

## **The First Two Pages: *My Darkest Prayer***

By S.A. Cosby (Intrigue Publishing)

### CHAPTER 1

I handle the bodies.

That's what I say when people ask me what I do for a living. I find that gets one of two responses. They drift away to the other side of the room and give me a sideways glance the rest of the night or they let out a nervous laugh and move the conversation in another, less macabre direction. I could always say I work at a funeral home, but where's the fun in that?

Every once in a while, when I was in the Corps, someone would see me in Starbucks or that modern mecca Wal-Mart in my utility uniform. Sometimes they'd catch me in my dress blues after a military ball just trying to grab something before heading back to the base. They would walk up to me and say, "Thank you for your service." I'd mumble something like "No, thank you for your support" or some other pithy rejoinder, and they would wander away with a nice satisfied look on their faces. Sometimes what I wanted to say was, "I took care of the bodies. The bodies with the legs blown off or the hands shredded. The bodies full of ball bearings and nails and whatever some kid could find to build his IED. I loaded the bodies up and dragged them back to the base, then went back out on another patrol and prayed to a God that seemed to be only half-listening that today wasn't the day that someone would have to take care of my body."

But I don't think that would have given them the same warm and fuzzy feeling.

Now I take care of the bodies at the Walter T. Blackmon Funeral Home in Queen County, Virginia. Today, the body I was taking care of was Mrs. Jeatha Tolliver from Mathews, the next county over. Momma J, as she was known throughout the community, was a deaconess and Temple elder who dropped dead at 78 while she was in the middle of berating her bingo neighbor for moving her lucky Jesus statue. I'm sure she would have ended the diatribe with, "Bless

your heart” which is Southern for “fuck you, bitch” if she hadn't expired.

I was standing at the back of the funeral home chapel while Rev. Duke Halston yelled into the microphone about Hell and damnation. The crowd shifted in their seats like they could feel the flames licking at their backsides. Duke had a bone-anchored hearing aid sitting on the back of his head like a mini satellite dish. He yelled when he was talking to you after the sermon. He yelled when he was in the supermarket. I think he lost the volume control years ago. Once he called for the undertakers to take over the service. My cousin Walter, his fellow funeral director Curtis Sampson, funeral assistant Daniel Thomas, and I would walk up to the casket and ferry the body along like four black-suited Charons. My suit didn't fit me quite right. It seemed to be cut and sewn at awkward angles. The knot in my tie kept trying to travel left or right in advance of unraveling. That's what I get for buying my formal wear from a thrift store.

“Now we uh, turn over the uh, services uh, back to the uh, hands of the uh ,undertakers.” Rev. Duke stammered. Walter nodded at me, and we began to make our way down the center aisle of the chapel. Despite the air conditioner running full blast, the air was stale and stifling. The flap of the hand-held fans reminds me of a flock of buzzards taking off after a full meal of warm carrion. We directed the stoic pallbearers to stand just outside the chapel door, three on one side and three on the other, as we transported Momma J for her final car ride. The pallbearers, her grandsons, apparently couldn't be bothered to wear suits for their grandmother's funeral. Some were wearing un-tucked dress shirts, some were wearing basketball jerseys and t-shirts emblazoned with Momma J's face. I'm sure Momma J was looking down with pride as the cast of a low-budget hip-hop video loaded her into our hearse. As Daniel began herding the crowd to the door so we could head to the cemetery, Walter motioned for me. My cousin was a plump chocolate drop of a man whose caramel-colored forehead seemed to be perpetually sweaty. He hung on to the jheri curl flattop with a tenacity that would have impressed Javert. His black suit was more expensive than mine but each button on his coat seemed to be screaming for help.

When I first started writing *My Darkest Prayer*, I knew I wanted to meld the traditional noir detective story with a rural southern aesthetic filtered through an

African-American perspective. To that end I wanted to open the book with a pithy arresting sentence that grabbed the reader's attention immediately. Once I have the reader in the door, I can then show them some things that might make them a little uncomfortable but ultimately will create an interesting and compelling story.

A lot of the action in *My Darkest Prayer* takes place in and around a funeral home. My main character Nathan Waymaker works in a funeral home but does some unlicensed PI work on the side. I knew I needed to establish the major components of his character early on in the book. The reader needed to know that Nathan was intelligent, humorous, and physically imposing. They also need to know he could handle himself if things got sketchy. Having him defuse an altercation as the scene continues was a way to articulate all these qualities at once.

If I did my job the reader will get a good understanding of who Nathan is and what kind of protagonist he will be as the story develops. They may come for the opening line but they will stay for the setting. Hopefully. I think your first two pages are your foundation upon which the rest of your book is built. A strong foundation will help to create a strong story. A strong story will make for a satisfying book. In the end I think that's what we all want.

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