

# BENEATH A WEEPING SKY

A RIVER CITY CRIME NOVEL



FRANK ZAFIRO

Part I

March 1996

RIVER CITY, WASHINGTON

*Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.*

--Paul Gauguin,

French Post-Impressionist painter (1848 - 1903)

**ONE****Wednesday, March 6<sup>th</sup>****0807 hours**

Heather Torin never intended to be a victim.

No one ever does.

She ran the same route every day except Sunday, when she didn't jog at all. It was two and eight-tenths miles long according to the odometer in her Honda Accord. She would have preferred to jog a three-mile course, but the route was just too perfect and so she sacrificed the two-tenths in the interest of aesthetics.

Running was the one thing she did entirely for herself. She enjoyed the firmness it gave her legs and buttocks, but it was the mental benefits that kept her going out day after day. After her three miles, almost every frustration from her day was flushed out, pouring out of her with the sweat on her forehead.

Wednesday's run was usually the hardest run of the week for some reason. Saturday morning runs were her favorite. She left before anything in her day had happened and with no frustrations to burn off, she experienced a calm that she imagined was similar to meditation.

Her breathing was deep and fluid as she padded along through the damp streets of River City's north side. It had been a mild winter, even though traces of snow still littered the ground where it had been piled high during the winter months. March began as a very wet month, but it had none of the iciness of January and February. Heather enjoyed the coolness of the air as she

drew it in and released it, trying to keep her breathing as slow as possible. Trees lined the street beneath an obscured, grey sky above.

She passed the two mile mark. *It's all on the way home now*, she told herself. Good thing, too, since her legs felt a little weak today for some reason. She forced herself to keep up the pace as she approached the park.

Heather liked zigging and zagging along the trail of the small, heavily-wooded park. The coolness in the air was palpable. She could almost taste the wetness and the bark on the pine trees. The damp earth muffled her footfalls. She skipped over a root that protruded from a massive pine.

She sensed the movement rather than saw it. The blow struck her in the rib cage, sending a shock wave of pain through her chest. She felt a pair of arms wrapping around her waist, grasping at her. Those arms slid downward until they clutched at her legs. Like a running back caught in open field, she took two stumbling steps to her left and she fell to the ground. The bulk of her attacker's weight was not on her. She tried to squirm loose.

"Don't move," a man's cold, angry voice growled at her.

Fear lanced through her belly. She opened her mouth to scream but he clamped a hand over her mouth and chin. His fingers mashed her lips into her teeth.

*Oh, God. He's going to rape me.*

Heather thought of her parents and her sister. She saw her funeral in a flash of light.

The attacker kept one hand firmly sealed over her mouth and the other arm around her waist as he half-carried, half-dragged her off the small trail and into the wooded brush. She kicked and struggled gamely, but his grip was strong and she could not break it.

Heather sobbed once underneath his strong, smooth hand. She didn't want to die.

"Shut up, bitch," the man whispered. "Shut up or I'll lay the whammo on you."

Heather's breath raced in and out of her nose. She couldn't get enough air.

The attacker flung her to the ground. She landed on her back with a dull thud. She felt a curious pain in her chest and realized that her wind had been knocked out of her. *Funny*, she thought. *That hasn't happened since she was about eleven and fell out of the tree in Grandma's—*

The attacker fell on top of her, forcing her legs open.

He forced her running shorts down her hips and tore at her panties. The action registered slowly with Heather.

*He's going to rape me.*

Heather shuddered.

*My God. He's going to kill me after he rapes me.*

She struggled to get air into her lungs as she swam in darkness.

*I should open my eyes. In case he doesn't kill me, I can identify him.*

She forced her eyes wide open and stared up into her attacker's face. It was covered with a ski mask. The impersonal wool scared her even more. She tried harder to inhale so that she could scream.

Still no breath came.

The attacker fumbled with his pants, his hips still pressed against her thighs. She felt him shudder momentarily. His breath came in ragged gasps. Then he stopped.

For a moment, all was still. There were no human voices, only the distant sound of automobiles and closer, the evening sounds of birds. Heather stared into the man's eyes and searched for mercy. She could find nothing behind the impenetrable gaze.

He rolled her over onto her stomach.

“Don’t move, bitch or I’ll lay the whammo on you.”

Her lungs ached.

"Please," she tried to say, but there was no breath to propel the words out her mouth.

She waited for the pain, expecting him to force himself into her and terrified at not knowing when the attack would come. She felt her fingers and toes twitching.

*Will he kill me afterwards?*

After an eternity, the smell of wet earth and leaves filled her nostrils.

Smell. She could smell. And breathe.

She took two short breaths.

No attack came.

Still breathing in short breaths, she twisted her neck and looked behind her.

He was gone.

She rose to a sitting position, full of disbelief. She hadn't heard him leave. But he was definitely gone.

Heather stood shakily, pulling her running shorts up and brushing the dirt and leaves from her hair. She stood perfectly still for what seemed like an hour or a lifetime, afraid he would come back and kill her for moving. But no one came. She stood alone in that small wooded area, where she first cursed God, then thanked him.

She eventually walked home on rubbery legs, her mind dazed and racing.

What had she done to cause this?

Who was going to know?

Her mother?

She drew in a deep, wavering breath.

Oh, God, her *father*?

What was everyone going to think?

Right then, Heather Torin decided not to tell anyone about what happened to her. But she stopped jogging that very day.

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0822 hours

The dank smell of the laundry room sickened him, but not as much as his own weakness. Cursing, he ripped the pieces of clothing from his body and slapped them into the empty washer. The sweatshirt and pants were soaked in sweat, as was the woolen ski mask. His underwear was soaked in semen, which he wiped away from his body. The rubbing caused him to twitch half-erect.

*Don't touch that! Dirty little boy!*

His erection faded.

He hurled the wet, sticky underwear into the washer. Then he quickly added soap and turned on the machine.

*Dead.*

*Dead.*

*She was dead.*

He shook his head. He needed a shower.

Trudging upstairs, a sense of great failure enveloped him. He'd failed.

Failed to lay the whammo on that bitch in the park because he'd been too excited.

More than that, he'd failed to show his mother who was stronger. And now she was forever gone from his grasp. He'd stood in his dark suit just yesterday as they lowered her into the ground. His girlfriend held onto his arm and cried for him because he didn't let a single tear fall.

He couldn't cry.

He didn't want to cry.

He'd wanted to scream.

He'd wanted to laugh.

He'd wanted to rip her from the casket and lay the whammo on her.

But he only stood at the graveside, solemn. Letting no one know. Not any of the mourners. Not the priest. Not the faking bitch at his side. No one knew his mind. No one knew his plan.

But now his plan had failed.

*He* had failed.

The warm water that pulsed from the shower head did little to wash that feeling away. He turned the water on hotter yet, but the scalding heat did not make a difference. It didn't burn away his shame. He stood under it as long as he could stand it, then twisted the dial back down to a comfortable level.

"I really should have laid the whammo on her," he told the flowered tile of the shower stall.

Things were going to change.

This was an inauspicious beginning.

He would have to do better the next time.

Part II

April 1996

RIVER CITY, WASHINGTON

*[The rain] descends with the enthusiasm of someone breaking bad news.*

-- H V Morton

## TWO

Monday, April 15<sup>th</sup>

0644 hours

Katie MacLeod turned off the engine of her Jeep Cherokee and rubbed her tired eyes. Some mornings, she came home full of energy and too jacked up to sleep. Other mornings, like this one, she returned home almost a zombie and couldn't wait to fall into bed.

The wet, crisp air smelled fresh to her as he trudged up the walkway to the front door of her small house. Living in a house instead of an apartment for the first time as an adult took some getting used to. For example, even through her sleepy senses, she noticed that the grass needed to be mowed. She promised herself to do that during the coming weekend.

Not for the first time, she wondered if the 9-to-5ers had an easier time of it when it came to taking care of their household chores. Still, she wouldn't trade her job for anything.

Most of the time.

Inside, the house was silent except for the light hum of the refrigerator and the tick of the old-fashioned clock on the wall. She listened for Putter, but the cat was either too busy sleeping or out adventuring to be bothered with greeting her.

*I should've gotten a dog instead, she mused. At least a dog would be happy to see me.*

She knew she wasn't home enough to take care of a dog, though. Cats were more self-sufficient, if aloof at times.

Katie hung her jacket. She debated a shower before bed but quickly decided against it. She was just too tired.

The heavy weight of her off-duty gun on her hip was the first thing to go. She set it on her nightstand and dropped her badge next to it. Years ago, when she first came on the job, she would carry a pair of handcuffs and her radio with her, too. Now she didn't bother. If anything ever happened off-duty, the gun would be for dealing with the bad guys and the badge would be for dealing with the good guys when they arrived.

Katie finished undressing and put on her robe. She wandered into the kitchen for a glass of orange juice. She drank it standing next to the sink and rinsed the glass when she had finished.

To bed.

On her way to the bedroom, she saw the blinking light on her answering machine. She considered letting it sit until she woke up that afternoon, but knew she couldn't do that. The call might be from work. Or her mother. Neither party would be happy about a return call at four in the afternoon.

Katie pressed the PLAY button. There was a beep and a male voice came on.

“Katie? Are you there? It's Stef.” There was a pause. Katie could hear the sound of downtown traffic in the background. “If you're there, will you pick up? I...I want to talk to you.”

Anger flared in Katie. After what he'd said and done to her, there was no way—

“Katie, please? Pick up.”

She detected the slight slur in his voice then. He'd been drinking and probably made the call after the bars closed. She knew that was how he'd been spending his time since he took a

medical retirement from the police department. Drinking and feeling sorry for himself. And now he wanted to drag her into it.

*No way.*

The message ended and the machine beeped. Katie pressed the DELETE button.

He was a coward. That was the conclusion she'd reached in the year or so since his departure. Sure, he'd been shot up physically. And sure, he made a tragic mistake that cost a little girl her life. But he acted as if he were the only one on the job who experienced pain or who ever failed. In doing so, he belittled everyone else's experiences.

She flashed to the Post Street Bridge and the image of a mentally unstable man dangling his infant son over the edge of the bridge. The rush of impending doom flooded her chest. She saw herself standing helpless, pleading with the man.

Katie bit her lip.

"Goddamn you, Stef," she whispered. "Don't call me any more."

She walked into the bathroom and turned on the hot water. Maybe she needed a shower after all.

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**0721 hours**

Officer Thomas Chisolm tried to sprint the final block of his run, but his tired legs and aching lungs wouldn't cooperate. He managed to work up to a long-striding lope as he finished off his three miles, then slowed to a walk in front of his home. Hands on his hips, he walked in large circles around the front yard, slowing his breathing and letting his legs cool down.

Mornings were melancholy times for him. Sometimes he had thoughts of Scarface, the robber he'd killed. Other times, memories of Vietnam crept back in to his consciousness, forcing their way out of the shallow graves in his mind.

*Like Bobby Ramirez.*

*Or Mai.*

He needed sleep. That's all it was. Some water, a hot shower and sleep.

As his breath slowed, he turned on the water in his front yard and drank from the hose. The city water had a slight metallic tang to it, but he took a deep draught before turning the spigot off.

Chisolm made his way up the short, concrete steps and removed his house key from his sock. Unlocking the door, he went inside, tossing the key on the kitchen table. A hot shower was calling to him.

As he walked past the refrigerator, a picture taped to the front caught his attention. An attractive, dark-haired woman stared out of the photograph at him. She had a smile on her face but her eyes were slightly sad. They'd always had that hint of sadness, as long as he'd known her.

Sylvia.

He'd intended to remove the photo over two years ago, but never remembered to do it. He didn't bother with it now, reasoning that the shower was more pressing. He almost fooled himself into believing that as he walked out of the kitchen and toward the bathroom.

Thomas Chisolm refused to think of her, concentrating instead on what he had to accomplish after he woke up and before going to work tonight. If he opened up the door to memories, far too many would come unbidden. Especially in the mornings.

“Regret is a luxury you can’t afford,” he told his reflection.

*We live in a world of broken promises, he added silently. And life is full of failure.*

Chisolm undressed and took his shower. He turned the hot water up until the searing heat was as hot as he could stand. Despite admonishing himself to forget about Sylvia, he allowed himself to brood a little more as the water cascaded down on his head. He knew that if he stopped thinking about her, there was another memory standing in line behind her.

*Stop chasing ghosts. Just stop.*

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### 0938 hours

Lieutenant Alan Hart drummed his fingers on the desktop. The rhythmic thud echoed through the empty office.

He stared down at the file in front of him, his eyes skipping over the words in the report that he’d already read three times and nearly had memorized.

According to the report, Officer Aaron Norris drove through the Life’s Bean Good coffee stand several times a day. He bought coffee each time, tipped generously, and asked the nineteen-year-old barista out on a date. She reported being flattered at first, then uncomfortable with his advances. When she told her boyfriend about it, he made her call in a complaint.

Identifying Norris had been no problem. Skirt chasers were common enough, but Norris gave the barista his business card with his cell phone number on the back. He insisted she call him by his first name. Besides that, when she came into the office, Hart directed her to the

picture wall that held every officer's photo but no names. She immediately pointed right at Norris' picture.

Hart flipped the page and read the transcript.

Question: How often did the officer visit your place of business?

Answer: Two or three times a day, at least.

Q: Did he buy something each time?

A: Yes.

Q: Did he ask you out on a date each time?

A: No, but more than once. And he flirted with me a lot.

Q: Did you ever feel afraid of him?

A: No.

Q: Threatened? Unsafe?

A: No. I just didn't want to go out with him.

Q: Did his demeanor ever change when you turned him down?

A: Not really. He just smiled and kept trying.

Hart sighed and closed the file. He'd been assigned to Internal Affairs for almost a year and here he was, reduced to investigating some patrol cop trying to get laid. That wasn't why he took the job.

He glanced around the empty office and smirked. When the Chief decided to assign a lieutenant to Internal Affairs, he pulled out all four of the detectives that had been assigned. Hart had no support staff and even had to type his own reports. He knew the Chief did it as a form of punishment, but he refused to let it get to him. He might be banished from patrol and investigations, but he still intended to have an impact on the department.

Norris' file stared up at him. He snatched it up and replaced it in his active cases drawer. What a waste of time. The worst the guy would get is a verbal reprimand from his sergeant and told to stay away from Life's Bean Good. He'd just go find another barista. There was a coffee stand on every corner in River City.

Besides, these cases were a smokescreen. Had to be. Hart knew there were things happening out there that he needed to find. Cops stealing. Faking evidence. Beating people. Just because River City was nestled in Eastern Washington, right in the center of the Pacific Northwest, didn't mean there wasn't corruption. Maybe not New York or Los Angeles corruption, but Hart knew it was out there. The cops were covering for each other, that was all.

They thought they were so smart.

But Hart knew they weren't as smart as him.

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### 1122 hours

Patricia Reno wished there were an easier way to get thin. Jogging was too painful.

She'd started jogging almost a month before, finally tired of the weight that never came off after Joshua, her second son, was born. Sit-ups, she discovered, did not burn fat and she couldn't afford a gym membership, so she took up jogging.

As her feet thudded heavily on the pavement, she felt her thighs and belly jiggle. Her breasts flopped uncomfortably. She vowed for the tenth time to buy a sports bra. At least she was starting to notice a little difference in her body. She was now able to just squeeze into clothes she'd worn early in her pregnancy.

If only her husband, Roger, would notice.

Patricia's breath labored in and out of her lungs, but she no longer experienced the ragged throat sensation that she had for the first week. Her wind had improved quickly. That made it easier for her to avoid smoking again. She'd quit the day she learned she was pregnant and hadn't started back up yet, but it was hard. Especially since Roger smoked like a chimney.

She spotted the small park less than a block away. As soon as she ran through that, she would only be five blocks from home. That meant four blocks of running, one block of walking to cool down.

Despite the discomfort, Patricia found that she was beginning to enjoy her daily run. She still struggled with it too much to have a chance to think while running, but with two kids to worry about, the solitude was nice. So was the sense of accomplishment. She hadn't stopped during a run since that first week.

The air became cooler as she entered the park and ran along the twisting trail that led into the small wooded area. The tree roots and turns of the trail forced her to adjust her gait. That nearly killed her three weeks ago, but now she did so much more fluidly and deliberately. She watched the ground, not wanting to trip on the damp earth.

She caught a flash of movement, but before her mind could register and identify it, a thudding darkness covered her face. Someone jabbed a towel over her face. A strong arm encircled her waist and carried her several yards before she felt herself hurled to the ground. A hard body fell on top of her. She lay on her back with her right forearm pinned under the small of her back.

The towel restricted her air. She panicked and flailed frantically with her free left hand, struggling to breathe. The cloth slid up, exposing her mouth. She took a deep, ragged breath. An iron hand clamped over her mouth.

"You're going to be my sweet little bitch," a male voice rasped in her ear. "And if you scream, I'll lay the whammo on you. Understand?"

Patricia lay still, stunned.

He jerked her head powerfully. "I said, do you understand?"

Patricia nodded and whimpered beneath his hand.

"Good."

The hand came away from her mouth and Patricia sucked in a grateful breath. He tugged at her waistband, sliding her sweats and panties down over her knees.

*Should I resist?*

She gulped more air.

*Will he kill me?*

He pulled her clothing over her running shoes and tossed them aside. She heard them land on a bush, a moment's rustle, then still.

There was a long pause. She heard paper tearing.

*Should I beg? Or just be quiet and let him do it?*

How could this be happening to her?

She gasped in pain as he thrust inside her forcefully. She was not ready and it surprised her that he was able to enter her.

"Oh, my sweet little bitch," he moaned in her ear, thrusting slowly.

Patricia began to cry softly.

"Unnnnh, Unnnnh," he moaned, pulling the towel more tightly across her face.

Patricia tried to stop crying, but instead she broke into a sob.

He stopped.

She thought for a moment that it had been her crying that made him stop, that it touched him or even enraged him. She stopped crying, quivering as she waited. He lay across her with the dead weight of a spent man. That was when she realized he was done.

After a few moments, he pulled out of her and rolled her forcefully onto her stomach. Panic surged through her again. When he pulled the towel from her head, she sighed in relief.

"Don't look up," he told her gruffly.

She wouldn't. She never wanted to see his face. If she did she would be dreaming of it every night for the rest of her life.

"Don't tell anyone," he growled at her. "Or I will find you again and I will lay the whammo on you."

"I won't," she whimpered.

He gave her a shove in the back of the head to reinforce his warning. She took it with a small cry. Then she lay still, breathing in the humid, earthy smell of the damp soil and pine needles.

*What is Roger going to say?*

When she was sure he was gone, she fumbled with her clothing, lifting them from the damp earth. Numbly, she pulled her panties and shorts over her running shoes. Then she rose on wobbly legs and stumbled home to call the police...

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