

## CHAPTER ONE

It was a crisp October morning, 9am, and Columbus, Ohio, still hadn't rolled out of bed. Not just one person. Not just one street. Not just one neighborhood. The entire city was fast asleep. No smell of coffee brewing, or sound of bacon frying. No joggers circling the block, or school buses making the rounds. No early risers mowing the grass, or raking the leaves. No papers on morning lawns. Even the dogs, the birds, the wild animals were sleeping. Insects, too. No swarming, or buzzing, or crawling, or whatever their particular species might be doing this time of day.

Outside of Columbus, Ohio, the rest of the country was growing alarmed. *Good Morning America* was first to break the story, and soon "*COLUMBUS GOES DARK!*" leapt to the top of everyone's news feeds... But despite all the attention, media coverage, etc., cold hard facts were still hard to come by. Even the weather satellites orbiting the planet were unable to pick up anything on the ground; for, as each of them passed across the corresponding GPS coordinates, each went dark until it had crossed. Nothing but an empty grey box was visible where shifting weather patterns could usually be seen sliding across the metro area.

Hoping for the best – *prepared for the worst* – first responders from Cleveland to Cincinnati were dispatched to Columbus. Likewise, an advance team from the nearest National Guard station. But all that had been set into motion hours ago, and still no word from Ground Zero. Needless to say, people were starting to worry...

## CHAPTER TWO

Halfway around the world, Columbus Ohio was getting a haircut. A tall, muscular, ruggedly handsome man with greying temples and a chiseled jawline, Ohio had returned home during the wee hours via winding backroads and narrow mountain passes from a record-breaking jewel heist the night before. The world's most famous criminal awakened on this day

to the sound of wind chimes and chirping birds in a breathtaking hilltop villa overlooking Lake Como — just one of the many gems squirreled away on this Alpine peak he now called home.

The left cheek of the man now in possession of the neighboring country's crown jewels was still smarting from the night before. Sleepy, running on fumes, he hadn't been as careful as he should have, peeling off the prosthetic material way too quickly. The horrific burn disfiguring the entire left side of his face. The bedrock of his signature disguise.

Add to the mix, a body suit creating the appearance of Olympic-sized muscles; a pair of specially-crafted gloves creating the appearance of a robotic left hand; a pair contact lenses transforming his sparkling blue eyes to metallic grey; thinner lips, thicker eyebrows, a wider nose — and *VOILÀ!*

'The Phantom' comes to life.

- an urban myth which always leads off the evening news following a heist.
- when the photos and footage from the surveillance cameras are released to the public.
- the grotesque images which make it possible for the world's most famous criminal to elude law enforcement, and to enjoy a (mostly) normal way of life.

This morning was no exception. As Ohio sat there in the middle barber's chair, customer to his left, another to his right, neither of his fellow customers, nor the three barbers clipping their hair, had a clue that the man in the middle chair was the same man on the television screen in front of them...