

Child Finder



Mike Angley

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Patrick O'Donnell was transfixed. Glued in place. Even the ferocious sting of thorny briar thicket against his bare arms failed to stir him. He glanced down at his left forearm. Dried blood formed strange black lines and dots, the thorns having given him an unwelcome greeting. He was in his bed clothes, long blue sleep pants moist at the ankles with scattered shreds of leaves and pine needles clinging to the bottom edges. His white undershirt was flecked with dirt. Confused and shivering, he wondered if he had sleepwalked to this place.

The cold, damp, and dark woods surrounded and enveloped him in a misty moist blanket of autumn air. Strange sounds and scents filled the night. Branches and brush crackled as unseen nocturnal creatures foraged about. All around him were towering pines mixed with oak, ash, hickory, and poplar. Their fall leaves, bright and colorful by day, were now white and bluish in the moon's glow.

Pat was crouched down, the strain from this position making his feet and ankles numb. He had no idea how long he had been there, but his fingers, arms, and feet were icy stiff from the cold air. He stared through the brush and exhaled a dense frosty mist that obscured his vision. He paused a moment, and held his breath long enough to see through to a small clearing about twenty yards in front of him. Although he had no idea how he had come to be in this place, or even *where* this place was, he knew he had to stay perfectly still. And wait. Then, as if on some strange cue, the low clouds overhead parted, and a bright moon cast an eerie beam of light down

through the mist. The moonbeam traced across the trees and brush and speeded toward the clearing Pat strained to see.

A spotlight from heaven, he thought. He did not want to look but was compelled to watch as if some force well beyond his understanding was controlling him. The scene was both familiar and strange. Pat had seen it many times before, yet never before. It was simultaneously distant and near. Real and surreal.

The spotlight from heaven moved about as if searching purposefully for something. Then it appeared. At the same moment as a screeching owl swooped down past him from behind, crying loudly with its claws outstretched, Pat saw it. The moonbeam centered ever so perfectly on the site in the clearing. The owl's trajectory helped aim his gaze as if intentionally leading him to the point where the moonbeam seemed to stop. There was the boy. He was lying in the small clearing, face down, cold, stiff from rigor long since settled in. Somehow Pat already knew he was dead. In some way he knew the boy had been dead for several days. Without moving, his gaze zoomed in on the corpse like a telephoto lens.

He was about seven years old. His red pajama top was torn open, barely covering his back. Nearby was a single light blue colored slipper with a Pokémon logo. A bright, cheerful looking Pikachu character was on top, but the creature's normal yellow countenance was mangled with a dark stain. The contrast in images was haunting, sickening.

"Blood," Pat whispered softly, as if he feared whoever perpetrated this horrific crime might be nearby.

But somehow in his heart Pat knew he was alone in the woods that night. Alone with the body of this lost soul. The boy had been beaten and strangled. He could see ligature marks on the side of his neck that he knew wrapped around to the front of his throat. The markings were neat and clean, and cut deeply into the boy's neck. He agonized over it all...no burial, no closure for his parents who surely grieved over his disappearance. He clumsily made the sign of the cross, his fingers shaking from the cold. In his mind he prayed a Hail Mary for the boy, his brain even stuttering out the words as he shivered in place.

Pat lifted his arms as if trying to fly, wanting somehow in this bizarre scene to be released from earth, to take the boy to heaven and deliver him. Personally. To God. The sensation at first was almost imperceptible, but then he began to feel it build. First in his head, and then his shoulders. Then his whole body moved up, slowly at first, as if being lifted by an invisible force.

Up, up and above the skyscraping pines, safely away from the briar patch that had been tearing his skin. The moonbeam split into two and provided coverage of both Pat as he ascended and the boy who remained on the ground. He rose to a point above the clearing directly over the child. The moonbeams warmed and thawed him, providing a peaceful state of grace and giving him the confidence he needed to complete this task. He felt an incredible sense of joy in his heart as he hovered in the forest; his eyes began to well with tears as the excitement grew within him.

Would this time be the right time? The moment I've longed for night after night?

He clasped his hands together as if in prayer and moved his gaze from the boy to the heavens. In a flash, and at the moment in his mind when he believed he was going to lift the boy up to God, Pat sat up in his bed gasping for air.

"Honey! Honey what is it?" Sara cried as she shook Pat to wake him from his nightmare.

"I'm okay, Baby," he responded, regaining his composure, shaking his head to remove the image of the boy that still lingered.

"It was another dream about the little boy, wasn't it?" she asked rhetorically, propping herself up on her right elbow and squinting at him sideways.

"Yeah. God, I wish they would stop! These dreams have been torturing me all week. I wish I knew why I've been having them over and over."

"You need to see someone, Pat. You've been under a lot of stress at work, and I think you need to see a, well, you know..."

"A shrink?" he asked sarcastically, cutting her off.

"No!" Sara stammered, brushing her hair from her face. "Not necessarily a psychiatrist--maybe just one of the mental health counselors at the Pentagon, or maybe a priest."

"Sara, we've been over this before. I don't want to jeopardize my security clearance. If I see someone from mental health the Air Force will pull my clearances." Pat knew he had genuine reason to worry. As an Air Force Special Agent with a TOP SECRET clearance, seeing a mental health professional could cost him his badge, his gun, his career!

"Look, Pat--you've told me that you can talk with a priest and it's protected somehow--what did you call it?" Sara asked as she took his left hand in both of hers, snuggling up next to him in the cool silk sheets. Her hands were warm and soft and made him relax somewhat.

“Privileged communication,” he answered, sounding slightly more resigned. He knew she was right. In the military whatever he told a doctor was a matter of official record. But what he told his priest was forever protected.

“Okay, Sorcha, I’ll talk with Father Reynolds this week.”

He sometimes affectionately called her Sorcha, an archaic Gaelic variant of her name. She was as Irish and Catholic as Pat with long waves of red hair, bright, clear green eyes, and no freckles...not a single one.

“Why don’t you see Father Reynolds today? Take a day off from work and call him,” Sara implored. “Colonel Lyons will give you the day off. He’s such a good boss, and you know he won’t even ask you why you need the time off,” she continued, squeezing his hand even tighter.

“I don’t know Sara, I took a day off last week because Sean got hurt at school, and I had to go and take him to the clinic.”

She stared at him for a moment. “Pat. Look. You’re just making excuses. Call the office and leave a message for Colonel Lyons. Say you are not feeling well today.”

“All right, Sorcha, I will,” he said, giving in to her insistence.

He also knew it was the right thing to do. He had to talk with someone after a week of these haunting dreams. He pulled Sara close to him, embraced her, and squeezed her tight for a moment. Then he kissed her softly on the lips.

“You know, I love you more than life, and I thank God every day for you and the two cherubs He has given us.”

She nuzzled in close to him, her head on his chest. “And speaking of angels, angel number one is right over there,” she whispered out a smile, pointing toward the bedroom door.

Pat turned to look, and sure enough, Sean was standing there in his bright green pajamas clutching a stuffed Superman action figure, his “absolute favorite,” as he was fond of saying.

“What’s going on, Buddy?” he greeted Sean who rubbed his sleepy blue eyes, as bright blue as his dad’s, his light brown hair all in a mop, mussed up. “Get over here!” Pat insisted with a broad smile, beckoning him with both hands.

That was the signal Sean was waiting for. The skinny lad instantly jumped onto the bed’s downy soft quilt and gave his mom and dad big hugs, giggling incessantly.

“Come on Sean,” Pat said as he left the bed and stepped onto the cool oak hardwood floor. He picked him up over his head. “Let’s let Mom get some rest, and you can help me find out what’s going on in the world.”

“Okay, Dad! I’ll go get the newspaper.”

Sean’s little feet began to tread air as his six-foot-one-inch father started to lower him to the floor. As soon as he had some traction, he bolted and headed for the front door, never once letting go of Superman. When Pat entered the kitchen, the small Tiffany glass hanging light over the eat-in table was on brightly, and Sean was there holding the Washington Observer in his hands. Pat took it from him with a big grin.

“Why don’t you go to the family room and watch some cartoons before Mom gets up.”

“All right, Dad, I will. Love you,” Sean blurted out, and then he was gone in an instant.

Pat picked up the paper, glancing at the date--October 4th 2001--as he unfolded it on the table and looked at the headline, *President’s War on Terror Begins!* He skimmed the top story. It was about events the previous month when radical Islamic terrorists hijacked a handful of commercial aircraft in the United States and crashed them into New York City’s World Trade Center Twin Towers as well as the Pentagon where Pat worked. Because of his job, he already knew about the ramp-up in military operations in the area. Reconnaissance flights were intense, satellites repositioned, forward operating bases hastily prepared. There was no real secret to the buildup. The Intelligence Community wanted the bad guys to know America was coming. The Pentagon detected their reaction to the escalation, measured their likely response, and pinpointed target sets accordingly. The Washington Observer article outlined a series of terrorist captures throughout Afghanistan. But the man most wanted by the United States, Usama bin Laden, the mastermind of the terror attacks, was still at large.

“Your day is coming you fookin’ bastard!” Pat said aloud with an Irish brogue, with both anger and a hint of delight in his voice.

After all, this was his business, his world. As a Special Agent with the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, the OSI as it was known, and one who specialized in counterintelligence and counterterrorism, he had spent his career hunting down and capturing spies and terrorists. He was in the thick of it all at the Pentagon, though he longed for the chance to get back in the field and do operational work. That was another reason he hated missing a day of work. He called his office and left a voice message.

“Boss, this is Pat. I don’t think I can come in today. My stomach is really sick, and I think I just need to lie in bed for awhile and let this pass. I’ll call you later to see how things are going.”

He hung up, thinking to himself how lame and transparent his little deception had been. Pat hated to lie, and he was not particularly good at it. His faith and heritage had taught him better. And after all, the Air Force’s number one Core Value was Integrity. But it was more than a faith and integrity issue for him. He really liked and respected his boss on a personal level. He also knew Colonel Lyons well enough to know that he would never question why Pat needed the time off because it had to be a good reason, which made the deception all the more troubling to him.

He looked at the wall clock above the kitchen table. It was 0630, still early, so he went about the business of making a pot of coffee before even daring to wake Sara. He sipped slowly as he read through the newspaper, savoring the rare opportunity of time he had this day to peruse it at home instead of at the office.

His reading was suddenly interrupted by a chorus of, “Daddy! Daddy!”

He looked up and saw his two children bounding noisily into the kitchen.

“Hey guys! Get over here and give your daddy some hugs!” Sean and his younger sister, Erin Kathleen, rushed to him beaming broadly. Sean was the first to speak.

“What’s new in the world? Have we captured that terrorist dude yet? What’s his name?” he asked, shifting his eyes upward and to the left as if searching for a word.

“Usama bin Knucklehead,” Pat replied with a smirk, generating giggles from both his children. “And what are you laughing at young lady?” he asked as he grabbed Erin and placed her on his right knee while he held Sean on his left.

Erin was just five years old, a kindergartner, and light as a feather. She had auburn colored hair, a mix of her mom’s red and her dad’s brown. Her light hazel eyes looked like two large freckles on her fair-skinned face.

“I love you, Daddy,” she said placing about a dozen butterfly kisses on her father’s cheeks.

She and her brother jumped off their dad’s knees, into their seats, and gulped down a quick meal of breakfast bars and cold cereal seconds before their mom entered the kitchen.

“Let’s get you guys moving and ready for school,” she prodded as she began herding them from the table.

Sara was a stay-at-home mother, determined to raise their children in a solid Catholic home and not to leave them to be cared for by others. Pat appreciated their situation. Although he

made good money as an Air Force major, they lived on a tight budget. Northern Virginia was an expensive place to reside, but for Pat and Sara, if raising their children right meant Sara took time off from being an interior decorator, it was an investment well worth the cost.

"I have a lot of errands to run today," Sara said as she finished putting the last few plates into the dishwasher. They clanked as she set them inside. The sound startled Pat who had been engrossed in reading the newspaper.

"Oh? What? Oh sorry, Sorcha. So you'll be out for awhile?" he asked, looking over the top of the paper.

"Yes, Baby. I'll drop the kids off at school and be gone most of the morning. Why don't you rest, and then go see Father Reynolds later this afternoon."

"I will. Just as soon as I finish the paper," he replied, mouthing a kiss to her as he finished his sentence.

She blew one back, and at once was surrounded by Sean and Erin bundled up in their winter coats, ready to go out to the minivan for the ride to school. "Kiss Daddy goodbye," she instructed both children.

They needed no prodding. Erin was the first to rush him with kisses and hugs, her fluffy pink coat making her seem twice her normal size. Pat gave Sean a bear hug, their usual goodbye ritual. And within a few moments, after the front door made a crunch sound upon closing, the house fell silent.

Pat continued reading the paper, sipping his coffee and enjoying the uncommon solitude he had this morning. A storyline just below the fold in the metro section caught his eye: *North Carolina Child Murder Has Local Ties*. The dateline was Mount Airy, North Carolina. *State police have joined the Mount Airy Sheriff's Department in the search for clues into the abduction, assault, and brutal murder of an eight year old Mount Airy boy. His battered and strangled body was found yesterday by hikers in a wooded area of Piedmont State Park, some 45 miles from his home. His parents reported him missing two weeks ago when he was apparently abducted from his home during the night. Authorities have few clues to go on at this point, and are appealing to the public to report anything suspicious they may have seen in the State Park or the boy's neighborhood over the past fourteen days.*

Pat read the article with great interest. The boy's name was Josh Branford. There was a picture of his parents in front of news cameras from a week back appealing for their son's safe

return. They had just moved to North Carolina from Northern Virginia two months earlier. Josh had attended the same school as Sean and Erin. The story continued on a different page. Pat fumbled with the newspaper until he reached it, and with it came an immense shock--a picture of the crime scene.

Pat knew this scene well. It was as clear in the light of day as it had been in his dreams night after night. There was the briar thicket and the clearing where the boy's body rested. A police blanket now covered the body, but the child's left foot was visible, turned in exactly the same direction as Pat had seen each night. His slipper was situated nearby with a dark stain on Pikachu's face that Pat knew to be yellow, despite the paper's black and white print. It was identical, except for the cordon of police tape that read, *Crime Scene Do Not Cross*.

Pat suddenly felt sick. He didn't know how to react, or even how to begin to make sense of this news in light of his dreams. He wasn't sure yet if he wanted to show the article to Sara. *How would she react? What did all this mean? Why am I connected to this crime through my dreams?*

He had a lot of questions, but no answers. Not yet, but that was to come in due time.