

CHAPTER ONE

MURDEROUS PROLOGUE

On a dune overlooking one of the many beaches around New York City, public binoculars offer a view of the landscape and the waves of the incoming tide. Day breaks and a fresh breeze caresses the horizon.

A gloved hand slides a quarter into the slot, then lowers the lever to engage the mechanism.

Slowly, the silhouette of a man begins to examine the seemingly deserted premises, coming to rest on a couple below, sleeping under a thick blanket.

Beside them, a wood fire casts its last embers. At this hour, they are the only two people on the beach. The cries of the seagulls, the sound of the waves and the cool morning air wake them up.

The night before, they had made love twice, curled up under the thick blanket that covered them. The night-time chill has not yet set in, and they have taken care to light a wood fire, which adds to the romantic ambience of the place.

The flames reflect in the passion-filled eyes of the two lovers. At this time of year, the beaches of Big Apple are mostly deserted, as they have taken care to avoid those adjoining amusement parks such as Coney Island.

The young woman finally addresses Steve, her companion:

- It's getting cold, darling.
- Steve, still drowsy, doesn't react.
- The fire's going out. Why don't you go and get some wood?
- Oh, I'm tired too...

The young woman shivers, then begs him with her eyes.

- Well, it's starting to curdle, he says, yawning. I'll be off...

He looks around. Steve hesitates for a moment, because they forgot to bring a thermos of hot coffee. He wonders whether he'd better take the car to the nearest town to get some breakfast, but he's afraid he'll find his partner freezing to death when he gets back.

So, lighting a fire becomes the most urgent thing to do. He gets up and heads for the dunes to gather branches and foliage.

Meanwhile, his companion curls up under the blanket and goes back to sleep.

- Thank you, darling, she mumbles.

A few seconds pass.

Then a figure approaches. Quite massive and dark, it emerges from the dunes. The cold sand crunches under the reinforced soles of his boots.

The young woman keeps her eyes closed.

Quickly, the shadow overhangs her.

Observes her for a moment. Leans over, and a gloved hand strokes her hair.

The seagulls circling overhead screech, accompanying the build-up of an icy suspense, increasingly tense as the atmosphere grows heavier. Their hoarse, mocking cries intensify to the point of concealing the hiccups of terror from the young woman, who suddenly opens her eyes and discovers her mysterious vis-à-vis.

She half straightens to make out the stranger.

He drew a blade and slit her throat without preamble. The victim's cries of terror turn into bloody gurgles. Having slit her throat, he begins to delicately cut off the top of her forehead, removing her hair, which he takes care not to damage. Although dead, the young woman's limbs are still twitching.

As he moves, without the slightest hesitation, the victim's skull begins to appear. It glistens with the sticky liquid that covers it. In the final throes of death, the stranger completes his task to recover the skull cap, which he carefully wipes dry before wrapping in a specially prepared bag.

From the precision of his gestures, we can tell that this is not the first time he has committed such an act. The cuts are straightforward and he shows no uncertainty in the execution of this horrific deed.

Meanwhile, Steve, his arms full of wood, returns to camp. He hasn't noticed anything because of the ambient noise of waves and seagulls.

As he approaches the form curled under the blanket, what he believes to be his sleeping girl-friend, the same silhouette rises behind him.

A tourniquet, its steel cable biting deep into the flesh of his neck, grips his throat.

The pain is so horrible that he feels numb. He drops his bundles of wood. Blood spurts out in long, copious streams and he's lifted off the ground to the point where his feet no longer touch the sand. He flails his arms and tries in vain to undo the bond that is causing him mortal convulsions.

His fingers, unable to reach under the tourniquet to pull it apart, frantically claw at his white skin. The helpless young man struggles, kicking weaker and weaker as the laughing seagulls screech endlessly overhead. After a final gasp, his hands fall back along his lifeless body and death welcomes him into his arms.

As soon as his deed is done, the massive assassin lets the body fall to the ground. He leaves without looking back, abandoning it to the cries of the seagulls, the only murder witnesses.

- AAAAaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh.....

Frank Zito wakes up with a start on his bed, its sheets and pillow soaked, his face covered in sweat. Perspiration beads his moustache.

Total silence surrounds him. The eerie bareness of the room's leprous walls.

Oh...

He hiccups, frightened.

Oh no...

His gaze is haunted, his eyes haggard.

He takes long, sharp breaths, trying to regain his composure.

Is this...

Did he dream, or rather nightmare, that barbaric double scene on the beach?

I... No...

A female mannequin lies beside him. Her face streaked with traces of blood, cascading from her hair held in place by a nail.

It was so...

Did he really scalp that young woman on the sand? Everything suggests so.

It was so real...

His gaze wanders to the squalid bedroom with its tiny adjoining bathroom, the half-light sparsely pierced by the glow of tiny light bulbs and candles framing the portrait of his beloved Mama, Carmen Zito.

Everywhere, dolls lie on shelves and furniture. All these dolls are unclothed, with not the slightest trace of hair.

For Frank Zito, they evoke the passion of his beloved mother, who collected them - a passion

shared by his older sister Mona, to whom he has always felt a fierce hatred and jealousy.

The atmosphere is barely illuminated by the gloomy crackle of a television. There are no windows, nor any opening to the outside world. The walls are covered in greenish, goose-poop paint, a perfect reflection of the occupant's state of mind as he wrestles with his demons. There's nothing to brighten up this place, where sinister drawings and paintings hang on the walls.

Death reigns supreme, Frank Zito's permanent roommate.

He struggles to his feet, examines his calloused hands for any traces of hemoglobin, but sees nothing, which doesn't mean he hasn't committed murder.

Yes.

Yes, of course, I could have...

Because he could have cleaned them up on his return home.

Then he staggers into the tiny bathroom, where the sink is topped by a mirror. Frank removes his sweat-soaked undershirt and begins to wash. As he does so, his hands come into contact with the deep scars and burns on his torso.

Countless reminiscences of the past rise to the surface. Memories of a childhood spent with his beloved yet cruel mother. And his sister Mona...