

# Altered Lives

A cold case mystery

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## CHAPTER 1

He waited a few seconds for the lawnmower to drag its operator to the far side of the back yard, hiding behind shrubbery that grew on the north side of the two-story home. He stooped low so the height of the branches concealed him before sliding across the driveway and into the shadows created by the Victorian home at 69 Oak Hill Drive.

His heart raced. He knew in minutes he would be confronting his target.

Visions of Marsha McCreary flaunting her voluptuous figure in the front yard flooded his brain. Her halter tops and tight-fitting shorts fueled his lust. He knew she wanted it; why else would she dress so seductive?

The side door, seldom locked, was within his reach. He took a deep breath before turning the knob and pulling it open. He exhaled with a sense of relief when he stepped inside, pinning himself to the wall so he would remain invisible. He stood in a small landing or alcove. Multiple steps to the right pointed toward the basement. To the left, three steps led upstairs.

He listened intently.

There was nothing.

Then, he heard her.

Marsha was giggling, like she did when she played with her children for all to see and admire. The vision taunted him. He closed his eyes and let the lust consume every cell in his body. He knew she would find him irresistible; they all did.

He couldn't believe his good fortune. She was busy doing something at the kitchen sink, only a few steps away from where he hid. He took a deep breath and unconsciously let the fingers of his right hand sweep through his long, curly locks. Bravely and with two loping strides, he entered the kitchen.

She was standing with her back to him, washing dishes at an L-shaped countertop. She wore cutoff blue jeans and a sleeveless white blouse. Her blonde ponytail hung to the middle of her back. Two blue barrettes helped keep it in place.

"Surprise!" he called out in a hushed voice.

Startled, she turned immediately, her face filled with panic.

Marsha McCreary wasn't expecting visitors, especially not him.

He saw alarm in her eyes.

He was dressed smartly but in dark clothing so he would blend in with the surroundings when he crept through the quiet neighborhood.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her words trembling and uneven.

"I came to see you. Doesn't that make you happy?" he replied as he casually crossed his arms and leaned against the kitchen wall. His nerves were getting the best of him and he felt the tick make his right eye blink. He hated it, but most his female friends thought it was charming.

"Do you make it a habit of sneaking into people's houses? Tim must have left the side door unlocked again. Wait until I get my hands on him," she said and chuckled lightly.

The sound of her laughter ignited a torrent within him. She was another one who thought the tick humorous.

"Are you laughing at me?" he snarled and grabbed her by the ponytail and pulled her face to within an inch of his.

“Stop! You’re hurting me! What do you think you are doing?” Marsha shouted.

That’s when she noticed his eyes, pupils focused and steely dark. They were black holes. Terror crawled up her spine and lodged in her throat.

“I came here with good intentions. Why do you think that’s funny?” he said with a scowl.

He was strong and pulled her body against his. She instinctively grabbed a butcher knife from the counter and pointed it at him.

“Let me go or you are going to regret it,” she said, waving the eight-inch blade in front of him. “Tim is just outside. If he finds you in here, you truly will be sorry.”

There was no turning back now. He remained silent as his confidence grew. She was like all the others; she liked to play rough. He didn’t mind. He fondled one of her breasts.

She screamed and swiped the knife dangerously close to his handsome face.

He smiled, grabbed her wrist, twisted and wrenched the weapon from her grasp. With his fingers wrapped tightly in the ponytail, he pulled her to the floor.

“Is this any way to treat an admirer?” he asked.

Then, the events around her flickered and slowed as if a camera lens was snapping each movement one by one. Marsha’s eyes filled with fear when she heard her daughter, eight-year-old Megan, enter the kitchen.

“What’s wrong, mommy?” she asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

Shocked Megan had awakened early from her afternoon nap, Marsha ordered her out of the kitchen.

“Go back to your room, sweetie,” she screamed.

The intruder’s eyes narrowed. This was an unexpected complication.

Marsha tried to kick free, but his grip was too strong. She grunted when he drove a knee into the middle of her back and pinned her helplessly to the floor. Now, she was defenseless.

Barely able to breathe, she decided her only chance for survival was to scream for help. She prayed Tim would hear and come to her aid.

“H-E-L-P! T-I-M! H-E-L-P!” she screamed. Unfortunately, her cries were drowned out by the lawnmower.

Again, though, it was tiny Megan who responded to her plea. She heard the little girl scream, “Leave my mommy alone!” and watched in horror as the tyke launched herself at the intruder. Megan wrapped her arms around his neck and was struggling to pull him away when he cast her aside like a drop of unwanted rain. She slammed hard against the cabinet below the kitchen sink, lay stunned for a moment and then leaped back into the fray.

It was a horrific mistake.

The hand the intruder held up to ward off the youngster’s attack still held the butcher knife. Megan ran directly into it, impaling herself instantly. As the blade sliced through her tiny heart, she froze for a second and then fell lifelessly to the floor. She landed with a thud, her beautiful blue eyes inches from her mother’s face. Agony and rage overwhelmed Marsha as her daughter’s final breath escaped her tiny lips.

She tried everything to free herself in order to help poor, lovely Megan. The intruder was too strong. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Her assailant’s knee pressed her chest hard against the floor.

She gasped for air.

Breathing was becoming more difficult.

She called for Tim one last time, but her compacted lungs could muster little air or volume.

Suddenly, the screen door on the front porch opened and slammed shut.

Panic filled the intruder’s eyes.

“Where are you, honey?” Tim shouted. “Were you calling me?”

Before Marsha could answer, she felt a fist smash against her cheekbone and everything around her

faded to black.

“Damn it!” the stalker muttered under his breath. Then, he smiled, patted Marsha’s unconscious head and said, “I’ll be right back.”

Catlike, the intruder sprang to his feet, leaving mother and daughter on the kitchen floor. He could hear Tim approaching from the living room. He was tall and lanky, but not a large man. He knew surprise would be his ally, and he could easily subdue him in order to make his escape. He pressed himself against the kitchen wall and waited.

Seconds dragged like minutes.

His heart pounded in his chest.

Panic struck when Tim saw his wife and daughter bludgeoned on the kitchen floor.

In shock, he stared at the bloody scene. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

It was the opportunity the intruder knew would come. With his left hand, he grabbed Tim by the hair and pulled with all the force he could muster. With the right, he drove the knife across Tim’s throat, severing his windpipe and jugular in a fraction of a second. The body collapsed in heap as blood flowed across his shoes.

With two people dead and Marsha unconscious on the floor, the assailant paced and assessed the damage he had caused.

He chastised himself and muttered, “This certainly didn’t go well. I anticipated a quick romp in the bedroom. Now, look what she made me do. It’s your fault, Marsha. You shouldn’t have laughed at me. And grabbing the butcher knife was a horrible idea. Do you see what you caused?”

Suddenly his stomach churned. His nerves came alive like sparks from a campfire.

A voice in his head said, “*Finish it or spend the rest of your life behind bars.*”

His eye twitched as his right hand gripped the wooden handle of the knife so tightly his knuckles turned white. His hand was covered in blood. He watched as two pools of claret snaked their way across the kitchen floor.

He shook his head in dismay and muttered softly, “I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

As consciousness returned, Marsha heard him rambling but all she could see was her daughter’s body and blood everywhere. She was numb with physical and emotional pain. Her left eye was swollen shut. She moaned and stretched a hand toward her daughter.

Suddenly, she remembered Tim and looked up. Her heart sank when she saw his slain body lying across the threshold of the kitchen. Blood streamed toward her from a gash in his neck.

Marsha cried out in agony.

Before she could move, she felt the intruder’s knee in her back again. His hand grasped her hair and pulled her head off the floor. The taste of blood filled her mouth and breathing became impossible. Then, everything went black.

On his knees, the stalker looked at the carnage and began to cry. Even in death, Marsha was beautiful. He slipped his fingers through her hair and struggled to dislodge the pins that held it in place. One went flying and the other rested in his bloody fist. It was sky blue, plastic and unblemished by blood. He rolled it between his fingers, and then slipped it into the breast pocket of his shirt.

Then, reality struck.

*What have you done? This is an abomination. You most surely will go to Hell for this.*

“I’m sorry, my darling! I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

It took several minutes for him to regain his composure. Then, with blood-soaked pant legs, he stood and exited through the back door of the house. He needed to vanish into the cool autumn air just as carefully and as quietly as he had arrived.

The stalker walked across the back yard and to the gate that provided access to an alley. He turned back, looked one last time at the wooden-framed exterior of the home and thought about silencing the

mower but chose to disregard it. Then, he simply departed.

He wiped the blade of the knife on his pantleg and passed through the gate.

The crickets started their endless afternoon song as the sun descended. Only an owl, perched high in a nearby oak, witnessed his escape as he faded into the shadows of the heavily wooded landscape that abutted the back of property. He descended a steep hill that towered above the Tecumseh River. He headed for the slow-moving waterway so he could wash off the blood and return home undetected.

In the late afternoon hour, families were preparing for Trick or Treat. They had no idea a ghoul had arrived hours early.



## CHAPTER 2

All of northeast Ohio awoke to the news of the bludgeoning of a young family in Kinkaid. A somber anchor reported it for viewers of WOHN-TV:

*“Something devilish was going on in quiet, little Kinkade yesterday when most children excitedly were getting ready for Halloween. A young jogger, Clive Stewart, noticed something amiss when he passed in front of a residence on Oak Hill Drive. Upon investigating, he discovered a family of three brutally murdered on the kitchen floor.*

*“Police are investigating. We’ve sent reporters to the scene and will have a full report on the evening news. Needless to say, the community is shaken by the horrific nature of the crime. The citizens of Kinkade hope yesterday’s carnage was an isolated incident. In a year when both the President of the United States and the pope have survived assassination attempts, one wonders when the violence will stop?”*

Kinkaid was a small community of less than 5,000 residents. It sat on the banks of the Tecumseh River, about ten miles south of New Harmony, a thriving manufacturing hub for the entire Tecumseh River Valley. Kinkaid gained a reputation as a vibrant farm community in the mid-1800s, supplying much of the Midwest with corn, hay, wheat and oats for livestock. By the 1960s, the same commodities were produced for local consumption only. Local farms were in short supply as Kinkaid became a bedroom community for New Harmony, where steel and automobile manufacturing employed thousands.

Where farms once thrived, golf courses and shopping malls popped up to support of the masses from New Harmony. A riverfront restoration project, shortly after World War II, preserved plush greenways and ancient trees, pushing property prices skyward and attracting wealthy residents.

New Harmony repeatedly had tried to annex Kinkaid, but city fathers resisted. They preferred not to be associated with their hard-working, iron-fisted neighbors downriver. They were welcome to come to Kinkaid and spend their hard-earned dollars, but Kinkaid leaders wanted nothing to do with big-city government.

Riverfront restaurants, specialty shopping and the new satellite campus of Buckeye State University helped Kinkaid maintain its quaint reputation. It was a quiet, safe and friendly place to live or visit until the triple murder sent tremors through every household.

Of course, the community was besieged by news reporters from across the Midwest. Due to the heinous nature of the crime, one tabloid suggested the murders were part of a nationwide spree of ritualistic killings that took place on Halloween night. It just so happened a dozen such homicides had taken place from coast to coast. It was publicity Kinkaid did not welcome.

Of course, Clive Stewart, the young jogger who discovered the bodies, was interviewed repeatedly and had become somewhat of a celebrity. He had stopped to investigate when he overheard the endless shrieks of six-month-old Mathew McCreary on the evening of the murders. The toddler was the only survivor of the massacre, probably because he was sound asleep on a blanket in another room.

Clive, 20, jogged Oak Hill every evening; it was something he had been doing since high school when he was a star runner for the cross-country team. He knew every crack in the pavement his lanky

stride methodically crossed, as well as most of the families who lived in the homes that lined the shady street. Residents waved to him as he passed.

Oak Hill was the final stretch of Stewart's nightly jog. The hill gave him the final cardio explosion he needed to complete his running regimen. When residents saw him pass by, they could set their mental timepieces to somewhere around 6 p.m. Clive was as regular as the bells of the First Presbyterian Church that tolled every six hours 365 days a year.

The bells had just struck six o'clock when Clive turned onto Oak Hill Drive. He suspected something was wrong at the house because a lawnmower was running in the back yard, the door to the screened in porch was standing wide open and the baby was shrieking frantically. He knew neither Tim nor Marsha would leave the child unattended. So, he decided to investigate.

When nobody answered his knock, he stepped into the screened porch and called out to Marsha. Again, there was no response. He ventured closer and discovered the gruesome crime scene. Sitting amidst his slain family was the infant, covered in blood and screaming at the top of his lungs.

Stewart resisted rushing to the child's rescue. Instead, he sprinted to a nearby house to call the police. At least, that's how the events were reported by The Valley Tribune, a daily newspaper published out of New Harmony.

Police told the newspaper it looked like the little girl and her mother put up a fight. Both appeared to have been killed with a knife that was not located. Tim's nearly decapitated body was found in the doorway to the kitchen, his blood splattered on a mirror in the dining room.

The Kincaid police, investigating its first murder in years, found a few partial fingerprints and a trail of bloody footprints. Most of the fingerprints belonged to the family and not a single neighbor had either seen or heard a thing that afternoon. Questions remained unanswered. Of course, the public was asked for information, saying whoever perpetrated the grisly crime had to leave the house covered in blood. A toll-free telephone line was created to collect tips and a small reward for information leading to the arrest of the person or persons involved in the murders was offered. Very few credible tips came in.

Authorities searched for months to uncover meaningful clues, but the probe slowly screeched to a halt. In the twenty-five years following the incident, the case had grown as cold as the steel mills in New Harmony, driven out of business by greedy union workers and cheap manufacturers overseas. They sat empty, slain by a silent adversary that drove American industries elsewhere.

Joggers still trotted past the two-story, Victorian home. Nobody stopped to investigate anything, though; not anymore. In fact, most residents stayed as far away from the nicely kept home as possible. For most, 69 Oak Hill Trail harbored only bad memories; rumors suggested it might even be haunted.

As time rolled along, the McCreary place become one of many abandoned homes that dotted the two dozen or so neighborhoods that made up quiet Kincaid, once a bustling community. Nobody really knew what it was that sucked the life out of Kincaid. Most pointed to the closing of Kincaid Fabricating, a tiny facility on the edge of town. Others said the small town never bounced back from the horrifying Oak Hill murders that Halloween afternoon. Its innocence destroyed by a knife-wielding villain, Kincaid no longer was perceived as a peaceful refuge for working families. Real estate agents directed newcomers to newer and safer neighborhoods. Kincaid stopped growing.

Following the hectic 1980s, the pace just slowed down. Days rolled by slower than debris drifted down the muddy Tecumseh, each day sliding into another without promise of excitement, change or resurrection. The years shuffled by like cards in the hands of a Las Vegas dealer. Before anyone had realized it, twenty years had passed since Clive Stewart made his horrific discovery. The name McCreary was forgotten by most.

The metropolitan newspaper in Clayton did one of those retrospective pieces that dredged up old facts and memories to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the town's only unsolved murder. Jim Swearingen, the paper's veteran police reporter, posed the question nobody had asked in more than two

decades: “Who killed the McCreary family?” Just as it was in 1981, no easy answers came forth in 2001 and the memory of the murders slipped back into the dusty annals of time. The house remained, however, a reminder of how evil can alter the course of any small community.

By 2006, the McCreary house had sat empty for one quarter of a century. Neighbors had come and gone. Houses had sold and resold, but the Oak Hill neighborhood had changed little. It still was a mixture of old families and new ones. The memories of the vicious murders haunted only long-time residents, and they preferred not to talk about it. When anyone asked why the property at 69 Oak Hill Drive sat vacant, they were happy to say the house had “bad history” and nothing more.

Unlike most abandoned homes in Ohio’s Rust Belt, the McCreary home had been cared for over the years. Fresh coats of paint were added to the exterior in 1990 and 2000 and a new roof was installed in 2005. The driveway always was plowed during the winter months and the grass mowed in the summer. The property was cared for regularly. Nobody cared to ask who was doing what or why. Residents were glad it hadn’t been allowed to deteriorate like so many others.

Greta Goodman, who had lived on Oak Hill all of her life, preferred not to talk about one of the darkest days in Kincaid’s history. It was from her home the fateful call was made to the police. Like Stewart, she had heard the child crying, but thought nothing of it. Now, every time a child shrieked, she trembled and glanced at the home across the street.

She was proud the residence was being cared for but had no idea who was responsible. She had asked workers who was paying for the upkeep but found out nothing. Goodman, now 70, went as far as making an inquiry at the mayor’s office but was stymied there, too.



TWENTY-FIVE YEARS later, life in Kincaid had become static. The highlight of October 13, 2006 was the arrival of a solitary figure who stepped off a Buckeye Touring bus in the middle of the day. The stranger exited right in front of Stewart’s Barber Shop. Yeah, the tiny shop was owned by the town’s most famous jogger. Located on Maine Street, right across from Town Hall, nothing escaped the prying eyes of Clive Stewart and his natty friends. Clive opened the tiny shop a few years after the murders. It had just one chair from which the downtown’s last male barber plied his trade. Of course, Clive rarely worked without an audience. The old wooden chairs that lined the wall opposite his workstation were filled with endless onlookers, an assortment of Kincaid’s most ubiquitous and obnoxious male residents. Clive called them the judiciary of wisdom and knowledge.

Three chairs lined the wall and four more were squeezed around a tiny table in the far corner, just beneath the television that played nonstop during shop hours, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Clive opened early in order to catch the morning walk-in business. It wasn’t unusual for a lawyer or two to stop by for a quick trim before appearing before one of the three traveling judges who held court across the street every other Wednesday.

His afternoon hours attracted after-school business. Walk-ins from the high school – two blocks away – frequently requested one of his famous buzz-cuts, a modern version of the flattop. Clive happened upon his specialty almost by accident one afternoon in 1988 when the high school football team’s star linebacker, James “Crusher” Calloway, walked in and asked him to cut his jersey number into what little hair remained on the side of his head. That began what Clive called “The Pilgrimage.” Every young athlete at Kincaid High wanted his jersey number or a girlfriend’s initials displayed in variations of Stewart’s buzz-cuts. Some chose Mohawk-style haircuts; others had all the hair removed except for the letters or numbers that remained. It became a rite of passage, and Stewart was the maestro. After every cut, he slid a bill with the picture of Alexander Hamilton into the cash register.

Of course, the buzz-cut came with lots of conversation, too. The expert onlookers who gathered to

gossip and chew the fat could solve all problems and answer any question. Stewart's Barber Shop was the perfect place to find an informed opinion on just about anything, whether you wanted to hear it or not.

The chairs were half full on the day Calloway came by to have the number "88" carved into his buzz-cut. A mixture of young and old intellectuals, some wiser than others, witnessed the first-of-its-kind artistry.

"I sure can do that," Clive replied to the hulking linebacker's request, "but I don't want your mother down here tomorrow complaining about it. Have you asked your parents' permission?"

"They know I'm here," Calloway growled. And the buzz began.

"You're lucky to be wearing 88, Jimmy," said Glenn Crandall. "That was Eddie Hogan's number when Kincaid won the state championship in 1966. The school board should have retired his number a long time ago. The dimwits just don't have a sense of history. They ain't worth a dime, not a one of them. You best do that number proud, boy. Eddie Hogan never missed a tackle, and you best not either."

Those were sage words from one of the town's most ardent sports fans. Calloway didn't disappoint him either. He went on to win all-state honors and accepted a full scholarship to play football at Buckeye State University. A knee injury ended his career on the first day of 1989 spring drills. While Calloway's career ended abruptly, the tradition of carving numbers and initials at Stewart's Barber Shop never did.

Of course, the clientele changed, as did the audience who gathered there for conversation every day. Glenn Crandall passed in 1995 while raising hell at a school board meeting. He dropped dead from a heart attack, arguing once again for Hogan's number to be retired. Out of respect, they put No. 88 behind glass and hung it on the wall of the gymnasium. They stood firm, though, and rejected retirement, much to the dissatisfaction of the Stewart judiciary.

As time passed, several other self-proclaimed authorities took Crandall's spot. The chairs generally were filled from around 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. by a collection of snoops and prattlers who had nothing better to do than trade stories and spy on passersby, especially those who came and went at the Kincaid Town Hall. Only occasionally was the tiny salon filled with customers awaiting haircuts. Residents preferred the fancy shops out on the strip and at the mall. Stewart's Barber Shop was mainly for chewing the fat, and it did that with great vigor.

Everyone wondered how Clive stayed open, but that was Stewart's secret, one not even the judiciary dared debate.

**COMING TO AMAZON SOON**

