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. C*ome 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—