

NIGHTMARE CITY

Prologue

It's said that people who were alive on November 22, 1963 can remember where they were and what they were doing when they learned that the President of the United States of America had been shot.

Gabriel Hunter could remember exactly. He was planning to kill his parents.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy, the thirty-fifth President of the United States, took place on a Friday, in Dallas, Texas.

Just before 12:30 p.m. Central time, Kennedy's limousine entered Dealey Plaza and moved towards the Texas School Book Depository. Nellie Connally, the First Lady of Texas, apparently said, "Mr. President, you can't say Dallas doesn't love you." Ironic in hindsight, but a statement of truth at that moment

Gabriel Hunter loved his parents, in his own way. It was just that he knew he had a destiny that involved their deaths. Even though he was only eleven years old and didn't really appreciate the significance of what had happened in that very different part of America from where he lived he felt it was a sign that he had to act. Not a sign from God. No, quite the opposite.

When the presidential limousine turned and continued down Elm Street, shots were fired. Most witnesses heard three shots. A minority of the witnesses did recognize the first gunshot they heard as a weapon blast, but many later said they thought it was a firecracker or the exhaust backfire of a vehicle just after the president started waving.

Gabriel had spent the day with his two brothers, Robert and Peter, mostly fishing at the lake, but when he went to bed that evening he was restless. He had experienced the feeling before and random acts of violence had usually satisfied his fevers. Not this time. This time he knew it was going to take more to satisfy what was driving him.

President Kennedy, Texas Governor John Connally, and Mrs. Kennedy, all turned. Connally, like the president a World War II military veteran, and unlike the president, a longtime hunter, testified he immediately recognized the sound of a high-powered rifle, then he turned his head and body right to see President Kennedy behind him. Connally confirmed he couldn't see the president, so he then started to turn forward again, and it was when he was facing forward that he was hit in his upper right back by a bullet that he did not hear, then he shouted, "Oh, no, no, no. My God. They're going to kill us all!"

Gabriel was one of triplets. Born moments apart they shared most things with an uncanny unspoken bond that their parents and the community where they lived had grown used to. Gabriel never grew accustomed to it. He didn't want to be one of three. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to be unique.

Mrs. Connally testified that right after hearing a first loud, frightening noise that came from somewhere behind her and to her right, she immediately turned towards President Kennedy and saw him with his arms and elbows already raised high and with his hands already close to his throat. She then heard another gunshot and John Connally started yelling. Mrs. Connally then turned away from President Kennedy towards her husband; another gunshot sounded and she and the limousine's rear interior were covered with fragments of brain, and blood, and bone matter.

Eleven years previously, in 1952, when Harry S Truman was still the president leading the country out of the war years, Kenneth Hunter, the local doctor, and his wife of nine years, Mary, who prior to her pregnancy had run the family farm, were blessed with not one newborn child, not two, but three healthy baby boys. They named them Gabriel, after the saint, Archangel Gabriel, Peter, after the Disciple of Jesus, and Robert, because it was Mary's father's name.

The rural community where they lived had much in common with the Amish with whom they shared many values and beliefs. Church played a big part in their lives and when Mary first learned she was pregnant they asked their priests to bless the unborn child. Kenneth was a man of medicine so he knew deep down that it could not be so, but a secret part of him always wondered, after the births, if it had been wise to ask all three of their community priests to perform the blessing.

The community was several hundred strong and they all worked on the communal farmlands, tending the cattle and sheep, raising the crops, feeding the chickens and keeping the fences and buildings strong. The summers in North Carolina were hot and humid but the winters could be cold with fierce winds from the Atlantic testing their carpentry skills.

Kenneth and Mary had waited a long time for their union to be blessed with child. Their parents never made mention apart from occasional subtle references that pricked at Mary's conscience when another barren month went by. They had no affection for the ways of modern science; their religion was based on firm, some might say blind, belief in the ways of our Lord. He would provide when and if He saw fit to do so. Until then they would contribute in other ways to their community. Kenneth was a fine doctor, and Mary had green fingers that helped the crops yield a bountiful harvest even in the driest and most unlikely of seasons.

When news of the birth of triplets spread throughout the community it was as if all the best harvests had come at once. Other mothers brought their own children to see the magic babies. Three was a special number to them and the Hunter babies were the first set of three to be born on their land. The community had been settled here for over one hundred years; the occasion of the birth was a joyous celebration.

It was summer so the days were long and warm. The seasonal storms were full of hot rain that poured from the heavens for an hour then ceased. Lightning was like fireworks exploding in the black sky and the thunder that danced with it was the clapping of the angels in recognition of the fortune that had been granted.

There was a week long party of religious fervor that left Mary tired; one baby was hard work, three was a career. Kenneth was proud of his wife for her achievement and he was secretly pleased that the whole community, which he already perceived thought of him as a man of importance because of his medical skills, now seemed to hold him in such high regard that he wondered if the manner of the profuse congratulations towards him was perhaps a little too similar to homage.

The birth of the Hunter triplets proved to be a blessing on the isolated community. It could only have been coincidental chance that the next five years

brought about such good farming production that there was sufficient for them all to prosper and to sell surplus in the nearby towns. Once a week the men would rotate the duty of driving the horse drawn carts to town where they would sell their produce to the local stores and restaurants. They were not greedy and often accepted payment in goods and essentials they required but could not produce themselves.

When they were five years old, and beginning their schooling at the communal school, the boys started to accompany the men on the trips to town. They had only seen life on the extended farm. Their boundaries were the extent of the fields and the woods and the rivers the community owned.

The town, with a single main street, stores and houses crowding in on each side was a whole new universe for them. Robert took it in his stride; Peter was a little afraid of the noise and the dust; Gabriel was fascinated by the saloon and the hard looking men who disappeared inside even during the bright sunlit mornings. The characteristics that would shape their later lives were already embedded. All so different despite their common genes.

Most of the townsfolk were used to the farmers who came in regularly on their well-kept carts, who tethered the horses at the drinking troughs and politely went about their business. The men looked and wondered, and if there was a suggestion of amusement about the way they considered the modestly dressed incomers it was only because they found them strange and like anything that was unusual or different they were a little frightened by it.

The children, especially the boys, were less equipped, socially, to hide their curiosity.

“Why’d you dress like that?”

“You never seen a TV before?”

Robert replied politely. He explained the way his family lived, and he showed genuine interest in the ways of the town. Peter tried as much as he could to stay with the horses, feeding them sugar and grass he pulled up in clumps from the verges.

Gabriel was confrontational.

One time three older boys began to make fun of Gabriel, who was striking in appearance with his black hair and blue eyes.

“Heh, Amish boy.”

“I’m not Amish.”

“What are you, freako?”

The three boys spread out so they circled Gabriel, who was a couple of years and several inches less than them. He didn’t seem concerned.

“Freako?”

“Yeah, weird freak farmer boy.”

“Ever see a farm?”

One of the boys moved closer to Gabriel and pushed him.

“You’re best not to do that.”

“What’d you say, shrimp?”

“I said not to push me.”

A second boy stood behind him and pulled his hair.

“Do you want to touch me as well?” Gabriel asked the third boy, who seemed reluctant to approach him but with some encouragement from the other two gathered up the courage to sidle across and shove Gabriel in the ribs.

The boys slouched in a loose circle, ready to beat on the smaller stranger but somehow hesitant to make the next move.

“You’re best to learn some manners,” Gabriel said quietly.

“And are you gonna...” The boy stopped talking as his tongue began to curl up inside his mouth. As if it had a life of its own it curled up, and back on itself until he was choking for breath.

Gabriel turned and stared intently at another boy. The boy tried to look away but he was transfixed by the blue piercing eyes that seemed to pin him like a butterfly on a corkboard, Gabriel’s eyes thrusting into his as if they were rays of the sun. A few moments passed while the two were locked in an intent staring contest, and then the boy’s nose started to bleed. He tried to stem the flow with his fingers but they were ineffectual. Soon his shirt front was the color of dead robin breast.

The third boy decided it was a good idea to run. He started to, and he got a few feet away from the others when his legs began to feel as if they were treading in quicksand. He was still pumping his arms, and his chest was heaving as if he was racing fast but his legs were all but going backwards. Then he felt both knees crack and he fell face first in the dust.

Gabriel walked away and didn’t see them again the next time he came to town.

Life in the rural community was good for three young boys growing up in the America of the late fifties and early sixties. They worked on the farm helping their mother. Peter especially liked to feed the animals while Robert proved to be adept at harvest time. Gabriel liked to hunt. He became skilled at tracking and killing the various wild animals that lived on the land and in the woods.

It was when he was about seven years old that Robert overheard his parents talking and the unformed doubts that had been fermenting in his young mind for a while began to take shape.

“It isn’t the right way a boy should behave, Mary.”

They were in the big barn. Robert’s mother was plucking chickens but the conversation had her full attention. The job of pulling feathers was one she could do in her sleep. In fact her husband occasionally teased her that so adept was she that she would wake up one morning and find her pillow had been stripped of feathers in the night.

“Kenneth, he’s a robust little boy. He enjoys the outback lifestyle.”

Her husband shook his head. It was always going to be an uphill struggle to get his wife to see any fault in her precious boys. He knew instinctively that there was something not quite right inside Gabriel. Just as he knew Peter was sensitive, perhaps too sensitive, perhaps edging towards weak. And just as he recognized that Robert was special; not just as a son but as a person. He had high hopes of Robert.

“Hunting for food is perfectly acceptable. It’s God’s bounty for us so long as we respect and honor the animals we kill.”

“Well there you are.”

“Killing is one thing but deliberately wounding to cause pain is something else. Maiming a deer so you can watch it struggle in pain is not God’s way.”

Mary pulled a handful of feathers out in a particularly angry gesture. "Next you'll be telling me that no other little boys pull wings off flies or burn bugs in a tin can."

"Only if their name is Ed Gein."

Mary tutted fiercely. "How dare you compare my son with that killer? They say he was ill in the head."

Kenneth Hunter smoothed the hair away from his forehead. He had heard things about the Gein case from other doctors at a recent convention he had attended. There was definite evidence of a dysfunctional family life, which was not the way Gabriel lived. There was also rumor that Ed Gein had killed his brother when a fire at their farm distracted the adults. That worried Kenneth because something he hadn't shared with his wife was the suspicions he had about Gabriel bullying Peter. Cruelty to animals was another factor in Gein's childhood that, for Kenneth, provided a similarity that he knew he would never be able to convince Mary about.

"I just think we should have a word with Gabriel."

"Concerning what?"

Kenneth sighed. He should never have started this conversation. "Perhaps I'll speak with him about being, generally, a little more gentle with things."

Mary stood. Feathers floated down from her lap. Three naked chickens lay on the table. "He's a boy, Kenneth. If he's a little too rough then that's why. He'll grow out of it, you'll see."

Robert didn't understand everything his parents were talking about but he pledged to keep an eye on his brothers from then on, for different reasons.

Robert didn't know at the time that Gabriel was also hiding in the barn, behind bales of straw.

Gabriel made a different promise; one his parents would never forget.

By the time the triplets were eleven they roamed the fields and woods without fear or boundary.

A favorite pastime was fishing for catfish in the big lake. Each had learned the skill of fly fishing using the basic rods they owned. Bait was generally worms but each boy learned to be innovative with the use of bacon, bread, fruit and chicken.

When he looked back on his childhood Robert remembered every day as warm and sunny. He worked hard on the farm but that was enjoyable because he was with his brothers, and very often worked with his mother as well. His father was out at work during the day and was often on call at night but despite his busy workload Robert remembered regular outings with him; often fishing, but sometimes just walking across the fields and meadows where his father would point out birds and tell his son the names, or wild flowers and explain their life cycle.

If he was asked to close his eyes to conjure up one image that described his boyhood Robert would immediately think of a cloudless blue sky, the sound of bees lazy in the air, long meadow grass tickling the backs of his legs, his brothers running besides him up the gentle slope of the hill towards the woods.

That was how he recalled his childhood.

Until the day at the lake.

It was November but it was still warm. The humidity of summer had gone and while it grew cooler in the evening, during the day the sun was hot enough for shirtsleeves and shorts.

By early afternoon this particular day Mary Hunter recognized that her boys were getting restless. They had worked hard since morning and she was wise enough to know that the time they spent at play was important.

“You boys going fishing?”

“We haven’t finished up here,” Peter said.

Mary wiped her hands on her apron. “Winter’s coming on quicker than we know so you want to make the most of these last days of sunshine. Go on, off you trot.”

They didn’t need telling twice. Their fishing rods were kept in the barn and the figured they could dig up enough worm for bait once they got there.

A lot of the trees had lost their leaves by now but the pines were green and swaying slightly in the breeze. The surface of the lake was still, occasional circles showing the locations of fish. Bugs scooted across barely making an imprint. Some ducks swam together in a tight bunch at the far side away from the boys. There was no sign of alligators.

Gabriel started to dig at the earth with his hunting knife but soon gave up. “Ground’s too hard.”

“We need worms for bait,” Peter said.

“I know,” Gabriel said and already anger was in his voice. “We’ll have to use something else.”

Robert had leaned his fishing rod and line against the big tree that grew close to the water. A strong solitary branch stretched out over the water by a good few feet. He was thinking about climbing up and crawling across the branch and just looking down at the water.

He had experienced the feeling before; some called it déjà vu but that was only a part of it. That only gave him a spaced out sensation of having been here and felt this previously. The feelings he was becoming familiar with were much stronger than that. It was a kind of prediction but so random that he couldn’t say what was going to happen, just that something was; and it wouldn’t be good.

“Maybe I’ll use you as bait,” Gabriel was saying.

Peter was used to his brother bullying him; it was how their relationship had developed. He didn’t know what made him say, “I’d like to see you try.”

It was best not to dare Gabriel.

Robert was halfway up the tree, the climb proving more difficult than he had imagined. He turned his head and saw the look in Gabriel’s eyes. He’d seen it before and even though he was his brother, and even though they were very young, Robert knew instinctively that it wasn’t the kind of look a young boy should get.

“You shouldn’t have said that, Peter,” Gabriel said. He sheathed his knife.

Later, as Robert remembered it the sun went behind a cloud; a cloud that hadn’t been there before.

Gabriel advanced on Peter.

“Don’t,” Robert cried out but it was too late.

Peter was lifted off the ground. He looked into his brother’s eyes; they were blue, brighter than they should have been. They seemed to be on fire, glowing with unnatural intent.

Robert was scrambling down the trunk of the tree. He wasn’t sure he could stop Gabriel when he was in this mood but he had to try.

Gabriel half carried, half dragged Peter to the edge of the water. The bank was crumbling a little from the hot summer and the earth gave way slightly from their combined weight.

Robert jumped the last few feet from the tree and rolled over once as he hit the ground.

Gabriel waded into the water waist deep, pulling Peter with him. Peter was resisting but already dirty water had invaded his mouth and he was beginning to choke.

Robert ran but he knew he wouldn't reach them in time.

Gabriel held his brother with one hand while he stretched his other arm out over the water. His hand on that arm was shaking. Gradually the surface of the lake began to move as if it was tidal. From the opposite bank a dark scaly shape slipped into the water.

The alligator was over ten feet in length. It usually fed off the fish in the lake, occasionally a deer that stooped to drink, sometimes smaller animals that got careless. The meal it was being offered would fill its belly for a month.

Peter could see the dark ripples defiling the surface and he thrashed out to get away. Gabriel shoved his head under the water and held it there for a few seconds before letting go. While Peter spluttered, spitting out water and shaking his head, Gabriel waded away and sat on the bank.

Robert was out of breath by the time he reached the water's edge.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Gabriel looked up at him and the blue eyes seemed brighter than the sun that beat down onto them. "He has to learn."

"Learn what?"

"To obey me."

Gabriel didn't even look when Peter screamed.

Robert saw the alligator swimming in a meandering motion through the water, the top of its head and some of its body visible. The tail was moving from side to side effortlessly. An alligator has about eighty teeth in its mouth at any one time. When the teeth wear down they are replaced which means that they can go through two or three thousand teeth in a lifetime.

Peter had seen it and was trying to get his feet to move but the clinging mud at the bottom of the lake was pulling him back as if it was in league with the alligator.

Robert quickly calculated the distance between him and Peter. Then he tried to gauge how soon the alligator would reach his brother. He had no chance of getting to Peter first. There was only one thing he could do.

He had known that something was going to happen. Still too young to appreciate the reason for the feelings he was prone to getting, Robert knew he had a power inside him that he could use to save his brother.

The triplets were blessed, or cursed, depending on each brother's developing perspective, with strong mind-controlling paranormal powers.

Robert closed his eyes. He could see black and yellow motes floating behind his eyelids. Reflections of the sun bounced around his vision, with what seemed to be a dark cloud rolling around at random.

He concentrated. He focused all his thought onto the alligator. Cutting out the screams for help he could hear from Peter, ignoring the low laughter from Gabriel.

He closed his mind to everything apart from the evolved dinosaur that was opening its jaws to clamp onto Peter's leg.

Robert shouted with his mind to send a pulse through the air that had a devastating effect on the alligator. It had its mouth wide open but it swam past Peter, so close that he felt it brush his arm, and then began to swim in tight circles, each one taking it further away until it eventually reached the shallows on the far side where it sank dejected onto the mud, its mouth finally closing.

Only then did Robert relax and let his brain shut down.

Gabriel began to clap, slowly and sarcastically. "Nice work, brother."

Robert ignored him. He half walked, half swam into the lake and helped Peter back onto dry land.

While Robert helped Peter, Gabriel stood. "We came to do some fishing, be a shame if we go back without any fish to show Mom and Dad."

Without waiting for the others to reply, Gabriel opened his eyes wide and scanned the surface of the lake. Gradually the water began to bubble as if raindrops were falling into it. Then there was a plume of water that shot soundlessly several feet into the air; it was as if dynamite had exploded beneath the surface. When the water had calmed there were a couple of dozen fish floating either stunned or dead.

Gabriel stared threateningly at Robert. "I have powers too, brother. Never forget that."

It was then, even at their young age, that Robert knew his brother would become his enemy. It was almost as if he had been born that way.

When they got home Robert had a choice to make; either to tell his parents about what Gabriel had done to Peter, or to keep it quiet. As it turned out his parents' instincts took away the need to choose.

"Peter?" Mary Hunter said. "What in the name of our dear Lord has happened to you?" It was true Peter was soaking wet, and his feet were cut from the bed of the lake. Not only that but it was obvious he was scared witless, it was all he could do to stop shaking.

"Oh, he went swimming in the lake and got out of his depth, that's all," Gabriel said and went to his room.

Peter accepted the towel his mother gave to him and dabbed ineffectually at his hair. He didn't say anything.

"Robert?" his mother said to him.

Robert looked at her and knew he was going to tell her everything. And he did.

When he was finished Mary looked shocked but resigned. "Kenneth, Kenneth could you come in here please?"

Kenneth Hunter came in almost immediately but he had other things on his mind. "I was listening to it on the radio."

"Dear, I need to tell you what our boys have been up to."

"He's been shot."

"Who's been shot?"

"The president. He's in the hospital."

"That's awful."

"What did you want to tell me...we need to get into town, they have a television set there."

Mary made a decision that would cost them dearly. "I'll go into town with you. I can get Millicent and George to look over the boys. I can tell you about Gabriel on the way."

So it was that as Kenneth and Mary Hunter took the buggy into town to watch the tragic news on the television in the local restaurant their triplets were laying in bed each lost in their thoughts. Their child-minding neighbors were in the sitting room reading and listening to events on the wireless set.

Peter was dealing with what had happened to him in the only way he knew that worked for him. He was rationalizing and compartmentalizing so that the effect was running away from the issue and leaving it so far behind he could almost persuade himself that it had happened to someone else.

Robert was trying to understand why Gabriel had acted in such a way.

Gabriel couldn't care less about any of it. His thoughts were focused on what his parents might say and do to him when his mother got the chance to tell his father.

There was no doubt they would punish him. Discipline within their community was strongly regarded and maintained as part of their religious beliefs. Behavior that would be tolerated in the outside world was frowned upon and rigidly resisted. His parents would punish him that was for certain, but they would involve the whole community so that what Gabriel had done would become common knowledge. Worse for him, the way he had done it would come out.

He would do anything to avoid that.

Around two in the morning when he could hear his brothers snoring and the neighbors were quietly dozing on the couch Gabriel lifted the window in his room and slipped out into the still of the night.

He knew where he was going to do it. The bridge over the river was narrow enough for his father to slow the horse so that the buggy didn't leap into the air.

He ran at a jogging pace to the river. Any animals that may have seen him kept well away. At the river he walked along the grassy bank to the bridge. There was an outcrop of rock there that he knew would give him plenty of cover. Not that seeing him would have saved his parents.

He didn't have to wait long. The restaurant had stayed open much later than normal to allow people to watch the news as it unfolded. Eventually though they had to close up for the night and Mary and Kenneth headed for home.

Mary had told her husband on the outward journey what Gabriel had done. He accepted the news with an inbuilt resignation, almost as if he had been waiting for this day, or for an event like it. On the way home they were discussing what punishment would be appropriate; both knew they would have to involve the community council.

The horse began to fret as they approached the bridge. It was a seven-year-old stallion they had owned since birth and it was usually calm and well behaved.

It was throwing its head wildly as it went onto the bridge. The buggy was swaying from side to side, and Kenneth had to hold Mary with one arm to prevent her falling out. His other arm was failing to control the reins.

Suddenly, in the center of the bridge, the horse reared. The buggy tipped backwards with it and Mary fell from her seat into the back. Kenneth turned his head and it was then the horse bolted.

As its front hooves hit the ground it moved to the right, eyes wide, nostrils flared and mouth frothing. It leaped over the wall of the bridge. The buggy was dragged behind it.

For an instant the horse and buggy were suspended over the low brick wall of the bridge. When Gabriel recalled it later it seemed as if it all happened in slow motion. Mary was hurled from the buggy as it tipped forwards and sideways; her head hit the top of the wall. The horse fell from the bridge. The buggy, still attached, pulled away from the wall as gravity took hold and the reins were ripped from Kenneth's hands. The legs of the horse pumped in mid-air like it was trying to fly. The buggy flipped over so that the wheels were pointing towards the moon. Kenneth held on frantically and his fingers were still grasping at the buggy seat when the horse, the buggy and Kenneth hit the water.

The horse struggled to its feet. As it tried to run it tangled the reins and they caught in its hind legs and the buggy, with Kenneth trapped inside, pulled through the shallow water.

Kenneth remained conscious long enough to see the body of his wife bobbing like a cork in the rushes by the far bank.

By the time the horse broke free Kenneth was dead.

When the authorities found the bodies and the remains of the buggy the fish had already started to feed.

Millicent and George took Robert and Peter over to their house. They stayed there for a few days while more permanent arrangements were made.

The arrangements were that the two brothers would live with their grandparents until they were old enough to run the farm; meanwhile their cousins and sons of friends would keep the place running smoothly. Robert and Peter would carry on working there.

The community made the funeral arrangements and the day went as well as could be expected. Peter cried and Robert comforted him. Robert did his crying in public just that once.

Mary's parents were good for the two boys. They made sure they concentrated on their schooling, even while working on the farm. They always made sure the boys knew the farm was theirs, and that the others were just keeping it safe for them.

When they reached thirteen their grandfather took them into the room in his house that he kept locked; it was a kind of den. He explained it slowly and carefully; the full capability of the powers they had inherited. The psychic ability, the extra sensory perception, the full range of what they were capable of; and just as importantly the way they should use the gift for good.

The subject that was on their minds was never mentioned.