

MONSTERS

in the

WOODS

A Horror Novel

By

RJ Smith

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Other Titles

FICTION

The Santa Claus Killer (2013)
FBI Serial Killer Task Force, Book #1

Cataclysm (2014)

Monsters in the Woods (2018)

Beach Bodies (2019)
Book # 2 FBI Serial Killer Task Force

Man's Best Friend (2020)

BIOGRAPHY

Destiny (2019)

SHORTS

The Storyteller (2013)
Victims Revenge (2019)

SCREENPLAYS

Destiny (2010)
Storyteller (2011)
Cataclysm (2012)
Santa Claus Killer (2020)

“Monsters are real,
They stalk us at night,
And hide just out of sight.
It’s a never-ending battle,
Of life and death.
Sometimes the creatures win...
By murdering us where we sleep!”

Dedication

Scott Webb, D.O.
Orthopedic Surgeon
The Florida Spine Institute
Largo Medical Center

Scott, thank you for saving my left hand and surgically repairing the damage to my cervical and lumbar spine that caused paralysis to my left-hand fingers and numbness to my legs!

Because of your certain expertise, and many steady and daring surgeries, I am now able to write again for my fans around the world!

SETTING THE PACE

THIS STORY is about monsters.

I'm not writing gobbledygook... for time is of the essence, my bones are getting on in age and the knees are creaking and popping.

My vision is beginning to blur... and there's no time to slide into pajamas.

The party is, most certainly, almost over.

Grandfather time is moving, his hands sweeping 'round the clock-face, like a ticking bomb, stealing my life-force and eroding the hopes and dreams of future decades.

Knock, knock, knock...

I think we all know who that might be.

Considering whether or not to open that walnut door, the minutes slowed and blackness surrounded me until I rolled the dice and hit snake eyes.

That's it! I'm a goner... and that's my cue to FADE OUT and ROLL THE CREDITS. There would be nothing more to say to anyone.

With millions of words written, I must leave this wonderful life and hope there's something more when I gasp that final breath. But, that leaves us with GOOD news... that my fiction books and screenplays will remain relevant in the world where I once lived, cried and laughed in the face of despair.

When that final day arrives my flesh will be consumed by the flames in the crematory; ashes sprinkled on a sugar-sand beach. So, that'll be it for The Master of Suspense. Goodbye, sayonara, turn the dog-eared page and hope to read me again.

After writing all that, I don't have time for fables, yet I need to nibble at the bone for as long as my flesh is capable of withstanding that unbearable sound...

Knock, knock, knock...

Do I open the door and accept my inevitable slog to nothingness? Maybe I've had enough.

However, none of that has anything to do with our purpose here. This is something entirely different, and that being the case... I say screw any thought of lullabies and tape placed over my eyes.

Let's not answer the door just yet.

So, here we are. If you're looking for rainbows and cotton candy go browse the fairytale isle. We don't need you here whittling down the time on your own death clock.

I wonder if you hear the seconds passing?

The tick-tock, tick-tocking is deafening. That horrid echo of finality has arrived and is speeding down the highway of life towards a head-on collision.

In my younger years I couldn't hear the ticking.

But, in the end, time chases us all to that lonely, dark and freezing grave. So, let us get to this novel and its warning of the things that stalk the darkness; the telling of the ones who snatch the flesh from the living and the demons that consume the body until the blood is sucked dry.

THE GOD'S HONEST TRUTH!

I have a story to tell you.

First, let me spin a yarn about my monsters!

They aren't just a work of scared shirtless fiction. This story is based on actual sightings of a reptilian race from outer space! They're real! They come to Earth and have been invading our planet since we bombed Japan with our newly created nuclear bombs!

I know this will scare you and maybe cause a nightmare or two... but to me, that is success! I want you uncomfortable, biting the tips of your fingernails down to bloody nubs, perchance grinding your teeth in a fit of vicious nerves. That's bliss for me, watching you in libraries and bookstores, shifting your eyeballs from side to side with a nervous glance my way; a terrified expression planted squarely on your face. That's where I need you. Horrified of that unexplainable thud beneath your bed; a movement behind your Sunday shirts... way back in the dark closet. Maybe there is a thump out in the darkness just beyond the window.

Haven't you always suspected a butchering madman waiting out there in the dark?

Having eyeballed, firsthand, that type of butchery and coming to know those types of killers, I've come to prefer the chaos of my monsters.

It seems safer here, somehow.

After all, *Monsters In The Woods* has roots in reality. It's about reptilian aliens that were randomly documented and then... erased from our historical records.

This tale speaks of *what if* and *oh, my!*

Not long ago, I happened across a legend that spoke of the reptilians that existed below the streets of downtown Hollywood.

Many claimed it was the stuff of science fiction, and yet... as outlandish as the myth may seem for this modern age, let me remind you that humanity can't even trace its own beginnings, other than to point to an ancient female hominid skeleton, named Lucy, who scientists believe existed 3.2 million years ago in the Awash Valley of the Afar Triangle of Ethiopia.

They say this *thing* started humanity.

That makes me laugh.

How does an ape evolve into an intelligent race, like Humankind, without divine intervention? Dare I propose it's unlikely we evolved from Lucy?

Would you have me dragged out back and flogged at the suggestion?

It's not like I'm proposing anything new. There is an abundance of evidence to prove *other animals* in the natural world don't evolve, so why should we? Why aren't we still evolving? As far as I'm concerned evolution is an unnatural theory.

Dogs haven't developed reasoning, they haven't begun speaking and bears haven't crawled out of the woods and become intelligent.

Did we miss something? Or is every species in nature the same as they've been from the beginning of time?

There is, of course, one exception... the story of Humanity.

The schemers want you to believe the ridiculous notion that birds and elephants developed from dinosaurs. If that's true, why are alligators and crocodiles still just alligators and crocodiles?

Haven't they been here from the beginning, too?

That brings me back to *this* story.

When I first heard about the existence of the reptilian creatures, during a trip to the UFO Congress' annual symposium in Arizona, I had to wonder... *could there really be something to this tale?* With billions of planets in the universe, isn't it probable alien life is out there in space

And yet, if you type *Men in Black* into your Google browser, the official Wikipedia page is all about the fictional Men in Black movie franchise.

That's how the ruling powers want it.

They want you believing none of it is real. Have you ever heard the expression that if you want to hide something, putting the secret in plain sight will make most people overlook the obvious?

It's true.

You see... there is a systematic disinformation machine in place to hide, manipulate and cover up the facts. And yet, the stories of the reptilians have been whispered everywhere...for a long time.

In 1955, the Sutton family was entertaining a guest when '*creatures from outer space*' invaded their home. The tale went that a guest stepped outside to fetch fresh water from a pump and saw strange lights hovering in the sky. Shortly after, green creatures with skinny legs and large, clawed hands attacked the farmhouse.

Now, don't laugh. These good people believed their encounter was real.

The *Green Goblin* had to be fought off with guns. You can look it all up. It's out there waiting to be exposed. Similar tales continue across America.

Massachusetts was also assaulted.

The Dover Demon was alleged to have had a large spherical head with bright orange eyes. It had no mouth or nose and its limbs were long and thin ending in long fingers and claws.

The legends flourish worldwide.

Although, at first glance, *Monsters In The Woods* may seem like a tale woven from the active imagination of a novelist, I assure you these monstrosities have been reported around the globe in various forms and descriptions.

However I may describe them, they've been said to be the worst creatures conceivable.

Writing this in 2017, and following a close call with death, I feel a renewed obligation to spin you this tale. Maybe you should take it as a warning of dire things to come. You see, not long after the Dover Demon appeared, something similar arrived in New Windsor, New York. It had all the hallmarks of a b-list horror movie make-up job. And yet, there was something quite unsettling about the story... thus, I decided to write it all down.

Traveling to the McQuade Campus, of Saint Christopher's, Inc., I found the same residential home for troubled kids that cared for me. So, I went back to the days of yesteryear and found my story. I'm dying to tell you all about it.

But first, I have to state how it all began otherwise you'll not have the foggiest idea of where we're headed. Are you ready? Can you handle the possibility that monsters are real?

They've always watched from the shadows, even when you think you're safe, snuggled in the warmth of your quilted beds. They hide in the closet, stare through the windows and sometimes, wait under your bed.

The Monsters in the Woods have been here since the beginning of time.

Chapter 1

THE STORM

FORTY MINUTES north of The United States Military Academy at West Point sat a small riverfront town. There wasn't anything special about New Windsor. It was just one of those small town, favorite, summer getaways.

Vacationers hailed from New York City, New Jersey and Vermont. Once in town, families would often venture out into the woods in an attempt to outsmart the plentiful Rainbow Trout found in the local streams.

However, there was much more out there.

And townsfolk knew, but never spoke up.

Telling horror tales and scaring the children was frowned upon. One of the most commonly whispered tales was that of old man Jessup who just up and disappeared one cold night after he frantically punched in a 911 call. "Somebody help me! Jesus Christ, I swear this thing is bigger than Satan! What do you want from me?"

That ended the short call and in seconds a New York State Police Major was speeding through New Windsor with lights and sirens breaking the night. Arriving on scene, he saw a deputy tying off yellow crime scene tape.

"What's happening?"

Listening to the description of the possible attacker, the major thought quickly. Picking up his radio, the statie pressed his lips to the microphone. "New Windsor 12, a bear, or some other large animal, has attacked old man Jessup! We are ringing up animal control right now to get them started, ASAP!"

"Roger that, Major,"

That's how the story went.

Many in town knew it was bullshit.

They had all known of the creatures, demons or whatever the heck those things were out in the woods. Now, the summer memories were fading with the cold, the winter had sent the tourists home, the shops were all closed and the economy dove into the dumpsters.

That was especially true on this blustering evening. With blizzard snow tumbling from huge, black clouds, the magnificent flakes became deadly.

It was a perfect winter wonderland postcard.

The storm visibility on the roads was severely reduced and the horizon disappeared in a swirling, blinding blur of white.

The squall was blowing in on the *Siberian Express*, a swath of cold air from Russia.

Pushing though six inches of snow, covering a long stretch of roadway dubbed Blooming Grove Turnpike, a new, red-hot Mustang fought for control, its rear tires working... digging for the asphalt. On either side of the thoroughfare were tall, deep patches of pine trees stretching for miles in every direction.

Inside the Mustang it was warm, thanks to heat blowing through the dashboard vents.

Stretched out on the leather passenger seat, a slim seventeen-year-old bombshell giggled at something snappy her boyfriend had just mumbled. Unzipping her sheepskin jacket, she blew him a bursting kiss and pointed out the window.

"Peter, isn't this storm amazing?"

"It's all good, baby-girl," the star, seventeen-year-old, high school quarterback answered, pushing long, blonde locks from his chiseled face...a mischievous grin stretching out the corners

of his pouty lips. Winking, he reached for the radio and punched in 96.1, WPKF. It was the closest thing to indie music they could get. However, the local station was currently giving a weather report.

"If you're out on the roads this evening, the New Windsor Police Department is asking drivers to be careful out there. If you don't have to go out, the police are asking residents to please remain inside until the blizzard has passed through our area. This advisory is for Orange and Dutchess Counties. Residents can expect a foot or more of new snow accumulating overnight!"

"Maybe we shouldn't have come out tonight," Jenny said snuggling closer to her boyfriend. "I mean, what if something happens and you wreck this bad to the bone car?"

"We'll be okay," Peter assured, peering through the wipers struggling to push the heavy flakes hitting the windshield.

"Are we close to the motel?"

"Yup."

That fine roadside accommodation served tourists well. But with business lagging through winter, the owner, Mr. Patel, skirted occupancy rules and rented rooms to anyone. That made *the place* popular with the high school crowd. Often they'd plan to meet up at the motel, smuggle in their cases of beer and cozy up to their partners for something of a slumber party. Tonight Jenny booked the Windsor Suite, a cozy, large space with a living room, bathroom and a queen-sized bed shaped in the form of a heart.

Peter thought it was lame, but Jen thought it romantic.

"Fifty-nine dollars a night is a good deal," Pete offered with a devilish grin.

"Oh, baby, you know I have daddy's credit card; no problem." Yes, Peter knew all too well. Jennifer was a wealthy child the moment she was born. In fact, the quarterback thought her dad was worth millions since he worked 12-hour days at the Emergency Room as an emergency medicine doctor.

They lived on the riverfront, on Hewitt Lane, inside a million-dollar estate with a stunning, unobstructed, Hudson River view.

But the biggest attraction for Peter was her dad's brand new 2017 Ford GT. An American mid-engine, two-seat sports car that was the ultimate expression of class and muscle with its teardrop-shaped frame, carbon-fiber body and 600-plus horsepower from a 3.5L Eco-Boost V6.

That car was a giddy up and go.

"Hey, Mister," Jen interrupted, "what're ya thinking about?"

"Your dad's red muscle car."

"You'll get one someday."

Yeah, right... he thought, *where I come from we're lucky to have bikes!*

Then, after a moment of silence, "You know I love you, right?" Jen purred into his ear, unbuckling her seatbelt and snuggling closer to the boy she'd loved since middle school. Kissing his pale, white, neck peppered with tan freckles, her lips left bright red lipstick along his throat.

"Hey, stop that," Peter chuckled, glancing into the rear-view and wiping the lipstick smudges to nothingness. Turning his dark, almond shaped eyes her way, he stared at her with squinted eyes that said... *I love you, too.*

She knew, all right. They had big plans for the future.

Then, Kevin Garrett's 2015 song, *Control*, burst from the speakers and Peter sang along. He liked indie artists and thought they usually had something to say. That and the fact he hated rap music; the artists prancing around the stage with their butts hanging out and their pants pulled down in some sort of fashion madness that displayed their underwear to the world.

Stupid is as stupid does, Pete thought. He wouldn't be caught dead with his pants hanging below his hips. Besides, he'd read somewhere that *the whole pants thing* had begun in prison as a way for homosexuals to announce they were open for business. Whatever that business was Peter could care less.

He was a straight, red-blooded, American with raging hormones.

Yet, Peter probably could guess because one of his best friends at school was Charlie Anderson, a flamer for sure, but loyal to the bone when it came to friendship. He didn't gossip or share secrets. Charles was a good guy and if that is what gay people were like Pete had no problem becoming their friend and helping out when bullied by the bigots at school.

Peter and Jen were in their senior year at Central High, out on Dragon Drive, just off old Route 94. Last fall Peter led the *Green Dragons* to the State Championships. That Friday night he threw for two hundred yards and soon the Ivy League schools began courting him for their football programs.

Pete was accustomed to the hyped-up visits.

But things were different when a rigidly standing recruiter from the U.S. Army offered him a tryout down at The Point.

They'd do anything to beat the Navy, he thought.

Yet, that was all a faded memory now.

Snapping back to the present, Peter glanced at Jen leaning into his ribs. Lost in the distraction of her inviting mouth and bright, green eyes the moment would have been like a thousand times before... had it not been for a flash of bright, thunder snow lightning that briefly illuminated something huge stepping into the middle of the road.

"What the heck is that, Jenny?"

"What?" she asked, glaring through the windshield at the massive shadow caught in the car's headlights and stomping through the wall of white tumbling from the sky. "Maybe it's a bear?"

It seemed too big, Peter thought, but whatever *that thing* was, it suddenly turned and charged straight for the Mustang. "Whoa," he panicked, forgetting his driver's education course and slamming his foot onto the brake while pulling the wheel hard right. Suddenly, he realized the chains weren't stretched over the tires to prevent the car from sliding on the black ice hidden beneath the snow.

Jen screamed, "Oh, my God!" as the car rocketed toward the wall of giant pines. Watching the scene play out, in *slomo*, she was locked in fear. Maybe because she sensed something horrible was about to happen, or perhaps her fright came from the knowledge that *this* was exactly what father had warned about... *Don't play around in the car and tell Peter to keep his eyes on the road*.

Dad always said there was death out on the dark, lonely roadways.

At that exact moment, and almost instantly upon Jen's thought of good ole dad, the Mustang crashed headlong into the woods. On impact her body soared out of the seat, crashed through the windshield and landed in a spray of glass on the hood.

Peter would've seen all this if his own head hadn't slammed onto the steering wheel and knocked him out cold. For minutes, silence overtook the scene before Peter jerked awake with a gasp and found a familiar ringing deep inside his skull. It was just like the terrible concussions he'd received out on the football field when the defensive ends broke the line of scrimmage and sent him tumbling to the turf. Groggily reaching to his forehead, his long fingers touched a large flap of skin that had unbuckled itself from the impact. Blood gushed over his eyebrows and into his frightened eyes... leaving a red sheen to his vision.

It was almost like looking through a red piece of plastic held up to light.

Then, he remembered something.

“Jenny?” he pled peering at her body. “Jen!” he screamed shaking with terror. Suddenly, he began to sob at the vision of her sightless eyes. But he didn’t have time to think because the instant everything became clear in his mind something slammed into the car.

What the hell?

His head on a swivel he pulled the door handle, but found it jammed from the impact. Struggling with the handgrip he glimpsed a gigantic, dark shadow circling the car. Reaching into the backseat, he flipped open a red toolbox, grabbed a yellow flashlight and pressed on the light before swinging it into the darkness.

“Hello? Is anyone out there?”

Turning 360 degrees and lighting the windows he again saw his girlfriend’s body. This time the light exposed her skull that was cracked wide open. Grey brain matter and bright, red blood was pooling on the hood.

Then, the shadow returned.

Peter didn’t know what it was, but he had an overwhelming sense of being stalked. Like those nature shows where ferocious lions circled old safari jeeps hoping a human would open a window or climb out the door.

Here... Kitty, Kitty, Kitty!

Shaking the horrible scene from his mind, he leaned over and peered out the passenger window at a trail of bloody claw marks trailing through the snow.

Is it an animal?

Unbuckling the seatbelt, he climbed from his seat, crawled over the dashboard and inched out onto the warm hood. There, confronted by a close-up from Hell, he took in the terrifying sight of his lifeless girlfriend.

She’d never get her sexy back; makeup would never again hide her pimples. Her face had been stripped from her skull and the sight reminded him of a Christmas turkey he’d helped carve in the dining hall with fifteen other boys from Fulton Cottage at McQuade.

It was bad! Nothing could have ever prepared him for this. Forgetting the danger of the imagined wild animal stalking the darkness, he pulled Jen’s limp body into his arms and sobbed. But then he sensed something from the tree line. Turning his gaze he saw a pair of glowing, red eyes. Unexpectedly, a shriek echoed through the silence of the night and pierced his ears.

He leaped from the hood and scrambled onto the roadway just as something emerged from the tree line. “Aw, noooooooooo!” he shouted, running out of his sneakers. Moving as fast as he could through the snow he frightfully glanced over his shoulder and saw the thing gaining on him. It brought back the terrible thought of that lion stalking a jeep... except this time the lion was something evil and he was sure it would chase him to his death.

This was no lion, of course. It was something very different that now hunted his youth... maybe it was a demon... or a maniac killer dressed in a monster suit. *It’s no bear!* The quarterback knew. But, from this distance, he really couldn’t make out exactly what it was... because the blizzard shielded its size.

Then, staring over his right shoulder, he watched as another mammoth shadow leapt from the woods and joined the chase.

That was all the quarterback needed to motivate his feet. Running for his life into the woods, he hoped he’d be able to lose whatever it was that chased him into the darkness. Sprinting, as if a lion *really was* on his heels, his screams broke the stillness of night.

“Somebody, help me!”

Of course, nobody heard him. There wasn’t a *human soul* within miles of the frightened boy. If he were going to survive he’d have to use his own wits and courage to find safety.

Behind him the things from Hell gained on their prey. Suddenly, Peter wasn't sure if he'd live to tell this tale.

He only had one hope of escaping the hunt.

Maybe someone on the other side of the deep forest would happen to be driving along Route 9W when I burst from the timbers.

But that was quite a stretch ahead and into the pitch-blackness. Before safety could be found, the teenager knew, he'd have to navigate the thick, dark and freezing forest. Recalling the horrid vision of Jenny... he grasped the possibility that she might already be food for those things sure to be pouncing on her flesh back at the car. Trying desperately to push that vision from his mind, he scanned the woods ahead noticing the path was littered with downed trees and thick branches. Slogging through knee-deep snow he thought, for the first time, that this might be it. There might not be an escape from the grave.

It'll take an act of God, a voice pounded his considerations, to outrun the demons chasing you into the woodlands.

God has nothing to do with these things, Peter knew. Those creatures are something straight out of Hell.

Chapter 2

BLOODY MURDER

ACROSS THE RIVER, in the Village of Ossining, a young thirteen year old was sound asleep when a drunken fool burst through a woman's front door. Knocking it from the hinges, the lumber exploded in a spray of splintering toothpicks.

"I'm going to kill you, Patty," the disheveled alcoholic grumbled. Grabbing her arms he shoved the woman across the sparsely decorated living room propelling her backward and onto a ratty, pleather, sofa-sleeper that had seen better days.

"Ronnie, stop!" Pat begged, a river of streaking tears sliding down her red, swelling cheeks. Escaping the sofa and scrambling across the room she knew death was coming for her weakened soul.

It was like the Grim Reaper could've taken her life right then and there... and although it may be true that death might've offered some relief from the agony of her life, she would not allow her son to be hurt by this miserable drunk.

I can't give up... not to this drunken idiot.

"Get off of me, Ronnie, or I'll call the police!"

"Go ahead! Until the pigs arrive I'll show you who the boss is around here by knocking some sense into that thick skull of yours!"

"I want you out of here, Ron!" Patty screamed, "I'm not going to clean your nasty apartment anymore or prepare your dinner every single night!"

"You no good witch," the drunk growled, his face red and dripping with sweat. "Now you've done it! You've brought out the ugliness of my dirty, rotten, murderous soul!"

"No!" Lars yelled from the doorway of his bedroom. Glancing to the corner of the room, he saw something invisible to the others.

"What should I do, Prince?"

Beside the boy a five-year-old Labrador barked angrily at the drunken man. Its ears were pinned slap behind its huge head with the tongue hanging out of a mouth that was stacked with sharp, pointy teeth.

"Shut up your mongrel or I'll snap its neck!"

"Prince, please do something!" Lars yelled to an unseen entity. It was almost like he was speaking to a ghost.

"Hey, boy!" Ronnie spat. "Can't your dumb, four-eyed eyes see there's nobody there? It's just you, your mommy and me. What are you, a freak? You're talking to invisible, make-believe friends?"

Patty knew Ronnie hated her son's absolute insistence that, since the day he was born, an invisible little alien, named Prince, had continuously abducted and taken him to a planet in outer space. Said to stand three-feet-tall with one emerald green eye, the boy had asserted the creature was the One of Knowledge, from a planet called Xylanthia located in the Sirius Star System.

It sounded ridiculous to Ronnie.

Even his mother giggled at the story.

"One day you'll grow up to be a writer," Mom had said all those years ago.

Nevertheless, the teen knew it was true and insisted his alien friend was real. "Prince is not make-believe!" He could prove it, too, had anyone asked for such verification.

But that was beside the point right now because, at this very instant, Lars had retreated into his bedroom to reach under his bed in search of the Rock of Wisdom. Feeling his fingers grasping a small, round, crystal globe that Lars thought looked eerily similar to the planet Earth.

“Leave my Mom alone!” the teenager shouted. “I swear, if you don’t, I’ll turn you to dust!”

“Ha-ha-ha-Ha!” Ronnie laughed and stomped into the bedroom with his fists balled into large, round, hammers of hate. He knew how to use those weapons, too, as both Lars and his mother had found out over the years.

Pulling the globe into view, Lars watched as the crystal began to pulse with a broad spectrum of brilliant blue colors. There was no reason for it to be vibrating in his hand as there were no batteries inserted into the rock.

To the average observer it appeared much like any cheap little globe of glass that might’ve been purchased from the Amazon store or at a neighborhood garage sale.

But this was no ordinary toy.

The fact was that there really was an invisible alien watching from the corner of the room and he had given the globe to Lars years earlier.

Focusing all his concentration on the crystal, the boy willed its power and waited for something to happen. “Please, Prince, help me!”

“Ha-ha-ha-Ha!” the *King of All Lowlifes* chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Put away your pathetic, stupid rock! What are you doing, trying to scare me off?”

He was attempting a tone of *calm, cool* and *collected* while trying not to display the absolute ferocity coursing through his swelling veins.

However, Lars knew there was fear deep in Ronnie’s weak, alcoholic heart. The pointy-eared alien had told him everything about the drunk’s true nature.

The man is a coward the invisible extraterrestrial suddenly whispered in Lars’ frightened thoughts. *He’s hiding behind the liquid courage of Jack Daniels and Johnnie Walker Black. Don’t be afraid of him, Young Blue Eyes. Find that burning courage deep in your pure heart and stand tall with bravery!*

Blue Eyes was the name given Lars by the alien. The name stuck, too, because of the boy’s blazing, bright blue eyes. They seemed to glow when he focused his attention onto the globe.

“Mom sure can pick the winners!”

“What did you say?” Ronnie yelled, stomping towards the boy. “Are you talking to that damn make-believe friend of yours again? You think he can save your momma from this whipping I’m about to hand out?”

Harness the power of the stone, the alien’s voice urged Lars. *You have the will, and ability, to make this terrible man disappear!*

Staring into the crystal Lars believed Prince, yet questioned where the globe’s true power came from. It seemed like a smaller version of a bowling ball without the finger holes. However, unlike a lane thrower, this little crystal had true supernatural powers.

Lars marveled at his reflection glowing in the globe and the bright, blue lights exploding from the crystal.

Nice and cool now, just invoke the words!

Maybe Lars had read too many novels. Perhaps he really did have an active imagination like his mom always said. He was, after all, an addict when it came to reading fiction novels.

The blue crystal had been a 5th birthday gift from Prince, the One of Knowledge. “It’s a tool for the future,” the bald, red-skinned, alien said many years prior. “The day will come when all its energy will be at your fingertips!”

Ronnie hated the thing. There was something unsettling about the way it glowed. Once, when he was alone in the apartment and was searching through Lars' bedroom, the sphere erupted in an unexpected blinding, brilliant light. Attempting to grab it from its cradle on a bedside dresser, it burned his hand. It was so hot it caused his entire palm to swell for days.

"Well, are you going to put that silly, little girl, sissy, marble away?"

At that moment, the room disappeared and it seemed like only the alien and Lars were standing there in the brilliant light of the crystal.

Staring at the glowing round rock Lars was spellbound by its magnificence.

Every creature through the dimensions depends on the universe, the alien told the boy, for their powers in the great expanse of life.

Mesmerized by the glow of the rock, Lars felt its power.

Then, suddenly, the room reappeared and Ronnie turned to where Lars stood, but he'd be darned if he saw anything except a wall covered with movie posters, a Gibson guitar and a PlayStation 3 controller sitting on a chair facing the television. Shaking his head in anger he turned toward Lars and raised his hand.

"I swear I'll beat that fantasy out of your head if you don't stop talking to things that aren't there!"

"Please, Ronnie," Patty begged, "Just leave my boy alone!"

"Look at this brat you raised! He listens to rap music and does nothing but watch superhero movies and Hobbit films!"

How dare he mumble such damnation, The Prince fumed, insulting the Land of the Hobbits! Invisibly running across the room, he touched the side of his nose with a finger and focused his bright, emerald eye on Ronnie's legs.

Instantly, the drunk tripped to the floor.

That'll teach you! a sinister voice pushed into Ron's head. *Pick on someone your own size!*

"What the...?" Ron yelled, stumbling to his knees. Staring at Lars he wanted nothing better than to slap the brat into adulthood. "Yes, that's what I'll do to you! Slap you senseless, boy!"

"Ha-ha-ha-Ha!" Lars laughed hysterically; his sides splitting after watching the entire event unfold the moment the alien ran towards the idiot. "Are you talking to your own invisible friend now?"

"I'll kill you," the man promised.

No, you won't, the alien knowingly nodded. At that instant Prince turned to the Boy Wonder and pushed this thought into the teenager.

Instantly, Lars knew how to end the danger. He understood, many years ago, this moment would arrive. Having been abducted since childhood, he knew all too well the destiny heading for humankind in the near future.

Do it! The alien assured. *Focus your thoughts on the stone and send his bones to the underworld! He has nothing over you unless you give him the power!*

Lars knew Prince hated this particular boyfriend. The alien had been here from the beginning watching the beatings, the drunken rages, the leather belt whipping the boy and his mother. Grimacing, the teenager felt a bead of sweat trailing down his brow and fought the urge to wipe an arm across his face.

"You no good, lazy, good for nothing brat!" the man spat, "You might as well pull a dress over your head because you're a little girl."

"Please, Ron," Lars mother again pleaded. "Don't hurt him!" Tears streaked black eyeliner down her cheeks while helpless sobs of desperation reverberated through the small room.

“Get away from her,” Lars ordered with renewed courage, a scowl of hatred creasing his brow. “I’ll send you to Hell if you don’t leave!”

Ronnie turned to him and in a few quick steps swung for Lars’ head.

That’s when the Labrador charged and chomped down on Ron’s ankle.

“Damn mongrel,” he yelled, kicking man’s best friend across the room.

“Leave Oscar alone!” the boy yelled.

Glancing to the alien, Lars saw Prince place a finger to his large nose. Then, suddenly, the crystal in the boy’s hand blinded everyone in the room with a blast of sapphire shaded energy. Blinking back all fear, Lars opened his eyes and sent his thoughts and anger into the globe.

It was like pulling the trigger of a revolver because right then a bursting lightning bolt of fiery, white light exploded from the crystal and hit Ronnie square in the chest. Suddenly, his body convulsed wildly, his flesh turned a deep red and his veins turned to a black web that ran down his face and arms. In a moment, clothes fell to the ground and Ron’s body collapsed to a pile of black ashes.

Prince smiled, winked at Lars and disappeared with these words whispering into Lars’ mind. *I’ll see you soon, Dear Boy. There is much work to do and so little time to prepare for the Battle of Redemption!*

“Lars!” Patty screamed, staring in shock at the mound of ashes that had once been her boyfriend. Not understanding what happened she knew her primary concern right now was to protect her son.

You did well, Boy. Prince’s voice assured from somewhere beyond.

“Come on, Son,” Patty cried, pushing the teenager from the apartment with Oscar the Dog trotting beside them. Once outside she left her son on the concrete stoop and hurried to the neighbor’s front door. “Ethel! Ethel! Open the door!”

A moment later a grey-haired housewife emerged with a hair net covering a fresh perm. “What is it, Patty?” she probed, pulling a cheap, pink robe about her plump frame. “Why are you banging on the door? What has happened?”

“It’s Ronnie.”

“What about him?”

“He fell dead onto the floor in a pile of ashes!”

“What?” The expression lining her face displayed disbelief. “Have you flipped your wig, Patty? What are you talking about?”

Patty understood how it must have sounded. Placing her trembling hands to her face she sobbed hysterically, “Oh, my Lord! Please help me, Ethel!”

“What is going on?” Ethel’s husband asked arriving at the door.

“Herbert, Patty says Ronnie is dead!”

Understanding she had to come up with something more believable, Patty glanced into Ethel’s face and made up her story. “I lit him on fire, Ethel. I poured gasoline over his head and threw on a match!”

“Jesus of Nazareth!” Herbert shrieked. “Ethel, honey, call the police!”

Lars, however, could care less about the commotion. He was sitting, in shocked silence, on the cracked concrete steps stroking his best friend behind the ears. Mentally, his mind was a chaotic jumble of ashes and questions of what really happened back in that room. Staring at an enormous weeping willow tree, he was lost in its seventy-foot height, spread with hundreds of barren branches and weighted by heavy, wet snow and long icicles stretching to the ground.

“There’s nothing but ashes!” Herbert’s voice yelled from inside the apartment. “Holy mackerel, Patty, you torched this poor man to death!”

Lars was oblivious to the words. The beauty of that old willow occupied his mind. There was something about the tree that captured his attention during all the years he'd lived here. Since a very young boy he had attempted to sketch the colossal tree into pages of an old, brown leather, journal the One of Knowledge had given him for thinking time. Had anyone looked inside they'd only see thick, blank pages. But, when Lars stared at those same pages, he would see they held detailed plans, genetic code and survival information written in black ink.

Everyone needs thinking time, Prince always stated. It builds character, allows for us all to plot the future and find our paths of purpose! Those plans will help humanity one day.

"Why me?" Lars had asked the alien at the age of seven, finally able to articulate the questions saved up over his development years. "Why not pick some other boy from another place? How am I supposed to save the world?"

During his years of being abducted in the dead of night and having traveled on a disc shaped spacecraft with the alien to outer space, he had been told he was one of many hybrid children selected to rebuild the human race after the coming destruction.

In every realm there is someone blessed with The Gift of Life. You were Earth's chosen one long before you came into the world!

"I don't know what you mean!"

You will, Blue Eyes! One day, time will make it all clear for you!

Pushing that old conversation from mind the teenager stared back at the century old willow and thought it never looked more beautiful than it did just then... pure as the snowstorm blowing around it. There might've been a universal meaning in that realization, but somehow its definition escaped his sensibility at this exact instant so he just stared at its frozen magnificence.

Things will never be the same, he thought. Everything has changed.

Watching the snow falling from dark, thick clouds, Lars realized it would be a white Christmas. However, the scene inside the apartment would forever stain the holiday. And yet, he didn't feel remorse. In fact, he didn't feel anything at all, except maybe a pinch of glee that Ronnie the Drunk was a goner.

"So long, partner. Bang, bang, you're dead."

As approaching sirens pierced the uncanny silence, and neighbors huddled around his mother, Lars was happy to have accomplished one simple little task. He had freed the world of a horrible, despicable man. Not many kids did that.

And soon, he'd be the hero of abused teenagers everywhere. There was only one thing he wished... that somehow the adults would get things together.

The polar ice was melting, the planet warming, the storms on Earth worsening and the disasters were getting bigger.

That meant something to Lars.

It was a sign that the end was near.

Chapter 3

ACCIDENT

BACK IN NEW WINDSOR, Police Chief Marty McBride had overseen thousands of accident scenes like the one on Blooming Grove Turnpike.

Now, sitting in an oversized, brown leather chair situated behind an L-shaped glass desk, the chief of police looked around his office that he'd been re-elected to every six years.

Located at 555 Union Avenue, the one-story, red-bricked, municipal center housed the jail, town hall, ambulance corps... and the justice court.

"This snowstorm is going to become a blizzard," the chief realized while staring at a computer screen's live radar image from The Weather Channel online. "Not much will be happening in the crime business. We only booked one perp today for breaking and entering out at Blooming Grove's Medicine Chest Pharmacy."

"Pill Popper Bill," Sergeant Stanley Stump noted, "a crime of opportunity, walking right in the door Mr. Jensen forgot to lock before he left for the night."

Chief Marty nodded. "Too bad, because he actually treats people with kindness and concern... makes it his business to be on hand to answer customer's questions. Hardly anyone around here fills their prescriptions at Walgreens or CVS."

"There is something to be said for small, Mom and Pop businesses," Stanley agreed. "We're small town, USA." Yawning, he glanced to the chief's wife, Delores, doubling as the town's 911 dispatcher. She had been doing such since the mayor cut back the department's annual operating budget.

Now, she was gathering details of the vehicle accident.

Grabbing a coffee mug, Stanley turned back to the chief and sighed in absolute boredom. Nothing happened in town. It was the kind of place where residents *could* leave their homes without locking the doors. Yet, things were changing and nobody was *really safe* anymore.

All the school shootings were proof of that.

"We're dead in winter, Marty. You know nothing moves after the fall exodus of Manhattanites who climb back aboard their Metro North trains for the ride back."

It's true, Chief Marty knew, Stanley is right, nothing ever goes on here except the occasional missing person like last summer when the whispers started circulating again.

That's when old man Steeply and his wife disappeared during an evening walk in San Giacomo Park. It was one of the strangest parks in the area, confirmed by a wooden sign at its entrance that restricted just about every activity conceivable in a normal park.

Pushing the nonsensical sign from mind, the chief thought of Mr. Steeply's kids, Matthew and Susan, who didn't notice their parents had slipped away during the annual summer festival, the *Nancy Pullar Summer Concert Series*. The event was held at the Town Hall Band Stand and brought out almost every tourist in town. The concerts occurred Wednesday evenings ... and every Tom, Dick and Harry came out for the free refreshments and hot dogs provided by the town's slush fund. The happening had always been held here... unless it rained. If that happened, the inebriated mayor would judiciously stumble onto the old wooden stage, grab a twenty-year-old microphone and usher everyone inside.

But it didn't rain last year. No, last year was somewhat different.

The chief understood, almost immediately, that something horrible had happened *because sixty-year-old residents just didn't disappear from a public park without a trace.*

"Marty," Delores interrupted her husband's thoughts. "Henry says there's something you really need to see out at his accident scene."

“What is it?”

“A dead girl and signs of a missing driver who ran his car into the woods.”

“Driving in this weather?” Marty huffed, glancing to his longtime sergeant and the pained expression planted squarely on his face. A silent understanding passed between the two that stated *this wasn’t good* and *something stunk to high heaven*, “What makes Henry think that?”

“What’s that, Marty?”

“His belief that the missing driver ran into the woods where this cold will surely kill anyone.”

“Henry found a pair of boy’s sneakers abandoned in the snow and clear, bloody footprints leading into the woods.”

“Jeez,” Marty griped and nodded to his sergeant. “Bloody footprints leading into the pines? Why the heck would someone do that in this storm?” The chief had a suspicion, and possibly what this all meant, but God help the people of New Windsor if reality was anything close to Marty’s thoughts.

“Stanley, let’s get out there and see what Henry is talking about.”

“I think you two better get a move on,” Delores agreed. “The scene is a quarter mile north of 623 Blooming Grove Highway and Henry has closed the entire roadway down with detour signs.”

“That’s by Saint Christopher’s old McQuade campus,” Stanley knew. “Is this missing kid one of theirs maybe out for a joy ride in the snow?”

Saint Christopher’s, Inc. was a privately run residential institution for abused and neglected kids aged eight to eighteen. Most had been placed there from agencies in New York City. They came from predominantly poor families with incapable parents who didn’t know anything about raising adolescents. Being a parent took guts. It meant teaching values and instilling a code of conduct in impressionable kids who needed all the help possible in this day and age. The organization did a good job at doing just that on a campus that resembled a well-tended college campus that housed both boys and girls, in four separate cottages, on a big parcel of land. The kids who lived in the cottages commonly ended up there after being orphaned at a young age by irresponsible parents. But the campus was also home to the Kaplan Career Academy and there were more than sixty teens from the surrounding community who attended the special needs school.

“I doubt it is one of their kids,” Marty mirrored his sergeant’s belief. Standing from his chair he shuffled over to his wife and kissed her on the cheek before heading for the door. “Call over there, Delores, and see if they’re missing anybody.”

“I’m on it,” she said reaching for a multi-lined telephone.

Could it be one of their boys running in the woods? The chief wondered. He knew most of them had it made at the school. They formed great friendships, learned well in their classes and had adapted very well to New Windsor life. Heck, some of the kids even helped at the town car wash every summer raising funds for the Fourth of July cookout sponsored by the Town Hall.

Hurrying through the squad room, Marty and his sergeant pushed out dual glass doors and slogged through the storm before climbing into a white and blue patrol car with POLICE CHIEF painted on the doors. Sliding the key into the ignition, the chief started the engine, flipped on the heater and glanced to Stanley sitting in the passenger seat.

“You know what this sounds like, Stan?”

“Case number 201608?”

Just a month prior a McQuade kid had come up missing along Blooming Grove Turnpike. His bloody tracks had also been discovered tracing into the timbers, but the body was never recovered. The most interesting aspect of that case, for everyone concerned, was another abandoned car that sat idling on the roadway.

It was eerily similar to this current accident call.

Remembering that case, the chief recalled that following two days of penetrating the deep woods, with more than a hundred law enforcement personnel, the bloody footprints ended in a pool of dark, red blood at the banks of Moodna Creek. That was the end of it and the case never went anywhere.

"If this accident is near McQuade," Marty grumbled with concern cracking his voice, "and we're dealing with one of their missing boys, we'll have to reopen that unsolved case from last year. This incident sounds similar to the Tommy Smith disappearance, doesn't it?"

When Stanley answered in the affirmative Marty shook his head and hit the siren. Navigating along Union Avenue he turned onto New York's Route 32 to Willow Avenue.

"The plows are working overtime," the chief of police noticed, eyeballing a huge, yellow truck pushing mounds of snow to the side of the road. Turning onto Blooming Grove Turnpike, he saw the flashing emergency lights. Then, just off to the side, he glanced at the abandoned Mustang that was crashed into a swath of pines.

"Jeez, what the heck caused someone to veer off the road like that?"

"Not sure," the sergeant answered.

Pulling alongside the scene, the men climbed from the car and rushed over to Patrolman Henry Tomlinson... a lanky, under nourished, five-year veteran of the New Windsor Police Department.

"What do you have?" Marty asked.

"I found the scene like this," Henry answered, swinging a heavy, black, service flashlight across the vehicle. "The dead girl on the hood was DOA when I arrived, the engine was still idling and I found these." Walking along a bloody trail, he led the chief and sergeant to the bloody footprints tracking into the woods. Pushing his light along their trajectory into the forest he shrugged and grunted in disbelief. "It doesn't add up, Chief. I don't like this for one minute!"

"What do you make of it?"

"Darned if I know, but I have a bad feeling about it."

Grabbing a flashlight from his gun belt the chief followed the trail a few yards into the woods with his men close behind. "It's dark as a haunted house on Halloween." Glancing at the night sky he noticed the moonlight was entirely blocked out by the storm and swung his light back through the trees. "My light is barely punching through this heavy darkness."

"Darn," Patrolman Tomlinson griped, a look of concern furrowing his brow. "I hope we aren't going further into these woods." As soon as he said it he was sorry. He was somewhat of a yellow belly, as strange as that sounds for a law-enforcement officer. Henry also couldn't stand the sight of blood and hated the thought that someday he might have to pull his sidearm, aim its barrel at another human being and pull the trigger. He suffered terrible nightmares about this and, at one point, he actually saw a psychiatrist to help deal with the stress of the job.

Then, suddenly, from somewhere back up on the road, an ambulance siren wailed in the distance. Everyone knew its blare, as there was a distinct sound to it. Police sirens all had a *whoop-whoop-whooping* sound whereas an ambulance screeched a solitary, non-stop, teeth-grinding wail.

"Go back up there," Marty ordered Henry, "and get the paperwork going."

The patrolman hated the form-filling more than anything. He spent more than half his shift filling out tickets, forms and incident reports. Often, those reports contained information about mutilated cattle, loud music from a neighbor's house, or pulling over a speeding motorist and filling out moving violations that drove in revenue for town.

"You want me to list this as an accident and missing person?"

Shaking his head, Marty wasn't sure yet. He knew he had an accident to deal with, but those bloody footprints leading into the tree line... that was something entirely different. It was possible they'd find to whom they belonged ... possibly shivering, hypothermic and pushed up against a tree trunk near death and frightened out of their mind. That being the case, it was also possible they'd find a dead body out in the woods with wolves nibbling at the feast.

"We can start searching the timbers," Sergeant Stump suggested. "Or, maybe, we should just call out a search party and wait until everyone gets out here to the scene; have somewhat of a backup in case something goes bad?"

Thrusting his hands onto his hips Chief Marty McBride wasn't sure what he wanted to do just yet. He supposed his first instinct was to follow the bloodied footprints, track through the building storm and find out exactly what had transpired. He didn't think waiting was a good idea. It wouldn't take long for somebody to die out here with these frigid conditions.

Pushing his flashlight through the trees, the sergeant glanced to his boss. "Want to track the prints or call backup?"

Grunting, the chief decided to lead the way. "Let's get a move on, every minute counts here. There is no time to waste on waiting for surrounding departments to show up and help us in the search. We don't know how long this person has been out here in the dark." His hope was... that each step would lead them to the owner of the abandoned sneakers up on the roadway. With his flashlight illuminating the bloody tracks he led his sergeant into the unknown dangers waiting in the darkness. His flashlight barely punching through the blackness, a solitary howl of a wolf broke the silence of the night. The animal could be miles away or shadowing their track laterally, just out of sight. Whatever the case, neither of the men cherished the thought of the mission that lay ahead. Many first responders had died in conditions just like this, some having been attacked by wild animals, others tripping over an unseen log or rock that littered the path.

Staring through the trees the chief recognized one thing. *This is not going to be good.* Something nagged at the back of his neck. "They are back, Stump, I can feel it in my bones!"

"Jeez, Chief, let's hope you are wrong," the sergeant answered. "We can't keep this a secret much longer. People are becoming concerned."

That secret had to do with missing people.

There were dozens every year.

And, by all accounts... evil was back in town.

Chapter 4

THE WOODS

THE THINGS were chasing Peter.

He heard them flanking his movements through the cold, dark woods. Tripping over a tree branch covered with snow, he fell to the ground with a thump.

Nervously scanning the tree line, he observed the old pines were tremendously large and sprouted more than a hundred feet into the air.

“Hello? Is anybody out there?”

Of course, they are and they’re coming for you.

Dad’s ghostly voice scared the crap outta him and fear ran the length of his backbone, causing a subsequent shiver.

“I have to get myself moving,” he urged, lifting himself from the frozen earth. That’s when he noticed the shiver had become an uncontrollable shudder and that he’d quickly become disoriented and drowsy.

This, of course, was a result of his core body temperature falling below ninety-five degrees. When that happened hypothermia set in. Soon, his flesh would start freezing as frostbite advanced and paralyzed his fingers, toes, earlobes and the tip of the nose. It would all be over... a dead boy walking.

They’d find his skeleton in the spring thaw, the joints disconnected and the bones bleached white from a blazing sun hanging low in the sky. The bones would be scattered over a great distance, remnants of what the wild things had left from the carcass after chewing away scraps of flesh.

“Dammit, I have to keep moving!”

Abruptly, a snarl erupted from somewhere out in the darkness.

“Gak mach ich noch!”

That’s not an animal that I’ve ever heard.

Behind the teenager, from someplace out in the impenetrable darkness, there was a quick, frantic movement. It reminded him of what a pack of wolves might sound like charging through the timbers and hunting their prey.

“I have to move!” he urged his numbing body while stumbling on his freezing, unprotected feet and pushing through the snow. *I’m going to die out here!*

These things chasing Peter had been a long whispered joke. Everyone in high school had heard the dreaded stories of *the things* that stalked the woods, yet none of his friends had solid proof they existed. Some supposed the demons were from middle earth while others said the creatures lived in the waters of Moodna Creek.

The Maniacs were legend in New Windsor.

That’s what the high school kids called the monsters around campfires on windswept, midsummer evenings. With beer coursing through their underage veins, most thought the stories were hysterical... just something insane to entertain.

Nobody *honestly* thought they were real.

Not so funny now... huh, Petey Boy?

Recalling every story he’d heard about *The Maniacs*, he wondered why all his friends hadn’t paid closer attention to the possibility of their dreaded existence. It certainly seemed plausible that creatures could live out here in the woods, maybe sheltering somewhere beneath a lean-to

or pushing into the back of a cave. There were plenty of freshwater fish and wild animals for them to hunt.

You've always known they were real, Peter, daddy's voice suggested. Deep down in your soul, underneath all your Doubting Thomas questions, at the very center of your being... you've always felt their existence was true!

And, maybe, that was true.

Perhaps every boy growing up across the globe had an undeniable certainty pounding in his chest. Maybe it was a rite of passage, for children everywhere, to sit around a campfire and listen to monster stories with the nervous understanding that going into the woods, alone at night, was not a good thing.

It was outright foolhardy to light a match without expecting consequences, especially if you knew what those fiery embers carried.

Now, Peter knew for sure, *The Maniacs* existed.

But it is too late, Sonny Boy! A nickel shy and a dollar short!

"Gak mach ich noch," another terrifying snarl erupted from the thickets. "Mach ich noch! Mach ich noch!"

Scared out of his mind, Peter scrambled backward through the brush until he collapsed onto his rump. The large gash on his forehead was persistently dripping blood now, the bright red stains leaving red tracks in the snow.

They smell your stink, Pete, and they're coming for you, Sonny!

Desperately trying to catch his breath, the quarterback scanned the blackness for the source of the terrifying, growling agony.

At that moment, another snarl bounded through the dark... but this time, the boy saw something large, maybe eight feet tall, hiding behind the trees. With fear lining his horrified face he leapt to his feet and ran for dear life through the knee-deep snow. "Oh, man, oh, man!" he cried, swiveling his blonde headed skull on his thick, white neck. Glancing over his shoulders and seeing nothing but towering saplings, every second seemed like hours, because he knew, at any moment, the perturbing, stinking creatures, trailing close behind, would soon catch his sorry butt and carry him, kicking and screaming, back to their lair where they'd probably rip apart his youthful flesh.

A fine meal... that milky-white flesh of yours will taste like a porterhouse steak.

That voice of dad's had stalked him since the day his pop died.

"Shut up!" Peter shouted, punching through the tree line and running onto deserted Route 74. The narrow, snaking, thoroughfare was covered with a foot of snow. The vision caused him to realize that he'd have to cut a path through the drifts. Glancing down the road that divided the thickets, he saw pine and maple trees for as far as his eyes could see. Breathing heavily and totally exhausted, a piercing, throbbing pain shot up his legs. Grabbing his aching hamstrings, he realized for the first time that it was possible he'd die right here, surrounded by the woodlands, bloody and lost in the dense coppices he thought he knew so well.

Glancing along the roadway, his memories recalled prior Saturday nights when his classmates ventured out here to make out with their girlfriends.

Route 74 was one of those secluded, unpatrolled, areas that kids always liked, where the darkness invaded everything and the thrill of making it to first base outweighed the risks of personal danger.

"Man," Peter huffed, realizing there was nowhere to run. The plow never ventured out here because moving snow from isolated roads was low on the town's priority list. With this awareness taunting his fear stricken mind, he knew the only way to safety was to run more than two miles down this road or risk a one-mile trek through the woods.

Both choices terrified him.

At this instant, from somewhere behind, *the things* moved through the darkness. Peter heard the claws, or something, crunching through the ice-covered snow and moving through the woods more rapidly than anything he'd ever heard before.

Then, quite unexpectedly and without warning, a large, flat limestone rock landed in a spray of snow at his feet. It looked like a water skipper, but this one was fifty times larger.

It's Bigfoot, Petey Boy, daddy's voice suggested. Forget all those stories you have heard, this is the sickest Mammy Jammy of them all.

"Damn it!" Peter shouted in terror. *The thing is stalking me, just waiting for the right moment.*

Glancing to the rock forced the quarterback to consider *the things* stalking him were something like a Sasquatch. They were known to traverse the woods of the Hudson Valley and were reported to taunt humans who'd dared hike through the forest.

Scanning the area, he considered his options.

I have to keep moving... if I want to survive. I'll have to make it through the woods to Route 9W where a car or truck might pass.

First, he'd have to navigate Murderers Creek.

It got its name in 1813 when a girl, named Sally Hamilton, came up missing. Later, her head was found half a mile north of where Peter now stood.

The rest of her body was never found.

Nowadays, if someone such as a reporter or investigator wanted to locate Sally's weathered gravestone, sprouting from the earth in Mount Hope Cemetery, they'd find the tombstone detached from its base and leaning against another monument. The lettering on the stone had been worn down and it looked like somebody took a grindstone to it. But if you looked real close, pushing your nose up against the headstone, the date of death was barely visible. Yet, if anyone excavated that tomb they'd find an empty casket with rocks weighing it down.

Of course, nobody was looking.

Sally's suspicious demise had been intentionally wiped from the town's vital statistics records.

Pete knew now that she was one of the first to be taken.

However, when newly discovered bodies were found out here, the stories came rushing back. Horror legends always crept back and found their way into the dark bedrooms of teenaged boys. That was especially true when, every few years, a cadaver was found near the creek. Some townsfolk claimed a serial killer was stalking New Windsor and had dumped remains along the creek bed for a quick discovery by the police while others told more sinister tales of creatures.

Big, snarling monsters drooling through razor-sharp teeth.

Peter didn't want to think of that right now.

"Crap," he spat through chattering, brilliantly white teeth. The braces of his youth had done him well and, dang it... they wouldn't much matter now, anyway. Except, maybe in a few years, when the bugs had eaten his lifeless body and his skeleton worked its way into the soil. If he was lucky a hiker might find the teeth, like shiny pebbles, littering the ground.

They'd be fossils by then and all evidence of his life would've been covered over by the town's foul secrets. The township knew how to hide the truth.

Snapping back to the present he peered across the frozen landscape and saw Murderers Creek had frozen over. Sprinting across the abandoned roadway, he swiveled his head and glanced back into the dark tree line.

But it wasn't dark enough... because, just then, he saw dozens of the monstrous creatures crouching across the road just behind a patch of tall pines.

“Whaddaya want?”

Dinner, boy; they want your flesh!

“You’re miserable, Dad!”

Then, the biggest of the monster clan leapt onto the road and tramped towards the boy. Stepping in large, swinging paces its movements appeared as if it was crawling on all fours, but actually advancing with just a few large strides.

“Gak mach ich noch,” the lead, huge reptile creature snarled through rows of large, triangular, jagged teeth that protruded from exceptionally thin grey lips. Its skin resembled football leather, except it was scaly and green in appearance... much like a lizard or snake. The beast was horrendous.

Making it harder to describe... was the fact it seemed to morph in and out of reality, as if it was suddenly disappearing and reappearing every ten feet or so. If Peter didn’t know any better he would’ve believed that the monsters were appearing through some type of wormhole, or portal, like on Star Trek Enterprise where the body materialized out of nothing after being beamed down.

Here comes the gravy train, boy!

It scared Peter so much he felt like passing out.

But he didn’t do that, because to fall down and close his eyes at this moment would mean certain death. Instinctively he turned and sprinted for the world record in the Olympic Games stumbling repeatedly, and not caring if the creek’s ice bed was frozen all the way through. Today there was only one thing Peter Massey cared about.

He wanted to live.

Chapter 5

DEAD ON ARRIVAL

CLIFFORD WEBB knew the girl.

And he immediately recognized she was dead.

An Emergency Medical Technician with New Windsor's Volunteer Ambulance Corps, he'd been with the department for ten years and had seen every conceivable cause of death.

Murders.

Accidents.

Suicides.

But there were also very strange mutilations of corpses.

Cliff was so used to seeing the deceased that it didn't affect him anymore; he was numb to the sight of them. It didn't matter if they were riddled with bullet holes, had their skulls cracked open, or were burned alive.

Once victims were dead there was nothing he could do about it.

His job was to save lives not worry about the departed.

"Wow," Clifford whispered to his longtime partner who was pulling sticky cardiac leads from the girl's cold chest. "She didn't have a chance! Killed the instant her skull struck the windshield."

"Yup, a very unlucky girl. You want me to jingle up the county morgue?"

Pushing the heart monitor back into a red, mobile *life bag*, Cliff shook his head and turned his eyes to the dark overcast skies.

"Nah, it'll take them an hour to get here in this weather."

Pulling a stretcher from the ambulance he had an idea. "Why don't we transport her over to Harry's place? Let him clean up the loose ends with a big red bow and his shiny, sharpened instruments."

That meant the horror of an autopsy.

Harry Mortinson was Orange County's Medical Examiner and, what some people termed, the *Tender of the Dead*. Although working from the morgue on Wells Farm Road, in the county seat of Goshen, he lived in town and often accepted a random, unlucky stiff at his custom basement morgue constructed within his old mansion.

That frightened the bejesus out of the kids in town who named him *Scary Harry*. It's not like he didn't deserve the designation... he understood the moniker, surfacing when he purposely left the basement windows open in summer... knowing that the stench of decomposing flesh filtering through the neighborhood alerted everyone in town that, if they dared to find the courage to peek into Harry's cellar windows, they'd see a cadaver stretched out for all its glory on a stainless-steel postmortem slab; the rib cage ripped open by bolt cutters; the chest cavity visible for everybody to see and the intestines and organs lying out in plain sight beside the body. Sometimes the kids saw an un-beating heart situated in the middle of a stainless steel scale hanging over the table.

It was scary stuff to regular folks and old Harry knew it.

That cellar of his and the cold lifeless bodies held captive inside the Mortech Morgue Stainless Steel Refrigerator didn't help the old man on Halloween, either. He bought the icebox for the price of \$14,000.00 from an online morgue supplier, MortuaryMall.com. They sold just about everything a mortuary needed to operate.

On Halloween, the neighborhood kids showed their displeasure by paying Harry visits he didn't appreciate. While goblins and costumed monsters knocked on doors, with demands of tricks and treats, teens would also toss toilet paper across the maple trees that peppered Harry's lawn.

The next morning, when he walked the brick driveway to retrieve his *New York Times*, he'd stare, in heated anger, at the branches covered by the paper.

This year, just months prior and because of the papering, Harry demanded the mayor and town council pass an ordinance banning the kids from possessing Silly String and toilet paper from October 31st until the morning of November 1st.

The vote quickly passed as the councilmen were sick and tired of paying sanitation workers \$18.00 an hour to clean the annual mess in Harry's yard. Sending out letters to residents, the ordinance notification warned fines of \$1,000.00 would be issued to property owners if their kids were caught in possession of the banned items.

You know what the teens did?

They papered Harry's trees anyway... a reason why passing *new laws* didn't work. There was always a work around.

Returning from his thoughts of the old coroner Clifford shook his head and stared back to Jen's corpse. "She's in a better place," he convinced himself while repacking his EMT trauma bag. "Besides, had she survived the crash, her cranial injuries would've left her paralyzed from the neck down."

Nobody wanted to live like that!

Glancing to the ground, he stared at the pair of sneakers lying in the snow. They appeared as if a kid had just pulled them off and left them to be found.

"Is there someone else on the scene?"

Patrolman Tomlinson walked up and shook his head pointing into the woods. "The chief and Stan are out searching for Peter Massey right now." Having run the Mustang's license plate he discovered the registered owner's name.

"Peter? My quarterback?" Cliff said in disbelief. "Is he out there in the cold, dark, woods running without his shoes?"

"Yup," Tomlinson answered, nodding at the footprints and claw marks, "Looks like he ran for six points into the woodlands with something chasing close behind."

"What could that be?"

"Not sure right now."

Clifford stared at the clawed impression pushed deep into the snow. Bending to inspect the tracks, he was familiar with the pattern because similar trajectories had been discovered in the woodlands around town. From Bear Mountain through the Hudson Valley Region every winter the tracks appeared everywhere.

The last time he'd seen them was last year when a cadet from West Point disappeared during the dreaded school's plebe Marchback hike. Later, when an Army search party fanned out to hunt for the soldier in training, similar tracks were found leading deep into the woods.

That disappearance made the NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt.

West Point Cadets just didn't go missing from the academy. When that happened, the woods were packed with an army of young plebes. But the missing cadet was never found. The only thing anyone discovered was a torn, United States Military Academy, ACU Patch. The green helmet and spear imprint was stained with blood, an undeniable clue that something horrendous had happened.

The resultant inquiry went nowhere.

Without a body there was no murder investigation.

Of course, everyone in town knew the student must've been murdered and his body hidden away somewhere.

But what could have killed him?

And where was his body?

The search party must've spent a week out in the woods looking for that teenager, probing every abandoned building, pulling up every old piece of plywood littering the ground with rusted nails punched through.

Recalling the search, Clifford pulled his coat collar tight around his thick neck to ward off the freezing gust of arctic wind. Glancing from the tracks he looked to the patrolman. "Hey, Henry, don't they resemble the giant lizard impressions? How can that be again this year?"

"They're certainly bizarre, all right."

Then, Chief Marty and Sergeant Stump returned from the woods and appeared back at the terrible car crash.

"Hey, Marty," Clifford called. "Did you happen to see these tracks?"

Nodding, the chief marched past the scene and over to his patrol car thinking he needed time to round up a search party to comb through the pines.

Damn, what if they are back? What am I gonna do if we start getting calls that people are being pulled out of their beds, in the middle of the night, by giant lizards? Who am I going to call for help?

The fact was he was scared out of his wits and knew two years ago something wasn't right in town, that perhaps *the things* people spoke of out in the woods had returned to wreak havoc on humanity. He didn't know where they came from, or what their objective was, but the witnesses calling 911 all spoke of terrifying creatures moving through their yards... and that was alarming.

"Chief?" Cliff interjected. "Why'd Peter run into the woods, without shoes, in the middle of a snowstorm like this? We've never had a problem with him at McQuade."

Marty pulled off his thick winter gloves, reached into the cruiser and grabbed the dashboard microphone hanging on its stainless steel clip. Pressing the transmit button, he held up a finger for Cliff to hang on a second.

"Delores, ya got your little ole ears on?"

"Go ahead, Martin."

Glancing through the windshield at the bloody tracks, he hoped he was wrong about what might've left them behind. But the chief was rarely wrong when it came to his gut feelings. He had a sense about things and, like most cops, he could tell you what might be happening around the corner and down the street.

He had an extra sense most people didn't.

"Marty, are you still on the air?"

Watching Cliff and his partner, Steve, loading the dead girl's body into the ambulance, the chief questioned his thoughts as the radio crackled to life again.

"Marty?"

"I'm here, Delores."

"What do you need, Sweetie?"

Scanning the desperate scene, the Chief knew exactly what had to be done. "Pony up surrounding departments and get the mayor out of bed. We have a missing teenager, Peter Massey, with a predator stalking him."

"You've confirmed its Peter?"

“Yes, Cliff is here and we know its Peter’s car, but his girlfriend is *DOA* and remains atop the hood.”

“I’ll notify surrounding departments and get them up there soon as possible.”

That backup is going to be needed, too, Marty knew. Because...if he had what he thought he did... there was a hunt out there in the darkness. From everything he knew about the demons of Hell the creatures would stalk the blackness of nightfall, snatch people from their houses and... those people would never be seen again.

“Did you roger that, Marty?”

Grunting, the chief answered in the affirmative and turned back to the men. “Clifford, we really don’t know its Peter right now, right? All we have is his car and dead girlfriend, and although it’s likely those are his tracks leading into the woods, we can’t prove it until we go find him.”

“It’s his sneakers, Marty!”

Staring into the blackness of the timbers, the chief decided he was going to track those footpaths into the woods, find the monsters and fill them with lead. He didn’t care if they used every bullet the town had in the department’s ammo safe.

“We’re gonna go into the forest and find that kid,” he finally decided, “If it’s Peter and he’s still alive. We’ll find him!”

It was going to be a long, cold night.

But none of them knew what was waiting out in the darkness.

They might just find their own deaths out there.

Chapter 6

DR. DEATH

SCARY HARRY was certainly a strange bird.

Nobody would argue that point.

The hunchbacked, white-haired, seventy-year-old medical examiner suffered from kyphosis, a degenerative disease that affected the curvature of his spine. Called *roundback*, the deformity was triggered by a wedged vertebra that developed after Harry returned from the war.

Since then he had suffered his entire life and sometimes wondered why he didn't just conjure up the courage to place a shotgun into his mouth, pull the trigger and blow out the back of his skull. The pain from the disease caused these thoughts and more. Occasionally, the stabbing, throbbing agony was so ruthless... he'd pull down the attic ladder and agonizingly climb its ten creaking, wooden steps.

Once up in the cramped and dusty space, breathing in dust particles, he'd unlock an old gun case and stare at the ancient weapons he'd slipped back from World War II.

Harry had a lot of secrets up in his attic.

A three-time divorcee, those enchantresses had each taken almost everything he owned and had tried desperately to get their greedy little hands on a pair of well-worn leather photo albums with the initials A.H. embedded in the lower right corner of ominous black covers.

Many people, the world over, had been searching for these private photo albums, but nobody suspected Harry had them hidden away on his New York estate.

Often, he'd pull the albums out of cardboard boxes and stare at the demented, private photographs of Adolph Hitler who'd secretly posed for the camera. Not many people knew The Furor posed for pictures, in advance of big speaking engagements, so he could see how he appeared.

Later, the poses would be replicated at speeches.

However, Harry knew... and so did a few good men from his squad. He'd found the albums while on assignment with the U.S. Army's Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Program. They were responsible for finding and safekeeping artistic objects stolen by the Nazis.

Hollywood made a movie about it in 2014.

Having been invited to the premier, Harry and a few of the surviving squad members watched the film starring John Goodman, George Clooney, Matt Damon and Bill Murray. But secretly, Harry had strong opinions of remaking history for the silver screen and often voiced those sentiments at parties.

Fiction was always better than truth.

That was a long time ago, he now realized, hobbling back down two sets of stairs and into his study. Moving to a handmade walnut bar, stocked with dozens of liquor bottles, he approached a wood-paneled wall and pressed the play button of a 1951 Seeburg wood-paneled jukebox. This particular one had a moving animation system that sent a rainbow of colors onto the front grill as it played the old records.

"Way better than digital music," he grumbled and closed his eyes in an instant of pure ecstasy. He smiled as Mozart's *Requiem* erupted from the speakers. As the piece played on he moved his hand through the air like a conductor directing a symphony. At the conclusion he opened his eyes in pure bliss with an expression of peace planted on his face.

At the bar he reached for a snifter and poured two fingers of Armagnac into a bell-shaped glass.

Lovingly, he stared into the brown liquid from Southwest France and carefully sipped the alcohol.

As the liquor hit his bloodstream his pain subsided.

“Ah, darling, you never fail this old man.”

Replacing the glass on the bar he poured another round as the symphony played on. At that moment, something distracted his peace as a black shadow moved across the room. It was one of the many entities that lived on, after death, in the old house. Often, the ghosts made themselves known.

Smiling, Harry shook his head and collapsed into an old, whiskey leather chair. The seat was creased and well worn, a depression of the aging man’s rump clearly visible where the sheen of leather was nearly gone.

“I have company, eh?” he mumbled, a smile turning up the corners of his lips. Pulling a Dunhill Shell pipe from his old, grey, woolen sweater pocket, he generously packed the bowl with Paladin Black Cherry tobacco and lit it with a hand-made, well-crafted, sterling silver, flip-top lighter.

Glancing at the walls he eyeballed a collection of oil paintings, one of which depicted his home, Edmonston House. Peering at the artwork, he recalled snapping the original picture forty years prior and turning it over to a local artist who used it to create the masterpiece.

The house was really a mansion.

Set on four respectable acres of land the two-hundred-year-old dwelling was built with natural grey stones cut into brick oblongs. Completely restored, it sat behind a wide, charming, flagstone portico leading to a rock frontage tanned by years of weathered patina. In the backyard was an inviting, Olympic size, in-ground pool surrounded by dozens of towering maples whose leaves had since fallen.

Now, the branches were weighted down with snow.

“You are a beautiful picture,” the old man whispered to the painting, grimacing from a stab of arthritic pain that ravaged his knees, elbows and wrists. Turning from the canvas he recalled the day New Windsor’s Mayor advised him a non-profit wished to purchase, and preserve, his estate purely for its historical value.

But the old coot wasn’t selling.

Those not-for-profit grubbers will have to pull my dead body over the hardwood floors before I sell out. I have history here; the house maintains a personality all its own.

The home was one of the town’s most eerie places. But it did have character and, like many old estates, every groan of the mahogany steps and bang of the copper plumbing had a story behind it. Those tales often involved a ghost or two. Souls who’d refused to move into the hereafter.

How many haunted the home, and for what purposes, the old man would never know. But every so often he’d catch them watching from the dark, deep shadows.

Just like now, he knew something was with him.

Everyone in town also knew it was haunted. Partly because of Harry’s descriptions of the dark, damp basement that doubled as a morgue. Visitors, likewise, saw ghosts appear and disappear.

Sometimes, they’d even feel the chilled souls pass through their flesh.

Glancing through the drafty basement, Harry scanned dozens of mounted animal heads hanging from mounts on the paneled walls. Each had been hunted down by the old man many years prior. They had been shot through the heart with a .223 long barrel rifle and he took pride in the taking of the animals. Regarding the room, he stared above the fireplace at the massive head of a lion he’d slayed in Africa years prior. Below its magnificence a brilliantly raging fire

crackled and popped in a hundred year old brick fireplace. Around the mantle face, black soot stained the bricks from years of fighting brutal winters.

Reaching to the hand-carved walnut mantle, he picked up a framed photograph that displayed the smiling image of his recently departed wife, Elizabeth.

Ah, how I miss you, darling.

She was his true love, the one who stood by him, no matter what, through thick or thin, for better and worse. The short Italian woman made Harry's life bearable.

But then, thirty-eight years into their perfect marriage, cancer took her. Placing the picture back in its place the old man shuffled over to his chair, sat in its comfort and dug his barefoot toes into a lush, black bear rug.

On the side table sat his beloved *New York Times*. Grabbing it he flipped to page five and settled his stare upon this article.

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

Hudson Valley authorities are still seeking the community's help in locating the whereabouts of a missing teenager, Tommy Smith. The teen is said to have disappeared last week when a McQuade outing snaked it's way along hiking trails at Bear Mountain. Last seen by a classmate, Ron Peters, the missing boy was hiking through the trees behind the McQuade Campus of Saint Christopher's Children Services. After Mr. Peters lost sight of his friend he heard a scream deep in the woods. After more than thirty minutes passed Mr. Smith still had not returned. The search party spent days searching the woodlands for the missing boy, but Tommy was never found. Now Police are asking residents in the tri-state area to keep an eye out for the boy."

"Hmm," Harry mumbled, a grimace of concern lining his brow, "it's all happening again, isn't it?" The vanishings, as everyone in town liked calling them, were becoming commonplace. It used to be that, once in a blue moon, someone would turn up missing... and not long after a body would make its way onto his autopsy table.

A hiker gone missing... a hit and run victim.

Nowadays, cadavers were rarely found.

They just disappeared.

Since 1990 millions of people in America had walked out their front doors in the morning, climbed aboard a Metro North railroad car... and never returned.

"Interesting," Harry whispered after reading the article and placing the paper back on the side table. Standing from his chair, he lumbered back to the bar and poured another round. Halfway through the pour the doorbell rang. Glancing to his watch, he groaned at the time. "Who might that be standing outside my home at this hour?" Navigating the stairs leading out of the study he arrived at the front door and pulled it open only to find his favorite EMT, Clifford Webb.

"Clifford, dear boy, what in the devil brings you out in this vicious mess?"

"We have a body, Harold."

Delightful, Harry thought. *Peace for another soul.*

Since the passing of Elizabeth the coroner never found happiness again and realized he'd only find peace by putting on his detective hat to discover the causes of death of people who found their miserable way to his basement and onto his autopsy table.

Some found happiness in the cars they drove, the jobs they maintained, or the children they raised from infants. Harry had been there and done that! Nowadays, he found contentment at the end of his stainless steel scalpel. Everyone got the same treatment from Harry and he always made the Y-incision on the chest, cut through the ribs with a bolt cutter and dug deep into the body to remove the organs. When finished studying them he sewed up the cadaver. If nothing was found there, he'd peel back the skin and hair on the head, grab his bone cutter and cut a perfect circle around the skull in order to remove the brain for further study.

For, Harry knew, life was a bitch and she always died. As far as he was concerned, that was the secret of life. Everything always died. No matter what one did, animal, reptile or mammal, sooner or later, they all met the same fate: death waited for nobody.

Chapter 7

GOD'S HONEST TRUTH

YOUNG LARS stared at the cops.

He never trusted them and Oscar the Dog seemed to agree. The boy didn't necessarily like them, either; that's just the plain, honest truth. In fact, he loathed their bloated assertiveness of self-importance.

They're just people with clubs and guns.

Gazing toward the copperheads, as they rapidly stepped from their siren-shrieking cars, he watched them march through the deep snow that covered a sidewalk leading to the apartment and the horrors.

Staring hard, with a look of anger, Lars noticed that each of the cops' steps broke a thin layer of ice covering the snowy sidewalk. The resulting crack reminded him of a twig breaking. Watching, he couldn't help but chuckle as one of the little piggy's fell down hard in the snow.

"Today's not my day!" an overweight cop grumbled, his hat flying from his bald head and landing beneath a great willow tree. Rushing over, two uniforms helped him up. Had anyone guessed what this resembled, they might've supposed a Saturday Night Live comedy sketch. Because, right then, they all slipped and fell with a litany of curses.

"You lard butt," a sergeant complained to the overweight cop. "Get New Windsor public works in here to clear out a path so we won't kill ourselves. And jingle up homicide to start rolling to the scene!"

"We're on it, Sarge," the patrolman answered, gulping down his hour-old cup of stale 7-11 coffee while reaching for a handheld radio.

Lars laughed uncontrollably at the sight of *Lardbutt* crawling to his feet and struggling to pull up his pants that were hardly held in place by a well-worn, Sam Brown, gun belt. Beside the boy Oscar the Dog wagged his tail happily seemingly having not a care in the world for what had happened.

"How did the victim in the bedroom die?" the Jenny Craig cop queried. Although he could've taken a lesson or two from that diet program, the truth was... he always lacked self-control.

"The mother claims to have set it afire!"

"Then, where is his skeleton?"

It's in there, all right! Lars thought. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust!

"Hey, Kid," Mr. 7-11 called out and approached the stoop. "It's a bit cold out here. Why don't we go sit in the backseat of my patrol car?"

"Sure," the boy agreed, biting his bottom lip. "Can I bring Oscar?"

Shrugging, the detective eyed the harmless looking animal, stared into its large round eyes and wrapped his arm around Lars' shoulders. "Sure, why not?"

"Come on, Oscar boy," Lars said to his best friend trotting beside him towards an idling marked cruiser. Glancing to the roof of the car he stared at the pulsing red and blue lights illuminating the scene. Sliding into the backseat he surveyed the interior and wondered what it was like to be handcuffed.

"Is it warm enough?" the Detective asked. "If not, I can turn up the heater."

"Nah, thanks," Lars answered eyeballing the army of cops rushing through the parking lot. *Wait till they get a load of Ronnie's incinerated remains!*

"I'll be back in a few minutes," the cop stated reaching into the front and turning on the radio. Then, almost on second thought, he stepped from the car, turned back and pointed out an Ithaca,

Model 37, Twelve-Gauge shotgun secured to a dashboard mount. “No matter what, don’t touch that fine gun or it will make holes in you.”

Nodding agreement Lars watched as Oscar leapt inside beside him as the man closed the door. Filtering through his ears Elton John’s *Bennie & the Jets* played through the speakers... and somehow the lyrics made perfect sense as the teenager stroked the incessantly content animal at his side.

♪ Hey, kids... We'll kill the fatted calf tonight! ♪

Turning his attention to the lard butt outside, Lars tracked the copperhead’s path to a black van with MORGUE printed in white along its side. Wiping a palm across the frosted glass he cleared a sightline.

Out there the *nose-lifting* neighbors surrounded his mother, sticking their nostrils so far up the butt of *The Happening*... turds should’ve packed their lungs.

“Stupid jerks.” Lars spat, never liking them, not for a minute. He especially disliked Ethel and Herbert McKenna when they spoke racial language, like *kikes* and *hebes*, when describing his friend, Mr. Stein, the owner of *Stein Butchery and Meats*.

Glancing to the worn out vinyl seat, the teenager recalled a day when he’d walked through pelting rain to find old man Stein cutting large, plump, lamb chops with the biggest knife ever witnessed.

“Baaaaaa,” Mr. Stein had clowned one day imitating a lamb.

It scared the bejesus outta young Lars. Maybe because of his solitary walk through the thunderstorm, or perhaps it was the size of the steel, or the way the butcher held the blade. To this day the teenager still wasn’t sure why that simple act had frightened him so. Despite it, he thought fondly of the *Slicer of Flesh*. Rarely did the butcher have a word out of place when interacting with him or Mom. Thus, every Sunday, like clockwork, he’d hurry down Main Street and pick up mother’s order containing chops, ground beef and liverwurst.

Although after being served, and as soon as mother turned away, he spat the liverwurst into a disposable paper napkin and fed it to Oscar the Dog who was happy for the unusual, special treat.

Lookie there, Lars thought, peering at Mr. Stein. *Speak of the devil himself!*

The butcher was struggling through the snow. Pushing in the door he reached mother’s side, hugged Patty tight and wrapped a gigantic woolen blanket over her trembling shoulders.

Glancing through the crowd Lars set his eyes on the Pryors... the only African American couple that lived in the apartment complex. Bald as the day he was born, Gavin Pryor looked more like Vin Diesel only without the bad attitude.

Then, *Lardbutt* interrupted the gathering and suddenly handcuffed Patty.

“What’re they doing?” he screamed, slapping the frosted window.

Arriving at the car, the sergeant opened the back door and guided mom into the backseat. “Have a seat, Patty. We’ll talk about all this down at the station. Don’t worry, it’ll work itself out, you’ll see.”

Lars hugged her the moment she hit the seat. “Mother, what’s happening?”

“It’s all right, Son. They think I set Ronnie on fire and got rid of the bones.”

“What, Mom? But you didn’t!”

“I know, Lars, but they’ll never believe your story that you turned him to dust! Let them believe what they want, just never admit to anything, you hear me?”

It was a flat out order and there was no arguing with her. Once commanded to jump the boy knew he could only ask how high.

It was case closed. And she would say exactly that.

“Case closed, Lars!”

The teenager always knew when mom was serious because, just like every other mother on the planet, she had *her right and mighty* way of pronouncing her son’s full name when something annoyed her.

But, this time, Lars figured she didn’t have an option. Her hands were cuffed.

“You want me to lie to the police? You know how he died, Mother!”

“Lars! I said case closed!”

“But Mom...”

“Boy! You do as I say and tell the cops I set that *Sorry Son of the Devil* on fire when he charged towards you with that belt.” Her face was beet red and the carotid artery was swelling her neck in anger.

When that happened her eyes tightened to pellets of doom. That’s when Lars knew to clench his pearly whites nice and tight. It was her physical *tell*, like a poker player. When the face went beet red he knew the debate was a done deal.

“You got me, Lars? Understand what I’m talking about?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he unhappily conceded, not sure why she wanted the *Uniform Wearers* to get a fractured sliver of God’s honest truth. But there was one thing he knew for absolute certain. He’d never defy mother’s orders. She was always right... even when she was wrong.

That was just the order of the universe.

Just as he thought this, the sergeant returned to the car, climbed behind the wheel and steered out of the apartment complex. The drive to the station seemed to last forever while his arm was interlocked with mother’s and with his head leaning on her shoulder.

Lars was scared... and yet, a sense of peace overtook his concerns.

He didn’t know exactly what would happen. He had no knowledge of how the law really worked outside of television shows. All he recognized was he loved his mother more than life itself. He could spend hours staring into his mother’s eyes. He loved her more than anything in the world.

God... how he wished the crystal globe hadn’t killed Ronnie.

It’s going to be okay, Blue Eyes, the alien’s voice filled his head. *Things are going to work themselves out in the end. All you have to do is believe in your heart!*

The boy never understood how the One of Knowledge got inside his head like he did just then. He could never really figure out the process. All he knew was that whenever he felt sad and down... the voice reassured with encouraging words of hope and confidence.

Most times, whatever it said came true.

You did nothing wrong today, Blue Eyes. Life is all about survival of the fittest. In the wild the stronger animals eat the weak, that’s why the lion is the king of the jungle.

The teenager wanted to protest at that moment, but he didn’t want to stress mother out by talking to his invisible friend. Thus, he became lost in embracing the woman he loved so much who sat bound beside him.

Do you hear what I’m saying, Blue Eyes?

Lars didn’t answer. He just clenched his eyelids shut real tight, pushed the voice from his head, and hoped everything would be okay with mother.

Within minutes the sergeant directed the car into the Ossining Police Department's parking lot, opened the back door and escorted Lars, Oscar the Dog and his mother inside to a stale, smelly room.

A feeling of dread overcame him once they entered the squad room. It was oppressing. As soon they pushed through the entrance he noticed almost all the cops had turned to stare at mother like she was a lowlife criminal.

I want to kill them all! The teenager thought.

Yet, as angry as Lars was, something warned him that a bigger battle was brewing. It would be a clash for all of humanity.

Chapter 8

THE HUNT

MURDERER'S CREEK had a dreadful history.

And Peter knew every frightful detail.

The creek was a small, Hudson River tributary that drained much of eastern Orange County. Fifteen miles long, its source was the convergence of Cromline Creek and Otter Kill Waterway. Legend held Murderer's Creek got its name from the 18th-century massacre of the Stacy family, killed by a trusted Native American Indian. In the distant past, Indians had scalped townies that utilized the creek... so the Stacy murder struck a chord with people and gave birth to a legend that quickly grew to include hundreds of imagined bodies said to be buried not far from the creek bed.

Murderers Creek was deserving of the frightful legend because everyone suspected that, if New Windsor's Mayor ever released the town's historical records, people would discover that hundreds of bodies really did show up in the woods surrounding the creek.

That's why the state changed the creek's name to Moodna Creek on all maps.

That action stunk of a cover-up.

But none of that helped Peter right now as he scanned the freezing woods. All he could think of while navigating the timbers was The Cropsey Maniac. Because, if that tale was true and knowing what he'd seen stalking him... he was about to become another statistic like so many others who encountered the sadistic, bloodletting monster.

So, pushing the legend from mind, he ran for his very life knowing that if he stood here long enough... he was sure to be slaughtered.

Rapidly, something moved through the pitch-black woods.

Barely able to see in the darkness, Peter expected something to snatch him by the throat and drag away his body.

That's all Peter thought of at that instant.

Scrambling through the darkness he controlled his fear of the things chasing him through the frozen tundra. All he wanted was to survive the night.

Can I possibly escape these things?

At that moment there was movement to his left.

I'm being stalked, he convinced himself and spun 360 degrees struggling to see through the darkness. In the distance a tree branch snapped and a snarling growl pierced the stillness.

You're being hunted, Sonny Boy! Dad's voice toyed with his fears. *The flesh chopper is going to chase you until your legs turn to rubber!*

Hearing dad's voice, whispering deep in his throbbing skull, Peter knew there was a big difference between *stalking* and *hunting*... because if a killer truly were hunting him he'd probably never escape the night with his life.

However, if the demons are really stalking me, merely chasing me through the dark, then I might have a chance to escape.

That's what the trembling teenager thought, but deep down inside he didn't believe he was going to escape. There would be no way for him to throw them off his scent. *After all*, he considered, *in the movies nobody ever escaped the bloodletting madman methodically stomping through the woods.*

The end was always the same.

Those things could be waiting right around the next tree, Sonny! Dad urged. You might as well lay your tender flesh down in the snow, pick up a rock and smash it into the side of your head. At least you'll be unconscious when the fiends find you and rip your flesh to pieces before devouring your blood-soaked body!

Shivering uncontrollably at this realization the quarterback navigated the shadowy woodlands by touching trees as he stumbled forward. Scanning the area he saw blackness had overtaken everything... and to make things worse, the temperature was dropping.

Unseen by Peter, on both sides of the creek bed, the diabolical monsters were advancing, closing in like one of those psychopathic serial killers hordes of kids went to the movie theaters to see. Each of the monster's steps was similar to a pack of ravenous wolves seeking out his warm, tender meat.

"Whaddaya want from me?" Peter finally screamed into the shadows.

They want to eat you, Mr. Tender Meat! Daddy's voice happily chimed. Don't take it personal, boy. They only want what's theirs. Out here, in the wild, its survival and right now you're nothing but a sniveling, frightened, weakling of a boy with no chance of surviving the night!

Daddy was getting under his skin.

On occasions like this the teenager wanted nothing more than to land a right hook on father's kisser. Just knock the words from his mouth and watch as his teeth fell to the floor.

But Peter couldn't touch his father.

It was way too late for any of that.

Precipitously, a deep, guttural, growl penetrated the surrounding forest.

Peter thought it resembled a hungry, desperate, thousand-pound black bear intent on filling its stomach with fresh meat to hold it over during these winter months of hibernation. He'd never heard a growling sound like this anywhere in all his life. There was evilness in the growl; a bloodcurdling ferociousness that warned it was coming to devour whatever waited in the pitch darkness.

That sound reminded him of Leo's movie, *The Revenant*.

"Damn it, leave me alone!" Peter bellowed into the gloom. Grimacing against a filthy, vomit inducing aroma carrying on the breeze, he fought the urge to throw up while glancing over his shoulder in search of the disturbing, sickening things that quickly appeared through the trees.

"Jesus, Freaking, Christ!"

"Gak mach ich noch," the biggest of the *demon things* shrieked. At more than seven feet tall it had enormous bulging muscles that flexed beneath grotesque, leather-like, green skin.

If the quarterback didn't know any better, and hadn't seen the monsters with his own fright filled eyes, he would've laughed off the happening and convinced himself this was some sick, demented, nightmare of a joke.

Nobody, after all, expected to stumble upon real monsters! As ridiculous as it all seemed, the entities standing just before him had symbols imbedded in their bodies.

The marks resembled a bird bending over an eyeball.



Tiring, Peter was no longer able to outrun the monsters. His body was depleted of energy so he fell to numb knees that buried themselves in the freezing snow. Suffering from hypothermia, he was prey awaiting slaughter.

You're going to just lie down and give up, huh, Sissy Boy?

Sobbing uncontrollably, and with his eyes wide open in a fearful stare, he could do nothing except shake in absolute fear, pee his pants and stare into the distance as the creatures approached. One thing he knew for sure, this was not *The Cropsey Maniac* or any other childhood monster.

This was something real...

And it was much worse than any nightmare conjured by the kids at McQuade.

This was a monster straight out of Hell.

Staring at the snarling, giant, lizard-creature walking upright on its massive muscled legs he couldn't rip his eyes from the terrifying thing. If it resembled anything, he thought it looked like a swamp monster. Waddling, its arms were swinging by its sides and almost touching the ground.

What is that symbol? Peter pondered with a wild, terrified stare locked onto the peculiar symbol covering the creature's body. Thinking the design looked familiar, he couldn't recall the memory because his brain was immobilized and suffering from a state of absolute fear. Pushing aside the sight of the symbol, he crawled through the snow trying to put distance between him and the things. However, spikes of jabbing pain caused his legs to spasm and he could no longer feel his face or hands. The unsympathetic cold was just too much, the gusting winds too bitter, and the temperature was plunging well below freezing.

Peter Massey was about to die.

Ripping his eyes from the horrific creature he jumped to his frozen feet. The soft white socks he had pulled on earlier, in the comfort of his cottage bedroom, were now nothing more than frozen blocks stained red by his blood. The once limber athlete believed that if he could just reach down to his socks right now he'd be able to knock his knuckles on frozen feet.

Knock... knock... crash.

His feet would shatter like a pane of glass.

At that moment the creatures were muttering their gibberish.

"Gak mach ich noch!"

Peter couldn't hear what it was trying to say through the growling and snarling. But yet, he understood what it communicated very clearly. He didn't verbally grasp... and had no idea what the growling meant. It wasn't like this thing growled and the quarterback heard what it said.

But *in his mind* the message was clearer than a church bell on Sunday morning.

Where is The One?

The words pounded into his brain.

It was a simple question, really, pushed deep into Peter's thoughts, telepathically implanted into his skull. It was as if the monster had full access to his brain and memories; like it was downloading every recollection he'd ever had.

Suddenly, his head started to throb and a stabbing headache forced him onto his back. The throbbing was so bad that he grabbed his head and slammed shut his eyes to try and deal with the agony.

"Gak mach ich noch!" the beast growled more ferociously.

Where is the One?

Clearly, the creature was searching Peter's mind for something. Somehow these disgusting beasts had the ability to scan human brains, telepathically ask questions, and search through memories like Spock would do on an episode of *Star Trek*.

But, for Peter, the pain of the mental attack was unbearable. The throbbing, stabbing pain of the telepathy was immobilizing; like the creatures had an ability to paralyze their prey just by entering thoughts and searching through memories.

They are downloading my brain, he thought.

When Peter didn't answer, the creature approached with its terrifying claws opening and closing; drool falling from its horrendous, spike-toothed mouth.

It's coming for you... and doesn't want to play ball with you out by the barn.

That cowshed was a disintegrating memory of yesteryear. Built in 1952 by grandfather, Peter maintained fond memories of throwing his football with grandpa on the forty acres of the Hudson Apple Orchard that his family once owned. The fruit and vegetable farm sat fifteen minutes north of New Windsor. In addition to growing apples his family harvested peaches, nectarines, cherries and pumpkins... all of which were available in season.

Your days of picking fruit and vegetables are surely over, boy.

Although Peter was fading in and out of consciousness his dad's voice was coming through loud and clear... it seemed like the old man was standing right there beside him, his large hands rolled into meaty fists and pushed onto his hips, the sweat-stained shirt-sleeves rolled up... a Dutch Master cigar tucked into the corner of his mouth.

That's how he remembered his father.

Dad and grandpa had gone on to heaven a few years before, leaving the boy all alone. Now, they were occupants of graves nestled between the pumpkin patch and the cherry trees. Funny, how life worked out. Toiling their whole lives tending to the family farm... dad and grandpa were now part of the Earth.

Better move your skinny white butt, Son. This thing is going to rip you apart if you just stay there in the snow thinking of the good ole days.

Blinking out of unconsciousness, Peter awoke and realized the pain from the mental attack had disintegrated. Forcing open his eyes he stared through blurry vision at the dozens of creatures surrounding his body. Naked as the day they were born, the creatures were similar to huge lizards.

After stumbling to his feet Peter thought his legs weighed a million pounds. Taking that first step of his escape was the hardest thing in the world because his legs felt like boiled spaghetti.

"Gak mach ich noch!"

Where is the One?

Cutting his eyes to the creatures' leader he watched the enormous monster rise onto its thick, muscled legs. Each step of its reptilian claws left deep impressions in the snow.

Run, Petey Boy, dad urged. Run like the wind!

Staring at the creature's sickening head, Peter was immobilized by fear gazing at the green skin stretched over the unusually small reptilian skull. Upon closer inspection he saw the skin was covered by deep, crisscrossing scars that jogged down its lizard-like face. But it was the eyes that really scared him. The glowing, ruby eyes resembled marbles. They glared at him through blackened eye sockets. Where head hair should've sprouted from the skull, its repulsive, rotting skin was pulled back and twisted into a jumble of knots that resembled Rastafarian dreadlocks.

Just as Peter wondered how this was possible, the creature lifted a massive, three-fingered claw that ended in blackened, twelve-inch, railroad spikes, with each claw curved inward toward the massive palm.

Mesmerized by the sight of the monsters, Peter watched as the leader reached down and scratched out a symbol in the snow:



He's marking his territory, Petey Boy.

"Please, God!"

Then, almost as if heaven answered his pleading call to the creator of all things under the stars, the whapping, thunderous, sound of helicopter blades punched through the darkness.

An instant later, a powerful searchlight pierced the darkness and moved across the creek bed.

"Help!" Peter yelled waving his arms overhead. "I'm over here!"

Suddenly, barking dogs echoed out in the woods. That's when the fiendish monstrosities charged towards the boy.

"No, no! Don't come near me!"

"Gak mach ich noch!"

Charging across the ice, in pursuit of the helicopter's searchlight of salvation, the teenager frantically ran after the zigzagging light. That was, until the ice cracked beneath Peter's feet.

When that happened, everything went silent.

Chapter 9

SEARCH PARTY

THE SEARCH PARTY combed the woods for over an hour. The woods were untouched by mankind for hundreds of years. There were no trails through the thickets of oak, pine and maples that sprouted for miles in either direction. Every step the cops took was slow and sure while glancing to the ground before moving on.

Chief Marty was relieved to have acquired help from hundreds of law enforcement officers... arriving from dozens of surrounding police agencies. They had fanned out as far as the eye could see... which really wasn't far at all... mostly because the darkness invaded everything and the chief couldn't see anyone.

Had it not been for the countless lights swinging through the shadows the darkness would have been inescapable.

Dozens of tourists, who hiked the mountains in summer, often never made it back. As they pushed farther into the woods they'd often disappear when the sun went down and darkness descended. It was easy to get turned around out here.

When the sky turned blood red before sunset people tended to panic. That was especially true over the last twelve months. There were hundreds of missing persons reports filed in the last year and many were never found. This was a principle reason why Marty's department made certain that every local motel gave visitors the town's *STOP Guidelines*.

It was important the town educated visitors on the dangers of hiking at night and how to stay calm and not make rash decisions that could cause a situation to deteriorate very rapidly.

Thus, Marty executed the STOP guidelines.

The (S) stood for SIT DOWN and was an important step for being able to stay calm. It offered the lost and disoriented an important opportunity to (T) THINK *how did I get here?* The (O) specified a need to OBSERVE surroundings and identify landmarks, such as mountain ridges, that assisted in figuring out positions. Yet, the most important stage of the process was (P) for plotting and creating a PLAN.

Sometimes, the lost didn't shelter overnight and failed to wait for morning light.

Marty knew the best way of being found when lost in the woods was for hikers to make a smoky campfire. Often, when police went into the woods in search of the lost, they'd search hillsides for billowing smoke that carried on the gusting wind. It was the easiest way to find terrified hikers.

But none of that mattered right now.

The lost boy, Peter, wasn't a tourist and didn't have a lighter...and it was snowing.

Goodness, gracious, Marty thought and pushed his flashlight into the night. *This teen doesn't have a chance of making it out of here unless we find him!*

"Peter!" he blurted into an oversized, red megaphone. "Peter Massey, can you hear me? This is Police Chief Marty McBride! The police are out here looking for you! Can you hear my voice?"

Surrounding the chief and fanning into the woods in a straight line of flesh and bones were a hundred cops layered in heavy coats and grey woolen service sweaters. Their supervisors had quickly answered Delores' desperate call for help. Arriving within minutes, the lawmen hailed from departments in Newburgh, Washingtonville, Highland Falls and many other agencies.

"It's cold as a freezer out here," Sergeant Stanley Stump groaned.

"Where the heck is this kid?" the chief wondered. With the temperature plummeting into single digits and the wind gusting in strong, biting squalls the *wind-chill* made it feel like minus

fifty degrees. There was no getting away from cold like that. It chilled a man down to the bone and sent sharp shivers right through his body.

"We'll find the boy, Chief," Stumpy confidently declared. "Where are the search dogs? Maybe they'll get on his scent."

Just then, New York State Police Lieutenant, Braggs Ferris, arrived on scene and held out his gloved hand to the chief. "Marty, long time, no see."

"How was the drive in from Port Jervis?"

"Just as crappy as a newborn's diaper." Braggs was a long serving, thirty-year career man and the commander of Troop F and the Uniformed Force & Bureau of Criminal Investigations sector. His squad maintained regular patrols, conducted criminal investigations and provided emergency and disaster services.

But he was here tonight to provide state support for Marty in the search and recovery of the missing teenager.

"You ready to get underway?" Braggs asked.

The chief glanced to the bloody tracks trailing through the snow and pushed his flashlight along their path. "We believe the teenager, Peter Massey, is being chased by a wild animal towards Moodna Creek."

"You mean Murderers Creek?"

"Yup, and if he tries to run across it we might not find his body until spring."

"What kind of animal is after him?"

"Not sure," Marty lied, "but we need your mongrels to track down our kid," he said glancing to three dogs crouched beside their handlers. "Those Cooperstown trained canine unit hounds will get my boy back."

Braggs nodded. "If he is still alive, they'll track him down within the hour."

"Okay," the chief nodded to the hound-handlers. "Find that kid, men. My friend, Cliff Webb, is worried sick about that young lad out there all alone in the cold woods."

"We'll track him down," the statie assured as the bloodhounds ventured into the forest. Somewhere out there, Orange County Sheriff's snowmobiles roared.

Staring back into the woods the chief let his eyes follow the bloodhounds charging forward and howling in the snow.

For a long time the chief and his men found nothing among the deep wall of trees... until suddenly they came upon a patch of hundred foot tall pines knocked over like bowling pins. There were more than two hundred trees knocked over for half a mile and all lying on the ground like something had moved through the tree line and just slammed the trees to the ground.

"What the heck caused this?" Marty asked.

Staring at the scene, Stanley was speechless. Pushing his flashlight through the downed trees he noticed their branches had been sheared off... almost as if a machine, moving through the dark night, had ripped them down.

"This doesn't make any sense," Chief Marty continued, "What passed through here and struck down these trees all the way into the distance?"

"Look at this Marty," Stanley muttered, shining his flashlight to the ground.

Glancing down, the chief saw gigantic, deep impressions dug into the frozen earth. Stretching in a straight line, through the downed ancient timbers, was a pathway resembling gigantic, square footprints the size of a Volkswagen Beetle.

"What are they?" Stanley grunted with disbelief planted on his face and fear filling his non-believing heart, "These footprints must be twenty feet long! What in God's name could have left them here?"

Stepping into one of the prints, Marty noticed he was knee-deep. Although seeing this with petrified eyes, there was nothing that could explain it. Could it be some type of UFO? Maybe a government black-op program that was out here testing a new military machine?

What machine makes footprints like this?

Climbing out of the impression he hiked alongside the pattern and pushed his light into the depressions. The front of the track resembled five gigantic claws the size of surfboards. Turning around and staring towards the rear of the hollow he shook his head, grunted and thought about his next words.

“I know this is gonna sound crazy, Stanley.”

“What’s that, Chief?”

“I think we’re looking at the footprint of a living creature. Something so large that I can’t even imagine how to explain what it might be.”

Stanley was thinking the same exact thing, but he wasn’t the chief and there was no way he was going to suppose anything like that out loud. After all, he was subject to psychological screening.

Marty could say whatever he wanted, *but damn, I believe he’s right! How could we explain this scene to anyone who hadn’t seen it? That was a pickle, wasn’t it?*

However, Chief Marty and Stanley were not the only witnesses. There were a hundred more officers, from different agencies, who also stared at the gigantic footprints of whatever stomped through here and knocked down the trees.

On this night, nobody knew exactly what to think. All they knew for sure was what they saw stretched out before them. The prints were gigantic, unbelievable and undeniable proof that a monster so big existed... that it had to be the size of Godzilla. And that was some scary stuff.

Chapter 10

THE AMBULANCE MAN

CLIFFORD WEBB loathed the dead, especially if they died during his shift and under his watch.

Whether the whisper of finality uttered its swan song following a shooting, car accident, or heart attack, it didn't much matter in the ultimate analysis of things. Before someone croaked, in that instant, just before death knocked on the door of destiny, it was Clifford's job... *his oath, really...* to do no harm and to try his best to save the injured or dying.

That was a promise he'd made long ago.

And maybe... just possibly, he'd failed that task tonight. Perhaps he could've saved Jenny had he arrived at the scene a little quicker.

If the roads were not so treacherous... things might've turned out different.

But second-guessing the order of the universe, wondering *what if...* and *why...* well, those suppositions of guilt never led anywhere productive. The unanswerable queries of *why* and *how* would ring their damnation in Chublet's head forevermore and lead to the loneliness of the grave.

Did I do everything I could? He wondered.

The overweight EMT was the only person on God's Good Earth who might've had a chance to save Jen out on Blooming Grove Turnpike tonight. But when he arrived on scene, she was a goner... a cadaver... a lifeless corpse. It didn't matter how many chest compressions he'd done on the poor young girl there wasn't a magic medicine he could have injected into her vein to restart the heart.

That unreal hope was left for the fantasyland of television and movies. Here, on the streets of reality... there was only life and death.

Life and death were separated by mere seconds; slivers of time that had real consequences. He didn't know why some people died and others survived. The process of natural selection was as unfair to him as was the world people were born into.

Dang it, she didn't have a chance.

Once life left Jen's body and she gasped her final lungful of air, the fat lady belted out her song. Nobody ever returned from that concert of the dead.

That's just the way things worked.

Even so, Clifford still felt guilty mainly because the young girl had died on his watch. He'd failed his mission. However, nobody could save everyone. Everyone could not be resuscitated and stolen from the steaming black train of fate.

Sometimes the dead had their own agenda.

Now, thinking all this while standing in Harry's basement morgue, he pushed aside his gut wrenching thoughts and studied the old medical examiner unzipping the black vinyl body bag containing Jenny's body.

"Who do we have tonight?" Harry asked, inspecting the pale lifeless flesh.

"Jenifer Marks. Just a sweet little teenager making her way through life."

"Phillip's daughter?" Harry grunted, his voice cracking in surprise and sorrow.

"Yep, but nobody has notified him yet."

"It's gonna kill him."

Harry was Phillip's best friend. They'd met years previously, while working their way up, at Saint Luke's Cornwall Hospital. Now, Harry was the doctor of the dead and Philip the Chief of Emergency Medicine. They were also premier club members of *The Powelton Club*; the oldest, full-service, privately run country club nestled along the Hudson River Valley. In autumn, the

two friends would swing through eighteen holes on the *Devereux Emmett* designed golf course and in spring they'd volley tennis balls until the sun went down over the red clay courts. In summer... they packed mini vans with their happy families for weekends at the club where they'd all relax around three refreshing and sparkling pools.

Those memories stabbed at Harry's heart now. *The club members will be heartbroken when they learn of this.* He felt a pang of sorrow at his realization. Although everyone would arrive at the funeral, shake Phillip's trembling hand and hug Jen's inconsolable mother, no amount of comfort would bring back their exceptional baby girl.

She'd been on the honor roll since middle school, was the lead cheerleader for the Dragons and would've been a shoe-in for Prom Queen.

But that was all gone... hopes, dreams... aspirations that were washed down the drain of life with her blood way before Harry could embalm the body. There'd be nothing left for the parents except questions of what happened.

"Who's notifying Phil?"

Clifford wasn't sure. "Probably Chief Marty, but he's in the woods right now looking for Peter."

"I'll do it," Harry insisted. "Phil is my friend and the news should come from me." Picking up a red phone, he dialed the familiar number and quickly broke the news when his friend answered on the third ring. Being a doctor he understood physicians wanted to hear things straight with no cherry on top. The quicker the bad news came the easier it was to deal with.

Of course, when he told Phil of his daughter's death, the man's cries filtered through the telephone line and into the room. He was in disbelieving agony and kept repeating it couldn't be true.

"We just ate dinner with her! How can she be dead?"

Nobody ever believed it as true when hearing a loved one had suddenly died. That was especially true when the departed had been shoveling forkfuls of food into their mouths just hours before.

It was inconceivable.

But news like this was always true.

Tragedy was never a made-up tale of lunacy.

Death just happened; there was no rhyme or reason, no prediction of when it called.

It stung like a bee on a late summer afternoon. Dead children...the news stayed with a man forever. The gut wrenching reality of inconsolable heartache could never be anything less than head shaking lunacy.

Harry's eyebrows went up when Phil advised he knew something wasn't right. Sobbing, the man admitted that an hour ago his wife, Suzanne, was suddenly overcome with feelings of dread.

That was about the time the car hit the pines.

Parents always know, Harry silently supposed. *When a child dies they know it almost instantly.* Thinking this, he almost missed the question his friend asked.

"How'd it happen?"

After twenty minutes explaining what he knew the medical examiner replaced the receiver and walked back to the body to perform his examination. "There is blunt force trauma to the skull and the eyes are fixed and wide open in the stare of sudden death."

Clifford nodded. "When arriving on scene we observed the car had plowed into the pine trees along the roadway."

"There were no passengers?"

"Just Peter Massey."

Harry raised one of his long, grey eyebrows knowing that Cliff had a personal interest in that particular boy. "Where is he now?"

"He's missing in the woods."

"During a major storm like this?"

"It looks like something chased him into the tree line."

Harry snorted and thought he had a good idea of what might've pursued the youngster into the woodlands. He had lived in town long enough and knew the stories, just as everyone else.

The frightening tales hadn't changed much since he was a kid running through those same thickets with high school friends close behind. But he'd never seen things escalate quite like this.

"Does Marty think *they*'ve returned?"

"Come on, Harry," Cliff interjected, not wanting to acknowledge what everyone else in town assumed since the West Point Cadet went missing. "Nobody believes in those ridiculous monstrosity stories. They're outrageous beyond belief. It was probably just a dog, a wolf or a hungry bear that came out of hibernation!"

That was possible... because one of the common fallacies about bears was that they hibernated all through winter. Although their activities did slow down, and they spent most of their time in dens or caves, they still often ventured out at times and snacked throughout the season.

Not wanting to get into a debate with Clifford, Harry stared back to Jen's body and shrugged with disappointment having lost such a fine young girl. Inspecting the pale, bloodless body he noted her weight and height. Reaching above the table he flipped on a microphone suspended from a popcorn drop ceiling. "It is December twenty fourth. The deceased individual is a white, sixteen-year-old female, five foot seven inches tall, one hundred twenty pounds with brown eyes and shoulder length black hair. Identified as Jennifer Marks, we have received verbal consent for autopsy from her biological father."

Removing her clothes Harry discovered a peculiar, however familiar, symbol sliced into her chest.

"What the hell is that?" Clifford asked, staring at the wound.

"I'm not sure," Harry lied. He knew exactly what the symbol was... and it had been the cause of many nightmares over the years. It wasn't the first time someone had found themselves face up on the autopsy table with this symbol sliced into their flesh.

"It looks like a bird bending over an eyeball."

Indeed, it does, Harry knew. The brutally inflicted symbol had been discovered around the world. The marking was the subject of the biggest cover-up ever managed by world governments.

"What do ya think it means?"

"I have no idea," Harry lied. "It might just be a weirdly positioned impact scratch from the horrible, steel bending, car accident."

But that wasn't true and Clifford knew it. He'd been to enough accident scenes over the course of his life to recognize the sliced symbol was something that couldn't have been caused by a motor vehicle accident. This handiwork had been intentionally carved into the dead body.

"You've never seen anything like this before?"

"Never," Harry answered, glancing sideways at the EMT. However, that was an outright lie. He was a medical examiner and every medical examiner on Earth knew what the mark symbolized. Having recently attended a United Nations meeting, where its significance was discussed among the smartest researchers in the world, the old man knew a war was brewing.