

Ghost

Copyright © 2020 by Michael Jack Webb

www.michaeljackwebb.com

*We shall not cease from exploring,
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

~ T.S. ELIOT

CHAPTER 1

Kate Justice stared at the young woman lying on the hospital gurney in the Woody Creek Emergency Room shocked by what she saw. The most recent victim of the serial killer the local media had nicknamed the “Ghost in the Darkness killer” looked familiar. But that was unlikely. Kate wasn’t from here. She’d arrived in the city two weeks ago, brought in by the local police to help investigate the ritual murders of what, as of three days ago, totaled seven young boys between the ages of six and nine.

Two other things made little sense. The eighth victim was much older and did not fit the intelligent killer’s pattern. She was an anomaly. That meant something altered the killer’s behavior. Still, when the paramedics brought the victim to the hospital, there was no doubt the woman was the latest testament to the sociopath’s demonic behavior. The many wounds he’d inflicted mimicked those of the seven young boys in every detail.

Except for one.

Extreme exsanguination over several days killed the younger victims. This victim suffered an ugly-looking gunshot wound to the chest. Something which didn’t fit the killer’s grotesque signature. The canvas for the insane killer’s demented and meticulous earlier artwork had been his young victim’s bodies. But a solitary shot from a large caliber handgun, a Sig Sauer P229R loaded with .40 caliber bullets, ruined his most recent work.

Kate wasn’t certain how she knew the specifics of the gun the killer used, she just did.

The once-attractive victim’s eyes were rolled back. And the once-white sheets covering the metal gurney were stained bright red. *No doubt soaked by buckets of arterial blood.* There were several pieces of medical equipment attached to the young woman’s broken and battered body, including an IV and an intubation tube. The doctor and nurse used the former to supply saline solution, painkillers, and multiple pints of blood in their desperate attempt to save the raven-haired woman’s life. The latter enabled the Emergency Room trauma staff to keep her constricted airway open while they worked feverishly to resuscitate her.

Kate struggled to grasp everything she’d observed and catalogued in her mind for later reference during the last thirty minutes. She needed to make sense out of what happened to this familiar stranger, and why. That’s what she did better than anyone. Solve puzzles no one else could. Come up with answers to questions others were afraid to even ask. Provide rational solutions for irrational problems.

It was her gift and her curse.

But on this rainy, cold, dreary Easter Sunday afternoon, the special gift she’d had since she was a young girl eluded her. Not only that. Something was wrong with the disturbing scene playing out before her.

The victim looked like her. The resemblance was so strong the woman could have been her twin. But Kate was an only child. In the next instant, Kate's earlier shock and confusion turned into terror as recognition and understanding flooded over her.

Kate thought she'd been observing the desperate efforts of the Emergency Room staff to save the life of yet another casualty of the serial killer she'd been tracking. A depraved man who'd taunted her and terrified an entire city with his gruesome and heinous exploits. Instead, she'd been watching the doctor's and nurse's futile attempt to bring *her* lifeless body back from the dead. She groaned, but no sound came out of her mouth—because she was no longer in her body. She was floating above it. A silent, ethereal watcher, unable to do or say anything, even though she was aware of everything transpiring.

The Emergency Room doctor glanced at the nurse across from him, then up at the large round clock on the stark, pale-green wall. "Time of death—two fifty-two p.m."

The crushing finality of that simple statement, and the sorrowful resignation in the young doctor's tired eyes, pushed Kate over the edge.

"This can't be happening!" she cried in a trembling voice, praying those gathered around her damaged body could hear her and had the power to change the outcome.

Then, as shocking, and surreal as things were, they got worse.

An impenetrable and pervasive darkness enveloped her, and she was thrust into another dimension. One moment she was staring at her own lifeless body. The next, she was standing in the midst of an alien and frightening landscape. Agonizing cries of pain spewed forth out of the contorted mouths of multitudes of people. Men and women, young and old, from every race and nation were arrayed before her—like trophies—in what appeared to be a vast underground prison. The cacophony of nauseating sound washed over her in endless waves. An invisible tsunami of suffering.

She clasped her hands over her ears as the deafening screams of soul-shattering torment increased.

Run away, before it's too late, a tiny voice whispered. Her legs didn't respond because her feet were rooted into the burning, sulfurous, lava-like landscape. Thick, black ash swirled about her as plumes of white-hot fire and brimstone consumed the teeming mass of groaning, tortured souls.

Kate attempted a deep breath but only managed a shallow, staccato gasp. She gagged as an overwhelming stench choked off her attempt to calm herself. With mounting horror she realized what it was—

Burning flesh!

More terrified than she could ever remember, her only hope was this was a nightmare. She closed her eyes tight. Something she did as a young girl whenever anything beyond her ability to deal with happened to her. "Wake up, Kate. This isn't real. Wake up, and this madness will fade away—"

But she was no longer a young girl.

She wasn't asleep.

And her vivid nightmare was growing worse by the moment.

A terrifying realization dawned on her as a long-forgotten passage from the Bible raced through her head. The scripture, seared into her mind when she was twelve and buried deep in her memory,

resurrected itself. *Come and see. And I looked, and behold, a pale horse: and his name was Death, and Hell followed with him . . .*

That's when *she* started screaming—

Chapter 2

"Welcome back—" declared Kate's mom as her daughter walked through the door into the spacious kitchen of their Fort Collins, Colorado home. Abigail Justice was busy preparing her husband's favorite dinner. Veal and spinach lasagna. Her slender, strong hands were splotted with flour as she blended the ingredients for the homemade pasta. "How was your time at the cabin?"

Kate's parents owned a secluded, three thousand square foot second home they fondly referred to as "the cabin." They'd constructed the rustic home-away-from-home outside Grand Lake, Colorado before Kate was born. It had taken a year to build the magnificent residence. They'd used hand-hewn Lodgepole Pine—timbered during the 19th century from the majestic Rocky Mountains surrounding the largest natural body of water in Colorado—and stone quarried from nearby Granite Lake.

"Uneventful," Kate answered as she set her large pack down on the hardwood floor. Whenever she went to the cabin, she used her Ruby-Red Osprey Xena 85 pack for her clothes instead of a suitcase, because it helped her imagine she was "roughing it," even though that was never the case. No one who'd ever stayed at the fully furnished, richly decorated mountain home could ever say that. "Combine the fact I got to the cabin before a late heavy snowfall with the fact that fewer than five hundred people call Grand Lake home and you have the ultimate definition of *b-o-r-i-n-g*."

"After what you've been through," called out her father from his study, "boring might be just what the doctor ordered." He stood up from his antique roll-top desk, stretched his lean and robust six-foot-four frame, then headed into the kitchen. "Besides, you told us you needed to take some personal time away so you could figure out what you'll do with the rest of your life."

Kate's mother raised her eyebrows as she kneaded the pasta dough but said nothing.

Although her dad intended his words to be supportive, Kate's stomach twisted into a knot. It had been a year since "the event," as they referred to it. But the memory of what happened to her the previous Easter was as fresh today as if she'd lived through it yesterday. Suddenly queasy, she took a deep breath and put on her best "I'm doing just fine" face. The face she always put on whenever her insides were churning like a summer dust-devil racing across the eastern plains of the state she'd called home for almost thirty years, her entire life.

"That's not how I remember our conversation, Dad. *You* said it would do me good to drive up to the cabin and spend quality time there. Alone. That I should think long and hard about what I want to do with my life now that I'm no longer with the Bureau. I agreed."

Her father shrugged and grinned. "So I did. Guess my memory isn't what it used to be."

"There's nothing wrong with your memory, Nathanael," interrupted Kate's mother. "You have a terrible habit of remembering conversations *differently* than the way they transpired."

Despite the momentary unease sparked by her dad's comments, Kate's mouth quivered with the beginnings of a smile. Her parents loved one another deeply. She could never remember either of them raising their voice to one another or treating each other unkindly. *Unusual for this day and age*. Growing up their bantering had always been good-natured, never mean-spirited. Their relationship was special. Something Kate hoped she'd find someday. Lately, she'd doubted that would ever happen. She wondered what her life would be like when her parents were gone. What was nearly a smile morphed into a grimace. It wasn't a future she wanted to think about. It was too painful. And she'd had enough pain and suffering over the past year to last a lifetime.

She banished the discomfiting thought as fast as it popped into her head. Shrugged off the sudden, irrational sense of gloom that suddenly wrapped her in its suffocating embrace. Then surprised her dad by giving him a bear hug and burying her face in his chest. "I love you so very much, Dad," she whispered.

Her dad wrapped his strong, thick arms around her and whispered back, "Not as much as I love you, peanut."

The tension Kate carried suddenly dissipated as she rested in her dad's comforting embrace. It had been a long time since they'd spoken to one another that way. Memories of much happier times during her childhood flooded over her. Her dad hadn't called her "peanut" since she'd turned twelve, and she hadn't verbally expressed the depth of her love for him since high school. Something significant had changed in them both as she grew from a young girl into a young woman, and finally an adult. She wished she hadn't allowed so many years to pass without telling both her mom and dad how much they meant to her and how much she appreciated their unconditional love.

"Are you two going to stand there acting like a long-lost father and daughter, or can I get a hug as well?"

Kate released her dad, then walked into the kitchen. She hugged her mom and kissed her on her cheek, plucking a cherry tomato out of the salad bowl sitting on the counter. "What can I do to help?"

Her mom playfully slapped her hand. "Not a thing. You have time to take a shower before dinner."

"Now that you mention it, I could use a hot bath. I did a five-mile hike this morning before I left the cabin. Even though it was cool, I worked up a sweat."

"The lasagna won't be ready for at least forty minutes, so take a nice, long, hot bath and relax. Your father and I have something we want to tell you over dinner."

Kate raised an eyebrow. "Sounds mysterious. My bath can wait."

"I'm busy finishing dinner and your father needs to finish his paperwork." Her mom gently nudged her out of the spacious kitchen. "Go soak your sweaty body and melt your aches and pains away. You want me to bring you a glass of wine?"

Kate thought a minute, tempted to push the issue, then decided against it. "I'd love a glass of Merlot," she replied over her shoulder, heading toward her room.

Kate was dreaming and knew it.

But she didn't want to be in this dream. It was too real and way too frightening.

Not just frightening—a horrific nightmare.

She was securely bound to a chair and blindfolded. A trembling, high pitched, male voice said, “You shouldn’t have stuck your nose into things you don’t understand. I tried to warn them. And you. None of you listened. Now, it’s too late. For all of us.” For an instant, the man’s distinctive voice sounded familiar. But she couldn’t link a face to the voice. The haze that cocooned her brain because of the pain made it difficult to think clearly. Besides, she doubted she knew the killer. She had only been on the case two weeks and the psychotic man had made no attempt to engage her.

She struggled to make sense of the man’s cryptic words. *Where am I? What’s happening? What does he mean “it’s too late”?*

The sharp, throbbing, migraine-like pain in her head resurrected understanding. Despite her training, she groaned, bringing a cackle of harsh, deep-throated laughter from her captor, followed by an eerie silence. She took several deep breaths. *I need to clear my head and assess my situation.*

She’d tracked the Ghost in the Darkness killer to what she believed was his “lair.” The place he returned to after every kidnapping and slaughter. She’d discovered the perpetually dark, stench-filled underground sanctuary using unconventional thinking. She’d often solved cases others could not by thinking out of the box, much to the chagrin of some of her more competitive and politically upwardly mobile focused peers. But this case was the most perplexing of her five-year career as an FBI Profiler. Her most “out of the box” analytical analysis. Quirky even for her. The inspiration for her surprising discovery came from reading *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. The 19th century literary classic gave her a stunning, almost laughable idea which she’d shared somewhat hesitantly with her boss, Vince Sotelo. Their thirteen-month-old conversation rattled through her aching head.

“Vampires only kill at night to satisfy their bloodlust. They avoid the harsh light of day as if it were an incurable disease, a plague threatening their survival. Which it is. They sleep in coffins filled with soil from Transylvania, especially when they travel from country to country, state to state, or city to city. I’ve reviewed all the case files attached to the Ghost in the Darkness killer, and I found a clue I believe will lead us to him.” When she told Vince what she’d uncovered, he looked at her as if she’d finally leaped off a cliff too high for her to climb back up on. “You’re way out on a thin, unstable limb, Kate. But you’ve always come through for the Bureau. If you’re confident you can take this guy down before he kills again, follow your gut. Remember how much is riding on this. And be incredibly careful. By your own admission, this killer is highly intelligent, more vicious than any sociopaths you’ve ever profiled, and nearly impossible to catch. That’s one reason he got the moniker.”

Her hunch had been correct, but she’d missed a vital piece of information. That had cost her the advantage. And maybe something worse. Her quarry had surprised her and knocked her unconscious before she could subdue or kill him. *How long had she been out?*

The pain in her head was so intense she hadn’t realized her chest and arms stung. The pain hit her like a vicious blow. Her blindfold was loose at the bottom. She glanced down reflexively and gasped as she glimpsed part of her torso. Her bra was still on and covered in blood. Her blouse had been ripped from her, and her slacks were soaked with even more blood.

A numbing realization hit her. She was no longer the hunter. She was the latest victim of the Ghost in the Darkness killer. He'd cut her, just as he'd cut the others.

But she differed from the other victims. She wasn't a child. That meant something significant had changed. She needed to figure out what, and why, fast if she was going to survive and bring this monster to justice. Or kill him before he could harm her or anyone else. She blurted out the question she needed the answer to. "Why haven't you killed me?"

The lack of a response and a sudden preternatural silence snapped her from her nightmare.

She was in the soaking tub in her room at home, and the water had gone from steaming hot to lukewarm. There was no wine glass sitting on the edge of the tub. *Why hadn't her mom come upstairs with the requested Merlot? It wasn't like her to forget, especially since she'd been the one to suggest it.*

She stepped out of the tub, glancing in the mirror. Her rare, red eyes, normally occurring only in albinos, with the equally unusual genetic mutation of double eyelashes, like Elizabeth Taylor, were drawn to the unwanted tattoo stenciled across her chest. The erratic line of odd, puckered, pink scars above her breasts, at the base of her neck, were a constant reminder of how close she'd come to death. And of her failure to capture one of the country's most monstrous killers. The internal torment the scars inspired was worse for her than having to see the vicious markings on her otherwise unmarred skin.

Shaking off the self-pity she detested, she towed dry.

Her long, black hair was in a ponytail. After throwing on her favorite sweats—the gray ones emblazoned with the burgundy-colored University of Denver logo, where she'd done her Master's Degree—she headed for the stairs. "Mom, what happened to my Merlot? I thought you were going to bring me a glass."

No response.

Frowning, she bolted barefoot down the wooden stairs heading for the kitchen as her stomach growled. Her nostrils flared. *Something is burning. I hope it's not the lasagna.* "Mom. Dad. What's with the silent treatment?"

The kitchen was empty, and the burning smell was coming from the oven. Kate opened it. Smoke wafted out along with a blast of heat. The top of the lasagna was black. Muttering under her breath, she grabbed the cotton mitten off the counter beside the stove, pulling out the ruined dinner, setting the charred pasta on one of the back burners.

"Mom, where are you? The lasagna is ruined."

Nothing.

Suddenly concerned, Kate headed for her dad's office. Her father's antique roll-top was open. There were a variety of papers scattered on top of it, as well as several on the wooden floor. The chair was three feet away, as if someone had interrupted her father and he'd stood suddenly, pushing it back in a hurry. She picked up the papers, setting them on the desk. "Abigail. Nathaniel. You can come out now." When she got no response, she headed toward the Great Room next to the kitchen. Her mom liked to be part of the "action" while she was cooking, designing the home with an open feel.

The eerie and unnatural silence sent an uncomfortable, familiar shiver up and down her spine.

The dining table was set with three places. In the center, there was a large crystal bowl filled with salad.

What's going on?

Kate was heading for her parent's Master Bedroom, when she halted, staring at the floor. Several feet away, over by the back of the couch facing the floor-to-ceiling slate stone fireplace and big screen TV, a splash of red caught her eye. Trembling, she walked over, stooping, then reached out, touching the viscous liquid with her right pointer finger.

Blood!

"Mom—Dad," she yelled, her heart racing, her mind a jumble of fearful, gut wrenching thoughts. She ran through the house, searching every room downstairs, then checked the garage. No one in any of the rooms, and both cars were still parked, the garage door shut. As well-honed investigative instincts kicked in, she went back to the kitchen. The refrigerator door was ajar. On the floor in front of it was another small puddle of blood.

"Oh, God, this can't be happening—" Her stomach was doing cartwheels. She had to force herself not to become so unglued she couldn't think straight.

Frantic, she grabbed the phone out of its cradle resting on the kitchen countertop, dialing 911.

Chapter 3

The detective who came to her parent's home an hour after the two uniformed police officers departed was just over six feet tall, had light brown hair and an athletic build. He was wearing an expensive pair of Vintage 1890 501 Levi jeans and a starched, slightly wrinkled long sleeve, button-down, white Oxford shirt under a Navy Blue checked Hugo Boss blazer. His stylish outfit was completed with a pair of brown leather Chuka boots.

Kate thought he could pass for Chris Pratt's twin brother. She'd developed a secret crush on the handsome movie star during her last year completing her Master's Degree when she saw him in Moneyball. She'd rented his earlier movies and binge watched them one weekend to relieve the stress of finishing writing her Dissertation. She'd also consumed a gallon of Andy's vanilla frozen custard mixed with crushed Oreo cookies while on her weekend sabbatical from school. Once she graduated a few months later, her life became a whirlwind, and she forgot all about the attractive actor.

Until tonight.

"Ms. Justice?"

The handsome detective's voice snapped her into the present. For a moment she felt guilty at having such thoughts, then remembered everyone who suffers a traumatic experience deals with the resulting pain differently. "Yes, Detective—"

The man who looked to be about her age or a few years older said, "I asked you if you had any reason to believe something bad happened to your parents, other than the burned lasagna and two small puddles of blood you found in the Great Room and kitchen."

Kate sighed, fighting rising anger. "As I explained earlier to the two uniforms who responded to my 911 call, my parents are creatures of habit. When I left the kitchen to take a bath before dinner, my father was working in his study. My mother was finishing dinner for the three of us. Before I went upstairs, she offered to bring me a glass of Merlot while I soaked in the tub. That never happened."

"Do you always drink wine while you're taking a bath?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" she snapped, immediately regretting her harsh tone. Had she been the one doing the questioning under similar circumstances, she would likely have asked the same question.

To his credit, the detective didn't react. He did what she would have done. He asked a different question. "Your parents have any enemies you know of? Anyone who might want to harm them?"

Kate shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. She couldn't believe this was happening. She'd been managing her PTSD and a semblance of normality was seeping back into her life before she went to the cabin to consider her options. It had taken a year of painful physical and psychological therapy for her to recover from the incredible events that irrevocably changed her life last Easter. Now, the sudden, mysterious disappearance of her parents was causing all the gruesome memories she'd worked so hard to sequester break free from the carefully constructed prison she'd built in her mind. They threatened to overwhelm her when she needed clarity and an iron control over her emotions. She couldn't let that happen. Not if she wanted to find out what happened tonight. Not if she wanted to keep her sanity from sliding down the slippery slope into the abyss of madness.

The detective was staring at her, expectant. People always noticed her eyes before anything else. They always seemed uncomfortable around her. But the detective didn't appear uncomfortable. She sensed he wasn't focused on the unusual color of her eyes. She needed to say something. "I'm sorry, detective. This is all surreal, and more than a little bizarre."

"You can call me Chris, Ms. Justice. Detective sounds a bit—"

"Formal," she finished, jolted when he told her his name, part of her wondering why he wanted to move from formal to informal so fast.

He smiled. "Do you always finish other people's sentences?"

Kate shrugged at his obvious attempt to help her relax, feeling flushed and like a fish out of water simultaneously. An odd combination. Neither of which helped shake the foreboding that had stolen over her after she'd dialed 911. She usually did the questioning and didn't enjoy being on the other end of this inquiry. Especially when it concerned her parents. "It's a bad habit. One of many."

"Anything like this every happen before with your parents? Can you think of any reason they'd leave abruptly without letting you know?"

She gave him a withering look.

"Would it be okay if we sat down and started over? I know this must be difficult for you. I apologize if I've added to your discomfort. I'm afraid one of *my* bad habits is being direct with people. Even when circumstances suggest I should be more—diplomatic."

The detective was smooth. She'd give him that. He was a natural interrogator. Under different circumstances, she'd have paid him a compliment. Instead, she replied, "We can move the dinner plates and salad out of the way and sit at the dining room table."

Once they were seated, Kate said, "In the spirit of starting over I should tell you I'm not unfamiliar with police investigations."

"I know."

Another jolt. "What?"

"When the call came into the station, I was about to go home. I heard the duty Sergeant mention your name and came over."

"Why?"

The detective captured her eyes with his own sparkling, ultra-rare, golden-amber-colored "wolf" pupils streaked with hints of gray and copper. Like her, people with "wolf's eyes" can see well in dark spaces. It also made it likely the detective had Spanish, Asian, South American, or South African ancestry. Her gut told her Spanish. Kate couldn't help herself. She saw and categorized, analyzed, and catalogued *everything*. She had a photographic memory for details. It was one attribute of her *gift* making her an exceptional profiler.

"You are *the* Kate Justice, right? The prodigy who completed her Doctorate in Criminal Forensic Psychology by the time she was twenty-four. Passing her EPPP, Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology, with a score of 795 out of 800. The youngest FBI Criminal Profiler in history who the Ghost in the Darkness killer captured, tortured, and shot with her own weapon. A Sig Sauer P229R loaded with .40 caliber bullets. The woman who was miraculously resurrected four hours after the Emergency Room doctor pronounced you clinically dead."

Kate was staring at the man across from her, too startled to be angry. Devastating memories she'd spent a year coming to grips with, or burying, were simmering inside her. She took a deep breath to dispel her momentary lightheadedness. "You weren't kidding when you said you have a habit of sticking your foot in your mouth, were you?"

The detective frowned. "That's not exactly how I put it. I meant I didn't want to miss the opportunity to meet you. I remember seeing your face plastered all over the papers last spring. You were quite a celebrity for a few weeks and even garnered national attention. Then you disappeared. I've been curious why ever since."

"I can't believe you're sitting in my home, ostensibly to help me find out what happened to my parents, because you're *curious* why I didn't take advantage of my temporary celebrity status. Perhaps write a book. Do the talk show circuit. Make a name for myself. Or whatever it is you think someone who lived through what I did should do to capitalize on other people's suffering." Her voice rose as she talked. By the time she finished, she was almost yelling.

There was an awkward silence for several minutes.

Finally, Kate calmed down. "I didn't disappear, detective."

"Chris, please."

"Okay *Chris*. Although it's none of your business, I took a leave of absence from the Bureau to focus on recovering. Despite being *resurrected*, I was in rough shape physically." Kate was uncomfortable with the partial truth and lie, but she had no intention of sharing the full truth with a man she'd met less than half an hour ago. A detective who might be a weirdo stalker. Besides, even if he weren't a man who became instantly infatuated with a woman he'd just met, he would never believe what occurred after they released her from the hospital. "Can we *please* focus on my parent's disappearance?"

Chris was staring at her, as if assessing her. "You may find this hard to believe, but it's possible your parent's disappearance tonight is connected with your last case."

"And you've come to that conclusion after being in my home less than an hour. You've asked me five questions. One of which has nothing to do with the evidence I shared with the two uniforms who left before you arrived. You haven't even examined the crime scene for clues I might have missed." She didn't keep a harsh edge out of her voice, but it didn't faze the detective.

"There is another reason I came here tonight."

"Oh? Pray tell." Kate crossed her arms and gave the man sitting across from her a fierce scowl that would have wilted the average person.

"For the past year I've studied the Ghost in the Darkness killer case. On my own, outside of official channels. At night and on my days off."

"If that's true, you know there hasn't been another kidnapping and murder matching the killer's demented, sociopathic and ritualistic behavior in over a year. Here, or anywhere else. Not to mention, the Ghost in the Darkness killer's victims were all children under the age of ten."

"Except for you—"

Kate was angry now. "What are you getting at, detective? You think reporting my parent's missing is some kind of bizarre joke. Or that they walked out the door in the middle of preparing dinner, without telling they were leaving. You think I planted blood on the floor and called 911 to regain my so-called celebrity status? Is that what you think?" She was shaking now, on the verge of losing control.

"No," Chris replied softly. "I don't think any of that."

"What then?"

"Do you believe vampires are real?"