

## Chapter 1

He wound his way through the scrub trees, blackberry briars, and thistles, paying no mind to them pulling at his clothes. This trophy would complete his collection of victims buried on Killer's Knob. The last to lie in this barren Kentucky patch of ground. The woman, though small, grew heavier with each step.

He stopped to douse the lantern before climbing the hill. Dumping her on the ground, he rolled his shoulders to loosen the kinks. He waited 1 his eyes became accustomed to the dark. The full moon flitted in and out of the clouds. He looked at the luminous numbers on his watch: 2:10 AM. Lightning flashed in the west. The storm was coming fast he had less than an hour.

An owl called from a nearby oak. He knew some Native Americans believed owls carried the spirits of the dead. Was she here, watching her murderer preparing to bury her? He shivered at the thought, yet it was not an uncomfortable sensation. With an eye on the thickening storm clouds, he hauled up her corpse and continued climbing the hill. Reaching the top, he shook her off. Her head bounced off a headstone. It didn't matter. She was past feeling.

He surveyed the flat land below him. No lights this time of morning. He must be the only one up. There was only one house within a mile. In the last hundred years, his were the only kills buried in this forsaken ground. He buried his first victim here three years ago. This one would be the last. Tomorrow he would seek another graveyard, a piece of ground where the weeds grew thick and the dead lay forgotten.

He made his first kill the night after Buck Olsen was elected sheriff of Beaufort County. He was 19, just starting out. Even as a teenager, he was fascinated with serial killers.

At the house in the valley, moonlight glinted off the windshield of Buck Olson's patrol car. Since Buck's wife died last fall, he didn't sleep well or much. The sheriff kept to home unless there was an accident on Route 5 or one deputy called in sick. A quiet place to live, Beaufort County never saw much action except a few druggies and a moonshiner or two. Five years ago, a guy from Indianapolis robbed the local bank. He didn't get far. Buck chased him down and had him locked up before the FBI arrived. Now the guy was cooling his heels in the federal prison at Terre Haute, Indiana.

Crime seldom visited Beaufort County. When it did, Buck was on it like a chicken on a June bug.

But Buck didn't know Killer's Knob had become this man's private burial ground. The girl's murderer had studied the great ones—Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy and others, careful to focus on the mistakes they made and how they were captured.

Most of them did something stupid. They buried their victims in shallow graves, or left behind clues, taunting the police. One serial killer, Gary Ridgway, dubbed the Green River killer eluded capture for many years. He couldn't understand how Ridgway could dump his kills in the Green River and operate for so long without being caught.

Finding the right for her spot, he sank in his shovel into the ground and paused. Yes, this was the place for her. She would complete the circle. He dug for 30 minutes. Softened by the recent rains, the earth turned over easily. He had just hit what he thought was a child's bone when a light winked on at the back of Buck's house. He froze, though the sheriff couldn't have seen him even if clouds weren't covering the moon. He stood stock still, his eyes fixed on the light.

Another light came on in Buck's bathroom. Three minutes later, it blinked off and the one in the bedroom went out soon after.

With the house dark again, he kept digging. What he thought a bone turned out to be a root with its sheath rotted off. Working for another five minutes, he uncovered a small skeletal hand. Moving the shovel to the left of it, he dug deeper. He glanced at the sky; lightning lit the area five miles to the south. The grave wasn't deep enough, but rain was coming and would catch him before he made it back to the truck. He was forgetting something? What was it? He couldn't think. He racked his brain. Shrugging, he rolled her into the grave. A vague feeling that he should say something came over him. But what? He was not a religious man. They used to drag him to church every Sunday, that is until he turned 13 and refused to go.

His victims were girls who wouldn't be missed for months, if at all. He took them from the road, bus station or train depot. He wore disguises and chatted them up to make them feel comfortable. He weaseled from them the details of their lives. If they were travelling with someone, he'd leave them alone. Pinky was unusual. He didn't find out until after he abducted her. If her father didn't hear from her every night, he contacted local law enforcement where he estimated she would be. When he found this out, it was too late to turn back. Now Pinky would wander no more.

Pinky. He wondered why her dad called her that. Before the experiment started, she'd talked about her father like he was some kind of saint: honest, God-fearing, strict but kind, back and knees half busted from years of crop farming, struggling to support his family. Pinky his only child, and he wanted more and better for her.

As Pinky's killer stood over her grave, he brushed off the thought of anyone finding her. Rumors had long floated around that this hill being haunted. He wasn't worried; he didn't believe in spooks. He was scarier than any ghost. Besides, no one had been on Killer's Knob in years. He felt safe.

What should he say? He knew no Bible verses. Even if he did, her murderer saying something from God's Book over the body of his victim didn't seem right. Wait. Yesterday that preacher gave him his business card. He took it from his shirt pocket. Straining to make out the words, he leaned over until his nose almost touching the card's surface. He mumbled the pastor's name, the name of the church, and the rest written there. Maybe since the card touched the preacher's fingers, possibly those words would get to God. Thunder like a gunshot made him jump. Lightning flashed over the ridge, illuminating him. Hurrying, he finished covering her.

The wind picked up, rushing over him. It felt cool and refreshing. Thunder crashed. The light in Buck's house came on again. He must get out of there quick. Vaguely he heard Buck's dog howling. Pinky number eight, the completion of his graves on Killer's Knob. He lingered, taking time to smooth the sodden dirt that topped her grave, and then pushing a big rock down into the mud to mark it. The headstone said the kid buried next to her was named Stephen. Now he had someone like a mother to follow him into eternity. No others were to be buried here. Tomorrow he would search for a fresh burial ground.

He looked at Pinky's grave one last time and then grabbed his shovel he scurried down the hill. Nothing else to be done. He was halfway to his truck when the rain came. Drops big and heavy like liquid bullets pounding him. By the time he reached the pickup, he was soaked. Even his boots were fulling of water. Cold even on this hot night, the rain refreshed him. After emptying his boots, he sat listening to it drumming on the hood.

He closed his eyes, thinking about her. He saw her this afternoon hitchhiking on Route 5, just south of Barstow. It had been a few months since his last kill. Time for another. She was slim, almost willowy, and young, Surly just into her 20s. Her face was heart shaped, her complexion

rosy and her hair strawberry blond. She was the kind he looked for. His heart sped up. His breathing came in spurts. She was the one she was his next kill.

He expected her to stick out her thumb. She didn't. She kept her eyes on the ground when he passed her. Cautious, he liked that. It made the game more fun. He topped the hill and lost sight of her.

He'd taken a chance. A mile up the road, he pulled to the side, faking a breakdown. On weekday afternoons like this, traffic was light on this stretch of road. He knew she wouldn't have to wait long for a ride. He might lose her if he did; but that was part of the game. Then he would start the hunt over again. He knew in the eyes of the public, a young girl travelling alone didn't pose the same danger as a man. Also, she would feel comfortable if there was a woman or a child in a car that stopped for her. He had to appear nonthreatening to her. Likewise, if anyone saw them together, he'd be forced to let her live and hunt elsewhere.

He got out and popped the hood. He didn't have to wait long. One car passed, going the other way. He kept his head down, peeking through the opening between the hood and windshield. The dark glasses and fake beard concealed his appearance. Coming over a slight rise in the highway, she entered his field of vision. Seeing him, she hesitated. She walked forward, starting to cross the road. "Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly," he murmured under his breath. He straightened up and grinned at her with his best Ted Bundy smile. Some women considered Bundy handsome, that is until they looked into his eyes. Bundy's smile was alluring, his eyes cold and hard as stones.

"Know anything about motors?" he called. "She was running fine 'til I topped the ridge."

"No, I'm sorry, I don't." She slowly walking toward him.

"That makes two of us," he said as he pulled out his cell phone. "Guess I better call for help. Can't be late for my gig tonight."

She stood several feet back, almost to the tailgate, ready to run if she sensed danger. "Your gig? Are you a singer?"

"Drummer and back-up singer," he said, palming the sap with his hands hidden behind the open hood. He stuffed it in the back pocket of his jeans. "Ever hear of Garth Brooks?"

Her face lit up with a big smile. "Garth Brooks! Oh, wow, he's my favorite. You play drums and sing with him?"

"Yeah, and fill in on guitar sometimes," he answered. He straightened up and smiled at her.

"Hey, tell you what. I might be able to get you in the back door to meet Garth if you're in Nashville tonight."

Her smile faded. "There's no way I can make it to Nashville by tonight. It's too far."

"Well I have to be in Nashville by tonight, so you might as well come along." His cell phone rang. Bill collector. Great timing. He hit the end button and held the phone to his ear. He had planned to fake a call. This was better. "Hello? Yeah, Brian? What? No, don't worry, I'll be there. Truck's broke down on Route 5 about a hundred mile away. But if I can't get it fixed in the next hour, I'll... sure, send the chopper. That'd be great. Okay, I'll let you know." He put the phone back on his belt.

"Brian Petrie. He's Garth's stage manager. Good guy, just a little crazy." He grinned at her. "Course, we all are." She smiled shyly. This was taking too long. He tried to think of a way to make a move on her without scaring her off. She did it for him.

"Here, let me take a look," she said. "Dad used to work on engines, and I watched. He got so good at it our farm neighbors had him fixing their tractors. That is if there wasn't too much

wrong with them.” Stepping to the front of the pickup, she stuck her head under the hood. He backed up so she wouldn’t feel threatened and slowly pulled out the sap.

“Sometimes the battery cable comes loo...” He hit her in the back of the head just enough to knock her out. As she fell, he caught her. She was lighter than she looked. He laid her in the truck bed and covered her with a blue tarp. No, that never do. What if she woke up? Running to the front of the truck, he slammed down the hood. Picking her up, he put her on the floor in the passenger side. He lifted her eyelid. Out like a light. He wouldn’t have to tie her up. Grabbing the blue tarp, he covered her up. Jumping in, he started the truck and pulled onto the highway. A mile down the road, he passed a sheriff’s car travelling in the opposite direction. He recognized the driver. Rodney Newen, the sheriff’s chief deputy, going full bore, light bar flashing and siren screaming. Rodney just glanced at the murderer.