confident of saving Darius's life, even if he couldn't set him free.

'Any word from the Governor's Office yet?' asked Korn.

Cody turned, shook his head, then checked his watch. Ten minutes to midnight. Ten minutes until Darius Robinson took his last steps to the chair. The wall phone was a dedicated line to the Governor's Office, but most lawyers sat on hold. Like Cody. Listening to dead air, and waiting for an act of mercy.

'He's gonna commute my sentence. I know it. I'm an innocent man,' said a voice. Korn turned to see Darius in the death cell, holding onto the iron bars, almost dancing from foot to foot, his teeth were in his lips, biting down in anticipation. Sweat covered his face, even though the hallway was cool. Waiting on a phone call to decide if you're going to live or die can tear a man apart, and the mental strain was showing on Darius.

Korn took his cell phone from his jacket, swiped, tapped and placed the device to his ear.

'Lieutenant Governor Patchett,' said Korn. 'I'm here with Cody Warren and the man of the hour, Mr. Robinson. I believe Mr. Warren has been on hold for some time trying to get through to the office.'

The Governor of Alabama was in the middle of an impeachment hearing, which had been adjourned on account of the governor taking leave due to illness. He was currently recovering in a hospital in Arkansas. As he was out of the state, the lieutenant governor was acting up.

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Korn tapped the screen again for speaker, so Cody and Darius could hear.

'I'm still considering the decision. Wanted to ask your opinion first,' said Patchett.

'Sure, let me discuss the position with Mr. Warren. I'll just put you on hold.'

Warren slammed down the phone in its cradle. He'd been on hold to the Governor's Office for almost an hour, and Korn liked letting him know that he could get the governor instantly. These little power plays gave Korn a momentary thrill.

'Look, Korn. He had a lesser role in that robbery, no matter what way you dice this. He doesn't deserve to die, and you know it. He's still a young man. He can still have a life and I'm convinced there's new evidence out there that's going to clear his name one day. Please, just give him a chance,' said Warren, his voice cracked and shrill – he'd been working flat out to save Darius Robinson from the chair for five days straight.

Korn's expression remained impassive. That blank, doll face. He said nothing in reply and took enjoyment from watching Warren's eyes search his own, looking for an answer, searching for hope, holding his breath.

No one spoke. No one dared breathe. Korn could stand very still when he wanted to, one of the other traits that made him seem at times inanimate. A portentous silence enveloped them. It was filled with possibility and dread. And Korn luxuriated in that ominous quiet as if he were bathing in dead water.

And then, the silence was broken. Darius took a breath. He inhaled deeply. Like the momentary vacuum in space as the core of a star collapses, drawing everything inside its fractured heart, right before it explodes.

'Porter held a gun on me after the robbery! If I hadn't driven him away, he woulda killed me. I didn't know he was gonna shoot somebody and rob 'em. I swear I didn't know!' shouted Darius, the fear and desperation dripping from every single word.

'I believe you,' said Korn.

'You what?' asked Warren.

'I believe him. And the acting governor will do whatever I tell him. I'll get him back on the phone right now. Give me a second, and it will all be over soon,' said Korn.

Tears began to run down Darius Robinson's cheeks.

Cody Warren's shoulders slumped, as if five hundred pounds had just been lifted off his back. He looked to the ceiling, whispered a *thank you* to the heavens and closed his eyes. He had saved a young man's life. And right then, nothing could be as sweet as that relief.

He strode up to the death cell, put his forearms through the bars and held his client's face. 'It's going to be okay,' he said.

Korn pressed the screen on his cell with this thumb. 'Governor, are you still there?'

'I'm here. We're cutting this fine, Randal. What do you want me to do? I'm inclined to commute the sentence based on Mr. Warren's submission, but I won't go against my district attorney – not if you have strong views. What's your attitude?'

Korn took a step back, admiring the scene in front of him. Warren and Robinson were hugging each other through the bars of the cell. Both of them were crying now.

'I've spoken to Mr. Warren. He is very persuasive. He has a strong argument for commuting Robinson's sentence. I understand that is your preference too. It's not easy to take a life in the name of justice,' said Korn.

Warren and Robinson were now smiling through their tears, laughing. The vast, unfathomable fear that had held them for weeks had gone, and the relief was total.

'But that's why we *must* go through with the sentence in this case,' said Korn.

Warren was the first to register what Korn had just said. His head snapped to the side, his eyes locking on the district attorney.

'A jury convicted Mr. Robinson of murder and sentenced him to death. We are dishonoring that jury, and dishonoring Mr. Robinson's victim, if we allow him to live. No, in my opinion, Darius Robinson dies tonight.'

Warren started toward Korn, but two guards stepped in between them, grabbing hold of Warren and forcing him back.

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‘Like I said, Randal, I’m not going to go against your wishes. The execution will proceed as planned. Appeal denied,’ said Patchett.

The Department of Corrections staff had performed training drills for weeks leading to this day, making sure the straps were tight, the sponge on his head held enough saline, the electrodes securely attached. They finished their well-practiced work in under two minutes, and stepped out of the death chamber leaving Robinson strapped into Yellow Mama and blindfolded.

The chamber itself was relatively small. The chair was in the center of the brick-walled room, facing the large viewing window. The controls for the electric current were in a separate room. It was through the glass pane in the control-room door that Korn would watch the execution.

Robinson’s blue prison-issue uniform had been altered somewhat. His left pant leg had been cut away just above the knee. An electrode strapped to that calf, which had been smeared with a conductor gel. Both legs were secured to the chair by thick leather straps with bright silver buckles around his ankles. More straps around his stomach, chest, arms and forehead. A sponge containing exactly three fluid ounces of saline sat ready on the electrode emanating from what they called the ‘helmet’, the cap which delivered most of the current into Korn’s body. If there was too much saline in the sponge, the electrode would short. Too little, and Darius’s head would catch fire.

The prisoner’s uniform had damp patches on it. Under the arms and on the chest. Robinson was sweating through his uniform. Even strapped down tightly, he was still shaking like a pistol in a child’s hand.

A lever in the control room pulled open the curtain in the death chamber to reveal the glass wall, and the people beyond. Half a dozen witnesses. None of them related to the dead used-car salesmen who’d been murdered by Porter. No, these were professional witnesses and reporters. Cody Warren was not present. He had been removed from the building. Korn could see the witnesses, but they could not see him. His viewing pane was one-way glass.

The condemned man was offered his final words.

'I'm innocent and they all know it.'

Korn knew it. And he didn't care. He didn't become a prosecutor in a death-penalty state to concern himself with guilt or innocence. It was the system that appealed to him. Justice was simply a cloak he wore to disguise his true nature.

All was quiet now. Then, he heard the sound of the machine kick to life.

Korn heard something else, a low hum, which suddenly became louder as Robinson's left shoulder jerked and then slammed back against the chair.

Yellow Mama had begun her first cycle.

Almost two-and-a-half-thousand volts were now coursing through Robinson. Korn's eye's widened, his lips parted. He could taste something metallic in his mouth. The air was thick with static.

For the first two seconds, Robinson appeared as if an invisible force had pinned his shoulder to the back of the chair. Another two seconds passed with his body jerking wildly, like a jackhammer was buried in his stomach. This first jolt was supposed to knock him out, stop his heart.

It did neither of those things. The human skull is a poor conductor.

After another five seconds the current was shut off. When it reconnected, it was much lower – just seven hundred volts. This would remain on for thirty seconds and then the machine would shut down automatically. If Robinson wasn't dead in that time, then the whole process would be repeated.

Korn stood at the window and watched the entire time, never taking his eyes from Robinson.

His gaze did not break from the man in the chair.

Not even when his skin began to smoke. Not even when the current fractured his left shinbone. Not even when the bloody foam erupted from his mouth.

All the while, Korn felt as if there was electricity flowing in his own veins. An elemental power that coursed through him. As district attorney, he had the power of life and death in his long, crooked hands. And he loved it. He had killed this man as surely

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as putting a bullet through his head, and the thought was intoxicating. Shooting or stabbing someone wasn't the same for Korn. Too animalistic. Korn killed using the power of his office, and his mind, and his skill. And that gave him more pleasure than he could ever have imagined. All the while he was willing Robinson to stay alive, just a little longer.

Long enough for the suffering to last.

When it was done, a cloud of smoke sat above Yellow Mama, and Korn was breathless.

It took nine minutes for Darius Robinson to die.

And in those nine excruciating minutes, Randal Korn felt truly alive.