

## CHAPTER 1

October 1, 2004

**T**HE DEATH WARRANT ARRIVED THAT morning, packaged in a large white envelope marked *confidential* and addressed to Tab Mason, Superintendent, Oregon State Penitentiary. Mason had been warned the order might be coming. A couple of weeks earlier, the Crook County DA had let the word slip that after nineteen years on death row, condemned murderer Daniel Joseph Robbin had stopped his appeals.

Mason dropped the envelope on his desk, along with a file about as thick as his fist, then ran his hand over the top of his cleanly shaved skull. He'd been in corrections for twenty years—Illinois, Louisiana, Florida—and on execution detail a half-dozen occasions, but he'd never been in charge of the actual procedure. Those other times he'd simply walked the guy into the room, strapped him down, opened the blinds on the witness booth, then stood back and waited. He'd worked with one guy in Florida who'd done the job

fifty times. “It becomes routine,” the officer told Mason, who was busy puking into a trash can after witnessing his first execution.

Now Mason slid into his chair, flicked on his desk lamp, and opened Robbin’s file. There was the man’s picture. A front and side shot. He had been nineteen years old when he was booked, had long scraggly hair and eyes squinted to a hostile slit. Mason turned the page and began to read. On the afternoon of May 6, 1985, Daniel Joseph Robbin beat, then shot fifteen-year-old Steven Joseph Stanley (aka “Shep”) while in the process of robbing the boy’s home at 111 Indian Ridge Lane. The victim was found still alive by his father, Deputy Sheriff Nathaniel Patrick Stanley, but died before medical assistance could arrive. The remaining family members—wife and mother, Irene Lucinda Stanley, and twelve-year-old Barbara Lee (aka Bliss)—were not present during the incident. The Stanleys, who were originally from Illinois, had been living in Oregon for a year and a half when the incident occurred.

The superintendent leafed through more pages—court documents, letters, photos—then leaned back in his chair and looked out his window. A squat rectangular building sat on its own toward the north end of the prison’s twenty-five-acre grounds. The last time someone had been executed out there was seven-plus years ago. Mason had been working his way up through the ranks at the Florida State Prison out of Raiford, aspiring for a job like the one he had now—head of a large correctional institution, good salary, power. He blew out a long, disgusted breath. Why now? The Oregon penitentiary was way overcrowded, inmates doubled up in their cells, half of them out of their minds; fights were breaking out left and right, gangs getting tougher to handle; there were race issues, drugs—all while funding for counseling and rehab continued to get slashed. Why now, and why this?

Mason reread the warrant. The execution was scheduled for October 29, 12:01 A.M.

“Less than a goddamn month,” he said, shaking his head. Then,

as if to rouse himself, he clapped his mismatched hands, one as dark as the rest of his black skin, one strangely, almost grotesquely white. There was no complaining in this job, he told himself. No moaning about what needed to be done. No stammering or stuttering or doing anything that might show the slightest bit of reluctance or hesitancy. No. Everything in his career had been leading him to this kind of challenge: his demeanor, his words, his actions would all set a tone. And he knew exactly what that tone had to be.

## CHAPTER 2

### September 1983

SHE REMEMBERED THE DATE, SEPTEMBER 20, and the time, 6:00 P.M. The scent of the air was spiked with apples and over by the river geese were taking to the sky. Her son, Shep, thirteen and a half years old, stood in the field near the barn playing his trumpet. And her youngest, Bliss, was on the tire swing with her best friend Jeff. And she, Irene Stanley, thirty-two years old and trim as a pin, was making her family dinner.

Nate pulled up in their brand-new pickup, tugged off his wide-brimmed Smokey Bear-style hat, waved to his kids, banged through the back door, and smacked a U.S. map on the counter next to where she was cutting vegetables.

He was a handsome man, with fighter-hard muscles, copper-colored hair, and bright green eyes. She smiled as he shucked off his jacket, dropped it and his hat on the kitchen table, and announced that a buddy of his back in the service had called that morning.

“He’s a sheriff out in Oregon. Says he wants me to come be his chief deputy.”

Irene glanced up from her cutting. “Since when are you looking for a job?”

Nate had been a Union County deputy for going on nine years. Not *chief* deputy, but getting there. He was smart, gregarious, a war hero. He’d be elected sheriff one day, Irene was sure.

“Since I talked with Dobin. That’s his name. Dobin Stubnik. We were pretty tight in Nam.”

“Sheriff Stubneck?”

“Stubnik.”

“Ooohh.” Irene reached for a potato, sliced it in half. It’d be stew for dinner. Beef, with carrots, potatoes, and those little onions Nate hated but the kids loved.

“He’s a good guy,” her husband said. “Smart, quick, going somewhere.” He pushed aside Irene’s cutting board, then opened and flattened out his map—crisp and new, blue and red lines crossing the lower forty-eight. Nate traced his way from the middle of the heavyweight paper to its very left side, stopping on the word *Oregon*. “It’s desert country out that way,” he said. “Wide and open. Hell, parts of it are still considered frontier.”

Irene looked at where Nate’s finger stopped and imagined a scene from some John Wayne movie: cowboys, Indians, saloons with buxom barmaids. The farthest west she’d ever been from their home in Illinois was St. Louis, and that felt good enough.

“There’s everything there, sweetie. Mountains, lakes, the ocean—you name it.”

Irene set down her knife. She’d grown up in the house where she now stood. Her mom had cooked in this kitchen; so had her grandma. The place was built by her great-granddad, and it sat on a fine and fertile piece of ground with the Mississippi curving around it like a hand. And Nate? He grew up not three miles away. For fifty-five years his family had run Carlton’s only butcher shop. Irene

and Nate's two children, Shep and Bliss, went to the same school she and Nate had gone to. Had some of the same teachers, even. Southern Illinois was their home, their only home. And it damn well was going to stay that way. She turned to face her husband. "*Family, Nate. We have no family out there.*"

Nate snatched up his map, then folded its creases tight and clean. "Yeah, well, we've always lived 'round family. Yours, mine—I mean, don't you ever just want to break out and see what we can do on our own?" He slapped the map against his hand. "It'd be good for us to get out of here."

Irene gave her husband a look, then pulled her cutting board back in place, wondering what in the world had gotten into him and, more important, how in the hell she'd get it out. Nate wasn't a tall man, but he carried himself with the sureness of one. A thick, sturdy neck holding up an even thicker head. Nothing got in his way once he made a decision.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Nathaniel Stanley. Moving wouldn't be good for anyone but you, if that."

Nate grabbed a carrot, bit into it, then walked to the sink. Irene sighed and cut into another carrot, her knife snapping the board loud and hard. "You don't just pull your life out of the ground like some kind of weed, Nate. I mean, I know people do it, but it doesn't make it right. This is home." *Snap*. "Everyone's here." *Snap*. "Your mom, your brother, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews." *Snap, snap, snap, snap*. "Everyone who's anything to us, right here. It doesn't matter if we're tired of them, mad, bored, or what. They're family. *You don't leave family.*" Irene scraped the cut rounds into her bowl and walked to the sink. "Anyway," she said, nudging her husband out of the way with her hip, "the kids are in school. Bliss just got voted class secretary, and Shep, well . . ."

She turned off the water, picked up a towel, and looked out the window. The sun, a burgeoning red ball in a scarlet sky, had turned everything—the ground, the barn, even the children—all shades

of peach and pink. Bliss and Jeff were climbing the old maple, and Shep was still in the field with his trumpet. He was playing “Silent Night,” and its long pleading notes made Irene clutch the towel to her chest. It was his closing piece to the day, and he’d either play it outside, when the weather was good, or inside on the piano. Nate often complained that it drove him nuts to hear a Christmas song all year long.

“Shep.” Nate spat the last piece of carrot into the sink, then slammed the window shut. “A place like Oregon? Hell, it’d be good for the boy, you know that?” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Fact is, Irene, I think it’s just what the kid needs.”