# Prologue

HOUSTON, TEXAS
APRIL, TWENTY-TWO YEARS AGO
LANDON

I gently squeezed my wife's shoulder. "Julia, wake up. The house is on fire."

She coughed in the smoke-filled room and intense heat. The alarm screeched. "A fire? I—"

"We've got to get out now. I'll wet towels." Acrid smoke stung my eyes and nose.

*Diesel fuel.* I shoved my wallet and cell phone into the pocket of my sweatpants. This smelled like a vicious crime.

She reached for her purse and stuffed a framed photo of us on our honeymoon inside. I started to object, but she had the purse positioned over her shoulder before I could ask her to leave it.

"Can you grab the go backpack?" The heavy fumes settled hard in my lungs. What was this doing to Julia? Our unborn daughter?

"Landon, I'm afraid." Julia coughed repeatedly while she waddled to my side of the bed and retrieved the backpack. The seventh month of our first child slowed her progress.

"Honey, trust me." I wanted to believe my own words, but fear for her safety threatened to paralyze me.

"Trust you? How can I when you're gone all the time putting out someone's fire? Now our home will burn to the ground."

*Please, Julia, I agreed to make changes.*

I said nothing. In the bathroom, I gave the bathtub faucet a quick twist. After grasping two towels, I doused them with water.

"There's no power." She stood beside me, and her body trembled against mine. "Our baby!"

"You both will be all right." I wrung out a towel and handed it to her. "Cover your mouth and nose with this."

She held the wet towel to her face, and I covered mine with a second one. I used my phone to light the way and cringed at the smoke, hoping my wife and unborn child would be safe from the rising inferno.

Slipping the straps of the backpack over my shoulders, a cough raged through my chest. Could I free us from this old house? We stayed low in the hallway, and I supported Julia near the wall and down the stairs, her coughing pushing me faster.

At the back door, the wood felt hot, and diesel smoke blinded me, the smell rising to a nauseous level. I hurried her to the front door, where the situation looked just as bleak. A billowing cloud seeped under the doorframe.

I dashed back into the kitchen for a chair and returned to the living room, my heart jackhammering against my chest. "Stand back."

Terror widened her deep-blue eyes, and she shielded her rounded stomach with her arm.

I rammed the chair legs against the window facing the front street, breaking the single-paned glass. Dense smoke rolled in. The odor alerted me to the harmful, burning hydrogen sulfide.

I kicked out the pieces of glass, picked her up, and stepped through the broken window. The flames licked into my arms and back, searing my flesh with pain.

She whimpered, called my name softly, and buried her toweled face into my bare chest. The fluttering sound of fire whispered we'd fall prey to the danger, yet I pressed on.

"I have you." I sheltered her in my arms, moving several feet from the house to the street. At the curb, I laid her on the cool grass near a budding crape myrtle tree and jerked my cell phone from my pants pocket.

Coughing and attempting to ignore the pain from the burns, I pressed in 911, giving them our home address while I swung my gaze to the house. Who had poured diesel fuel around my home and set fire to it? I detected rubber, oil, and chemicals compounding the smell and thick smoke.

"Someone did this to us." Julia's voice rose to near hysteria. She pointed at the front door. "That looks like a burning tire. Who have you angered, Landon?"

"Honey, I'll find who did this. I promise they will spend their life in prison."

Julia snorted. "Like you promised to spend more time with me?"

*Really? Give it a rest.*

In the distance, the wail of fire trucks and flashing lights ticked away the seconds. Studying our home engulfed in a flaming monster, I doubted if the firefighters could extinguish it. Who had—?

My phone sounded with a text. In the darkness, I flipped up the screen and glanced down.

**Destroy the evidence against John Malcomson or next time I kill Julia.**