

## Chapter One

A chill teased the air across South Texas in the early morning hours of December 31, 1999. In less than twenty hours, thousands would light fireworks to herald the coming of a new century, the promise of a new beginning. Just west of Del Rio, on the Guajia Bay, fireworks of another kind were lit to announce the departure of one young life and the end of innocence for another.

Down a dark, narrow road, the six inhabitants of a doublewide mobile home were deep asleep at 4:30 a.m. The man outside the residence first tried to trip the lock on the back door with his knife blade but failed. The family dog started barking in the pen. He let the black Rottweiler smell his hand and patted him on the head until the animal was quiet. He removed the screen from the window above the air conditioner, pushed up on the sash, but the latch lock was drawn, holding the pane in place.

He moved on panther feet to the front of the house. The window to fourteen-year-old Justin Harris' room was raised to the welcome coolness of a mild December. Outside, the open window was an invitation to the man lurking in the shadows. He removed that screen and set it off to the side. Beneath his makeshift entryway, a large metal tub rested. He stepped up on its edge unaware that in the dark water below his foot, two ill-tempered snapping turtles waited for him to slip. From his perch, he pushed the sash up a bit further until he created an opening large enough for entry. Carefully, he threw one leg up over the windowsill and into the room. He paused, his ears tuned to catch the slightest noise. He hoisted the other leg into the room and eased himself down to the floor.

Justin, blind from birth, thought one of the girls was messing with him again and said, "Will you all stop coming into my room." Then went back to sleep.

The intruder walked into the next bedroom and struck his lighter. There was a very small girl sleeping on the bed, seven-year-old Marque Surles. Her heart-shaped face looked even more innocent in repose than it did by day – nose smooshed in the pillow, delicate eyelashes feathered on its case. Her body curled up in a loose, comfortable ball. He stared at her in the flickering light. Then, he turned away.

He walked down the hall to the other end of the trailer. Spinning the ridged wheel on his lighter again, he saw a woman, Crystal Harris, and a young girl, 12-year-old Lori Harris, fast asleep. He touched the woman on the leg. She did not stir. He looked down at her long hair splayed across the pillow, at the curves of her body undulating beneath the covers. He shook his head and stepped away.

He went back down the hall to explore the one remaining bedroom. Stepping across the threshold, all he heard was the quiet flow of breath from the two occupants in the room. He inhaled a heady smell: part sweaty child, part air freshener, part blooming female adolescence.

He pulled the door closed behind him. In the top bunk, ten-year-old Krystal Surles stirred and he froze in his tracks. No thread of light penetrated the room. He was unable to identify the source of the noise. His right hand squeezed the knife handle until it left a deadly impression on his palm. In two steps, he was leaning over thirteen-year-old Kaylene “Katy” Harris on the lower level of the bed. “Wake up,” he hissed into her ear. He lay down next to her and held one hand to her trembling throat while his other hand wielded a hideous twelve-inch boning knife.

“What are *you* doing here?”

Without responding, he slit her shorts. He cut her panties. He sliced her bra in two. Then he returned the knife to the terrified child’s throat while his free hand danced across her small body. She jerked free, tumbling out of bed on the side that was closest to the wall.

She shouted, “Go get Mama,” as she surged toward the door. But he was already there blocking her escape. His knife stabbed, drawing first blood.

“Look, you cut me.”

He flipped on the light and looked at the fresh wound on her arm and pulled her toward him. Above, Krystal awoke with a start, peering through the slats of the bunk. First she saw Katy, a hairy hand was clasped over her friend’s mouth. Then, her worst nightmare came true, she saw him – the monster under the bed lived. He stood behind Katy, holding a wicked-looking knife to her throat. As the thirteen-year-old struggled, Krystal looked in her eyes. She received an urgent message that was as loud and clear as if spoken. “Do not move.”

Without warning, the knife sliced. A helpless Krystal watched as a long red streak of blood raced across Katy’s neck. The knife pulled back and cut again, deepening the wound. The thirteen-year-old twisted away, clutched at a poster on the wall and pulled it down with her. She fell to the floor, gagging, choking, gasping for air as she drowned in a profusion of her own blood. He leaned over her, stabbing her stomach, her chest, her arms until he was certain he had completed what he had begun.

The intruder then turned to the top bunk where he saw Krystal for the first time.

“I’ll be quiet. I promise. I won’t say nothing. I’m not making a noise. It’s Katy, not me,” she begged.

In response, the silent stranger brought the menacing knife toward her throat. Her jerking hands flew up to that vulnerable part of her small eighty-pound frame in a valiant attempt to defend it from assault. “Please don’t hurt me,” she whimpered.

He answered her pathetic plea with a cold command: “Move your hands.” When she did not comply, he brushed them away and brought the boning knife across her throat with sufficient violence to slice her windpipe in two. Krystal uttered not a sound. She lay motionless smelling the acrid scent of blood and the pungent odor of her own fear. She fought back the urge to flee, instinct warning her that any sign of life would ensure instant death. The bearded, long-haired nightmare turned off the bedroom lights and left the room.

Still Krystal did not move. Her heart pounded with anxiety, dreading the man would return. When she could bear it no longer, she got out of the bed on the side next to the wall. She pushed on the window there but could not open it. Feeling her way with her hands, she moved to the end of the bed, identified her suitcase by touch and stumbled over the limp, bloody body of her best friend. Without thinking, Krystal lay down next to her. She patted the other girl's leg with pitiful tenderness, hoping she could make the horrible noises stop. Katy showed no sign of receiving the comfort her desperate friend wanted to impart. Her body, ravaged by sixteen stab wounds and two severe lacerations, was unable to respond.

Krystal thought she heard a car start and drive away in the distance. She felt her way to the bedroom door, banging her toes hard into the ladder to the bunk bed that had fallen in her path. She moved it out of the way and exited the room. Help was just down the hall but she did not know it. Her thoughts were consumed by brilliant images of red and the gut-wrenching sounds of a dying friend. Believing her attacker had killed everyone else in the house, she fled the horror, out into the naked night.