

Chapter One

New Jersey, 1975

“Get in.”

She got in the car. She was nervous, but she didn’t think he would hurt her. They drove through the deserted town, pulled onto a dark road, and sped off at forty miles per hour.

“Where we going?” she asked.

“What do you care, you little nigger whore?”

She turned her head away from him so that he wouldn’t recognize her fear. Through the window, nothing but a dim moon illuminated the trees rushing by.

The man asked, “So, how’s your new boyfriend?”

“Who? What boyfriend?”

“Don’t give me that crap. You know who.”

He reached over and grabbed her knee. The speedometer climbed to seventy as he squeezed her leg and watched the road. She gently tried to push his hand off her leg, but he held it firmly and squeezed harder. “You been whoring around in the family?”

The girl understood now. He was talking about his father. She didn’t know how he knew about that. For six months she had tried not to think about what happened, but the awful events of that night now seared her memory like a branding iron.

“I didn’t do it. At least I didn’t want to do it. It was him. He forced me. I swear, I didn’t want to do it. He made me.”

Molly struggled against his hand, now drifting up toward her private parts. She held her legs closed and pushed on his hand to prevent it from getting any farther up. The speedometer soared to eighty.

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to stop screwing everybody in the family, and you will, God damn you.”

Molly was terrified now. “Slow down. I’ll do whatever you want. Slow down, please.”

“Not yet.” He accepted Molly’s restraint of his hand and withdrew it, but slapped her hard on her stomach. “Getting a little heavy in the gut, there, ain’t you, Molly?”

She winced at the shock and folded her arms across her abdomen, which protruded beyond her normally sleek figure. Molly was pregnant.

The man moved his hand off of her body, never taking his eyes off the road. He reached across her and opened the passenger door. It was hard to do against the eighty-mph wind, but he

was strong and young. Still, the wind against the door made it difficult to push against. With his left hand on the steering wheel and his right arm outstretched toward the open door, restraining Molly in her seat, he gave up, steadied the car with both hands on the wheel, and stomped on the brake. The door flew open, almost coming off its hinges, and then slammed shut. Molly plunged into the dashboard. A reach to his right, a click of the handle, and the man turned his body toward her. He kicked her into the door with his right foot. The door flew open again at sixty mph.

Molly grabbed the door handle as it swung farther out. He delivered another kick at fifty mph, and another. The car was at forty now, not much resistance on the door, and easier to keep open. Molly was half in, half out of the car.

He pushed on her legs and twisted the steering wheel with his left hand to keep from crashing. Molly fell out, but she clutched the slippery door handle with her left hand. Her right hand frantically grabbed the top of the doorframe as her legs dangled onto the road, scraping the asphalt painfully. She reached for the top of the door with both hands, desperately trying to get back into the car.

A last look at the road, and a last kick with his foot put Molly onto the road at thirty mph. Her leg and hip slipped under the wheels of the car, which veered to the left from the bump. Molly's head and face were shattered with uncountable mortal wounds and her body and baby were flattened under the tires.

He turned the wheel against colliding with the trees to the left and right, the car eventually ending up facing in Molly's direction after two spins. The engine had stopped from the violent turn, but he quickly restarted it and crept the car back to where Molly should be. He got out, looking carefully into the blackness of the woods for the body. She wasn't hard to find, following the path of the blood. The man examined Molly's mangled remains, pulled her deeper into the woods, and laid some branches and leaves over her casually, careful to make sure he could find her the next day, but nobody else could.

"Damn mongrel coloreds, I'll teach you." The man walked back to his car and drove off.

Chapter Two

New Jersey, 1985, Ten Years Later

Four teenage boys drove down a deserted road in the middle of the night. Ben Bradshaw sat in the passenger's seat and studied a map with a flashlight. "Slow down. It's going to be to the left up here."

A boy in the back asked, "Where we going, anyway?"

Ben said, "Miller's Chapel."

The boy groaned, "Ah, come on, not again. That place doesn't even exist."

"Yes, it does. Joe Mullen, from Algebra, he's been there. He said it's on this road."

Ben glanced at the road and at the map. He wondered if they were where they should be, since the map showed a straight road, but they obviously approached a bend to the right a hundred yards away. "Damn, I don't think we're on the right road."

From the back of the car came the unmistakable sound of beer cans opening. One of the boys handed a beer up to the driver and opened another one. The driver pointed the car in the general direction of the road, held his head back, and guzzled a long swig with one swallow. He still had his eyes off the road, indifferent to the approaching bend as the car sped straight ahead at sixty mph. Ben yelled, "Oh, my God!"

Ben grabbed the wheel and tried to pull it to the right, but the driver held it fast with his leg to keep it straight. "Hey, Ben, stop that. You're... holy shit..."

The driver slammed on the brakes. His half-empty beer can tumbled to the floor and floated under the brake pedal. He pushed hard, but it wouldn't go down. The bend arrived fast. All the boys, front and back, stared at the road and at the right turn ahead, only fifty yards away.

The driver stood up in his seat and pushed the pedal down with his full body weight. Finally, the can crunched under the pedal. The car slowed and crawled to a halt.

"Holy shit." The driver picked up the beer can and threw it out the window.

Ben said, "Let me check again for that bend." He shined his flashlight on the map.

A teenager in the back said, "Jesus Christ, Ben, you almost got us killed."

"Me? I didn't do that. Stop drinking."

The driver said, "We're getting out of here."

"No, I see where we are now. See? We're on the right road, I think."

From the back came, "Aw, come on, Ben, let's just go."

"No. We came this far. I'm pretty sure this is the road. Wait a minute. Joe Mullen said it's just past a bend. I remember he said that. I think this is the road now."

The driver reluctantly pulled ahead and rounded the bend at thirty mph. Ben leaned across the console and peered out the driver's window into the darkness. "Slow down a little. It's going to be to the left up there."

The driver pushed him back. "Get off me, Ben. Jeez, what are you doing?" The driver turned around to the boys in the back. "He's getting fresh." They laughed. "Give me another beer."

The boys in the back sent another unopened beer up to the front. The driver aimed the car straight ahead with his knees holding the steering wheel and steadied it with his legs. Good enough, the road was straight here. He adjusted his aim a little to make the car curve gently to the right into the middle of the road, then back left to straighten it. With both hands off the wheel, he popped the beer-can top, took his eyes off the road, looked up, and put the beer to his mouth.

Ben shouted, "There it is." His face was right at the driver's ear.

The driver slammed on the brakes again. He dropped the can into his lap and tried to recover it, but the momentum of the full beer carried it forward, where it smacked into the dashboard and dropped to the floor, beer all over the place. The boys in the back plowed into the seats ahead, their open beers spraying the cloth and ceiling of the car. The car stopped.

The driver shouted, "Jesus Christ, Ben, what the hell are you doing? Now my dad's car stinks of beer. I'm in deep shit!"

"I saw it, back there. Back up."

The driver laid his head on the steering wheel. "Ah, Jesus Christ, this is ridiculous."

A boy from the back said, "Yeah, let's just go over the bridge like we planned."

The other boy wore a pair of tan shorts, which were now soaked with beer. "We can't go over there now, it looks like I peed myself. Damn you, Ben. Let's just go home."

Ben said, "No, it's just back there. I saw it."

The driver shook his head. "This is the last time I'm doing this, Ben. You don't like it, get your own car. And if this place doesn't exist, I'm going to beat the crap out of you." The car backed up slowly.

Ben squinted through the driver's window. The boys in the back looked out the left side for a dirt road. One of them spotted it. "There's a road there."

Ben said, "Yes, that's what I saw. That's it."

The driver backed up, stopped, and drove forward, turning left onto the dirt road. They came to an overturned tree blocking their way. Ben said, "Joe said you can't drive that far, you have to walk. This has to be it."

"Ah, come on, Ben, it's getting late."

"No, let's get out. It's just a little farther."

The boys got out of the car, stepped over the tree, and walked down the road. It was pitch black, except for a rising full moon that barely cleared the trees. Ben shined his flashlight on the ground ahead and waited while the boys relieved themselves in the woods. Ben led, watching for obstacles, and then turned around so his friends would have some light as they caught up. They came to a clearing in the woods, an unusual place for the trees to be so sparse.

A boy yelled, "Oww Oww. Something bit me."

The driver turned around and searched through the darkness for his friend. Ben cautioned, "Everybody stay still." He walked back to the boy, carefully feeling his way among the branches. The boy with the tan shorts sat on a log.

He said to Ben, "Something bit me on the leg."

Ben stooped down with the flashlight. There was a one-inch scratch on the boy's leg, but no blood. The boy looked down at Ben angrily, but with a plea for help. "What is it?"

Ben said, "It's not so bad."

Ben shifted the flashlight left and right, peering closely at the ground. The others watched as the various logs, stumps, rocks, and dead branches were illuminated by the faint and fast traveling light. There was nothing dangerous so far.

The driver yelled, "What if it was a snake?"

That did it.

The other boys panicked. "Oh, my God. Ben, get us out of here."

"It wasn't a snake. Calm down."

"Well, what the hell was it? Look at this," said the wounded boy. Ben shined the flashlight on the boy's leg again. It was indeed getting more and more red, but it was a long scratch, not a snake bite.

Ben walked behind the boy. He searched the ground for a stick or a rock, something that would indicate what caused the scratch and disprove the snake theory. "It was probably just a sharp rock. I'll see what it was. Stay here." Ben walked just five feet behind the boy and pointed his light at the floor of the clearing. A young plant rose a foot out of the ground where the clearing stopped. "This is it. See, look. It's got thorns on it. You probably brushed against this plant."

"I don't care what it was. I want to get out of here."

Ben knelt on the ground to remove the plant and bring it over to the boy, but the spikes were too numerous. Curiously, his right hand sank into the dirt when it supported his weight, but when he shifted to his left hand, it didn't go down. The ground there was as hard as stone. He brushed away some dirt and grass with his left hand.

There it was, a row of broken bricks. Beaming his flashlight across the clearing, another row of bricks rose an inch out of the ground, eight feet away, and aligned in the same direction. The ground between the bricks was perfectly flat.

Ben walked to the middle of the clearing, stooped down, and rubbed some more dirt off the eight-by-eight area. A flat stone appeared. Another stone lay next to it. "Oh, my God."

The driver yelled, "What is it, the snake?"

"No, this is the chapel. This is the chapel, where they used to give the eulogies."

"What? What the hell is a eulogy?"

"A sermon, you know, to talk about the dead people when they died."

The driver looked at his friends. One of them whispered, "He's nuts."

Ben heard that. "No, I'm not. This is Miller's Chapel. This is the chapel, see? Right here. Oh, my God, this is the chapel, Miller's Chapel."

The full moon just peeked over the dense trees to the east, illuminating the clearing. Ben turned off the flashlight. A dozen headstones appeared as the boys' eyes became accustomed to the brightening moonlight. Ben said, "This is it, Miller's Chapel, the lost graveyard."

The driver said, "Can't be too lost, here's a beer can." He kicked it to the side.

Ben said, "I can't believe we found it."

The boys peered into the woods. More and more headstones became visible in the diminishing darkness.

The moon spread shadows across the ground like ghostly fingers. Mysterious shapes were all dark against the rising light. In front of the boys, and curving around the chapel, stood solemn headstones, rising a foot out of the ground. They all slanted one way or the other.

The boys gawked at them. "This is weird."

A boy said, "Let's go."

"Yeah, Ben, this is spooky."

Ben walked over to a headstone and pointed the flashlight at the leaning grave. He had to get on his knees and angle it up against the tilt. "Look here. This guy died in 1855. I can't read his name. Can you make it out?" The boys stared at him.

Ben asked, "Wow. Do you know what life was like in 1855? Only like," he paused to calculate, "forty-one years old."

"Come on, Ben. That's enough."

"Only forty-one years old. How did he die? Was he sick? Don't you see?"

"Yeah, so he died. So what? Come on. We've got to get out of here."

Ben, on his knees, focused the flashlight to the left. Another headstone was far down in the ground and leaning west at thirty degrees. Ben stood up and walked over to it, went behind the headstone and gripped it tight with his thin-skinned teenage hands. If he could just pull it up straight, he might be able to read the name on the stone without crouching down. And another thing, maybe if the last marker of that man's life were pointing skyward instead of slanting west, maybe Ben could restore a little dignity to the man who rested there. Ben pulled, with no effect. He pulled again, hard. It hurt. He looked at the scrapes and bruises on his hands. "Help me. Help me straighten this."

The boys got it now. Ben was nuts. One of them muttered, "We gotta get him home."

Another boy said, "This place is giving me the creeps." An invisible rabbit scurried through the brush in the eerie quiet. "Whoa, what was that?"

"Oh, my God, the snake."

The two boys ran back down the dirt road, crashing into trees and each other, falling down, trying desperately to get away from the imaginary snake. The driver waited, but not for long. There could well be other snakes around.

The driver looked at Ben, ahead, who foolishly walked farther into the woods. "Ben, we're leaving." He looked back at his two cowardly friends behind him, running to the car. The driver glanced around. His eyes focused on every rock, every log, and every tree that could hold a monstrous load of snakes in this devil of a graveyard from long ago. "Ben, let's go, right now."

Ben wandered deeper into the graveyard toward a certain headstone that stood straight up. "I'll be right there. Give me a minute." This particular grave was newer than the others, not slanting. Ben walked up to it.

The driver tried to be brave, but the darkness overcame him. He was alone at the edge of the chapel. The headlights of the car bit into the woods from fifty yards away, but they pointed far to the left, no help against the evil creatures who probably watched them now from their secret hiding places in the trees. "Come on, Ben."

Ben was able to read the name and dates on this headstone without crouching down. He shined his flashlight on it and said, "Wait, it's a lady."

The driver said, "God damn it, Ben, come on."

The inscription read, 'Molly Childress, 1950-1975.' Ben said to himself, "Wow. Twenty five," as he stared at the grave.

The driver headed for the car. "See you, Ben, we're leaving."

Addressing the headstone, Ben asked, "Why did you die, Molly? I'm sorry, very sorry. And why are you here?" He looked around at the graves, all so much different in posture than hers.

Focusing again on her grave, he turned to go, but just as the light moved, his eyes caught an unusual marking. Ben stooped down and steadied the flashlight. The initials 'MC' were scratched into the lower-left corner of Molly's headstone.

"Hey, guys, come here. Look at this. Somebody carved her initials in here. See, 'MC', Molly Childress, see? That's her name." He mumbled to himself, "Or Miller's Chapel."

The driver ignored him, and the other boys were already at the car. Ben looked at the grave again, and at the initials. He heard the engine of the car start and shouted, "Hey, guys, wait. Wait for me."

A last look at Molly's grave, and the initials, and the black woods, and the moon, and the crooked headstones, all of these things stirred a feeling of senselessness in Ben's heart. "Sorry, Molly, very sorry. I've got to go. Maybe I'll see you again. Sorry, Molly."

Ben ran through the cemetery and caught up with his friends. They all got into the car and drove off.

Chapter Three

Chicago, Twenty Years Later
Thursday Evening

Ben stooped down next to a headstone. He held a piece of wax paper over the stone and rubbed it with a soft object. The image of the gravestone appeared through the paper as he rubbed, the paper capturing the bumps, crevices, patterns, and features of the letters and the stone.

Ben wanted to do a good job on this one. It would make a great addition to his 'Famous Chicago People' collection. The letters appeared on his side of the paper as he rubbed, 'OSCAR F. MAYER.'

Just as Ben finished up with the dates, a security guard crept up behind him and asked, "Hey, what're you doing?"

Ben turned around. "Nothing, just taking, like, you know, a picture of this."

"That don't look like no camera. You're defacing private property."

The guard pulled out his radio and called, "Yeah, I got that wacko here."

Ben gathered up his stuff quickly and sprinted toward the cemetery gates.

"Hey, you, get back here." He shouted into the radio, "He's getting away."

Ben slipped and plowed headfirst into a headstone, his documents falling in the mud. He looked back and saw the guard stumble, fall, get up, and limp toward him. Ben panicked. His feet couldn't quite grip the slick grass, and his documents were all over the wet lawn. The guard was fifty yards away, holding his hip, but still coming, talking into the radio.

Ben grabbed Oscar Mayer with his left hand and pulled on the headstone for support. He fell again, face down in the mud, protecting Oscar from the force of the fall. He looked behind him. Wait. The guard seemed confused as he surveyed the landscape, peering around bushes, looking for Ben. Ben could see the guard, but apparently the guard lost track of Ben. Ben held his breath and sank low against the headstone. He maneuvered his body to allow the many statues and monuments to block him from the guard's view.

The guard turned in another direction. Ben angled his body again so that the guard couldn't see him, but that was only a temporary solution. He had to get to the cemetery gates, and fast.

Ben gathered Oscar Mayer under his left arm, careful to avoid exposing himself to the enemy guard. He clutched his bag with his left fingers, because he'd need his right hand free to pull himself up. His plan was to wait for the guard to look away, then grab the headstone he was using for cover and run to the gates. It was a good plan. The guard wandered to the left, but continuously searched the cemetery for signs of the criminal Ben. Another guard came out of the building a hundred yards away. Ben had to go.

He grabbed the headstone for support with his right hand, ready to pull up for the sprint. He had Oscar Mayer cradled under his left arm and his bag in his left hand.

Ben turned toward the headstone for one last, instinctive look, to make sure his right hand had a good grip, good enough to pull himself up and launch him toward the gates, but not firm enough that his skin and blood would end up on that headstone from some stupid piece of sharp, jutting rock at the top, just waiting to slice his finger open if he grabbed it the wrong way. He also needed to figure out how to get around the headstone, which interfered with his path to the gates.

He sneaked his right hand up and rubbed the top of the stone from his prostrate position on the ground. OK, no sharp edges. He got a good grip, but he thought he heard the guards coming closer and lay still. Ben couldn't tell where the guards were any more because his face was flat on the ground.

He looked around and behind the headstone to lay out his path to the gate. It was now or never. He'd have to zigzag like a rabbit to get out of Rosehill Cemetery.

Then it happened.

Ben looked at the grave. The headstone that protected him bore the initials, 'MC' on the bottom left.

Miller's Chapel crashed into Ben's brain like a tornado in the night. His mind didn't even have to search for the image. The initials were just there, staring at him again, now, twenty years later, exactly the same, those same initials in the same place, same size, 'MC,' and the memory, still clear after all these years, of the grave of the girl who died at Miller's Chapel thirty years ago.

Ben sank down. "Oh, my God, oh, my God." He looked at the grave, 'Antisha Dunne 1980-2004.' Ben stared at the name, and then at the initials, but the security guards saw him this time. Ben got up and sprinted, dodging headstones.

He glanced back to see the guards coming toward him, but not looking where he was going, Ben tripped over a three-inch-high plastic fence and slammed into the arm of a statue. He held his shoulder as he bolted through the gates and into the street.

Chapter Four

Ben trudged up the stairs of a low-rent apartment building. Graffiti covered the walls. Shouts of "You whore," and "Hey, Momma," drifted through the hallway. He carried a gym bag and several papers, coiled like historical documents.

He got to the top step, but he was expecting another one. He couldn't see because the tube of wax paper was across his eyes. Ben fell facedown onto the landing, his documents spewing onto the floor. His shoulder hurt from the statue he had broken.

A neighbor at the end of the hall opened the door an inch. Ben heard it and looked up. The neighbor closed the door.

Ben said, "Sorry."

He gathered his documents, pushed his extra paper into the gym bag, and unlocked his apartment door. Before he could go in, though, he dropped Oscar Mayer on the floor behind him. He turned around and stooped to pick him up, but the document unraveled and Ben kicked it as he stooped. Oscar slid three feet across the hall to a janitor's closet, the corner sliding under the door. Ben pulled on the closet door, but it stuck. He pulled hard. It opened this time. He carefully extracted Mr. Mayer so that the corner of the document wouldn't tear.

The door at the end of the hall opened again. A girl walked toward him and then stopped. "Stupid white boy. Should have known."

Ben looked up and saw Angela Monroe, a strikingly beautiful dark-skinned girl.

Angela asked, "What's a white boy doing here?"

"I live here."

"What? You live here? In this building? Are you nuts?"

"Yeah, well, I don't have any money. I'm getting a divorce."

"They all say that."

"No, really. I can show you the summons."

"You hitting on me?"

"No, no. I swear. I'm not. I wouldn't do that."

Angela walked past him. "Pull yourself together before I have to call the police, OK?"

Angela walked down the hallway and down the steps. She got to the first floor, but before she went out, she looked at the mailboxes, "Ben Bradshaw."

Ben went into his apartment, sat at a table, and folded the extra rolls of blank wax paper neatly into the bag. He took the wax object out of his pocket and stuffed it in, careful to avoid crinkling the papers. Then he laid out the scrolled gravestone duplicate of Oscar Mayer on the table and curled it backward to straighten it out.

Ben said to himself, "MC. What the hell? In Chicago?" He looked at Oscar Mayer for a few moments, his triumph for the evening, but his mind drifted to the initials, 'MC,' on Antisha Dunne's grave. He rolled Mr. Mayer fondly into a loose coil, walked him over to a cabinet, and laid him gently to rest on a top shelf, next to Richard Warren Sears and Alvah Roebuck.

Ben picked up a pad and pencil and wrote, ‘Miller’s Chapel.’ He looked up, then back to his pad. ‘Mandi Christian. Mary Chandler. Morey Chaefer.’ “No, that’s an ‘S.’ What the hell am I doing?” He shook his head, searching for some combination that would make him remember the name.

“Mighty Cute.” He smiled. “No, that’s her.”

Ben wrote, Antisha Dunne ?-2004. He couldn’t remember the exact birth year, but he knew it wasn’t that long ago, and he wasn’t worried. He could get that. He just didn’t want to suddenly lose Antisha Dunne’s name, too.

But there was a problem. Antisha Dunne was ‘AD,’ and had nothing to do with Miller’s Chapel. She was buried at Rosehill Cemetery on Foster Avenue. Ben smashed those problems into his brain for later processing and went back to the issue at hand, “Who was the girl at Miller’s Chapel in New Jersey?”

He wrote, ‘Minnie, Mercy, Mary, Maggie, Mandi, Money, Monkey, Maybe.’ As he wrote each name, he crossed it out, drumming his left-hand fingers on the table. His right leg shook against the kitchen counter.

Ben rewound his memory twenty years. He remembered the dirt road and fast-forwarded to the overturned tree, the moon, the graves, and the boys yelling at him, and they almost left him there alone in the dark woods, and how the hell would he ever get home if they did that? Stop. Slow forward to the grave.

Ben recalled the image, ‘MC,’ comparing it in his memory to the one that he had just seen an hour ago. He was at the same angle on both of them, the same distance. He could fit them like a glove over each other. The initials were exactly the same.

Ben tried again, desperately running forward and backward through his memory for the name of the girl at Miller’s Chapel. No luck on the name. He was just too confused now.

Chapter Five

Ben heard loud knocks outside his apartment at the end of the hallway. An angry voice shouted, "Angela, Angela." Ben stopped working and listened closely.

"Angela. Open up. Right now."

Ben opened his door slowly. He peeked out and saw a large black man furiously banging on his up-the-hall neighbor's door, the beautiful dark-skinned girl who went past him a few minutes ago.

Ben went out into the hallway, closed the door quietly and locked it. "She's not home. You can't make any noise here. You should go. I don't want to call the police, OK?"

Jake rushed over to Ben and shoved his fist in Ben's face. "Who are you? Where is she?"

Ben looked at the fist inches from his face. Jake grabbed Ben's shirt and stared menacingly at him.

Ben said, "I don't know. I don't even know her."

Jake released Ben's shirt with an angry huff. "Don't piss me off, boy. If you know she's not home, then you know where she is, or you're screwing her."

"No, I'm not. I told you, I don't know her. I just talked to her for a second. I don't know her."

"She say anything about me?"

"Who are you?"

"Jake."

"Yeah, I think she said you were her boyfriend."

Ben wasn't sure if this huge black man would believe that lie or not, and for several seconds, Ben wondered if he shouldn't just bolt into his apartment, slam the door shut, and lock it tight, but too many seconds passed with Jake staring at him, not beating him up. And besides, Ben had locked his door. Foolish, now that he thought about it. He waited anxiously for Jake's next move.

Jake said, "You see her tonight, you tell her I'll be back. I need her to do something." He walked away, back to the stairs. Ben stood in the hallway for a minute and watched Jake go, but Jake turned back. Ben froze in fear.

"And just in case you're thinking of screwing her..." Jake lumbered back to Ben's location.

Ben turned to get away, but his door was locked, and he didn't have time to unlock it. He needed protection until he could get his key into his door. The janitor's closet across the hall was always open. Ben reached for the handle and turned it. Maybe an open door would protect him, but with Jake approaching quickly, and Ben, looking down the hall at imminent pain arriving faster and faster, unfocused on his task of opening the closet door, Ben failed to remember that the door sometimes stuck. He pulled hard. The door opened and smacked him hard in the face.

Jake stopped. "Let that be a lesson to you, boy, in advance."

Ben fell to the floor. Blood streamed out of his mouth and nose. Jake walked away and down the steps.

Ben sat, hunched over, with his nose in his hand. He tried to get up but got dizzy, and dropped back against the wall.

Jake stopped outside the building and breathed deeply. "Hey, Jude... two... three... Don't make it bad... two... three..."

Jake's shoes stomped heavily back up the stairs, stopping at the top step. Ben looked up like a trapped rabbit as Jake watched from ten feet away. Ben glanced at his apartment door across the hallway. If Jake took one more step, Ben would run for it. He calculated his chances of unlocking his door, pushing it open, falling inside, slamming the door shut, and locking it from the inside before Jake could get to him. He needed more time, though. He secretly extracted his keys from his pocket and inched closer to his apartment door.

Ben was surprised at Jake's remark, "Sorry, boy, but you pissed me off. Was you going to hide in that closet?"

It didn't look as though Ben were going to get beat up just now. "No. I was just looking for a... a mop... I've got... uh... water... You know."

"Yeah, I know. Tell Angela I'm looking for her. Sorry, boy. Take care of that nose."

Jake left the building. He didn't see Angela coming.

Angela walked slowly up the steps with groceries in her arms. Ben lay in the hallway outside his door, holding his nose.

"Oh, my God." She dropped two grocery bags on the floor and ran over to Ben. Blood poured out of his nose. Angela crouched down. "What happened to you?"

Ben stared into the face of the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen, for the second time tonight, same girl. For only a second, he considered using the sympathy ploy, but then he remembered that Angela had a problem. His name was Jake, the brute who had just left.

Ben handed Angela his keys. His hands shook. "Can you open it?"

Angela turned the lock. They went in.

Ben's apartment was one large room with a bed and an open kitchen behind an eating counter. There was only a small chest of drawers next to the bed. The counter and the table were cluttered with wax-paper images of headstones, held down by books, tape, cans, and laundry-detergent bottles. Coils of loose paper lay on the floor. Angela looked around, astonished. The place was a complete wreck.

Ben fell into the bed. He held his nose, bleeding all over the sheets. Angela walked into the kitchen area and wet some paper towels, then returned to the bed and held them against Ben's nose and mouth.

Ben said, "Hi. Nice to meet you. I'm Ben, Ben Bradshaw."

"I know. I'm Angela Monroe. What happened?"

"You know a guy named Jake?"

Angela's eyes shot open. "Oh, no, Jake's back? Oh, no. Oh, my God."

Angela looked around for the phone, which was hard to find in the clutter. "We've got to call the police." She found the phone on the floor and dialed.

Ben gently took it out of her hands. "He didn't hit me. It was an accident, my fault. I'll be OK. I should have stood up to him. Jeez, I'm such a wimp." He held the towel to his nose and fell back into the bed.

Angela grabbed the phone. Ben released it without argument. She said, "I have a restraining order on him. And you're not a wimp. He's 250 pounds. I'm calling the police."

"God. Why did you... How could you know a guy like that?"

"It's none of your business."

"You're right. Call the police. You're in danger. Call."

Angela looked around again, dialed slowly, and then hung up. She rested the phone in her lap. "What is all this stuff?"

Ben followed her eyes, her face frowning at the headstone papers all over the floor, the counter, and the chairs. "I collect headstones."

"You what?"

"Well, not exactly."

Ben's nose bled again. He wiped it and cringed in pain. "I, like, uh, I make an image of them, headstones. Call the police, come on."

"No. They'll think you're a nut, which you are."

"Then give me the phone."

"No, not yet." Angela hid the phone behind her. "I have to find out what Jake wants. Did he say what he wants?"

"No, he didn't. He said to tell you he needs you to do something. What does that mean?"

"How would I know?"

Ben noticed Angela's confusion. Apparently she was thinking about this monster of a boyfriend and what he wanted her to do, probably drugs, money, prostitution, or God knows what. Maybe Ben should just ask her to leave and save himself a lot of trouble and money, of which he already had plenty, 'trouble, not money,' he thought.

But she was just so beautiful.

Angela looked at him. "Why do you collect all this creepy stuff?"

"I don't know. Neither does my soon-to-be-ex wife. She thinks I'm nuts, too."

"You are, you know."

"Yeah, I know. I just sit here some evenings and look at them. I think about who they were, when they died, why they died." Ben looked down, embarrassed at how that sounded.

Angela said, "Let me wet another towel."

She went into the kitchen area, stepping over a gravestone impression held open by several cans of soup. She glanced curiously at the headstone duplicates taped to the counter.

Ben called into the kitchen, "So why aren't we calling the police?"

"They'll never believe you. You're too crazy. They'll probably arrest you." Angela came back into the main room with the fresh towel. "Can you afford a lawyer?"

"Damn. That security guard. They'll probably find out about that."

Angela stared at him.

Ben said, "No, I can't afford another lawyer. I can't even afford the one I've got. Jeez. You think they'd put me in jail?"

"Ben, look at this place." Angela waved her hand around the apartment. She turned back to Ben. "What security guard?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said, 'That security guard.' You said, 'They'll probably find out about that.'"

"Well, no, probably not."

"Tell me, mister."

"OK. Well, I usually do very obscure graveyards. You know, overgrown, nobody takes care of them. It's something about the people being forgotten. It bothers me, people with nobody to come by and do flowers, you know." Ben winced at Angela's sour expression. "That's the people I usually do."

"And the security guard? God, Ben, no wonder you're getting a divorce."

"I know. I'm not usually this rambling. I'm a computer programmer."

"The security guard?"

"OK, so tonight I wanted to get Oscar Mayer."

Angela scowled at him.

"You know, the hot dog guy, Oscar Mayer, you know?"

"Of course I know who Oscar Mayer is."

I've been eating a lot of them lately, hot dogs, too much. You know, I don't have any money. Too expensive to eat right. That's why I wanted to get Oscar Mayer. I've seen a lot of him lately." Ben smiled. "I'm getting a divorce. I don't have any money. That's all I have to say."

"Ben, make some sense."

"All right, he's buried at Rosehill Cemetery on Foster, Oscar Mayer. I have a lot of famous people, over there." Ben pointed to a cabinet across the room. Angela went over and opened it. Shelves were full of images. The fronts of the shelves were marked in tape with 'Famous,' 'Died Old,' 'Died Young,' and 'Died Long Ago.'

Ben said, "I'm still processing them. Like, 'Died Old' could also be 'Died Long Ago,' or 'Famous.' I'm working on that. I have a code, but I'm not done. My Civil War collection is underneath."

Angela opened another drawer and saw hundreds of other headstone papers. She came back warily and stood between Ben and the apartment door. "So?"

"OK, so I was doing Oscar Mayer, and this security guard caught me."

Angela asked, "What do you mean, 'caught you'?"

"He caught me waxing Oscar Mayer."

"You were waxing Oscar Mayer?"

Ben sucked in his breath. "Yes. OK. Wait. I hold the paper over the stone. Sometimes I tape it if there's a wind. I have a kit. Here, look." Ben walked over to his bag and pulled out a dark, hockey-puck-like object. "This is the wax. I rub this wax over the paper. It makes an impression of the headstone." Ben hoped that his explanation was enough.

"Why don't you just take a picture?"

Ben shook his head solemnly. "Oh, no, that's not the same, nowhere near the same. A picture can lie, but not this."

Angela rolled her eyes. "Ok, the security guard?"

"All right. I had to get away, so I jumped over a little fence where I wasn't exactly supposed to be."

"And?"

"Well, I sort of knocked an arm off of somebody."

"You what?"

"Not somebody, but a statue or something, so I had to high-tail it out of there." Ben rubbed his shoulder and smiled. "But I got Oscar Mayer."

Angela shook her head. "You're insane. So now the police are after you for destroying property, is that it?"

"Yeah, well, more or less."

Angela closed her eyes briefly, but longer than a blink. Ben could almost see her eyes rolling under the lids. She said, "I'm afraid Jake will come back."

"Not tonight, I don't think. Of course, you can stay here if you'd like. Maybe you should. You can sleep on the floor." Ben realized how bad that sounded. "Or I could. I'll sleep on the floor. You can have the bed. I'll sleep in the kitchen. You know, he might come back."

"Hitting on me again, aren't you? You just can't help yourself, can you, mister?"

"I wasn't, I swear."

Angela said, "I have to get home. I have to go to work tomorrow."

"Where do you work?"

Angela glared at him suspiciously.

Ben said, "Aw, come on. I'm not doing it. Look, I work at the Tribune Tower, downtown." He wiped a little more blood from his nose for sympathy. "But I'm calling in sick tomorrow, give my nose time to heal by Monday, I hope."

"I work at the library on Foster."

Angela opened the door and walked out. Ben followed her. She went down the hallway to her own apartment.

Ben said, "I'm a light sleeper. I'll hear if anybody comes up here."

Angela went in and closed her door without another word.

Ben shouted through the door, "Hey, can I get your phone number?" No response. Ben put his ear to the door and tapped. "What if he comes back? I might have to call you to warn you."

Nothing. Ben turned around and walked slowly down the hall.

Angela's door opened three inches. Ben heard it and turned back hopefully. A piece of paper dangled between two light-brown fingers. Ben took it, and then the click, clang, and the chain screech of Angela's door locking tight echoed through the silent hallway.

"Good night, Angela," said Ben, under his breath. He looked at the telephone number, all even digits, easy to memorize. He smiled as he went into his apartment.

Chapter Six

Friday

Ben walked up to a small, faded-yellow brick building. Red neon letters at the top displayed, "CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY." He went in.

Two workers sorted books at the checkout counter. There were no patrons anywhere. An employee came out of the back and asked a question of the two booth attendants, but it wasn't Angela. "Where is she," he thought. He milled around for a minute, waiting and watching, then went over to the desk to get a better angle on the back room. A desk attendant looked up.

"May I help you?"

"No, just looking."

Ben cringed at the mistake. The attendant went back to her work, but glanced at her co-worker and motioned to a location behind the desk where they kept the "call-the-police" button.

"We don't have any money here, you know."

"What?"

"Do you want to check out a book?"

"No, no. I'm sorry. I'm looking for someone."

"Who?"

"Angela Monroe. She works here."

The second attendant held her finger on the button. Both girls stared at Ben. The second attendant turned to the first one, who seemed to be in charge, "Marsha, should I?"

Ben panicked. He could see that the second attendant had her hand on something behind the desk. Ben knew what that was. "Look, I'm a friend of hers." He reached into his pocket, pulled out Angela's phone number, and showed it to the first attendant. "See? I have her number. She gave it to me. This is her handwriting, right? See? Please, is she here? I just want to take her to lunch."

Marsha, the lead desk attendant, replied, "If she told you she works here, why didn't she say how to find her here?"

"I don't know. I just know she's my friend. Is she here? Please?"

An elderly woman struggled into the room with a stack of books. She dropped one on the floor. Ben turned around at the sound and picked it up for her.

"Thank you, young man."

Ben took the rest of the books out of her arms. "Are you returning these?"

"Yes, but I have a complaint."

Ben dropped the books into the slot. He looked at one of them as they fell in, "Wings of Glory," a WWII novel. The woman noticed Ben looking at the book.

"My husband, he was in World War Two. He used to go to the drop-box, and now it's all the way in the back. I don't have a car, and he's dead now, so I have to..."

Ben interrupted. "We're working on that, Ma'am. In fact, you can just call us, and we'll pick up the books for you." Ben looked at the women at the desk. "Isn't that right, Marsha?"

"Yes, Mrs. Bedford. We'll come and get them. We'll do that for you."

"Well, I seriously hope so. You know, Henry used to tell me he had trouble in the snow. When winter comes, I don't know what I'm going to do."

The second desk attendant came around to the front and put her arm around Mrs. Bedford, chatting amiably and walking her to the door. "Now you take care, Agnes. The cab is waiting. We'll see you next week."

"Thank you dears. And thank that handsome young man of yours."

Marsha looked at Ben. "I'll call Angela. What's your name?"

"Ben Bradshaw."

She dialed and got a busy signal. "She's not here."

"Aw, come on."

Marsha looked at the other lady. Ben didn't seem like a serial killer or anything, but you couldn't be sure in Chicago these days. She looked at Ben, then back to her partner. The partner shrugged.

"She's in there." Marsha pointed to a set of double doors. Ben went in.

Angela sat next to Paula Lincoln, a middle-aged black woman. Angela talked on the phone and didn't notice Ben approaching. Paula typed into a computer.

Paula asked, "Can I help you?"

Paula was attractive, but thin. When she looked up, Ben noticed heavy circles under her eyes and an expression of weariness in her face. She looked as though she'd endured more than her share of hardship in life. Paula looked to Ben like a person you'd want to avoid having an argument with.

Ben said, "You'd think Chicago could afford a bigger library."

Piercing daggers stabbed from Paula's eyes. "It's a branch."

Angela recognized Ben's voice. "I've gotta go, Mom." Angela hung up the phone and looked at Ben. "What are you doing here?"

"I have to find out something. Care for lunch?"

Angela asked, "Paula, can you cover for me?"

"What?"

"Please, Paula. I'll owe you."

Paula waved her away and went back to her computer. Angela got up from behind her desk and walked past Ben through the doors and into the lobby. Ben followed. The three attendants watched them go past.

As Angela got to the library door, Marsha asked, "Angela?"

"Yes, Marsha?" She veered over to the desk. Marsha glanced at Ben, who stood behind Angela.

"Marsha?" Angela asked again.

"Nothing. You OK?"

Marsha shifted to the right to get an angle on Ben. Angela noticed Marsha's shuffle and turned around. Ben stood patiently against the wall.

Angela turned back to Marsha. "Oh, him? He's harmless. I'm OK. Thanks for worrying, Marsha."

Angela smiled. Marsha nodded. Ben and Angela walked outside.

Ben said, "I'm parked over there."

"No. We'll take my car, so I can ditch you and get away if you give me any crap."

"All right, but stop at my car first."

Ben got in the passenger's seat. Angela drove over to Ben's car. Ben got out and opened his trunk. He pulled out his gym bag, put it in Angela's back seat, and got back in.

Angela snickered, "That your axe?"

Ben stared at her quizzically. "What?"

Angela giggled.

Ben said, "Oh, yeah, I'm an axe murderer. Funny. McDonald's OK?"

"Big spender, aren't you?"

Ben and Angela sat in a booth. Ben asked, "What do you think Jake wants?"

"I don't know. How would I know?"

"He was your boyfriend, right?"

"Yes. So what?"

"Sorry. I'm upsetting you. I don't mean to. You know, I'm a nut."

"Yes, I know."

"You done?"

Angela swallowed the last fry, nodded her head, and got up. They left McDonalds and walked back to Angela's car, Angela still chewing.

Ben asked, "Mind if I drive?"

"Yes, I do."

"Ah, come on, I have to go somewhere. I need your help. It's just over on Foster."

Ben drove Angela's car in silence. Angela looked out the window, so Ben could tell she was worried about something.

Angela said, "He wasn't my boyfriend."

Ben didn't say anything.

"He was my husband."

"I thought so."

Angela said, "Just for a couple of months. Then he threatened me. He never actually hit me. I don't think he ever would."

"So you're divorced?"

"Well, no. We never had the money. We never got divorced. But I haven't seen him in over a year. I don't know why he's back."

"Maybe he wants to give you your share of the tax refund."

"Don't be funny, Ben, it's not attractive, especially with that nose, although it looks better. How is it, anyway?" She leaned over and lightly touched his nose.

"It feels a little better." Ben enjoyed the closeness of Angela's body. He could smell her perfume, barely a wisp of fragrance that wafted up from her wrists as she touched his nose, different than his wife's perfume, different smell, different strength. Ben looked at her just as she turned back into her seat. Angela didn't see that.

"God. What the hell is he coming back into my life for? He doesn't like me any more than I like him."

Ben considered asking the question, "Why did you marry him?" but didn't speak. The answer would be, "None of your business, and you're married too, right?" That would be justified. Ben didn't ask.

He drove in silence. He hated himself for being married and even thinking about asking Angela why she married Jake. Ben avoided a rebuke by keeping his mouth shut, a rebuke from

the most beautiful girl he'd ever known, sitting right next to him, who also happened to faintly smell so wonderful.

Angela looked peripherally at Ben, catching casual glimpses of his face. They turned left onto Foster Avenue.

Ben slowed the car and stopped outside a cemetery.

Angela sat in the passenger's side. "Where are we?"

"Rosehill. I need to get a copy of something."

"Oh, no. Please."

Ben got out. He reached into the back seat and grabbed his bag. Angela stared at him.

Ben asked, "Can you get out, please?"

Angela looked around at the headstones. She got out slowly.

Ben said, "See that building over there? Watch to see if a guard comes out. I have to find this grave."

Ben dashed into the cemetery. He peered intensely at the headstones, looking up frequently at the guardhouse.

Angela said, "What are you doing?"

"Shh. Just tell me if anybody comes out."

Angela followed him around. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm trying to find somebody. It's over here someplace."

"Ben, this is crazy."

"Wait. Let's see, there's Oscar Mayer over there, and I hit that statue, I think." Ben walked toward the statue, calculating the location of the grave he was looking for, between Oscar and the statue. He slanted right to put himself between the statue and Oscar Mayer. Ben searched the headstones carefully, looking at each one for any markings on the bottom.

Angela said, "I'm going back to the car."

"No, no. I need you. Here it is."

Angela came over and looked at the gravestone. "Antisha Dunne 1980-2004." Ben crouched down. He glanced back at the guards' building. Nobody came out, but Angela's stance was in the way. Ben glanced momentarily at her knees, an inch below her skirt. For a fraction of a second he looked up at her. She moved sideways.

Ben said, "Watch over there, can you?"

Ben dodged another possible blast from Angela with his quick thinking. He wasn't really looking at her beautiful legs, he was looking for the guard. Yes. It was business now.

Ben put the paper over the stone and taped it tight. He rubbed the paper gently but firmly with the wax brick, over and over against the headstone, including the initials at the bottom, 'MC,' especially the initials. He held his hand against the stone to keep the paper from drifting while he did the letters.

A gray-haired man sat at a window booth in a sleazy restaurant across the street. He sipped his coffee and watched Ben and Angela scrambling around in the cemetery.

He looked around the dining room. A couple of old men at the counter faced away from him. The waitress was in the back. Even though it was still lunchtime, there were only a few people at the tables, none close.

The man took out a pair of small binoculars and trained them on Ben and Angela, especially on Angela. He looked back at Ben, a white boy, then back to Angela. He noticed her dark skin, but she wasn't really colored. She could be one of 'them.' He watched Ben stare at her

legs. He read Ben's thoughts, sex with a colored, or worse, a mongrel colored, already the product of inbreeding between races. Maybe. He'd have to find out. He watched Angela turn toward the building as Ben spoke. Yes, she was definitely one of 'them.'

Angela said, "Somebody came out."

"Let's go. I'm done."

Ben took off toward the gates. He looked behind him at Angela dragging along slowly. Ben stopped, went back to her, and hustled her toward the gates. "Let's go."

Ben maneuvered behind her to keep her going, looking back continually at the building. He noticed the guard watching them. He grabbed Angela's arm, ahead, and slowed her down. "Don't talk. Don't look back."

Angela frowned in confusion. "Ben, what are you doing?"

"Shh. Just look at this grave and make like you're crying."

"What?"

"Cry. Look at the grave and cry." Ben glanced behind.

"Cry at what, Ben?"

The guard stared at them from fifty yards away. Ben said, "Cry. Just look at the grave and cry. Please."

Angela looked at the grave, but didn't cry. She looked up at Ben.

Ben could see that she didn't understand. He told Angela, "Turn around and move to the gates slowly. Cry, please."

Angela walked toward the gates. Ben hung his head low, his back to the guard, in deep sorrow at the death of their imaginary relative. Angela was almost to the gates with Ben right behind her. He turned around, head low, to see where the guard was, and raised his head slowly.

Ben gazed into the guard's eyes across the graveyard. It was the same guard who had limped toward him in the mud last night.

The guard shouted, "Hey, you, stop. Get back here."

Ben turned to Angela and shouted, "Get out. Run to the street."

Ben and Angela ran to the gates and into the street. Angela got to the car. Ben trailed, rolling up the wax-paper impression of Antisha Dunne as he ran.

The old man left the restaurant, walked to an old car, got in, and saw Angela and Ben get into Angela's car. The man waited for Angela and Ben to drive away. Ben squealed out onto Foster. The man followed them.

Angela fumed as Ben drove. "What the hell was that about? You really are nuts. I was just kidding before, but now..."

Angela slapped Ben as hard as she could on his accelerator leg. It didn't hurt. Angela was incapable of exerting enough force to even make a bruise. She was just frustrated at liking this seemingly intelligent, resourceful, kind, gentle, shy, adventurous man, cute enough to be attractive, but obviously crazy and obsessive. "You're nuts. You know that? You're nuts."

Ben asked, "You have microfilm in your place?"

"What? My apartment?"

"No, the library."

"Yeah, sure. What do you think, we're in the 18th century just because we're on Foster Avenue?"

They arrived at the library. Before Ben could even park the car, Angela got out, slammed her car door, and walked to the library doors without a word.

Ben rolled down the window. "I'll just put my bag in my car and be right there."

No reply. Angela went in and held her head down against the stares of the front-booth attendants. She went into the back room and sat at her desk next to Paula.

Paula said, "You crazy, girl,"

"I know, but he's very sweet. He's just a little nuts. He's getting a divorce."

"That's what he told you?"

"I know, Paula. I'm being very careful. He lives in my building."

Paula shook her head and went back to her work.

Marsha, the main attendant at the front desk, looked up as Ben came in. She nudged her companion slightly to get her attention. Ben walked past them. The three girls followed him suspiciously with their eyes.

Ben went through the doors and into the back room. Angela put her head down at Ben's approach, but Paula stared straight into Ben's face. Angela was seated to Paula's right, so Ben flipped the keys into his left hand and placed them on Angela's counter. He addressed Paula directly, "You have microfilm here?"

Paula looked at Angela, then back to Ben. "In there. On the Intranet." She motioned toward another room.

Angela watched Ben go into the microfilm room. Paula looked at Angela again and wagged her head, "You crazy, girl."

Outside, an old car pulled up close to Angela's car. The gray-haired man got out, opened his trunk and took out a car-door opener. He walked over to Angela's passenger-side door and jimmied the device between the window and door. A quick pull and the lock popped open.

He opened the glove compartment and read Angela's insurance card. He pulled a notepad and stubby pencil out of his shirt pocket and scribbled the information.

Jake stomped up the steps to Angela's apartment. He banged on the door. "Angela." He waited for a minute and knocked again, "Angela, open up." Jake softened his voice. "Angela? Are you in there? It's Jake. I need to talk to you." Jake put his ear to Angela's door, then reached into his pocket, pulled out a note, and slipped it under the door.

Angela glanced up again and again at the entrance to the microfilm room. "What's he doing in there? He's been in there for hours."

Paula looked at the little room. "Probably doing all the porn sites."

"I'm going to see what he's doing."

Angela got up from her desk and went into the room. Ben walked around, talking into a cell phone. "Did you have a daughter named Antisha who died?"

Angela asked, "What are you doing?"

Ben covered the phone with his hand and turned toward Angela. "Shh. I found that girl, Antisha Dunne. She's from Chicago, but I don't know where."

Ben spoke again into the phone, "I'm looking into her death. OK, sorry to bother you."

Ben clicked the button of the phone with a weary sigh, "Damn."

Angela marched over to him. "What are you doing? You can't just call people and ask them if their daughter died." She grabbed the cell phone away from him.

“I need that back, please.”

“No. Go home. I’ll give it back to you tonight. Go home, Ben.”

Ben left the microfilm room and walked past Paula at the desk. Paula watched him go with a ruthless expression. The three attendants at the front desk saw Ben come through the door. They stopped their work and watched as Ben went out and into the parking lot.

Chapter Seven

Friday Evening

Angela walked up the stairs of her apartment building. Gliding coolly past Ben's door, she opened her own. A piece of paper on the floor caught her attention. She picked it up and read Jake's note, then rushed down the hall to Ben's apartment. She knocked so hard that her knuckles hurt.

Ben opened his door. "Hi. You have my phone?"

"Ah, here's your damn phone." She threw it into the pillow on the bed. "I got a note from Jake. He wants me to call him."

Angela looked around. Copies of headstones filled the tables, chairs, and the bed. The cabinet was open. Wax-paper impressions dangled from the shelves. One fell on the floor as the wind from the opening door caught it off guard. "What's all this?"

"Antisha Dunne was from Chicago. I'm seeing if there are any other girls."

"Why do you care so much about this Antisha girl?" Did you know her?

"No. I think she was killed."

"What?"

"The microfilm article said she fell onto the tracks downtown."

"People get killed in Chicago every day, Ben. I know, I'm sorry for her too, but just because she got killed, doesn't mean you have to get involved."

"There's something else."

Ben noticed Angela's perplexing stare, like he was crazy, the face he'd seen on his wife many times. It was the first time he held the image of his wife and Angela in his mind at the same time, and he didn't like that feeling one bit, his wife's face superimposed on Angela's.

No, they were different stares. They didn't match. His wife would bend her head down, in a straight line to his shoes, but her eyes would glare at him from the tops of their sockets, as if peering over the tops of her glasses, but Ben's wife didn't wear glasses. Her head would bend forward aggressively, waiting for Ben to say something, logical or not, before she'd pounce verbally on his stupidity. Sometimes she wouldn't even wait for a whole sentence. Angela, instead, waited patiently for an explanation.

Ben couldn't take the chance that Angela would think even less of him. He hesitated, then changed the subject, usually a successful tactic in dealing with people. "Are you going to call Jake? I'll stay with you if you want." It didn't work this time.

"Never mind about Jake. Why are you so obsessed with this girl?"

Ben took a chance. He'd have to come clean and hope that Angela understood that he wasn't a nut. "It's the initials in the corner. Look."

Ben pointed out the initials on Antisha's headstone, 'MC' in the lower-left corner. Ben expected the contorted expression that Angela just gave him.

"When I was a teenager, I saw these initials at a graveyard in New Jersey, Miller's Chapel. The marking was exactly like this, and in the lower left."

"What marking?" What are you talking about, 'marking'?"

Ben breathed deeply. He might just drive Angela away now, but he had to get it out about Miller's Chapel. "You see these initials? Right here."

"Yes. So what?"

"Doesn't it seem odd that there are initials here, obviously not put there by the company who made the stone."

Angela looked closer. "I still don't see what that has to do with her falling on the tracks. God, Ben, I've got Jake..."

"I know. I'm sorry. Look, I can explain this to you later." Ben thought he found a cosmic worm hole out of his predicament, that of not looking like a crazy lunatic. "Let me see Jake's note."

Angela mechanically folded the note and put it in her pocket, looking intensely at the two letters carved into the wax-paper headstone. She looked up. "What do they mean?"

Ben had to tell her, a huge risk of getting that 'you're crazy' frown, maybe from Angela's upturned eyes, her head angled at his shoes.

"I saw these same initials on a headstone. It was at a graveyard in New Jersey. That's where I'm from." Angela did not run out the door hysterically, as Ben thought she might.

"Miller's Chapel. The initials were plain as day, just like these, same size and everything."

"Miller's Chapel? What does that mean?"

"It's the name of the graveyard."

"A graveyard is the name of a Chapel? Ben?"

"No, wait." He could see that this was getting away from him. The chapel wasn't important. It was the graves that were important, but Ben had to explain the chapel in the fewest words possible to get the explanation of the graves worked in before Angela walked out on him forever.

"The chapel was a bunch of flat stones with some sides, I think. It was almost gone when we got there. I think maybe somebody used to give a speech there or something when they buried the people."

Angela listened. She still hadn't run out yet.

"It's not the chapel that's important, it's the graves, about a dozen of them, all run down, but not this one, far in the back."

"There were letters on it?"

Ben got excited. She was interested, but he dared not scare her away. "Yes." He had to be careful not to act like a rambling fool. He thought about the best words to use, looking intensely at her face for a reaction against his possible insanity. "The initials were like this, 'MC,' Miller's Chapel, plain as day, on that one grave far in the back. It was a girl. She was 25, I think, young, anyway."

Angela looked at the letters on Antisha's grave. "They were like this? Is that what you're saying?"

Ben's mind leaped into a silent and expressionless Hallelujah. "Yes. I'm checking my archives for anybody else. Can you help me?"

Angela looked around at the papers. "Did you do these?"

"Yes. Can you check the cabinet?"

Angela pulled some headstone copies out of the drawers.

"Look for initials in the lower left, or partial initials. I don't usually go down that far."

"Ben, this is crazy."

"I know. Please, keep going."

Angela pulled a paper out from the drawer. Dozens of others were underneath. She looked hurriedly at them, fingering them.

"How many of these do you have?"

"About two hundred."

"What?"

"Actually, two hundred and sixty, with Oscar Mayer."

Angela sighed. She picked up one, no initials. She placed it carefully upside down on the floor. Another, no initials. Another, no. She put it on the pile. On the backs of all the papers, Ben had written the name of the graveyard and sometimes some other notes.

Angela slowed her pace as she studied the crooked bumps and impressions of the headstones. Another man died in 1830, eighteen years old. "Wow." She took another one, 'Bradshaw, Cornelius, Died April 2, 1864.' On the back was scribbled, 'Rosehill Cemetery. 1st Mich. Sharpshooters.'

"Ben, did you have a relative named Cornelius?"

Ben was busy. "What? Uh, no, I don't think so. I don't know."

She put it on the pile, upside down.

The next one was 'Angela Monrovia, died 1893.' Angela shouted, "Ben, it's me."

Ben rushed over, excited. "Are there initials in the corner?"

Angela Monroe put her head down. She had forgotten about the initials. "No. It's just her name. It's the same as mine. Well, it's not exactly like mine, but it's similar. She died in childbirth."

Ben read the inscription of Angela Monrovia,

IN CHILDBIRTH SHE DIED
MY LOVE, MY HOPE, MY BRIDE
IN DEATH CREATED LIFE
SLEEP PEACEFULLY, MY WIFE

Ben looked at the dates. He calculated, "Thirty-four years old."

Angela said, "That's how old I am."

"Are you? I'm thirty six."

Ben turned the document over, 'Acacia Cemetery.' There were no other notes by Ben. "That's on Irving Park Road. I probably got that one because she died in childbirth." He turned it back over.

"And it's a good epitaph, and the stone is so clean for being so old. See, everything is legible. That's probably why I got it."

Angela stared at it. 'Angela Monrovia,' almost her own name. She focused intensely on the image of the girl's name and the numbers and the poem. She said, "I think that's a country, isn't it, 'Monrovia'?"

Ben replied, "I think it's a city."

Angela's stare burned a hole between Ben's eyes. She said, "I think it's a country."

Ben smiled. "If you think it's a country, then it's a country. No mater what, it's a girl. She could be your guardian angel."

Maybe Angela Monroe, his own Angela Monroe, was beginning to understand his fascination with people who died, when they died, and why they died. He said, "Maybe you want to take that one home. Maybe she's watching over you. You should call her 'Mrs. Monrovia'."

Angela broke out of her trance. "Oh, Ben, do you believe in that stuff?"

"No, I don't. The only thing I think God could have done better was to make Pi a whole number."

"What?"

"Two decimals, max."

"What?"

"But at least He made ice float. Got to give it to Him for that."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Ben chuckled. "Never mind. Keep looking for initials, please. He went back to his pile, then turned, "Hey, what about you? What about Jake?"

Angela fished for the piece of paper in her pocket. "I think I'll think on that for a while."

"You think?"

Angela shook her head. She rolled up Angela Monrovia and placed her gently on the kitchen counter, away from the other headstones, and went back to looking at the papers. So many had died so young, and so long ago. None of them had initials, though. Ben searched diligently through his pile.

A quick exam and on to the next one for Angela. She glanced over at Ben, who was working fast. With Ben intent on his own work, Angela slipped over to the counter, unraveled Angela Monrovia, and looked at it for a minute. She said to herself, "I think I'll call you Angie."

She read the poem again 'In Childbirth she died...' Angela asked, "Ben, why did you care if she died in childbirth?"

Ben stopped and came over. "Because it must have been so terrible for her."

"So you like to think about things being terrible for people?"

"No. I feel horrible for them. I feel horrible for myself."

"Why?"

Ben raised his voice. "I don't like pain, all right?"

"Nobody does."

"But I think about it more than most people, I think. I don't even like going to a dentist." Ben touched his sore nose. "I should have seen somebody about this nose to make sure it's not broken."

"I was going to suggest that you do that."

"I'm glad you didn't, because I wouldn't. I wouldn't be able to stand somebody poking at it. I'm a wimp, I told you that."

Ben settled down. "If I get into an accident, or have something really bad happen, I don't know, Angela. I think I'd just rather die. It scares me. But then I think about all the terrible, terrible suffering that people have gone through, and I think, 'Who am I to be so afraid?'"

Ben didn't wonder what the stare was about this time. He already admitted that he was afraid, and he knew that she thought he was nuts.

Ben said calmly, "I once came across the grave of a soldier who got shot in the head at Gettysburg. He lay in the field all day, and then the flies came along."

Angela listened.

"They laid their eggs on his head and for three more days the maggots ate out his brain."

Ben paused. He gave Angela a chance to speak or walk away, but she didn't. "Then they found him. He lived for two more days, screaming in agony, and finally he died."

"Oh, Ben."

"I wouldn't be able to stand that. The amount of suffering that people have gone through is just unimaginable to me. I'm sorry. It's just one of the reasons I do this. It bothers me."

Ben went back to his papers. "Keep looking, please."

Angela flipped through a couple more headstones. She looked at initials now, more carefully than before. She found one and studied it closely. "Ben?"

Ben continued with the images on the bed, putting them gently into a 'disappointment' pile. "Just keep looking, please."

Holding an image in her hand, Angela glanced over to Ben. He sighed as he searched through his pile. Ben had tackled this job randomly, and now he was frustrated at no success. He couldn't remember which ones he had checked, a bad practice for a computer programmer, and he knew it. Back to the beginning. He gathered up all the unread duplicates lying all around, moved the examined ones into a pile on the floor, and went back to organizing and searching.

Angela looked again at the headstone in her hand. It might be letters in the lower left, but the scratching was very faint, and only top high. She looked over at Ben.

Angela said, "I think I found something."

Ben looked up. He came over and looked at Angela's paper. "Oh, my God."

The impression of the gravestone said, "Tamara Cruz, 1986-2004"

He looked at the obscure letters on the lower left of the sheet of wax paper. He could only see the tops of the initials, but they were more than enough to identify them as 'MC.'

Ben turned it over. He read a note on the back, 'Resthaven.' "Resthaven. I remember getting that, a small cemetery at the airport, south of the runway."

"What?"

"The 'C' on this headstone is exactly like Antisha Dunne, and the girl in New Jersey. See, it's straight across at the top, the 'C.' I remember that. It's like the guy was too lazy to make a curve." Ben drew his finger along the top of the letter. "It's a straight 'C' at the top, see?"

"See what, Ben?"

The phone rang. Ben answered it. "Hello. Yes, I called you. Are you Antisha Dunne's mother? Yes, thank you... I can't say right now... Yes, I'm looking into her death." Ben wrote something down. "OK. I'm very sorry. Thank you. Thank you very much."

Ben hung up the phone. "That was Antisha Dunne's mother. She couldn't talk to me earlier, but she thinks something is wrong, too. I'm going to see her tomorrow." Ben studied Tamara Cruz's headstone. The tops of the initials definitely indicated 'MC,' for Miller's Chapel. Ben looked at Angela. "I've got to figure this out."

"Oh, Ben, you're scaring me again. What the hell is going on?"

"I think somebody killed that poor girl in New Jersey and now he's in Chicago."

