

EXCERPT FROM BODY TOLL
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Prologue

A Nor'easter was howling on this cold and moonless January night as Jimmy Barton headed over the wooden walkover toward the beach, staggering from side to side like a sailboard tacking into a strong wind. He pulled his ragged jacket closer around his throat to keep the bitter wind at bay, the sour-sweet smell of stale beer drifting along behind him like an invisible shadow. Barton stumbled through the soft sand as he made his way beneath the walkover, settling onto a piece of plastic tarp. Pulling an old blanket from his backpack, he curled into a tight ball to conserve body heat, drifting quickly away into a deep sleep.

Barton had no way of knowing his life would end that night, cut short at the hands of a serial killer. An alcoholic living on the streets for almost ten years, Jimmy denied he had a drinking problem. "Hell, I been drinkin' since I was 'bout fifteen or so, but that don't mean I got a drinkin' problem," he would tell his street buddies. "Life sucks, ya know? And havin' a beer or two kinda knocks the edges off." Jimmy couldn't conceive of the possibility that his life sucked *because* of his drinking.

He usually dressed in filthy layers of clothing that hadn't seen the inside of a washing machine since the day he got them. Rather than wash them, Jimmy simply rotated the order of the layers as the mood struck him.

His days revolved around panhandling tourists for beer money, not that they knew what he really meant to do with their gifts. His nights were spent avoiding the cops as he searched for a place to sleep under the stars on the white sands of Jacksonville Beach, Florida. When panhandling slacked off, Barton financed his drinking habit by working at a day labor pool. Daily meals were provided courtesy of the local soup kitchen.

Jimmy Barton's killer was not homeless, nor did he drink to excess. Instead, he took great pains to keep his body in top physical condition. Women considered him attractive, if not handsome. This night, however, those same women would have quickly turned away to avoid making eye contact with him. His head was covered with a ragged old hoodie pulled down to his eyebrows; jeans smeared with so much dirt they appeared brown rather than their original denim blue. His running shoes had turned a grimy shade of grey, long ago abandoning their original, store-bought white. In his disguise, he appeared to be just another homeless man, living a life most people could never understand.

The killer had sat huddled for two hours on a hard concrete bench overlooking the sand dunes and sea oats. He had been feverishly scouring the boardwalk area for the past few days, ever since the local TV stations had identified James "Jimmy" Barton as a witness to the brutal murder the killer had committed on this very beach. Finally, around midnight, he spotted Barton, bobbing and weaving like a punch-drunk fighter as he headed for the beach. He watched his intended victim cross the sand dunes, crushing the tender sea oats under his shoes as he veered under the walkover to seek shelter from the cold and wind.

Before tonight, the killer had focused his lethal attention on prostitutes, a warped tribute to his whore of a mother. Now, he was excited at the prospect of tapping into another target-rich field, homeless people, and especially this homeless man. Most, if not all of them, were

alcoholics or drug addicts, in his estimation. People who let addictions control them were pathetic losers, thereby meeting his twisted justification for purging the weak from the human herd.

Even at this late hour, one couple was still strolling along the boardwalk. Pursuing his prey too quickly could draw unwanted attention to himself when Barton's body was later discovered; that would be a fool's choice, he knew. The killer was many things. A fool was not one of them. He patiently waited until the couple left the boardwalk and then moved along in the direction of his intended victim.

Slump-shouldered, weaving his way across the pier parking lot toward the beach walkover, the killer carried a ratty backpack that appeared to contain all his worldly possessions. To anyone still foolish enough to be out in this weather, he would seem to be just another drunken homeless man. Smiling with anticipation, the killer moved under the pier as he spotted Barton, sunk in the depths of alcohol-induced sleep. Looking both directions, the man saw no one on the beach. He wasn't surprised, considering the time of night and the Nor'easter that had been blowing for the past two days.

He approached the sleeping form and kneeled quietly in the sand beside him as he pulled on leather gloves. From his coat pocket, the killer withdrew a dagger, five inches of black, razor-sharp steel. He leaned forward, heart pounding, his breath coming in short gasps as if he had just run a four-minute mile. The pleasure he derived from taking a human life was like no other, better than sex, better than the most wonderful meal in the finest five-star restaurant.

The killer possessed the ultimate power, to hold a person's very essence in his hands, and then take that essence for his own. This power made him feel immortal. Weak humans the world over recoiled at the very concept of murder. Their petty morality was laughable to him. By adhering to society's rules, they deprived themselves of the most intense emotions and pleasures a human being could ever feel. He had known since that fateful day many years ago that he wasn't one of those weak mortals. Now, he was about to add this bum, Jimmy Barton, to his own private curriculum vitae, thereby ridding the earth of one more waste of oxygen.

Leaning forward, he touched the tip of the knife to the soft, fleshy area below Barton's right eye, pressing just hard enough to pierce the skin. Barton's eyes flew open as he tried to focus on the person looming over him.

"Remember me?" the killer asked.

There was just enough light coming from the boardwalk street lamps to allow Barton to see the man's face, and especially his cold eyes. Along with the voice, Barton instantly recognized the killer. "No, no, please, no!" he exclaimed.

As the blade slashed straight across Barton's neck, his killer jumped back to avoid a gusher of blood spurting straight into the air. The cut was so deep that Barton's windpipe was completely severed, leaving him unable to cry out. As Barton thrashed about, his life pouring onto the sand, the killer watched, no expression on his face. In seconds, it was over.

He kneeled once more beside his victim and used the dead man's sleeve to wipe the blade. Careful to avoid the splashes of blood, he placed a folded sheet of paper on Barton's chest, anchoring it with a small shell he found beside the body. Then he sat back on his heels and contemplated the scene, remembering again the brief message printed on the paper, "One dead child molester, 20 children saved!"

This should push the cops in the wrong direction, he thought, figuring they would check the man's record and find his sex offense conviction in Tampa. *No sense making it easy for them to link this scum to my previous trophy.*

Before leaving, he quickly searched Barton's meager possessions for a souvenir for his collection. The killer picked up a small plastic picture frame with a little girl's picture inside, cradling it in his hands. Written in a childish scrawl across the bottom was the inscription, "To Daddy from Meghan. I love you."

How pathetic is that? he sneered. *Carrying around a picture of his daughter from who knows how long ago. As if she still cared about a loser like him.*

Smiling in satisfaction at the accomplishment of his goal, the killer slipped the picture into his pocket and walked away. He headed south on the beach for two blocks before taking another walkover back to the street. As he moved, his heart and breathing slowed almost to normal. He watched carefully for police cars that he knew regularly patrolled the downtown area and the beach. The streets were silent, like an old abandoned cemetery.

Cutting through alleys to the side street where he had parked his car, he climbed in, cranked the engine, and connected his seat belt. The man didn't want a cop to have any reason to stop him this night.

Turning on the car's satellite radio, he found his favorite show featuring an anarchist who spoke of the wretched excuses for leaders who were taking the United States of America ". . . down, down, down!" He believed it to be true. Every worthless human being he killed was one less miserable asshole contributing to the country's downfall. He was proud to do his part.

Driving away, a brief smile crossed his face.