"Skeletons in the Lake" and "Chasing Pegasus"

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ABSTRACT

"SKELETONS IN THE LAKE" AND "CHASING PEGASUS"

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This thesis contains two sections. Each section is made up of the introductory chapters to longer writing projects that I am currently working on. It is my intention to turn these collected chapters into two mystery novels: *Skeletons in the Lake* and *Chasing Pegasus*. 
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PART ONE

“SKELETONS IN THE LAKE”

Chapter One

Chester Cobblefield blinked his eyes in the overexposed hours of afternoon. He had just finished his last day at Haunted Beach High School. Now, there would be no more school ever again. Just a few short months ago that very thought would have left Chester feeling utterly pacified. Yet, now, he couldn’t help but feel anything but angry and anxious.

Chester was sick; he knew that. And he had gotten worse; he knew that too. He had been seeing a psychiatrist for over a year, but Dr. Rebecca Good only caused his sickness to intensify.

As he boarded the school bus, Chester thought about Dr. Good. It was all he could do to ignore the insults and jeers coming from a group of jocks in letter jackets gathered around a Camaro. They had to get their last jabs at Chester before they went off to college, or the army, or wherever it is normal people go after they graduate high school. Chester hated them. Hated their laughs. Hated their girlfriends. And hated the fact that they wore their letter jackets even though it was the first week of June.
Chester sat down in a seat near the rear of the bus. He closed his eyes and thought of Dr. Good. She was in her early thirties, single, and lived alone. He knew this because he watched her two nights a week, compiling every detail of her life in a journal that he kept with him at all times.

He thought about her hands. She had great hands. Her fingers were long, slender, and ended in perfectly manicured nails. She never chewed them. Chester chewed his constantly, until they bled. During their sessions, Chester would watch Dr. Good’s hands as she wrote down notes. She always wrote with an American number 2 pencil, and had a habit of chewing the eraser. On good days Chester would imagine kissing Dr. Good’s soft lips. On bad days he imagined driving the number 2 through her lips and twisting until they ripped off. Today was a bad day.

Chester stepped off the bus in front of his parents’ farmhouse. He felt a terrible sense of disequilibrium inside his head. Unconsciously, he began to clench and unclench his hands. Suddenly, he experienced an uncustromary flash into the future, and he did not like what he saw.

He did not go directly inside. Instead, Chester hiked for nearly two hours through an unruly forest of pine and hardwood trees. His destination was a one-room cabin hidden along the shore of Lake Charlevoix. When he arrived, the first thing Chester did was conduct a thorough inspection of the surrounding area. The moment he was
convinced no one had been snooping around, he unlocked the door and went inside.

The interior of the cabin consisted of a hammock tied between two support beams and two wall-sized book shelves. The shelves were lined with what amounted to roughly five hundred spiral notebooks, along with another couple hundred hardbound books. Stacked in piles on the lower shelves were photo-albums overflowing with photographs. Collectively, the contents of the cabin consisted of enough evidence to send Chester to prison for a very long time.

Chester took off his backpack and removed a spiral notebook. He opened it and flipped through the pages. Each page was covered in his flowing handwriting; it was the latest volume of his journal. He slid the notebook between two others on one of the shelves. Then he turned toward the hammock. His head was pounding and his eyes still ached. The thought of a short nap suddenly sounded good.

Chester climbed into the hammock. He stretched out and thought about where his life went wrong and what had driven him to become a near recluse. Before long, he dozed off.

Shortly, Chester found himself drearily dreaming. He recognized himself as a child sitting on his bed, alone in his bedroom. He wore a pair of worn-out blue jeans and a striped shirt. His hands were folded neatly in his lap. Even in his sleep, a sense of dread filled his mind.
Chester had been sent home early from the Haunted Beach Elementary School for hitting Molly Wilson at recess. His mother chose not to deal with him. Instead, Chester was sent to his room to wait for his father.

He sat motionless on the bed for what was perhaps hours, or maybe even minutes. Time for Chester, in both his life and dreams, took on a bizarre feeling. Finally, he heard the grumble of his father’s pick-up truck in the driveway. Moments later, Chester heard the hushed voices of his parents downstairs. He couldn’t make out the words. Then, he distinctly heard his father say, “I’ll deal with him.”

Again, Chester waited. He sat motionless, feeling nothing. He didn’t expect his father to come upstairs right away. Chester knew better; his father would wait until he was drunk and his head was clouded with anger.

As the afternoon sun cast its light through the window, Chester heard the clunk - clunk of his father’s footsteps on the wood stairs. His stomach turned violently. He anticipated being beaten within an inch of his life. The footsteps continued on the landing and down the hall. Then they were right outside Chester’s door. There they stopped for what seemed like hours.

Slowly, the door opened with a familiar squeak. It was the same squeak that had prevented Chester for years from sneaking out of his room. He had been poisoned with the fear his father would hear the
noise. When his father stepped into the room, Chester did not look up. The man’s towering scarecrow-like figure loomed on the edge of Chester’s peripheral vision.

“Your momma told me what you done,” his father said as he placed an almost empty whiskey bottle on the dresser.

Chester remained silent.

“Look at me boy.”

Chester stared at the ground.

“I said, look at me, damn you.”

Still, Chester refused.

Suddenly, Chester’s father whipped off his belt and slapped it across the boy’s face. The pain was hot and shocking. Tears welled up in his eyes, but Chester didn’t allow himself to cry out; he wouldn’t give his father the satisfaction.

“Just what is wrong with you boy?” Chester’s father said as he towered over him. “Didn’t I teach you to treat girls with respect? You say yes ma’am and no ma’am to anything with a skirt.”

Chester didn’t utter a word.

“You little punk,” his father breathed and he reached out and grabbed his son by the throat. Chester felt a crunch as he gasped for breath. “You never, ever strike a girl,” his father screamed. “I’m going to teach you a lesson.” He let go of Chester’s throat and stumbled over to the dresser where he finished off the whiskey with one quick swig.
Chester rubbed his sore neck, his father continued. “We’re going to play us a little William Tell,” he said and laughed. Then, he began humming a demented version of the William Tell Overture and performed a mock gallop.

Suddenly, the performance stopped. “Get downstairs and wash up for super,” Chester’s father said. “Afterwards, I’m going to teach you a lesson you ain’t going to forget so easily.”

This time Chester did as he was told.

At dinner, the family sat in silence. Occasionally, Chester would look up from his plate hoping to catch his mother’s eye. He did not.

With deliberate tortoise-like pace, Chester ate his peas one by one. He was merely delaying the inevitable. Finally, his father pushed his own plate away and declared, “My, that was a meal. A fine meal.” Chester gulped as he prepared himself for the unknown horrors which were about to occur. “Chester,” his father said. “You go outside and stand by the big tree. Don’t even think about running off, because if you do, then I’ll kill you.” For additional impact, he added, “and your mother.”

Chester looked up horrified at his mother. She did not look at him. Instead, she stared solemnly at her plate. Chester turned to his father, and the man smiled.

Outside, Chester leaned against the tree. His mind and body felt numb. Above him, the light to his parent’s bedroom flipped on. He looked
at it and watched as shadows moved across the wall. He noticed the window was open so he listened for the hushed voices of his parents. Later, he would wish he hadn’t.

He heard the squeak of their rickety bed, then his father’s voice. “Hey, look at me” it said. His next words were unclear to Chester. Then his voice grew louder. “I said, don’t you?” Chester looked away from the window above him and closed his eyes, but he still heard.

There was a series of loud slapping sounds, which were followed by his father calling out obscenities and laughing.

A tear formed in Chester’s left eye and he slowly began to clench and unclench his fists. He lost track of time, and when his father finally stumbled outside carrying a rifle in one hand and a whiskey bottle in the other, Chester had mentally slipped away. His body still stood against the tree, but his mind was elsewhere.

“You don’t hit girls,” Chester’s father slurred. “I damn well told you that. Now, I’m going to remind you for the last time.” He finished off his second bottle of the evening and walked toward Chester. Chester’s eyes were glazed and he stared into the middle distance.

His father placed the glass bottle on Chester’s head and said, “Don’t let that fall. I’m likely to shoot you.”

Chester was vaguely aware of what was happening, but he was frozen in uncaring thought. His father walked twenty yards, cocked the gun, and turned around. Once again he hummed the music from the
William Tell Overture. It sounded much worse this time. Suddenly, he stopped his song and in the dim light aimed the gun at the bottle on Chester's head. "Stupid kid," he whispered and squeezed the trigger.

Chester woke from his slumber with the echo of shattering glass in his ears. He blinked until his eyes came into focus. For long moments he remained motionless in the hammock. Time had passed since the days when his nightmares were a reality. Now, he was beyond the realm of his father's influence; the man was dead. He was the victim of a freak accident, fell from a ladder and broke his back while painting the house. The local paper called it a tragedy; Chester called it God's blessing.

These days, Chester was his own master, and he aimed to prove it. He had a plan.

Chapter Two

Sometime before dusk, Chester left his cabin in the woods and headed toward Route 131. The highway ran along Lake Charlevoix and connected Haunted Beach with the upscale towns of Charlevoix, Petoskey, and Harbor Springs to the West and the low-scale towns of Beaver Falls, Pine Bluff, and Pine Valley to the East.
He walked along the edge of the highway, empty handed. Only one car passed him. It was the same Camaro he saw at school earlier that afternoon. Luckily, the jocks inside didn’t recognize him. Chester figured they probably didn’t even see him hidden by the shadows cast from the pines along the highway’s edge. No matter, he’d see them later that night.

A short time later, Chester came to a fork in the highway. Route 131 continued to the right; Chester took the left. As he neared his destination, his throat tightened and his breath drew short. Occasionally, his fists clenched.

Rebecca Good’s house stood alone on Lake Lane; the closest neighbor was at least a mile away. Chester knew this and he stood on her porch staring at the front door. His fists clenched open and close, as he breathed. Warm, orange light spilled out from a window onto the porch. Chester imagined her inside curled up in a comfy chair reading one of those psychology books, the kind that tried to explain freaks like him. Well, he had news for Dr. Good: There is no explanation.

Chester felt his body tingle as the temperature of his blood increased. He was hot all over; he was going to explode. Yet, despite the turmoil inside him, he appeared calm. He had to; it was part of the plan. In fact, he even went so far as to make himself cry. Tears collected in the
corners of his eyes, and when they began spilling over onto his cheeks he pounded on the door.

For a moment there was no noise from within. Then Chester heard a shuffling sound. “Just a minute,” Dr. Good called.

Chester’s heart was nearly pounding through his chest. Another moment passed before she opened the door. When she did, Chester was surprised.

She looked different, not at all like a doctor. She was dressed in faded jeans and a tattered sweatshirt. Her hair was down over her shoulders, rather than pulled back in a ponytail like she wore it in the office. Chester was a bit disappointed. She seemed *almost* too human. It didn’t matter though; he had been planning this day far too long to let minor details bother him.

“Chester?” Dr. Good said, stunned. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Chester said nothing. He let the tears flow, and he stared at the ground. His shoulders were slumped and his body was limp, except his fists, which continued to clench and unclench with each breath he took.

Dr. Good opened the screen door and said, “Here, come inside.” She reached out and placed her hand with those delicate fingers on Chester’s shoulder, guiding him inside.

Chester took a few steps into the house. Dr. Good closed the door behind him. Chester shut his eyes. Deep within his head he heard a
voice that was not his own. He recognized it instantly as his father’s.

“You’re worthless, Chester,” the voice said. “Just worthless.”

Suddenly, Chester filled with rage. “Shut up!” he screamed. Then without warning he erupted into a tantrum. He fell to the ground and began pounding his fists into the sides of his head. Dr. Good’s eyes widened and her jaw dropped. She started to reach for Chester, but the instant her fingertips touched him, his fit stopped. Slowly, he rolled over and faced her. His face was wet with tears and his eyes looked pitiful. Dr. Good offered her hand.

Chester pulled himself up with Dr. Good’s help. As he stood, he held her wrist with one hand and used the other for balance. His next move was so sudden it stunned her.

Like lightning, Chester pinned one of Dr. Good’s arms to the small of her back. She let out a shriek from the pain. Then before she had a chance to fight, Chester dug his chin into her back just behind the shoulder blade. The pain was intense enough to knock her off balance. Chester used his weight to maneuver Dr. Good into the next room. There he leaned her over the arm of a sofa. He stood over her. With one hand he held Dr. Good down, while the other worked the buckle of his belt. This was the exact reason he kept it loose.

“Chester! Why are you doing this?” Dr. Good sobbed. “Please don’t hurt me,” was the last thing Chester heard before the pounding in his ears drowned everything else out.
When it was over, Chester sat on the sofa caressing Dr. Good’s cheeks and lips. “I won’t hurt you,” he whispered. “I could never hurt you.”

He stood up and went to the kitchen where he soaked a towel in cold water and filled a glass. As he returned, Chester said, “Here drink this. You’ll feel better.” He tilted the glass and the water spilled between her lips and onto the sofa. Then he dabbed the towel gently on her face. He stood and looked down on Dr. Good.

Her body was bent in an angle over the arm of the sofa, causing her buttocks to be angled toward the ceiling and her torso to be sprawled out over the cushions.

A flash of horrible, sudden realization ripped through Chester. His breath came in short raspy gasps as his mind raced. Then without further hesitation, Chester unwrapped his belt from around Dr. Good’s throat and barged out of the farmhouse. He didn’t stop running until he was back on Route 131. The rampage had started and there was no turning back.

Chapter Three

Connie Lane, Haunted Beach High School class president, head cheerleader, and valedictorian closed her bedroom door. A blue towel was wrapped tightly around her body and her hair was dripping wet. She
had no idea Chester Cobblefield was wedged in a tree outside her second story window watching her.

Connie’s room was spotless. Framed photographs and prints from Monet and Picasso covered the walls. Centered on her dresser were two certificates protected inside ornate, wooden frames. The first, in flowing calligraphy, announced; *Connie I. Lane, Haunted Beach High School Valedictorian, Class of 1985*. The second was a letter informing Connie of a full-ride scholarship to Michigan State University. These were important to Connie because they symbolized her ticket out of Haunted Beach.

Connie unwrapped the towel from her body and used it to dry her hair. Droplets of water glistened on her skin.

Outside, Chester watched. He made mental notes of all her moves and the clothes she put on. Later, he’d write it all down in one of his detailed journals, a very special one, which he’d been compiling for five years since the day he first laid eyes on her.

Inside, Connie brushed her long brown hair. She pulled it back and tied it with a bright yellow ribbon. She looked at herself in a full-length mirror on the back of her door.

Looking herself over, Connie’s stomach turned. It ached with the butterflies of anticipation. Tonight was the night. In a few hours she was going to say goodbye to her virginity and so was her boyfriend Daniel Roberts. They had been friends since junior high school when Daniel asked to be her lab partner in biology class. Then six months ago, at a
New Year’s Eve party, they crossed over into the realm of more than friends. It had worked so far, but both knew it wasn’t going to last. In the fall, Daniel was off to Dartmouth College and Connie was going to East Lansing.

But that was still a ways off.

Tonight they were together and it was going to be an unforgettable night.

Chester arrived at the Robert’s family farm. He had spent most of the evening following Connie around, trailing a safe distance behind, careful not to be seen. He waited for two endless hours in a cornfield while Connie made her appearance at Sandy Green’s end-of-the-school-year party. While he waited, he managed to venture from the field to pay a visit to the familiar red Camaro. He sliced its tires, then after the happy couple left the party Chester jogged the four miles down Route 131, following Daniel’s pick-up truck.

Slightly out of breath, Chester rested. He looked around. The Roberts’s farmhouse was dark and looked as if the owners were not home or were already asleep. He guessed it was the later, which meant Connie and her lover-boy would be out in the barn. Chester knew the routine all too well.

Rested, he headed for the barn, which was small and used to store straw. His steps were usually silent, but this time Chester was careless.
He stepped on a tree branch and ran into a wheelbarrow, leaving him with a sore knee and no patience. He’d waited patiently for far too long. He’d watched as Connie loved other guys.

Now it was his turn.

Next to the barn Chester could hear hushed voices. Silently, he listened.

“Did you hear something?”

“No, why?”

“I thought I heard a noise.”

“It’s probably just Cooper. Dumb dog probably got out again.”

Chester thought that their ridiculous, hushed conversation reminded him of something from a cheap horror movie.

Chester waited for a short time, then took a deep breath and crept to the barn's door. It was slightly ajar and a line of orange, flickering light snuck out. He peeked in through this crack. What he saw burned him up inside like nothing before. He couldn't take it.

Inside the barn, in light from a lantern, Connie Lane and Daniel Roberts made love on a blanket thrown over the straw. Their bodies rocked together gently. Daniel was breathing hard and Connie gave out soft, barely audible moans.

As he watched, Chester's fists clenched so tightly that his fingernails cut open the underside of his hands. A bulging vein appeared in his forehead. His breath came in deep, violent gasps. Then, the inner
turmoil Chester had struggled with for so long escalated to a level he could no longer control. The shy boy who never said a word to Connie Lane before suddenly exploded in a fit of anger.

“Connie!” Chester screamed and pushed open the door.

With shocked expressions, Connie and Daniel whipped their heads in the direction of the door. Neither one recognized the boy before them.

Chester barged into the barn. The reflection from the lantern glowed in his wild eyes. With his curly hair a mess and his gaunt face, Connie swore Chester was the devil.

Suddenly, Chester grabbed a pitchfork that was leaning against the barn’s wall and pointed it at Daniel and Connie. Reacting quickly, Daniel was up and had his shorts on. Connie reached for her clothes too.

“Who the hell are you?” Daniel was scared but tried not to show it.

Chester didn’t answer. Instead, he lunged forward, aiming the pitchfork at Daniel’s midsection. Daniel was quick but not as quick as Chester. With a surprisingly powerful thrust, Chester drove the pitchfork deep into Daniel’s belly. His momentum carried through and drove Daniel back against the opposite wall. When Chester let go of the handle, the pitchfork had been driven completely through Daniel and had pinned him to the wall.

Then he turned to face Connie. Her green eyes were wide in shock and her mouth had fallen open.
Chester sucked in the musty air from the barn’s interior. His heart raced, its beats thumping heavily, deep within his ribcage. This was the moment he’d been dreaming and fantasizing about for five long years. Now was his chance. Connie Lane was all his.

Connie was frozen. Her eyes filled with tears. She was crouched with one knee on the blanket. In the seconds since Chester’s entrance she’d managed to slip on her shorts and shirt. Gooseflesh already covered her thighs and was now creeping up her arms.

In five years Chester had been too scared to utter a word to Connie. Now, however, things were different. He had a new source of strength burning within him.

That strength prepared him for what he was about to do.

“You,” Chester whispered through clenched teeth. He looked right into Connie’s cat-like eyes as he spoke. His body radiated with hot rage. It filled the small barn like electricity fills the air during a summer thunderstorm.

Connie didn’t wait for lightning to strike. Instead, she stood up and bolted straight for the open door, taking her chances with Chester who stood between her and escape.

Connie was athletic, she always had been, but she’d never moved as fast as she did then. Unfortunately, Chester was fast too. He leapt for
her and drove his shoulder into her side as she tried to run by. She hit the ground hard, rolled backward, and before she could react he was on top of her. When she opened her eyes she saw his hideous face with its wide, blood-shot eyes and parted lips. A trail of hot, sticky saliva fell from the corner of his mouth and slid down her cheek. His breath was heavy and rotten and it burned in her nostrils. Then Chester started to giggle.

Connie tried to push Chester off of her but he was strong and outweighed her by at least eighty pounds. She suddenly felt an intense pain and realized it was coming from her right arm. It had been pinned beneath her.

Now, his hands were snakes, slithering over her body. With his left hand he held her free arm down while his right groped violently at her.

Connie did her best to ignore the piercing feeling of violation inside her and instead focused on escaping. She squirmed underneath him but for the moment got nowhere.

Chester tightened the grip his legs had around her midsection while he reached for the button on his jeans.

Reacting with incredible speed, Connie hit Chester in the temple with her newly freed hand. Her fist crunched against his skull with such force that he tumbled off her onto the straw covered ground. A groan escaped his throat.

Connie got up and again tried for the door. She managed only two steps before Chester grabbed her ankle. With a sudden force, he pulled
her leg out from under her and she fell to the ground hard and fast. On the way down her arm struck the lantern. Its top flipped open and an orange flame spilled out onto the straw. Instantly, the fire spread.

Again, Chester was on her. This time he was more aggressive. His hands spread over her faster than the flames through the straw. Connie wiggled and squirmed as best as she could. Then, when his fingers were on her thighs, she kicked her legs.

Perhaps by sheer luck, Connie's right foot struck Chester just below the bellybutton. His breath shot out of his mouth in a swift stream. Veins bulged from his neck and head.

Chester coughed. Then with sudden speed, he grabbed Connie by her throat. He forced her face to the side so that she was looking directly into the oncoming flames. Again he started to giggle. The sound of it echoed in Connie's ears and would continue to haunt her for her entire life.

In an instant the flames were on Connie. The left side of her face went ablaze. Through her own screams she could smell the sour stench of her burning hair and flesh.

Chester was caught up in his moment of triumph. He was wonderfully tickled at the idea of Connie's beautiful face burning off right before his eyes. The moment was his, but only for a moment. In his glee, Chester failed to see the flames creeping up his pant leg. And before he knew it his entire back had caught fire. Within seconds he was overcome
with pain. He rolled off of Connie and into the straw, trying to extinguish the fire.

Connie, hanging on to consciousness, also rolled. The flames covering her left side went out. For the third time she pushed herself up. In the flaming barn she took one last look at Daniel then looked at Chester who was a ball of fire on the ground. She looked for the door, saw it, and ran.

On her way out, Connie's blurred vision caught something small and brown on the ground, half-buried in the straw. A wallet. Grabbing it on her way out, Connie escaped, leaving Chester, Daniel, and the burning barn behind her.

Chapter Four

Late evening in early December. Detective Michael Ryan sat alone, waiting, at Luigi's, the finest Italian cuisine Cincinnati had to offer. The familiar restaurant was nearly empty; it was way past the dinner hour. Only the Wednesday regulars were scattered among the white-cloth-covered tables.

He shot a quick glance at his watch and saw Mark was late. Nothing new. In the twenty years they'd been friends, Michael had never known Mark to be on time to anything; it was a wonder he'd made it through the Academy.
In an effort to ward off the self-pity, which had been taking a toll on his life lately, Michael turned his attention to the menu. His eyes were scanning the prices when a female voice asked, “Are you dining alone this evening?”

Michael lowered his menu and saw the waitress, a familiar looking young woman, standing by his table. “No. Actually a friend will be joining me shortly,” he said as he studied her face. He knew he’d seen her before but his mind was drawing a blank. A bad sign.

“Detective Ryan,” the woman said. “I almost didn’t recognize you; I haven’t seen you in here before.”

For a moment Michael was at a loss. His mind was numb with forgetfulness. In his eight years with the FBI and three years in homicide investigation he had prided himself for having an astounding memory. He never forgot a face. Until now.

“Usually I don’t,” Michael said, stalling in order to recall the woman’s name. “This isn’t the sort of place a detective can afford to frequent.” Then it hit him. “How is it, Carmen, that you find the time to work here and at my office?” Michael asked after realizing she was one of the interns from Xavier University. She started working in his office at the station on Monday.

“I can’t afford not to,” Carmen said and smiled. “Have to pay tuition somehow.”

“I remember those days.”
Then, unexpectedly, Carmen changed the subject. “I saw the article about you in the Cincinnati *Inquirer* this morning. It was very impressive.”

Michael shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He was in no mood to talk about the over flattering article, which had appeared in his behalf on the lower right corner of the front page. “Thank you,” Michael replied, not knowing what else to say.

“Can I start you off with a glass of wine tonight?” Carmen asked.

Michael let out a small sigh of relief. “Not tonight. Ice water will be fine.”

Okay, I'll be right out with that. And I'll bring a loaf of bread too.”

“Thank you Carmen,” Michael said.

The instant she was gone a tall, blond man took a seat at the table across from Michael. “You told her you are a cop, didn’t you?” the man asked.

Michael smiled. Suddenly he felt a world of difference. His old friend, Mark Croskey, hadn’t changed a bit over the last two years. If anything he looked better, since he finally managed to kick the bottle.

“Maybe I did. Why do you ask?”

“Because the only way an attractive young woman like that is going to talk to you is if you told her you’re a cop,” Mark said.

“Like I said, maybe I did, maybe I didn’t.”
“Of course you did,” Mark said. Then he offered some of his world famous logic. “Women always go for the cop. They can’t help it. I guess I don’t blame them; it makes sense. I mean, a woman meets a cop and she figures she’s got a catch, right? Chances are pretty good he won’t turn out to be some sort of homicidal maniac.” Then he added, “It doesn’t take much to impress a woman these days.”

Michael shook his head. “You give me no credit.”

“I give credit where credit is deserved, and you my friend deserve no credit.”

Michael laughed. Then the two friends shook hands.

“Together again,” Mark said.

“Just like the old days,” Michael replied.

“Exactly like the old days. Do you remember the last time we ate at this place?”

“How could I forget?” Michael asked, again feeling the pain of the haunting memories. “It was the night I met Carrie. You and Nikki set the date up if I remember correctly.”

“It was more Nikki’s doing than my own,” Mark mentioned. “Sorry to break it to you buddy, but I didn’t care whether you ever found yourself a good woman. Still don’t.”

“I appreciate that.”

“What are friends for?”
Carmen reappeared with Michael's ice water and a steaming loaf of bread. Mark only needed a moment to browse the menu, and the two friends ordered their meals.

When Carmen was out of earshot, Michael said, "By the way, she works at my office."

"See, I knew it," Mark said triumphantly. "She didn't just start talking to you on her own free will."


"An intern, huh?" Mark said through a mouthful of bread.

"Not that kind of intern." Michael smiled and relaxed "It's good to see you Mark. It has been way too long."

"That it has."

"So what brings you to Cincinnati?"

"Business. What else? Actually, I'll only be in town tonight. In the morning I leave for Chicago. This is a pit stop for me. I'm meeting another agent at the office here for some collaboration work on a case.

The bodies of three women have been found murdered in a suburb of Chicago. They match the victim profile of a killer we've been hunting the last eight months. He's been real slippery so far. This might be a break."

"You'll get him," Michael said. "You always manage to catch the bad guy."
“That I do, but from what I’ve heard, I’m not the only one.” Michael detected the sarcastic tone in Mark’s voice. “So tell me,” Mark continued. “How does it feel to be Cincinnati’s Super Detective?”

Michael groaned at Mark’s reference to the Inquirer’s article. “It’s not all it is cracked up to be, I can assure you.” “I’m sure it’s not.” Mark laughed. Then he changed the subject. “If you don’t mind me saying, you look absolutely horrible. What gives?”

Michael was quiet for a moment. He wasn’t sure if it was a good time to be completely honest. He hadn’t seen Mark in nearly two years, and he was sure the last thing his friend wanted to hear about was all the problems in his life. Finally Michael decided to be open. “To be honest,” he said. “I’m glad you’re here. I’ve had something I need to get off my chest, but I don’t exactly have anyone in my life to unload on right now.”

“Unload away.”

Michael had a feeling Mark would say that, so he took a breath and let it all out. “I’m considering resigning,” he said.

“What? You can’t be serious.”

“I’m very serious, or at least I think I am. I don’t know. It’s a strange time for me right now.”

“Sure it is. You’ve had one hell of a year. Your parents were killed in that boat wreck, Carrie left you, and of course there was your accident. All this in what, the last fourteen months?”

Michael stared at his glass.
Just then, Carmen returned with their meals. The two men were silent as she placed the wonderful smelling food in front of them. "Enjoy," she said. Mark nodded and Michael continued his blank stare.

"Can I ask you something?" Mark said, twirling his spaghetti.

"Sure."

"Are you still seeing that shrink?"

"No. It wasn't helping."

"I'm not going to nag you about not going; God knows I wouldn't go myself, but you need to do something. I've never seen you like this. I'm not sure what to tell you Michael, but my very unprofessional opinion is that resigning is not the answer. You worked hard to become Chief Homicide Detective. Besides, you love being a detective."

"I've been a detective because I always loved the work. And when you love your work you do it the best you can. I've done my best and I've been a good detective."

"A damn good one."

"But now it's not the same. I've been getting sloppy, and it doesn't feel right. Lately, my mind is always somewhere else. I've hit rock bottom. I'm at the worst of it; I no longer want to be a detective and at the same time I don't want to quit either," Michael said and rubbed his temples. "Am I making any sense?"

"Sure you are," Mark said. "I felt the same way at the peak, or pit, depending on how you want to look at it, of my drinking days."
“I’ve been tentative and flat with my work, which is very uncharacteristic of me,” Michael said.

“According to the paper, you’re top cop around here.”

“Nah, in reality I’m running on empty; full of lackluster.”

“Michael, the saying ‘once a cop, always a cop’ is true. If you quit you won’t know what to do with yourself. You’ll be so much worse off than you are right now. And so will this city for that matter. Here’s my advice, take it for what it’s worth. You’ve had probably the worse year of your life. I know you weren’t close to your parents, but you loved Carrie, probably still do. And as far as your accident, well, bad things happen to good people all the time. You said earlier when we talked on the phone that you have tomorrow off work. Well, take advantage of it. Relax and clear your mind. I guarantee you’ll decide to stick it out.”

Michael wasn’t so sure. He decided to take full advantage of Mark being there and added, “I really miss our Bureau days here before you transferred back to the home office. Those were the good old days.”

“You are right, but let me tell you something,” Mark said. “The good old days were good, but they’re gone. They aren’t coming back.”

The two friends remained quiet for a short time as they ate. Michael broke the silence in an effort to ward off another wave of self-pity. “What’s the news on you and Nikki? I figured she’d have roped you into marriage by now.”
“Shoot. You underestimate my determination to forever remain a bachelor,” Mark said. Then he added nonchalantly, “She left me.”

“Mark, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was for the better.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, who did she find that was so much better than Special Agent Croskey?” Michael said, recognizing a rare opportunity to tease his friend.

“You remember Richard Finch?”

“Sure, the doctor who dug the bullet out of your shoulder.”

Mark nodded.

“Are you serious?” Michael said. “She left you for that guy? I don’t believe it.”

“Let me tell you something about Nikki,” Mark said. “The woman had a keen eye for pants.”

Michael was confused.

“She could find a bulge in them from a mile away,” Mark continued. “Her attraction to Finch was certainly to the bulge in the back pocket of his pants, whereas with me, it was the bulge in the front of mine.”

Michael laughed. “You are impossible.”

“My friend,” Mark said. “When it comes to women, if it weren’t for bad luck, we’d have no luck at all.”

The truth of that statement weighed heavily on Michael, especially considering all the memories of Carrie the restaurant stirred up. For the
third time that evening he had to shake off the heavy feeling of 
disappointment and self-pity. He turned his attention to yet another issue 
in his life. “Since you seem to know somebody for everything,” Michael 
said, referring to Mark’s vast source of contacts and acquaintances, 
maybe you can help me with another dilemma.”

“Hit me with it.”

“When my parents were killed in the boating accident, my sister and 
I inherited their estate. Suddenly, Mindy and I both had a substantial 
amount of money in our hands.”

“If you don’t mind me sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong,” 
Mark said. “How much money are we talking here?”

Michael told him.

Mark made no effort to close his gaping mouth. “Do you know how 
many years it would take me to make that kind of money?” he asked.

“A few less than it would take me I’m sure,” Michael replied.

“No wonder you’re having doubts about keeping your job.”

“Actually,” Michael said. “I don’t even think about the money. In 
fact, the cashier’s check is still sitting in a safe under my bed.”

“Are you crazy? Michael that’s not something you want to have just 
lying around the house. Besides, just think of all the interest you’ve 
already missed out on.”
“Really Mark, the money is not that important to me,” Michael said.

“So do you know anyone who can recommend an investor or a bank? I know nothing about finances.”

Mark reached for his wallet and produced a business card. He scribbled something on the back of the card. “Here,” he said. “This is my card with my new phone number on it. Call me anytime. The number on the back is for a private investing firm here in Cincinnati. They’ll take good care of your money.”

Michael knew better than to ask how Mark knew about the firm.

“Thank you Mark. I appreciate it.”

“Just remember me when you write your will, okay buddy?”

“I’ll do that.”

The two friends finished their dinner. Michael picked up the bill, and they called it an early evening since Mark had to leave for Chicago the next morning. Shortly after saying goodbye, Michael parked his Jeep outside his apartment building. As he walked up the steps to the second floor landing, he tightened his coat around him. It had started to snow and the December wind was bitterly cold. Behind him, across the Ohio River, sirens wailed in the city. It was just another night in Cincinnati.

Michael went to bed uncaring.
Chapter Five

Michael woke-up to a cold and snowy December morning. His bedroom was still dark, and he could hear the snow tapping against the window.

He did not need to look at the clock on the bedside table to know what time it was; he knew. It was five o’clock; the same time he woke up every morning, work or no work. For long minutes Michael couldn't, or rather didn't want to, move. Each day since his accident it had gotten harder and harder to get out of bed. This day was by far the worse.

Duke, Michael’s two-year-old Golden Retriever, had decided to skip the morning all together and continued to sleep peacefully at the end of his bed. Michael watched in the room’s dim light as Duke slept, his chest expanding and retracting with each deep breath. Every few seconds his leg would twitch. Michael’s eyes burned as he watched the hypnotic rise and fall of the dog’s chest. He tried successfully not to think about anything. Before long, he dozed.

The ringing of the telephone jerked Michael from his sleep. He fumbled for the phone, knocking over a lamp in the process. Finally, after five rings, he had the receiver in his hand. “Michael Ryan,” he answered.

“Hey boss, it’s Amy,” the voice at the other end of the line said.

“We’ve got another one. Looks like our guy is at it again.”

“Where?” Michael asked already out of bed.
“Three blocks from the zoo.”

“You sure it’s our guy?”

“No, but the news seems to think so.”

“What are you talking about?” Michael asked.

“Turn on your television; I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Michael hung up the phone. He flipped on the television in his bedroom. The Channel 12 news anchorman was in mid-sentence before what he was saying registered in Michael’s groggy head.

“. . . Let’s now go to Melissa Hart who is live at the scene. Melissa.”

The TV showed a blond woman in front of a white two-story house. The word LIVE was written in red in the upper left corner of the screen. It was still dark outside, and behind Melissa were a half dozen Cincinnati police cruisers with lights flashing.

“Thanks Roger,” Melissa said. “Authorities say that the body of a young boy was found in the bushes directly behind where I’m standing. The body was discovered by a neighbor and appears to be yet another victim of a bizarre string of murders plaguing the tri-state area. From what I’ve gathered, the boy was bludgeoned to death in the same manner as the five previous victims. This comes the day after Cincinnati homicide detective Michael Ryan was recognized in the Inquirer for . . .”
Michael shut off the TV. He went to his closet, put on a shirt and a pair of pants, then headed for the door. On his way, he managed to slip on socks, a pair of shoes, and grab a sweater.

Back in Michael’s bed, Duke rolled over and yawned.

A minute later, Amy was outside in an unmarked police cruiser, honking the horn. Michael shut the door to his second-floor apartment and ran down the stairs. Reaching the ground floor, he passed his body-building neighbor, Greg, who was wearing a robe and had a newspaper tucked under his arm.


“Let Duke out for me, would you Greg?”

“Sure. No problem,” Greg tried to answer, but it was too late; Michael was already in the car and gone. For a moment, Greg stood in the drizzle, while he watched the Taurus drive down the street. Then, as he turned to go inside, he said to himself, “Another day in the life of Michael Ryan, Cincinnati’s Super Detective.”

Inside the car, Amy drove and Michael finished dressing. He tucked in his shirt and pulled a sweater over it. Amy shot a quick glance in his direction. She chuckled.

“What?” Michael asked.

“Your hair. Did you just wake up or something?”
“Funny,” Michael said. He flipped the sun visor in front of him down and looked at himself in the mirror. He didn’t like what he saw. His brown hair was disheveled, with a clump sticking up in the back, and he sure could’ve used a shave. “Listen,” he said. “Do me a favor. Next time something like this happens make sure I know about it before the media does.”

“Sure boss,” Amy said, continuing to drive.

“Remind me to put a fire under someone’s butt down at the station. I want to be the first person to know when anything happens in this city,” Michael said. Then he added, “Who called you?”

“Jenkins did.”

“Jenkins? That twerp. I’m going to chew him a new one the moment I see him.”

“Relax, Michael. He probably called me because he’s scared of you. You chewed him a new one just last week in case you don’t remember.”

“I remember, but he’s got a lot to learn.”

“He’s young.”

“He’s clumsy, and clumsiness gets cops killed.”

Amy didn’t push the matter.

“So what information do we have?” Michael asked.

“The body was found in some bushes in the front yard of his own home. Address is about three blocks from the Cincinnati Zoo. Same
scenario as before. Pants pulled down and back of his skull cracked open."

"White or black?" Michael asked.

"Black."

"Strange. If it's our guy, he's deviating."

"Not necessarily. Remember a few months ago there was the Hyde Park murder?"

Michael nodded.

"I'm still convinced that one is related to the string we've had lately," Amy continued. "The Hyde Park murder had the same M. O.; the only difference was it was a little girl instead of a little boy."

Michael shared the same hunch as Amy. In fact, they thought alike most of the time. Amy had continually impressed him with her raw police skills. She was the best detective working for his force and an even better friend. Their friendship really took off after Amy nearly resigned from her position. Michael talked her out of it.

"Michael," Amy said. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, why?"

"Because you don't seem like yourself. Usually on the way to a crime scene you don't shut up. What's going on?"

He wasn't in the mood to regurgitate his conversation with Mark from last night. "I'm fine," he lied.
“It’s the children isn’t it Michael?” Amy asked, causing Michael’s stomach to nearly twist itself into a knot. “The dead children remind you of your accident, don’t they?”

Michael was silent and didn’t deny Amy’s assumption.

“Are you still seeing a doctor?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It wasn’t helping.”

“You didn’t give it much of a chance,” Amy said. “You went, what, five times?”

“Three.”

“Jesus, Michael. Three visits aren’t going to solve any problems.”

Michael knew he was in for it now. Once Amy wanted to talk, there was no stopping her. It was like trying to keep Duke from sleeping on his bed.

“Michael I think you should start going again,” she pressed.

Suddenly, Michael pounded his fist on the dash. “Amy,” he snapped. “There is nothing in this world so grotesque as the meeting of a child’s head with a bullet. I live with that image everyday. And, I live with the fact that I am responsible for a child’s death. I killed him.”

For a moment an uncomfortable silence filled the car’s interior.

Finally Amy said, “It was an accident.”
The rest of the drive they were silent. Amy was lost in thought about Michael. Michael tried to lose his thoughts.

By the time they arrived at the scene, Michael was in full detective mode. The self-destructive thoughts of his past were gone, temporarily shoved aside; his attention was on the matter at hand. He got out of the car and looked around.

In the early morning light, through the snow, half a dozen police cruisers were parked in front of a run-down, white house. The postage stamp sized front yard had been roped off with yellow tape. Michael could see Melissa Hart leaning over the tape trying to get a closer look at the action. He could also smell bacon frying.

The scene looked far too familiar. He’d seen nearly the exact same thing before. Six times, in fact, over the last four months.

A killer was preying on young children, luring them away from their homes and molesting them before bludgeoning them to death. So far there were no leads. Cincinnati’s Super Detective was stumped.

As Michael and Amy approached the front yard, Amy said, “Over there,” and she pointed.

Michael could see a group of grim-faced officers huddled near a patch of evergreen bushes. “Wonderful,” Michael said irritably. “More feet to stomp all over the evidence.”

“As if the snow wasn’t enough,” Amy added.
“Let’s go,” Michael said, and the two detectives passed under the tape. As they neared the group of officers, one of them recognized Michael and Amy.

“Detective Ryan. Detective Kim,” the officer said nodding his head. Michael didn’t bother to acknowledge him.

“Good morning Jenkins,” Amy said.


Michael read his badge. “Good morning Sergeant Pugel. I’m Chief Homicide Detective Michael Ryan.”

“I know who you are,” Pugel stuttered. “Your reputation precedes you.”

Michael picked up on Pugel’s nervousness. He guessed the sergeant wasn’t accustomed to dead children. He’ll learn, Michael thought. “What’s been done here?” he asked.

“Well we’ve roped off the area and secured the residence.”

“I can see that. Anything else?”

“Oh right,” Pugel said. “I covered the body with some plastic. I figured I’d do my best to keep the snow off. After that I did the usual, you know, check for signs of life.”

“Where you the first officer to arrive?”

“Yes. Jenkins got here right after I did.”

“Did you touch anything?”
“No. Not since I checked for a pulse. Jenkins and I just put the plastic over the body. We were careful not to step on anything.”

“Has anyone else come within close proximity of the body?” Michael asked.

“No.”

Thank god, Michael thought. “Listen,” he said. “Where is the body?”

Pugel pointed toward the clump of evergreen bushes. Michael could see a clear sheet of plastic covering a pair of scrawny brown legs protruding from beneath the bushes.

“Sergeant,” Michael said. “I want you to have your men execute a thorough fingertip search of this area. Spiral out from the body. Have them walking in straight lines over a fifty-yard radius. Then expand from there. I want every piece of grass turned. And let me know the instant one of them finds a hair, fiber, or foot print.”

Pugel looked at Michael with disbelief.

“One other thing,” Michael added. “Whatever happens, make sure that body is not disturbed until the forensic team gets here. They’re going to need to get photographs of all evidence and the location it is found in relation to the body. The snow is going to make their job hard enough; I don’t want your men making it any worse.”
Pugel nodded, turned and headed toward the group of officers. Once he was away from Michael his mannerism changed and he began barking orders at the men.

Michael stared at the plastic cover and watched the snow flakes collect on it. “Amy,” he said. “Go inside and interview the family. Then hit the neighbors on the east side; I’ll take care of the neighbors on the west. We’ll meet in a couple hours and compare notes.”

“Right boss,” Amy said. Then she added, “We’re going to get him Michael. Sooner or later.”

“Let’s make it sooner.”

With everyone else gone, Michael had a few moments to himself before the forensic team arrived. He needed every second. Normally, his mind would be racing, pumping out theories. Unfortunately, he was no longer his normal self. The detective inside him was dying. He took a deep breath and tried his best to put his demons temporarily aside. He succeed.

Michael put on a pair of rubber gloves. He needed to have a look at the body in order to examine the wound and determine whether it appeared to be the same killer as before. Thus far, the weapon of choice had been a blunt object; Michael had a hunch it was a baseball bat. Two victims ago he had discovered tiny fragments of splintered wood lodged in
a bit of brain taken from the victim. Similar fragments were found in the last victim's hair as well.

Suddenly, a piercing gust of wind cut through the air. Michael shivered and his stomach tightened. A haunting image of splattered blood on a white wall filled his head. He closed his eyes in hopes it would disappear.

It did not.

When he opened his eyes again, Michael found the image gone, but an equally grotesque one replaced it: a dead little boy covered in plastic. Michael decided now was not the time to examine the body. Fortunately, the forensic team arrived. Michael stepped aside and let them do their job. He turned his attention elsewhere.

Before interviewing the neighbors, Michael took a walk around the run-down house. He hadn’t even made it as far as the back yard when he made his first discovery. On the side of the house closest to the where the body had been discovered he saw what appeared to be two footprints. In the slowly increasing morning light, he squinted. He knelt down and peered at a strip of mud along the base of the house. Sure enough, two distinct footprints were visible.

Nike’s.

Looking up, Michael saw he was standing beneath a small window. Nearby was a large box-like air-conditioning unit; there were smears of mud on top of it. His heart rate quickened. He stood and climbed on to
the unit, careful not to step on the mud. Then he looked through the window. From his vantage point he had a clear view of a small bathroom.

Michael decided to test a hunch, and tried to push open the window. It slid open easily. He stuck his head inside. Below him, next to the toilet, he thought he saw more mud on the floor; but there was little light in the bathroom and he couldn’t be sure.

Michael reached for his pocket and produced a tiny penlight. He twisted it on and shined the thin ray of light onto the ground below him. A smile formed on his lips. He had his first real break in the case. On the floor was a perfect footprint, outlined in mud, complete with the Nike swoosh.

“Sergeant Pugel,” Michael yelled. A moment later the officer came jogging around the corner of the house.

“What is it?” Pugel asked with great effort between breaths.

“Get someone from forensics back here,” Michael said. “Have them make a mold of these footprints. If it doesn't work, make sure they get pictures. Also, have your men gather soil samples of this entire block. I want every bit of evidence I can get in case we get an opportunity to place a suspect at this scene.”

“I’m on it,” Pugel said.

As Michael jumped down from the air conditioning unit, he made a mental note to call Mark Croskey. He planned to send Mark a picture of the footprint. Mark would be able to search a database the FBI kept that
included records of different shoe patterns. Michael wanted to know exactly what type of Nike made those prints.
PART TWO

“CHASING PEGASUS”

Chapter One

Midnight.

I was awakened from a deep alcohol-induced slumber by a noise in my bedroom. I strained to listen. Nothing. Just an eerie silence lingering in the ink-black air.

Then again, a soft sound like socked feet on carpet. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I turned on my side and twisted my neck enough to see the half-open door. Someone was in the room.

Suddenly, I became aware of my heart thudding heavily in my chest and the thin film of sticky sweat covering my body. The common sense associated with the daylight hours was gone, replaced by a child-like imagination. I succumbed to my creativity and imagined the hand of a disembodied spirit reaching invisibly toward my shoulder.

I felt the pin-prickly sensation of gooseflesh crawl across my shoulders and the back of my neck. Then I heard a voice. This time it was real.

“Daddy?”
I spun over and flipped on the bedside lamp. It took me a moment to recover from the bright shock to my eyes and the rush of blood to my head.

"Peggy," I said. "What's wrong?"

"He's back."

"Who's back?"

"The bad man."

I climbed out of bed and knelt down in order to get to eye level with my daughter. Her face was pale and tear-streaked, and her hazel eyes were wide with apprehension.

"Sweetheart," I said. "We've been through this before. There is no man."

"Yes there is, Daddy. I saw him."

Gently, I placed my right hand on her shoulder and used the thumb of my left to wipe away a freshly spilled tear. "Peggy-"

"Can I sleep with you tonight?" she interrupted.

"No," I said. "You're too old for this. Now let's go back to-"

"Will you at least check to make sure he's gone?"

I sighed but smiled. "Yes," I said, and taking Peg's hand in mine, I stood.

Before heading to her bedroom, I glanced at the bookcase near my bed that doubled as a liquor cabinet and half considered a bourbon, but Peg's insistent tugging of my hand changed my mind.

The walk down the hallway to Peg's room was a not-so-pleasant trip down memory lane. Before her death, my wife Beth had lined the walls with framed photographs. Now, the images in the photographs were ancient memories. In
the shadows they looked like a series of hieroglyphics painted on a cave wall meant to represent the events of a life that seemed to never have existed.

Despite the intense gogginess that plagued me as a result of the three-too-many Rum and Cokes I downed in the hour before bed, I managed to catch brief snapshot-like glances at the images of my past. I remembered our first kiss, our wedding dance, our first house, but most of all I remembered standing in the rain by the grave of my first love.

Beth’s death was sudden and shocking and left me ill prepared for a life alone.

In the time following, I allowed my life to be stripped to the bare essentials: teaching, writing, and drinking. But my duties as a father I still took with great seriousness, especially protecting my eight-year-old daughter from a tree-climbing bogeyman who had been haunting her since shortly after Beth died.

“You go first, Daddy,” Peg whispered as we approached her bedroom door. Her already-clutching fingers squeezed my hand tighter.

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe we’ll catch him this time.”

Peg didn’t answer. Instead, she bunkered herself behind my right leg.

I stepped inside the room and cut on the light. At first glance, the room appeared bogeymanless, but I inspected all the usual hiding places anyway. I started with the empty bed. The sheets and pillows were on the floor, no doubt a result of the moment when Peg’s fear became too much for her to handle and she scrambled for the safety of my bedroom. I peeked under the bed. There
was nothing underneath except for a couple of board games, a diary-looking book, and the missing flip-flop Peg claimed to have lost the week before. Next, I checked the closet.

Again, no bogeyman.

After one final exaggerated scan of the room, I said, “Well, it’s all clear. I think we can go back to bed now.” I turned toward Peg who still stood in the doorway. She pointed toward the window.

“He was out there,” she said.

“Outside?”

“In the tree.”

I let out a frustrated but barely audible sigh as I took a step in the direction of the wide-open window. When I did, the back of my head suddenly hurt. I felt a strange sense of disorientation, like I’d snorted a glass full of icy-cold saltwater. Maybe, I could be drinking too much. But I knew better. I was drinking too much.

To put Peg at ease, I took a look out the window. At first glance, all I saw was a blue-violet darkness. Earlier in the evening, a storm had passed through.

“Do you see anything?” Peg asked from behind me.

“No.”

“Look harder.”

After my eyes adjusted a bit and as a warm breeze broke the clouds, the low-hanging moon cast its light over the storm-tossed yard. In the center of the yard, perhaps thirty yards from the house, were the charred remains of an
ancient oak tree. Just before dinner, while Peg and I played a game of Scrabble, lightening struck and destroyed the tree. From the oak, I scanned the woodpile at the edge of the property. Then the tree line beyond. Nothing. Just a stillness stirred only by an occasional summer breeze.

Suddenly, a thought struck me. It was the stillness. The same eerie stillness I had experienced minutes before in my bedroom. In the summer time, around midnight, the whole countryside of southwestern Ohio came alive. The insistent chatter of frogs, raccoons, and insects created a sub-text of life within the night air.

Not tonight.

Instead, there was a noticeable silence as if the nocturnals had had their nightly frolicking interrupted by something.

Then, just as I was about to turn away, the wind stirred again – only a puff – and the pink sheer curtains swayed slightly. Outside, the moon reappeared in full. As I stared into the middle distance – not seeing anything in particular – my eyes came into focus on a shadowy portion of the woodpile just beyond an expanse of summer-dried grass.

A vague terror seized me.

I saw something, or rather, someone.

Or did I?

For a moment I was groggy and confused. Disoriented, I tried to concentrate on the woodpile and the tree line and the dark spots representing the
entrances to a half dozen trails. This time, I didn’t see anything. The stillness had returned.

Satisfied, I turned my attention back to Peg. She had found the courage to enter the room, and now she sat cross-legged on her bed.

“You must’ve scared him away,” she told me, smiling that small, slantwise smile of hers.

I smiled back and collected the sheets and pillows from the floor. “I guess so. Now, let’s get you to sleep.” Peg nestled into a comfortable position and I spread the sheet over her, tucked her in, and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Feel better?” I asked. Peg nodded as I tenderly kissed away the remains of the tears on her cheeks.

“Good,” I said about to leave.

Suddenly, Peg asked, “You’ve been drinking again, haven’t you?”

“No.”

“Liar,” she said wrinkling her brow in disgust. “I can smell it.”

For a moment I remained silent and gazed at the window across the room. My chest felt constricted and my lungs burned with every breath. “I’m sorry,” I half lied. I wasn’t sorry I’d been drinking, but I was sorry that I’d hurt her feelings.

“Why do you do it?”

“Lie?” I asked, turning back toward her.

“No. Drink. I know why you lie; so you don’t hurt my feelings.”

“I’m really not sure, sweetheart.” I sighed, trying to figure out how to explain alcoholism to an eight-year-old. As a father raising a daughter alone, I
faced a lot of tough questions. “I don’t want to drink but at the same time, I do want to. Do you understand?”

She shook her head slowly.

“Me either,” I said and rubbed the top of her head. “You know what else I don’t understand?” I asked as I gripped her small shoulders in my hands.

“What?”

“How I can love you so much.” I kissed her again, this time on the forehead.

“I love you too, Daddy.”

I stood and turned off the light. But before I went back to bed myself, I walked over to the window for one last look.

Outside, the stillness was gone, replaced by a steady breeze. I noticed the rustlings in the foliage of the trees. It was there, just inside the woods, that danger lurked.

Suddenly, a flash of lightening illuminated the yard. In the half second of light I saw the same figure I thought I saw moments before. This time it was standing man-like just beyond the fallen oak.

Thunder rumbled and lightening flashed again. My heart was racing and I squinted in hopes of catching another glimpse of the figure. But now, the yard was empty. I shook my head as if to ward off a mosquito. Just then, a thunder boom rattled the windows and echoed across the night sky.

“Daddy?”

“Yes,” I said without turning from the window.
“Can I sleep with you?”

I closed the window and locked it. “That sounds like a good idea, kiddo.”

Chapter Two

It was ten past midnight. Detective Nathaniel Thorn sat at the table in his well-lit dining room. The rest of the house was dark and heavy with an abundance of silence.

Outside the wind stirred, and the sun-faded curtains in the open window closest to him rippled. The breezed continued inside and rustled a few sheets of loose paper near the corner of the oak table. One sheet, containing a single handwritten word – Doppelganger – tangled momentarily with the breeze then spiraled to the floor.

Nathaniel didn’t notice.

Instead, he stared forward into the middle distance. His eyes were blood shot and his collar was unbuttoned and his sleeves were rolled in a tight wad at the crooks of his arms.

Outside, lightening flashed. Thunder followed, rattling the windows.

Over the summer, the dining room had become Nathaniel’s makeshift office. Now, late August, it was a mess. Stacks of papers and file folders were scattered in haphazard fashion about the room. A series of bulletin boards covered with crime scene photos and sticky-notes dominated the wall opposite the open windows. A dozen or so boxes labeled unsolved were stacked in piles two and three high on chairs and in the room’s far-stretching corners. Cast
aside, to the far end of the table, were two-day-old Chinese food carry-out containers. One still had rice and chopsticks in it.

Nine months of arduous and now seemingly hopeless investigation caused the clutter. It also served as the source of terror that plagued Nathaniel during every waking moment. Even more, sleep teased him with the temptation of solace, but in the end, his dreams betrayed him and he would wake suddenly sweat-drenched, breathless, and terrified.

Intermittently throughout his career, especially the years after his marriage, Nathaniel had been insomniac. And he’d yet to discover the source of the palpable tension that night after night kept him awake. Maybe it was the hardened knowledge that comes with a decade of servitude to homicide investigation. Then again, maybe it was the series of dead kids being found in this corner of Ohio.

Whatever it was, it had unsettled Nathaniel enough to cause him to carry his pistol everywhere he went – even inside his own house.

Nathaniel yawned and leaned back in his chair, interlocking his fingers behind his head. Frustration consumed him and he filled with boundless impatience. The case was dragging.

However, despite the hopelessness, he’d put together a theory. He called it gut instinct. Cop instinct.

Nathaniel listened to the silence and his ears picked up the tick-tock of the wall clock in the kitchen.
With each tick Nathaniel thought about his rumor-based theory. The temptation to run with it and dive in was, of course, immense. But under the powerful and exacting lens of homicide investigation, rumors didn’t cut it. He needed facts. And the facts in this case were few.

Six dead kids. All under twelve-years-old. Five girls. One boy. Sexually assaulted and bludgeoned. Probably a baseball bat.

Outside, lightening illuminated the night sky. This time, the thunder crashed much louder.

Nathaniel leaned forward. He massaged his temples then rubbed his eyes. The invincibility and elusiveness of southwestern Ohio’s most ruthless killer – *Doppelganger* – was more than taking its toll on him.

“Don’t you ever sleep?” a woman’s voice from behind said, startling Nathaniel out of his preoccupation.

He turned. “Jesus, Kathy, you scared me.”

Kathy, a petite blonde of thirty-five, stepped out of the shadows.

“How’d you get in?” Nathaniel asked.

“I have a key, remember?”

Nathaniel regarded her for a moment then turned back to the mess on the table. “You alone?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s Amanda?”

“At home. With Frank.”
“I see,” Nathaniel said indifferently. Then added, “You shouldn’t be out this late by yourself.”

Kathy took another couple steps forward and placed her hands on the back of his chair. She peered over Nathaniel’s shoulder, noticing the 9mm Glock Pistol within quick reach of his right hand. “I’m fine,” she said. “Besides, I just got off work.”

Nathaniel picked up the closest sheet of paper and feigned interest. He stared blankly at the words. “What do you want?”

“What, no how are you?”

“Kath, knock it off. I’m up to my neck in paperwork.”

“Relax,” Kathy said and crossed her arms. “I just stopped by to remind you about Amanda’s birthday.”

“I didn’t forget,” Nathaniel lied and felt momentarily guilty.

“It’s Friday, just in case you did.”

“You could’ve called and told me.”

“You don’t answer your phone.”

“Leave a message.”

Kathy dropped her arms to her sides and let out an extended sigh. “You never change, do you Nate?”

There was a long, heavy silence.

Finally, Kathy broke it. “Goodnight.” She huffed and returned to the shadows.
“Lock the door,” Nathaniel called after her. A short moment later he heard the door slam shut.

Now, Nathaniel let out a frustrated sigh of his own. He massaged the back of his neck with his right hand while unconsciously rubbing his left thumb against the bottom of his wedding band.

His was far too shaky a life to allow for marriage. His most-of-the-time-loveless marriage to Kathy had proven that.

Nathaniel stood, but before leaving, he grabbed the Glock off the table and tucked it in the front of his pants.

In the darkened living room, Nathaniel pulled back the curtains. He stared outside for a long moment. The street was empty. Kathy’s Toyota was already gone. He shut the curtain and then fastened the deadbolt on the front door. He started to walk away, but stopped. He went back to the door, double checked the deadbolt, and fastened the chain.

Outside, it started to rain.

Many of Harvest’s residents were still negligent about locking their doors at night. Nathaniel wasn’t one of them. He could never be too safe. Besides, if his theory was correct, Doppelganger would be making his slow, bloody way to Harvest that night.
Chapter Three

Half past midnight.

Near the windows, hidden by the dark, Doppelganger sat in Peggy McCaffery’s plastic turtle-shaped sandbox again.

His eyes were greasy orbs and his face was cold from the rain, which now fell in a steady downpour. His lungs burned with each labored breath and his fists clenched so tightly that his fingernails dug into the softness of his palms.

The inside of his head tingled and itched as if his brain had brushed against a vine of poison ivy. He breathed low, slow breaths and waited for the headache to pass.

Little by little, it did.

At night, in the darkness, he was an invisible phantom. He became his shadow self – the mischievous and malicious apparitional double of his everyday self.

He became Doppelganger.

Recently, he’d developed a morbid attraction to Miles McCaffery’s daughter – Pegasus as the professor called her. In the day, he knew it was wrong; nevertheless, he allowed himself to succumb to a nocturnal preoccupation with her.

Like the others. All six of them.
Doppelganger's life was full of buzzing confusion; it was contradictory. In the daytime he was respected and successful. At night, he was savage and infected with rage.

“Pegasus,” he whispered, looking up at the darkened second floor window above him.

Just then, one of the tingling itches in his head switched to a sharp pain. He winced. With his right hand, he massaged the back of his neck near the base of his skull.

Looking down through blurred vision, he saw something in the sand.

A tiny tube of chapstick.

Doppelganger picked it up, twisted off the cap, and held it close to his nose. There was an elusive smell – strawberry, maybe? Smiling, he put the cap back on and slid the tube in his pocket. Later, he would savor it, maybe tuck it away in a drawer in his office. Perhaps smear it on his cracking lips when his rough, dry tongue wasn’t helping.

Now, his headache was a dull throb.

Doppelganger left the sandbox, and without a backward glance, headed toward the woods. Treading lightly, he melted unseen into the shadows of the trees, and like so many times before, disappeared without a trace.
Chapter Four

The next morning, the room was dark when I awoke. My arm ached from Peg’s weight and my head throbbed from the Rum and Coke. I glanced at the clock on the bedside table.

It was only five.

Without success, I tried to fall back to sleep. I wanted to sleep a long, long time but my body wouldn’t allow it. Instead, I shifted restlessly, trying not to wake my still-sleeping daughter.

At first sign of daylight, I gave up.

In the dim light from the window, I slid out of bed and went to the bathroom. Once inside, I splashed cold water on my face. Then I looked in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of the door. I frowned at what I saw. My shoulders were still broad, but my body sloped to rotundity at the waist. My throat was fleshy and my eyes looked tired. I was pale and hung over.

Frustrated, I turned on the shower, undressed, and stepped in.

That summer, I was thirty-six years old, a moderately successful fiction writer, and a professor of English at a small liberal arts college in Harvest, Ohio. My professional life allowed me to put up a smooth façade of emotional stability, but privately I was in an ugly downward spiral.

Financially, I was in good shape. For a moment, as I let the hot water hit my face, I thought about my money. I had the house, an insurance policy, and my salary from the college. After adding the modest earnings from my first—and last—novel, I was worth close to one-and-a-half million dollars.
Hard to believe, but a year later I’d be broke.

“You look handsome, Daddy,” Peg said as I came into the kitchen. She was still in her pajamas and making herself some breakfast.

“Thank you.”

“You really want to go back to work, don’t you?” she said in an accusatory tone.

“Yes and no, kiddo.”

She had a blank look on her face.

“You understand what I mean?”

She nodded.

I didn’t address the matter any further or try to comfort her, maybe say something like: I love you and I don’t want to be away from you, but I’m getting stir crazy around the house. I’m restless and I need to go back to work.

I didn’t say a word.

In those days I tended to deal with things by denying the obvious. Instead, I changed the subject. “So, what are you going to do today, Pegasus?” I asked, using her long-time nickname.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Don’t know. Maybe go to the library with Grandma B. or chat online. Something like that.” She poured herself a bowl of cereal.

I poured a cup of coffee, and when Peg turned her head, I added some brandy. “I don’t want you spending too much time online,” I said.
“Okay, Dad,” she replied through a mouthful of cereal.

“Pegasus, I’m serious.”

“You always are.”

I looked right at her hazel eyes. “There are better things to do with your time besides sitting in front of the computer all day.”

She smiled a slantwise grin and said, “Yeah, but you do it.” She kept her eyes on mine as she shoved a heaping spoonful of cereal into her mouth.

“It’s my job,” I replied, holding back a grin of my own. “Now, finish your breakfast.” I took a drink of my coffee, glanced at my watch, and promptly poured the remainder of the drink into a small plastic mug for the road. “Shoot,” I said. “I’ve got to go.”

I kissed Peg goodbye. “Be good,” I said.

“You too.”

“Mrs. Benner will be here any minute. Will you be okay until then?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I love you.”

“I love you too.”

With that, I rushed out the door.

Outside, it was hot and rain-soaked. Reminders of last night’s storm were everywhere: bent flower stems, scattered twigs, and a dewy glisten on the grass.

I noticed that the birdfeeder Peg had made at school and decorated with the words home sweet home was now lying inch-deep in a puddle beside the porch, the seeds floating like miniature boats in the water.
I heard a car horn and looked up to see Mrs. Benner's silver Ford Taurus pulling into the driveway. From my vantage point on the porch, I could see the back seat was full of groceries. Hiring Mrs. Benner – or Grandma B., as Peg called her – was Beth's idea, and a good one. Over the last year, Mrs. Benner had spent more time raising Peg than I had.

Mrs. Benner stepped up onto the porch with an arm full of grocery bags.

"Here," I said, reaching out to grab one of the bags from her. "Let me help you."

"Not a chance," she said with defiance. "I'm not as weak as I am old."

I smiled. "Fine. Have it your way, but at least let me get the door for you."

"Suit yourself."

I opened the door for Mrs. Benner, and she marched past me into the house. Then, despite her insistence, I stepped off the porch to help carry in the grocery bags.

No sooner had I returned to the porch, than Mrs. Benner had returned. Now she stood with her hands on her ample hips.

"I said I didn't need any help. Now get yourself to work."

"Out of my way old woman," I teased and went past her into the house.

On my way back out, I said, "Don't let Peg stay on the computer too long."

"Yes, Mr. McCaffery."

"I'm serious," I said getting into my Jeep.

"You always are."
Chapter Five

Driving to campus, I turned the air conditioner on in my Jeep. It was a typical August day in Ohio. Hot. So hot, in fact, that the streets shimmered under the morning sun. By midday, the woods, ponds, suburbs, and cities would be sweltering under temperatures in the mid-nineties.

I drove without the radio. It wasn't my intention, but I was lost in thought. The tiresome sameness of my life had given me a gloomy heart. I sipped my iced coffee laced with brandy and tried to enjoy the view.

I passed the splendid houses on the oak-lined avenues of Harvest. Then the sandlot baseball diamonds, overgrown with thick grass and host to a couple of pick-up games.

Harvest was a good place to raise Peg, and it would've been a great place for a writer to live, but the writer in me was in perpetual hibernation. Maybe even dead.

On summer days the Harvest fire department sponsored barbecues, pancake breakfasts, and the occasional fish-fry. Weekends were filled with church picnics and bake sales. Mrs. Benner organized all of them, and there was rarely a one in which she wasn't selling apple pie or a batch of chocolate chip cookies.

Harvest was the all-American town. It had everything, including its own resident child murderer.
I found my parking spot on the edge of Wellington College's tree-hidden campus. As I walked toward my office, I realized it felt good to be back. The first day of classes was fast approaching, and I had my hands full. Considering my present state of mind, I knew I would have to dig out old syllabi from the previous year's composition course, and I guess I could wing it in the creative writing course.

I started across the central common. Students were scattered in the grass enjoying the last day before classes resumed. On the lawn in front of Ivey Hall, a trio of well-muscled jocks tossed a Frisbee. They dove and tumbled and cheered, no doubt trying to impress a pair of blond coeds sunning themselves close by.

Near the stone steps to the main entrance, I noticed an eye-catching brunette among a small group of friends. She sat with her legs outstretched, crossed at the ankles, and barefoot. The sleeveless shirt she wore afforded me a view of her round, bronze shoulders.

Her brown hair was pulled in a ponytail revealing a widow's peak and a few loose strands dangled in front of her face. Then I saw her eyes as she glanced up at me. They were a shade of deep blue-gray.

She noticed me looking, and we sustained eye contact for a slice of a moment too long. She smiled in a sly way as if she knew my thoughts. I looked away and continued my walk. I felt myself holding back a private smile of my own.

For the second time that day I noticed the snugness of my pants. As I walked, I tugged a bit on my belt to let my belly breath. I first noticed the tightness when getting dressed. I hadn’t worn anything but jeans in a while and it showed.

With this fresh start, I decided more exercise was needed. Maybe even diet a bit. I decided to start running again. Beth and I ran and swam, hiked and biked. I really needed to start paying attention to what I was eating.

Just then, a shaggy-haired kid shot past me on roller blades. I noticed the slogan on his shirt: Got Beer? Suddenly, I realized I wasn’t ready to change all of my unhealthy habits.

When I entered my office, I closed the door and tried to get some work done. But I was having trouble trying to stay focused. My mind wandered through a series of random thoughts and images. However, one image burned longer than all the rest.

The blue-eyed girl.

That day wasn’t the last time I’d see her, but looking back now, I wish it had been.