

Like A Suicide: The Wraith

Book 1 of “Like A Suicide” Series

By

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&

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Note from John J. Archer;

Collaboration with author Lee Daniel occurred for the writing of the 'Like A Suicide' series. This was due to his extensive training and work in military intelligence operations as well as his in depth study of psychology. He has spent many hours researching the mental illnesses that permeate amongst criminal minds and the various catalysts of madness. It has been beneficial in aiding me to write this book and hopefully you will agree as you read through the dreaded 'Like A Suicide' series.

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Chapter 1

Wraith felt the bite of the cold wind against his cheek. It was the first weekend in October, and autumn was making itself known. He checked his watch and surveyed his surroundings from the bench he sat on in Lincoln Park. It was two thirty in the afternoon, but few people were out and about in the park due to the cold. To his right, a couple of die hard golfers were getting their clubs out of the back of an old Jeep Cherokee. From the squared body, Wraith guessed it was probably from the late eighties, early nineties. The men were not wearing the typical outfits that Wraith associated with golf. There was not a speck of plaid on either man. Instead, they were dressed in hooded sweatshirts and jeans. 'What is the world coming to?' he wondered to himself. If you couldn't stereotype golfers, who could you stereotype?

This made him smile inwardly. Chaos. Change. These were things that many feared, but not Wraith. He was an agent of chaos. Anything that pulled away from the status quo was just fine with him. On a regular basis, Wraith himself was the instrument of such things, but every now and then they happened without his assistance. This was a fine example. These two men had chosen to wear what was practical rather than expected. It was almost enough to save their lives. Almost, but not quite.

While allowing the men to carry on in their recreational pursuits would allow them to display a small measure of rebellion due to their aversion to the norm, it did not create the sort of chaos that Wraith preferred. Subtleties can only be enjoyed by those that are looking for them after all. Wraith was more interested in the kind of chaos that shocked those who were mostly oblivious to subtle changes in the environment. That kind of chaos could only be achieved through the work of an expert such as himself.

He watched as the two went into the clubhouse in order to claim their tee time. Checking his watch again for no particular reason, Wraith lifted himself off of the bench. He was not really concerned about the time; he just liked to be aware of it. It never sat well with him if any of his contributions to chaos took place at a regular interval in time. Increments of five, ten, or fifteen minutes simply would not do. Truly heinous acts were better suited to be done at random times, like four thirty three, or seven nineteen. Since the times of his actions were important, Wraith checked his watch quite often.

Other than that, he had no reason at all to be concerned. It was Sunday, after all. He was not on any schedule, save his own. He did not have any assignments pending. He was simply out for his own enjoyment as a fan of chaos. That meant that it was quite necessary for him to wreak havoc in some sort of fashion. Sure that was what he did for a living, but it was also great entertainment for him on a personal level. Even if he was not getting paid for it, the only way he could truly enjoy himself was to pursue his one and only interest.

He casually walked across the grass to where the practice greens were situated. From here, he circled around the clubhouse and walked out onto the course. Nobody was currently near the first fairway, so he stepped out on to it and walked in the direction of the restroom

building that he saw out in the middle of the course. He walked briskly so as to imitate somebody trying to limit the amount of time they were exposed to the wind. When he was almost up to the small brick structure, a cart pulled up next to him with a portly man sitting in the driver's seat. From his shirt, it was obvious that he worked for the gold course.

"Can I help you sir?" The man asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Oh, no, I am just looking for my cell phone." Wraith said. "I was out here yesterday, when the weather was nicer, and I think that it must have fallen out of my pocket while I was using the restroom. I am just going to duck inside and see if it is there."

"Sure, no problem." The fat man said. "I just wondered what you were doing out here without any clubs."

"Now those I managed to keep track of." Wraith said smiling.

"Yeah." The man laughed. "It is all about priorities. Well, I hope you find it in there. If not, you might have better luck in the lost and found box in the clubhouse."

"Thanks." Wraith said. "I will look in there if I don't find it out here."

"Good luck. I am getting out of the wind. Have a nice day."

"You too." Wraith said, smiling congenially as he watched the fat man drive off on his golf cart. It had briefly crossed his mind that he could dispatch this man as well as his intended targets, but then he liked the idea of leaving a witness to provide his description to the police. It was a game that he played. He changed his look on a regular basis and dared the authorities to track him down.

He stepped into the bathroom and looked at his reflection. Devilish blue eyes stared back at him, so bright that they nearly mesmerized even him. They were contacts, of course. His real eyes were blue as well, but paler. So pale, in fact, that in certain light, they almost seemed colorless. A light blond wig sat on top of his smoothly shaven head. It was such a good fit that few would have been able to tell that it was not really his hair. He had unremarkable features that made it easy for him to blend in with any crowd, but he was able to use his contacts, wigs, and other accessories to make himself as attractive or ugly as he needed.

He smiled and winked at his reflection. He loved being an anarchist, and he loved himself. He loved only himself. He was not a social creature by any stretch of the imagination. In fact the truth was that he was not only anti social, he was shy to a debilitating degree. That was how he had learned to disguise himself. He had never known how to talk to others, until he had learned to act. Acting had opened a whole new world to him. He could be anybody he wanted to be. It did not matter how afraid he was of everybody around him. As long as he acted like he was bold, then he was bold. He could fake it with the best of them.

He waited inside the building for slightly more than half an hour before he heard the sounds of voices approaching. It sounded as if both men were in jovial moods despite the weather. They were laughing quite loud over some comment one of them had made. Wraith smiled the smile of a shark about to feed on unsuspecting prey. They might have been in a good mood for now, but he was ready to change that for them. One more glance at his watch told him that he was good to go as soon as they drew near. It was two forty one.

"Hey, I need to take a piss really quick." One of the men said from outside the bathroom.

"Me too." This was perfect. Wraith had thought that he would need to approach them, but here they were offering themselves up to him for the slaughter. While he had never tried to rely on such luck, these sorts of things tended to happen on a regular basis. He had always taken it as a sign of divine approval. Clearly God wanted him to continue in his quest to both thin out the herd and move society away from conformity. Wraith welcomed his divine assignment and stepped away from the door.

The first man who entered did not even register recognition of Wraith's presence before he was pulled inward and had a knife thrust between his ribs. Wraith expertly found the man's heart and he was dead before he even hit the floor. There was barely any blood on Wraith's knife due to his quick efficiency. He had already withdrawn the knife and focused on the second man before the first had finished dying.

"What the hell, man?" The second man laughed, not realizing what had just happened. Wraith had made a good living off of the element of surprises just like this one. "Did you forget how to walk or something?"

"I think he bumped into me." Wraith said with the knife held behind his right leg as he knelt down next to the dead man. He was lying on his face, so the wound was not visible. "I think he is hurt."

At this, the second man stepped in and knelt next to his friend. As the door closed behind the golfer, Wraith rolled his first victim over for the man to see. A small pool of blood was on the floor underneath the body. The man's eyes were open wide in a look of surprise and his pants were wet with the urine he had intended to expel in peace.

"Oh, my god, what happened?" The man stammered in total shock.

"This happened." Wraith said whipping the hidden knife out and slashing his throat. He always kept his knives well sharpened, and the blade sliced through without the slightest hesitancy. Blood sprayed from the wound, but Wraith had anticipated the path it would take and had managed to avoid getting any of it on him. It was not that he was afraid of blood. He had actually bathed in it from time to time. His current aversion was only to prevent being spotted walking through the park splattered with somebody else's blood. It might raise an eyebrow or two.

Once the majority of the blood that was going to flow out of both of them and poured itself out on the bathroom floor, Wraith began to strip their clothes off of them. This was not too difficult. Wraith was fairly strong, but often dead bodies were still hard for him to move around. These two men, however, were both small in stature, so it was with relative ease that he stripped them. When they were both naked, he reached for the knife once more. Humming slightly to himself as he worked, he severed their sexual organs. He shoved the first man's penis into his friend's mouth and repeated the step with the opposing man's organ as well.

It was not that Wraith had any sexual perversion in this regard. He was not gay. He enjoyed sex with women. He was also not into necrophilia, but this particular display was necessary in order to properly shock the individuals that would come across his work. It would also throw police off his trail. They would think that this had been done either by a homophobic person that thought these men were gay, or by a spited lover of one or both of the victims. In any case, an anarchist would probably not be on their radar. At least, not immediately.

He then took the first man's clothes and stuffed them into the only sit down toilet in the bathroom. He took the next man's clothes and used them to clog the drain in the urinal, as well as the sink. There was also a drain in the floor, which he used the man's socks to block. Once every known drain was plugged, he flushed the toilet and the urinal and turned the sink faucet on. Stepping out of the bathroom, he looked around quickly and saw that he was still alone on the course. He pulled out a roll of duct tape from his jacket pocket and taped off the edges of the bathroom door. This would allow the water to rise up suitably.

Satisfied with his work, he walked back in the direction of the clubhouse, whistling softly to himself as he went. This had been a very good day. With luck, he would be long gone from the park before the two men were discovered. Once they were, the place would be thrown into turmoil. Chaos would reign over the park for a while. Blessed, chaos.

Sure, eventually everything would go back to normal, but it would take quite a long time for those who knew about the incident to forget the horrible crime that had been committed on this cold autumn afternoon. Wraith smiled happily as he exited the golf course and walked across the street. This had been a very good day indeed.

Chapter 2

James finished brushing his teeth and stepped out the bathroom, of Jennifer's apartment. He had just moved in with her, so technically it was their apartment together, but it did not quite feel like it was his just yet. Most of his boxes were still down in the storage unit provided by the complex, and he had a feeling they might end up taking a permanent residence there. He had learned from watching friends and family that when a man and a woman find themselves in the same living quarters, either through marriage or an arrangement like his, the man's stuff is generally exiled to some place out of sight. In many occasions, this was a garage, an attic, a basement, or in James' case, a storage unit. For some reason, men's belongings seemed to 'clash' with everything.

As long as James had Jennifer's love, though, he did not consider the banishment of his personal affects to be any sort of loss. She was an amazing woman, and he counted himself lucky to have gained her affection. Not only was she drop dead gorgeous, but she had such a sweet tenderness to her, that even blind men would have been instantly attracted to her. He was still trying to figure out what the sexy red head had ever seen in him, but he was grateful that she never seemed to be trying to figure that out as well.

They had met six months ago in a coffee shop. Jennifer had approached him because of his smoothly shaven bald head. She worked as a nurse at St. Mary's Hospital in the radiology department, so she had wondered if he had cancer. She was familiar with most of the cancer patients in the Grand Valley, and yet she had never seen him before. When he told her that he had only kept his head shaved as a sign of support for his mother that really did have cancer, she was immediately struck with him. Talking over coffee soon led to talking on the phone, going to movies, kissing, and eventually laying down in the sheets together. It was inevitable that they would eventually move in together.

The move had made plenty of sense. James' work took him out of town all the time, so he was rarely ever home anyway. When he was in town, he was always over at Jennifer's. In that way, it was as if they had been living together for far longer than the recent official move. He knew that eventually he was going to have to ask her to marry him, but for some reason he felt the need to hold back on that. At least for a while. It was not that he was afraid of commitment. There was something else that he could not quite put his finger on. Some darkness in the back corner of his mind that was always there and yet eluded him when he tried to find it. He did not think it would be wise to lock down forever with a girl until he could figure out what it was that seemed to bother him so much.

He shook his head. This was not the time for such dark and dreary thoughts. The important thing was that he was happier than he had ever been. Work was going really well, and the love of his life was sitting up in bed smiling at him. Life was good today. There was no reason to mess it up with this stupid delusion of his that something terrible lied within him. He smiled back at Jennifer and slipped into the bed beside her. She felt warm against his body. It was not just the heat of her body against his. It was something much deeper and more

profound. Whenever he thought about the darkness, he felt cold, but Jennifer always took that away. She felt so refreshing and comforting. She felt like life in the fullest sense. He bent his neck down to kiss her.

"No, not yet." She said, squirming away. "Morning breath. You can't come in here right after brushing your teeth and kiss me with my nasty breath. It isn't fair. If you want to kiss me in the morning, you need to have just as stinky breath as me."

"You don't have stinky breath." James said. "Everything about you is wonderful."

"Oh, yeah, Mr.-doesn't-play-by-the-rules?" She said and breathed hot breath on his nose.

"Okay, maybe it is a little stinky." He admitted. "But it still isn't nearly as bad as mine is in the morning. Trust me, you don't want me kissing you before I brush."

"I want you to kiss me all day, every day." She said on her way to the bathroom.

"I think that sounds like a great idea." He called after her. "Why don't we do that today?"

"You know that I have to go to work." She said. "Just because you don't work anything resembling a normal schedule doesn't mean the rest of the world is just as chaotic. Today is Monday, and I have to go to work. If you don't have to go out of town on Saturday, I think I would love to stay in bed and get all of your kisses."

"Just call in sick." He said.

"Yeah, like they are going to believe that. I have my boyfriend move in with me over the weekend and all of a sudden I am too sick to go to work on Monday." She laughed. "You know that wouldn't fly."

"Okay, fine." He said, giving up. "Just don't stay late after work. I think a special dinner would be a nice way of celebrating."

"Sounds good to me." She said as she moved away from the bathroom to her closet. She pulled off her night gown and revealed her wonderful body. James had to resist jumping up and pulling her back to bed with him. She was not tall; she was only five foot three inches in height, but she was well proportioned. Her thin neck trailed down to perfect breasts. Each one was just slightly larger than James' hands, and they were nice and firm. She had a flat stomach from all of her exercise videos, and a perfectly toned backside. James always wanted her, even when she was clothed. When she was not clothed, he absolutely could not resist her.

He had to turn his attention away from watching her dress if he was going to let her get to work on time, so he reached for the television remote. He thought he might as well see what was going on in the world. He leaned back against the head board and relaxed. He did not have anything to do today. He was a travelling business consultant. He only worked when businesses needed him to come and tell them how to better run their office. It meant that he did not always work every day, and many days were spent in travel, but he made really good money at it, so he did not mind the lack of routine. In fact, he relished it. He did not know how Jennifer could handle working Monday through Friday of every week. It was always the same. James liked to have things changed up on a regular basis.

A news alert brought him out of his muse. Two men had been found naked and mutilated in the bathroom at Lincoln Park. At this time, police were not identifying the victims, but said that it might have been a hate crime. For the time being, it looked as if the men might have been homosexuals that were killed in order to make a point. No photos were

being released, but it was clear that the crime had been simply awful. James could tell by the look on the face of the police officer giving a statement that he had seen something that would haunt him for a while. A police sketch was shown of the suspect. Apparently a man that worked at the golf course had seen this man walking to the bathroom shortly before the killings were said to have occurred.

James looked at the picture of a man with short blond hair and bright blue eyes, but did not recognize him. He almost wished that he could. Anybody sick enough to do something like that needed to be locked up. The man's face was somehow unsettling to him. It was not ugly, but it seemed like something out of a nightmare. There was a darkness to it. James felt cold again.

"Hey babe, can you believe this?" He said to Jennifer.

"What?" She asked. She was back in the bathroom fixing her hair and had not been paying attention.

"Some freak killed two men at the Lincoln Park Golf Course yesterday. He stripped them naked, mutilated the bodies and used their clothes to flood the bathroom that they were in." James said. "I can't believe how sick some people are these days."

"Well, more and more people are moving here all the time." She said. "Grand Junction is really growing. A lot of these freaks come from big cities and bring their sickness with them."

"Well, I think it is disgusting." James said.

"I agree, but I think the more this city grows, the more we will see things like that." She said. "I know that it is a violation of HIPPA, but the things I hear out of the Emergency Room would scare the crap out of you. Last week a man came in with bite marks all over him. He was homeless, and another homeless man had tried to eat him. He had barely made it to get help. The nurses from over there said he had big chunks of his flesh that were torn away."

"Gross." James said.

"I know. With Halloween coming up, it sparked a bunch of talk about zombies." She almost laughed at that part. "There were some nurses who were actually afraid that the man would turn into a zombie and start infecting the hospital. I think they have spent too much time watching movies like Dawn of the Dead."

"So did he turn?" James asked jokingly.

"Yeah, and he bit me." Jennifer teased. "I want to eat your brains."

"Well, you will have to look elsewhere." James said. "I think I misplaced mine somewhere."

"Very funny." Jennifer said, coming out of the bathroom and reaching for her purse. "If you weren't smart, then companies would ask you to come and tell them how to run a business."

"Maybe they are just dumber than me." James suggested.

"Shut up." Jennifer said playfully and kissed him. "I have to go now. Have a good day. I will make sure that I get out of there in plenty of time to dress up for our dinner tonight."

"Sounds good." James said. "Don't get bitten by any zombies today."

"If I do, I am coming after you first." She laughed, as she went out the door.

James smiled and leaned back, slipping his glasses over his pale blue eyes. He loved her so much. She always made him feel good. Even her weird story about the homeless man had

cheered him up. He was no longer even thinking about the creep that had killed the golfers. He shut off the television and reached for the novel that he was reading. It was a good political thriller about China taking over the whole world and turning it into a big water monopoly empire. He found his place and began to read. Life was good.

Chapter 3

Wraith released himself from Vixen and rolled onto his back, chest heaving from the exertion. They were both covered in sweat and breathing hard from their afternoon rendezvous. Vixen was his lover, and the one person that he did not have to fake it to be around. With her, he was Wraith in his purest form. Head shaved, pale eyes and all. She was a freak and that was what he liked about her. From her dyed black hair to her red contacts, to her usual knee high socks of one bizarre color or another, she had never failed to excite him with her lack of conformity. He did not love her; he only loved himself and his work. He did crave her, though. He craved her all the time, especially after a nice kill.

Her name was not really Vixen, but that is what she went by. Wraith had no desire to learn her real name. A name like Susan or Becky simply would not have been very exciting. Vixen, on the other hand, was a name you could really sink your teeth into. And sink his teeth he did. So hard that he drew blood even. She did not shy away from such things, but rather screamed in ecstasy with every wound that he would inflict. She loved it rough. She would not have it any other way.

That was how he had formed this bond with her. Originally, he had been drawn to her when he saw her dancing at a bar called Cactus Canyon. He loved the way she presented herself as a mixture between a prostitute and a vampire. He had picked her up with the intention of raping and killing her and dropping her blood soaked naked body in the middle of an elementary school playground. When he had started to rape her, though, he realized that she was simply enjoying it. This had pushed him to try to hurt her even more, to push her beyond her pain threshold. He had tried his damndest to break her, but she just wanted more.

This incredible love of brutality had fascinated him. He could not bring himself to kill somebody that he could not break. Instead, they formed their bond that night by grabbing hold of a high school girl that was walking home alone from a friend's house. Wraith had held the girl, while Vixen took a knife to her. By the time morning came, Wraith was obsessed with Vixen and she was head over heels in love with him. And, of course, there was a mutilated naked body with its vitals strewn across the Clifton Elementary School playground.

Since that fateful night, Wraith had been abusing Vixen and using her to satisfy all of his twisted carnal desires. It seemed that the more psychotic his lust, the more willing Vixen was to satisfy. It was a truly beautiful relationship as far as Wraith was concerned. Vixen was so in love with him at this point that she would do anything for him. She would step in front of a train for him if he asked her to, and he had not ruled that out. He liked the idea of watching somebody willingly commit suicide.

Suicide fascinated Wraith to no end. He was so obsessed with it that he often forced his victims to kill themselves. Sometimes he would torture them until they begged him to kill them. Instead of performing the mercy kill, he would give them the instrument of their demise. A knife, a gun, or any sharp object would do. He would sit in rapt attention and

watch them take their own lives. Yes, Wraith loved the feeling of a good suicide. Nothing veered further from the norm than self murder. It was beautiful.

But Wraith was not ready for Vixen to kill herself for him. She was still too much fun to play with. Eventually he knew that he would find a way to break her, but for now he enjoyed the pursuit. Once she was broken, she would be discarded like any broken toy. Then he would watch her end her life in the ultimate display of her love for him. In the mean time, every love making session they had felt like a suicide to him. Each time she gave herself more and more to him for whatever brutality he had in mind. She was like a suicide. Not quite a suicide, but very much like one.

He turned his head to look at her. There was blood on her face from when he had smashed it into the head board with all of his strength. Her left eye was swollen from when he had backhanded her upon entering her place. Her stomach was smeared with blood from the light slashing wound he had ravaged upon it. He had definitely gone too easy on her this time. Next time he would need to make up for that. Scars went across her body in all sorts of different angles and shapes to give testament to better attempts he had made at breaking her. Some of the scars were not inflicted by him, though. She had been cutting herself long before he showed up.

"Not your best effort." She said, as if reading his mind. She ran her index finger through the blood on her stomach and brought it up to her mouth, licking it as if it were the nectar of the gods. "How do you ever expect to break me like that?"

"I will try harder next time, Vixen." He promised. He hated to disappoint her need for violation. "I am just a little distracted today."

"Why are you distracted? What could possibly have your focus more than raping me?" She demanded. "Do I not deserve all of your malice?"

"Not today." He answered honestly. He could see her pain at his lack of focus. "Something has come up that really pissed me off."

"What?" Vixen demanded. Wraith recognized and cherished her hurt feelings. Little by little she was offering herself up to him. Soon she would be broken. He could feel it. She was so close that he almost gave it another shot. Ultimately, though, he knew that he just did not have the right kind of concentration for the task. Not right now. He needed to take care of this new thorn in his side before he would be able to concentrate properly.

"Somebody has been stealing from me." He said.

"Who would be stupid enough to steal from you?" She asked. "Just go kill him my love. Then you can get back to breaking me. I want you to break me. I am willing to offer myself up to you."

"I know, pet, I know." Wraith responded. "You are close, but you are not ready yet. Just be patient. Your time will come soon."

"So what are you going to do?" She asked. Vixen realized that she was not going to regain his focus on her until he was over this distraction.

"I can't rush this." He said, thinking out loud. "My first thought was to hunt him down and kill him immediately. The more I think about it though, I think that I should take my time with it. The fact that he would steal from me tells me something about him. To steal from me, he would most likely know how I come across my money. That would mean that he is either incredibly stupid, as you suggested, or incredibly confident."

"Confident?" She asked.

"Yes, confident enough to think that I would pose no real threat to him. He didn't even try to hide his trail. It is almost like he is daring me to come after him." Wraith said, with a slight smile on his face. "Anybody that bold needs to be carefully studied. Hasty action could lead to my demise. You wouldn't want me to die before I could finish breaking you, would you?"

"No, you can't." Vixen said, sick at the thought. "You have to finish what you started. You have to accept my sacrifice of body and soul to you."

"I will." He said. "That is why I need to approach this man with caution. I need to learn everything about him. I need to know what drives him, what he holds dear. When I figure him out, I will take away everything from him that he loves until he begs me to kill him. Then I will make him kill himself."

"You think he will be a suicide?" She asked with a touch of envy in her voice. Wraith knew that she desperately wanted to be worthy of a suicide for him. She was always jealous when she found out that he had deemed somebody else to be worthy of a suicide over her. She wanted so badly to be considered worthy of a suicide.

"Yes, I think so." Wraith said, feeding off her need to be the one that pleased him. "He definitely feels like a suicide."

"Well, then I want to help." Vixen insisted. "Suicides are important, and I want to be a part of it. If he is going to offer himself up to you, I want to be there to see it. Please, let me help you."

"Okay, pet." He said. "You can help. I don't see any reason to keep you out of it. It would be good for you to see his offering. It would help prepare you for when you are ready to do the same. In the mean time, I need to let my employers know that I am going to need some personal time. I can't concentrate on an assignment from them until I am able to finish this thief."

With that, he got up and went to his laptop computer. Using the wireless internet connection to get online, he logged onto the website entitled 'Cute Little'. He couldn't help but smirk at the name. But then, it would be a red flag to the authorities to advertise their real name on their website. The Devoted Brotherhood of Anarchy did not want undue attention brought upon them. Not only did they support anarchy, they actively pursued it through employing Wraith and others like him.

Since they had more than one operative, Wraith did not have to be available to them on a constant basis. While he was their favorite instrument of destruction and chaos, they did have others that would gladly step in to fill a temporary void. In fact, his status as the number one operative was what allowed him such autonomy that he was able to take personal time whenever he so chose.

Wraith typed out a simple message announcing that he would not be available for a short time. He did not say what he would be doing or when he would again be available. He only typed in that he would be in touch. After he logged off of their site, he brought up Google. Whistling softly, he typed in the name James Harper and hit the enter button.

Chapter 4

James nearly lost his breath when Jennifer stepped out of the bathroom for his inspection. She was the image of Aphrodite in her sleek form fitting black evening gown. Her hair was worn in a classy up do that he was amazed she had been able to do herself. Normally a stylist was needed in order to achieve the sort of look that she had going on. The even more amazing part of all this was that she had only been in the bathroom with the door shut for half an hour. From his experience with women that was record time for getting dressed for something as mundane as a trip to the grocery store. Getting ready for a special night out generally required at least two hours.

Her red hair was offset by her always bright green eyes that seemed to reach inside his soul and hold him captive. It was very easy to be cast under a hypnotic spell well gazing into the deep emerald pools. Her outfit was accentuated with a simple, yet elegant diamond necklace, and black high heels that made her almost as tall as him. All in all, she was mesmerizing.

"Well?" She asked. "How do I look?"

"Doesn't the fact that I had to pull my jaw up off the floor to answer you speak for itself?" James asked her. "You remind me of a song."

"What song is that?" Jennifer asked, fighting off the urge to blush. She was aware that she was attractive, but she was not stuck up. She usually felt embarrassed whenever she was given a compliment about her looks. When James looked at her like this, she almost felt like a silly school girl on the verge of giggling because the high school quarterback was winking at her.

"Wonderful Tonight, by Eric Clapton." He said. "I know it sounds cheesy, but that is all that comes to mind. You look absolutely wonderful tonight."

"Thank you." She said, feeling her cheeks warm up as her cheeks reddened exposing the blush she had been trying to hold back. That was one of her favorite songs of all time and to have him apply it to her was very special. "You don't look so bad yourself."

James grinned and tugged at the lapels of his double breasted suit coat. It was one of the nicest suits he owned, and he couldn't think of a better use for it. They were going out to celebrate their commitment to each other as indicated by the move. She was the best thing that had ever happened to him, so why wear his best clothes.

"Are you ready, love?" He asked.

"Absolutely." She replied, turning toward the door. James would have just about preferred to take her straight to bed, but he knew that it was important to make a woman feel special from time to time. Keeping her on her back and sweaty was a sure fired way of making her feel like nothing more than an object. He stepped ahead of her and opened the door.

"Wow, you are even holding the door open for me at our own place." She said. "You really are feeling like quite the gentleman tonight aren't you?"

"Now why should my lady have to open a door for herself?" He asked.

"Don't you forget it." Jennifer laughed as she headed toward his black Mazda 3. She couldn't wait to get dinner over with so she could tangle the sheets up with him. She was so in love with James that she could hardly contain herself. She never wanted to be apart from him. She only hoped that moving in was one step away from actually tying the knot.

They went downtown to the Winery to eat their dinner. James had made reservations early in the day, so they were sat down immediately. As they sat and talked about their day, Jennifer began to hope that James might be leaning toward asking her the big question. She knew that might be rushing things a bit, but she couldn't help hope for it anyway.

James was considering this possibility as well, but he held back. He could not deny that he was head over heels in love with her. There was no arguing with the fact that he cared more deeply for her than anybody else on the planet. He would have been willing to lay his life on the line for her in a heartbeat. Still, the darkness on the peripheral threatened to ruin everything. He needed to conquer whatever it was that haunted him first. If only he knew what it was.

"I love you." He said to her out of the blue. He was so into his own thoughts that he was not sure if she had even been talking or not. He just blurted it out before he could stop himself. He really hoped that he had not interrupted anything important.

"I love you too." She said.

"I know, but I mean I really love you." He said. "More than anything else in the world. Do you know what I mean?"

"I do." She said, feeling her hopes rise. "That is how I feel about you. I have been on cloud nine ever since I found you. It feels like we were meant to be together because life without you just does not seem right at all."

"Exactly." He said. "I want you to know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I would even drop down on one knee right here and now, but there is something I need to take care of first."

"What is it?" She asked, trying not to let her disappointment show. For a minute, she had gotten so excited that she nearly lost her breath.

"Well, that is just the thing. I don't really know." He couldn't believe that he was telling her this. He was afraid that it would sound crazy. He was so in love with her, though, that he trusted her to accept what he was going to tell her. "It may sound crazy, but there is a darkness that I have to conquer first."

"Darkness?" She asked, not comprehending. Now she was beginning to get worried. She had never heard him talk like this before. Whatever it was, though, she wanted to be there to support him.

"Yes." He said. "I don't know what it is, but it seems to hang out at the periphery of my awareness. Every time I think about settling down and having a nice happy life, I can feel it threatening to tear everything apart. I don't know what it is, but I need to find out and overcome it before I can totally commit to you."

"Whatever it is, we can work through it together." She said.

"I don't want to drag you into it if it turns out to be something truly awful." He said. "I want to find out on my own. If it turns out to be something silly, you will be the first to know about it."

"I understand." She said. In truth, she did not, but it was important to him. She loved him enough to trust his judgment. In the mean time, she would tide herself over with the knowledge that she had his heart as much he had hers. Life was about small victories. He may not have proposed, but at least he had said that he wanted to when he had his personal demon taken care of. She could handle that.

"Thank you." He said. "I know that I must sound crazy. I am sorry for even bringing it up, but I don't want to keep anything from you."

Wraith had just finished performing his favorite activity. Killing.

All in all, it was a refreshing activity that helped him to consider his target with renewed enthusiasm. James was an odd character, and he felt he really needed to understand him better. Perhaps he needed to have some face to face contact with him. He was not ready to strike yet, but an up close and personal encounter might help him figure out who he was really dealing with. He wanted to learn what it was that drove this man that had not only stolen his money, but also his identity.

Wraith had called himself by his self-assigned name for so long that he had almost forgotten that his real name was Jim Harper. Now it seemed this arrogant jackass thought he could step right in and fake being Wraith. The idea was asinine at best, but anybody this brazen needed to be understood. While Vixen went about mailing the packages, he would find James and have a little sit down in a public place with him. It was time for Wraith, aka Jim Harper, to meet with James Harper. He really wanted to know what sort of game James thought he was playing, and why he thought he could win.

Chapter 5

James sat in the small coffee shop off of Main Street sipping on his latte and thinking. Had he gone too far in telling Jennifer about the unknown darkness? Only time would tell if he had led her to conclude that he was crazy. After all, who is too afraid to commit to someone because of something unidentifiable? Maybe he really was crazy. Could this inexplicable fear really be worth putting a great girl like Jennifer off? She was the best thing that had ever happened to him and he was in danger of losing her.

He was so engrossed in his own thoughts that he barely noticed a man come in and sit down at the same table. He looked up and was struck by the remarkable resemblance to the face that he saw every day in the mirror. He felt a chill as the pale blue eyes pierced his own. He could have sworn that he had seen him recently, and not as a reflection. He mentally beheld the darkness moving in from the outskirts of his awareness.

"James, it seems that we have a problem." Wraith said, never wavering in his stare.

"Who are you, and how do you know my name?" James asked his visitor.

"I am you." Wraith said. "Or at least I am who you claim to be."

"Excuse me?" He asked. "I have no idea what the hell you are talking about."

"That is good." Wraith said. "You are very good. I happen to be an expert liar myself, and I am, therefore, usually able to tell if somebody is lying. But you are very convincing. I almost believe that you do not know who I am. You are probably just trying to figure out what your next move is. Don't worry, I am not here for a physical confrontation, I just want to know why you think you can just waltz in and steal my identity and my money."

"I am not stealing anything." James said. "I am James Harper and have never felt the need to be anybody else. Now please leave."

"Are you stalking me or something?" Wraith asked, not even acknowledging that James had just spoken. "Is that why you have tried so hard to look like me? Are those contacts or are your eyes really that pale?"

"I don't wear contacts." James said. "Now are you going to tell me what this is all about, or am I going to have to make you leave?"

"James, this is ridiculous. There is no point in trying to deny what you have been up to. You must have realized how closely we resemble each other and decided to take advantage of it. However, when you looked into copying me, you must have figured out how I come to have the money that you felt no compunctions out taking for yourself. I just don't understand why you would try to steal from someone who kills people and destroys things for a living." Wraith said with amazing calmness. James felt a chill run through him as Wraith spoke. Now he knew where he had seen this man before. His hair was black now, instead of blonde, and it hung low over his eyes, but this was definitely the same man that had killed those men at the park.

"You killed those men at the golf course." James said. "You are sick."

"Yes, I did, and no, I am not." Wraith said. "The rest of the world is sick and I am trying to rectify that through one horrific act after another. But that is really neither here nor there as it pertains to our specific situation. You are stealing from me, and I cannot let that stand."

"I told you already, I am not stealing anything, and I have no idea who you are." James insisted. "I am a business consultant and that is how I get my money."

"And I told you already that, in spite of your excellent performance, I know that you are taking my money." Wraith said with the tone of talking down to an obstinate child. "Tell me, James, if you are a business consultant, who are your most recent clients?"

James opened his mouth confidently to answer with a list of big name companies, but for some reason no answer came forth. He did not understand why, but for the life of him, he could not even come up with a single company that he had provided services for. This strange man that had come out of the blue with bizarre accusations smiled at him. It was an infuriating smile that silently declared his victory. James knew that he was not a thief and it frustrated him to an incredible degree that he had no response to the killer's question. Why could he not answer?

"You see, this is where you fail at faking innocence." Wraith said. "If I had been in your place, I would have made sure that I had a list of businesses that would be able to verify my services to them. You may be a convincing liar, James, but you are not an exceptional one. Under different circumstances, I might have offered to teach you how to fake it with the best of them. Since you came to me as a thief rather than a pupil however, I am afraid that I am going to have to kill you."

James immediately had his eyes go to the door in search of a possible escape route. He was in pretty good shape and nobody would have called him weak, but he was not a fighter. He definitely did not think that he would be a match for somebody that made a living out of killing other people.

"I see that you are thinking about escape." Wraith said, watching James' eyes. "There is no need of that in the present. This is only a meet and greet that I felt was necessary. I do not intend to kill you in a coffee shop. In the long run, there is no hope of escape for you. I will make you suffer to the point that you will offer to kill yourself in order to end your torment."

"Why are you doing this?" James asked, fighting the feeling of panic that was seeping in.

"Because you took my money." Wraith said. "First I am going to take away everything that is precious to you, and then I am going to come after you personally. Trust me, James; you will not be disappointed with the amount of torture headed your way. I am a man of my word."

Wraith looked down at his watch. It was ten thirty-seven. Perfect. He had learned what he wanted to about his adversary and had managed to do so without ending at a conventional time interval.

"Now if you will excuse me, I have discovered what I was looking for, and it is time for me to leave. Thank you for the stimulating conversation." With that, Wraith stood up, nodded at James, and walked toward the door.

James watched him leave in a state of shock. He was immobilized in place. Only a few minutes ago he had thought his biggest problem was trying to figure out how to get past his

own feelings of hesitancy when it came to giving Jennifer the kind of commitment she deserved. Now he not only had to fear for his own life, but Jennifer's as well. He knew that she would be top on this strange man's list when it came to taking away everything that was precious to him. He wished that he knew what to do, but was unable to do anything other than sit in stunned silence. He could not remember a time that he had felt more inept than he did at this point in time.

"Are you okay?" Ben Waters asked, bringing James out of his trance. Ben was the owner of the small coffee shop and he was almost always there, either working behind the counter or just hanging out and talking with his customers.

"I'm sorry?" James stuttered.

"You look as if you've seen a ghost." Ben said. "I mean you have been sitting over here with a look of concentration ever since you got here, so I have left you alone, but now you look horrified. I can't help but butt in now. At the risk of repeating myself, I have to ask. Are you okay?"

"I...I don't know." James said, trying to think about what had just happened. "Ben, did you see the man that was just here?"

"No, I just came out of the back room." Ben said. "You were the only customer, so I thought I could go check out our inventory. Did he cause a problem for you?"

James thought about answering his question honestly. Did he cause a problem? Hell yes he caused a problem. He came in and threw around wild accusations and told him that he was a dead man walking.

"I guess you could say that." He said. "Ben, I hope you don't mind, but I need to use your phone. I accidently left mine at home this morning and I need to call the police."

"No problem." Ben said, heading for his cordless phone. "Is everything all right?"

"No, it's not." James replied as he started to stand up. He felt his knees shake and he sat back down. "I just hope they can help."

Chapter 6

Detective Todd Sweeny sat down at the table across from James Harper and looked around the coffee shop. It was not a bad little setup. If he were a coffee drinker, he might have enjoyed sitting around this place and downing a cup or two. That is, of course, if he did not have anything better to do with his time. Being a homicide detective in a city with a fast rate of population growth did not give him much extra time, though.

As far as he was concerned, he was married to his job. It certainly seemed as if his work was never done. Grand Junction was seen as one of the nicest places for people from big cities to move to in order to settle down in what they considered a smaller community. All that really did was make his city grow exponentially. It also meant that the big city people brought their problems with them, most of which involved crime. Most of the crime involved somebody getting killed.

When somebody got killed, Detective Sweeny was usually involved in the investigation. Sure there were other homicide detectives, but he was always lending a hand even if he was not directly in charge of the investigation himself. This was the reason that he had never been able to maintain a successful relationship with any of the women that he met. Eventually, they all figure out that they took second place to the solving of murder cases.

It was his need to assist in catching every depraved killer that roamed the streets that had him sitting in this coffee shop. Twenty minutes ago, the police station had received a call that the man suspected of killing the two men at the golf course had been in here and threatened one of the patrons. Detective George Anderson was the guy running the case, but he was not in the office when the call came in. Sweeny had gladly gone out to gather information in his stead.

"Mr. Harper, I presume?" He asked, chuckling inwardly about stealing a famous line from history. Sure they were not in Africa, and he was not sitting across from Dr. Livingston, but it still humored him. Mr. Harper either did not get the reference or did not see the humor.

"Yes." James said. He was still fighting off the shock of his encounter with a killer.

"I understand that you called saying that you had been threatened by the man suspected of murdering two men at the Lincoln Park Golf Course." Detective Sweeny said, looking deeply into James' eyes. James had the feeling that he could see all the way down into the depths of his soul. He was glad that he was merely a witness, and not a criminal trying to hide something, for he doubted that anything could be hidden from the man on the other side of the table.

"Yes that is correct." James said.

"Why don't you tell me the whole story." Sweeny suggested, taking out his notebook.

"Okay, I was sitting here drinking my coffee..." James told the detective about the whole confrontation, careful to include every detail that he could think of. Detective Sweeny listened intently, taking the occasional note.

"So you are saying that his hair had changed remarkably from the artist's rendition that you saw on television." Sweeny noted. "Are you sure that this was the same man?"

"Yes, I am sure. He had the same face, the same look in his eyes. His eyes were not as bright though, so he must have been wearing contacts when he was seen at the park. Besides that, he admitted to me that he was the killer." James said.

"Yes, you mentioned that." Sweeny said, tapping his pen against his lips and looking at his notes. "You also said that he accused you of stealing from him. Maybe he was just trying to scare you by saying that he was the man who had committed the crime at the park. It could be that when you accused him of this, he felt like running with it to keep you intimidated."

"Well that would have been stupid. He must have known that I would try to turn him in." James answered.

"Admitting to the murders whether he did them or not would be stupid, Mr. Harper." Sweeny said. "I think at this point it would be safe to assume that we are not dealing with a man that is in full control of his faculties."

"Right." James said, feeling foolish.

"You said that he accused you of stealing from him." Sweeny said as he scratched the side of his face. His face always itched when he felt like he was onto something. He was sure that a psychiatrist would love to tell him that it had something to do with his mother, but he simply didn't have the time or patience for a shrink. "Are you stealing money from him?"

"Of course not." James answered defensively. "I am a business consultant. If I were stealing money from somebody, why would I call the cops and tell them that I had been threatened?"

"If you had killed two men on a golf course, why would you admit it to a stranger in a coffee shop?" Sweeny responded, answering his question with another question. "It would amaze you what criminals do and say without thinking of the consequences. Would you mind if I verified your source of income?"

"Why would you need to do that? Shouldn't you be more focused on catching the killer than looking into my activities?" James asked indignantly.

"Look, you are throwing around some very serious accusations." Sweeny said. "I just need to verify your credibility in order to list you as a witness. If it turns out that you are making stuff up in order to dodge a man that is just trying to get his money back, well that would be a pretty serious thing to do."

"I am not making anything up. I told you that he looked just like the man that was shown to be the primary suspect." James said.

"Yes, you did say that." Sweeny said, reaching for the first time into a folder that he had brought with him. He pulled out the picture that had been shown on television and held it up next to James. "Of course that would not be hard. After all, you look a lot like the man yourself. Sure, this man has short blonde hair and bright blue eyes, and you have a shaved head and pale blue eyes, but the face is quite similar. If you were to put on a wig and some contacts, you could be the man at the park."

"Now that is just plain stupid." James said. He could not believe the fact that he had become the focus of the detective in this way. "Why on earth would I have called up the police and told them that I had seen the suspect, if I was the suspect?"

"As we have discussed, criminals do not always behave in manner that follows conventional logic." Sweeny answered. "Don't worry, I am not going to haul you off and accuse you of murder. Not yet anyway. I am only making a point. You said that the man looked a lot like you. I say you look a lot like the man we are after. Perhaps the three of you are all just very similar in appearance."

"But I told you that he admitted he was the one that did it." James insisted.

"And I believe that he did. I still say he may have only done this to make you worry about what would happen to you if you did not give him his money back." Sweeny said calmly. "This, of course, brings us full circle back to verifying your income. Why don't you just give me a list of your clients and I will check with them to make sure that you are, in fact, a business consultant."

"Because I can't think of any to give you." James knew how lame that sounded. "I don't know why, but ever since he asked me to provide a list earlier, I have not been able to think of who my clients are. I know it sounds crazy, but it is like he put some sort of haze over my mind."

"I tell you what, Mr. Harper. I will run your name through every company I can think of and see if they can verify your claims. If even one company says that they remember your services, then I will be satisfied and take a serious look at tracking this guy down. If nobody knows who you are, I will need to speak to you again. By then, hopefully you will have a list ready." Sweeny said.

"What about my girlfriend and me until then?" James asked. "I told you that he threatened to take away everything that was important to me. Can't you give us some sort of protection?"

"Mr. Harper, I know that, in the movies, people have protection thrown at them at the drop of a hat. In the real world, we can't go around throwing away our resources and man power on every person that has been intimidated by someone else. First we have to verify you as a credible witness, and then we can talk about protection." Sweeny said.

"What if he comes for us before that?" James asked.

"We work fast James." Sweeny said, standing up. "I believe that I have gotten all the information that I want from you at this time. If I think of anything else, I will give you a call. In the mean time, I hope you have a nice day."

With that, he turned and left the coffee shop. James felt even more helpless than he did before. He did not think that this strange man that had threatened to kill him would wait around until Sweeny was done verifying James' story. Why couldn't he think of any of the companies that he worked for? All he would have needed was to come up with one name, and he could have had protection. One stupid name.

He thought about Jennifer and began to worry. The crazy man had said that he would take away everything that he held dear. He loved Jennifer the most, and this psychopath would no doubt figure that out. He was not able to contain himself anymore. In state of near panic, he rushed out of the coffee shop and headed for the hospital. He needed to make sure that she was all right.

Chapter 7

Wraith smirked as James rushed out of the coffee shop with a look of urgency on his face. The little punk had called the cops. Wraith had apparently overestimated his opponent. He had thought James was playing this game with confidence, but that idea had just been shot out of the water. He had expected James to follow him out of the coffee shop in an attempt to assault him once they were no longer in a public place. Instead, he had sat in there like a scared little child and waited for the police to come and do his dirty work.

Why the hell had James decided to steal from him if he did not have the balls to take it to the next level. Did he really not know who he was taking money from? That was just plain reckless and stupid. Wraith had to accept that others just might not have the same sort of appreciation for details that he did. If he had chosen to be a thief instead of a paid anarchist, he would have made sure that he knew every little detail about the people he decided to take money from. How else could a person be sure that it was worth the risk?

This was truly disappointing. Wraith had actually hoped for a decent adversary. Breaking James was probably not going to be the challenge that he thought it would be. Well, he might as well squeeze as much fun out of it as he could. It was time to follow the little irritant and see what he valued so that Wraith could take it away from him.

Wraith followed from a distance as James raced to his car. It was a nice car, but he was not sure that James valued it as something precious, but he would take it away nonetheless. People like James tended to view people as precious, not things. However, if you take away a man's means of transportation, they tend to discover just how precious it really was. The car would definitely be one of the first things to go.

James never even looked behind him as he headed straight to the hospital. The man really was ignorant in Wraith's opinion. He was never as aware as he should be. He did not bother to find out who he was taking money from in spite of the fact that he took his name. He did not look around to see if he was being followed while on his way to the car, and now he never checked the traffic behind him to see if he had a tail. Wraith was nearly disgusted with his lack of caution. James was outclassed beyond his comprehension by the predator that now stalked him.

This was almost fun, though. Wraith liked viewing himself as the changeling predator that moved about through the world, taking his prey at will. When you can surface at any time to take whatever you wanted, it was fun to play with your target first. What fun is there in merely popping up and devouring the innocent when they are not aware of your presence? It is much better to let them know that you are after them and then watch as they fruitlessly try to escape. You can feel and feed off of their fear and panic.

James parked at the northwest entrance of the hospital and rushed inside. Wraith parked a few spaces over and followed him in. He felt the urge to laugh as he easily tracked his quarry without feeling the need to avoid detection. James would eventually need to have it

shown to him that he had led Wraith straight to a target, but first Wraith needed to know who exactly the target was.

He did not need to wait long. James hurried up to a nurse's station and began to speak to an incredibly attractive red head. Wraith was nearly paralyzed by her beauty. Scrubs are not the most flattering form of clothing on anybody, but this woman stood out as a true beauty in them. Wraith clutched at his chest as the woman came around the desk and embraced James in a tender and caring manner. She was worried about him. She could see that he was scared and she wanted to comfort him.

Wraith slumped his back against the nearest wall as he watched. He felt as if his heart was breaking just to look at her display of affection for his victim. It wasn't fair. He did not know why or how, but he loved her. He wanted to have her more than anything. How could this unworthy little copy cat get someone so lovely? For the first time in his life, Wraith started to doubt himself. Could he really take her? Could he kill the only woman he had ever felt love for?

The answer came quickly to him. He had to kill her. He had to punish her for causing such strong emotions over him. Nobody was allowed to affect him as deeply as she had simply by her appearance and grace. He would not allow that to pass. She needed to die, but he knew it would be hard to do it directly without allowing her to affect him again. He would let Vixen do it. She would want to after he told her about his feelings for the woman. She would hate the nurse for stealing the affection of the man she loved.

Yes, Vixen would be perfect for the job. He would send her out to the task by herself so that he would know the matter would be out of his hands. Vixen would show no mercy. She would make her suffer as much agony as could be enforced before her life was ended. Later she would tell him every detail as he beat her for killing his love.

He was brought out of this line of thought by his need to discover the woman's identity. He moved closer to where James stood talking to her. He was insisting that she needed to come with him. He told her that she was in danger, but the police would not offer protection. She was not being cooperative, insisting that she could not leave in the middle of her shift. She told him that she would see him later at home. So they lived together. Wraith peeked around James' shoulder to read her name tag.

"Jennifer." He whispered in James' ear. James whipped his head around to see who had whispered to him and his face went pale. Wraith smiled an evil smile at James and winked. Without a word, James grabbed Jennifer and ran down the hallway.

"James, what are you doing?" She asked as she was tugged along. They rounded a corner into another hallway, and James pressed his back against the wall.

"He is here." James answered. "Didn't you see him? He came up right behind me."

"Who?" Jennifer asked.

"The man that is trying to kill me. The man that killed those men at the golf course." He answered.

"I didn't see anybody." She said. James peaked around the corner to see if they were being followed. The man had disappeared.

"He's gone." James said. "We need to call the police."

"James, what is going on?" Jennifer asked.

"I told you, we are in danger." James said. "The man that killed those men at the golf course thinks I stole from him and he said he is going to kill me. He said that before he kills me, he is going to take away everything that is precious to me. You are more precious than anything, so he is going to come after you. We need to call the police and get you some protection."

"What does he look like?" She asked as they walked down the hall. She was beginning to feel frightened. She had been worried about him after he had spoken to her about the darkness, but now she was really getting scared. She had never seen James act this way.

"He looks a lot like me." James answered. "I think he even has his head shaved. I think he wears wigs to change his appearance."

"I didn't see anybody that looked like you." She said.

"That is because you were looking at me." James said. "He came right up behind me and whispered your name in my ear. That was when I grabbed you and ran."

"Are you feeling okay?" Jennifer asked.

"As okay as a man whose life has been threatened can feel." James said. "Look, I am not crazy, okay? He came up right behind me and spoke in my ear. You might not have seen him, but he was there."

"I believe you, James, but you have to understand that this is quite a shock to me." She said. She had not meant for it to sound like she had been questioning his sanity. The truth of the matter, however, was that she was concerned about his stability. His eyes were darting around wildly and he was not making much sense. Whatever had happened to him had brought out a whole new side of the man that she had never seen before. She still loved him and would stand by his side, but she was concerned.

James went to the nearest phone and dialled the police. He was still looking around for any sign of the killer when the phone was answered. He really did not know how he was going to explain this to a man that already seemed to doubt him, but he had to try.

"I need to speak to Detective Sweeny." He said.

Chapter 8

Wraith looked at Vixen as they drove in her little Honda Civic. They were out in the country west of town. There was no real reason for the drive, other than to get out of town for a little while. Sometimes he liked to get out of the hustle and bustle of the growing city in order to get some space from the rest of society. In spite of how good he was at faking it, he was still very anti-social. He liked to be able to separate himself and relax. He really felt the need for it after seeing Jennifer. She had moved him in a very disturbing way.

He did not know how she had affected him so strongly, but it had rocked him to his core. He needed to hurt her for that. No, he needed Vixen to hurt her for that. He still did not trust himself to get the task done without wavering. At least he knew that he could rely on Vixen. Women had mostly been an unreliable source of betrayal for him. Not Vixen.

He had never been able to have a normal relationship with a female. The closest he had ever come to that was Vixen, and he doubted that anybody would be so bold as to call that normal. Ever since his mother had betrayed him, he had been suspicious of girls as he grew up. It did not help that he was so shy.

Whenever he had been around members of the opposite sex, he had felt like they were judging him, mocking him, and generally looking down on him. He had viewed any girl that was nice to him with suspicion. It was clear that they were trying to set him up for something. Yes, girls were nothing more than a source of pure humiliation.

He had been sixteen the first time he had sex with one of them. She had been a cute girl one year younger than him with braces and freckles. They had been study partners in their high school biology class and he had let his guard down. When he was studying at her house, she had kissed him. One thing led to another and they had ended up naked in bed.

To call it sex might actually have been less than accurate. Wraith had gotten too excited and blown his load upon entry. It was embarrassing. She had laughed at him and told him to get out. The next day at school had been a nightmare. She told everybody that he was a premature ejaculator. Everywhere he went other kids were laughing and pointing at him. Some of the boys would fake having an orgasm in their pants as he walked past. She had ruined him.

It was only a given that she would be the first human that he would kill. He had waited until most of the ribbing and teasing had died down to act. Killing her immediately after his humiliation would have been stupid. Everybody would have pointed the finger right at him. Instead, he had waited until she whored around with her next boy. Apparently he had been more up to the task, for they took a long time at their fornication.

When the boy had left the house, he threw his used condom in the trash can. Wraith had picked it out and entered into the house. Her parents were always gone on one trip or another, so he did not worry about them. He went straight into her room where she was laying naked on her stomach, talking on the phone to one of her friends. She was mentioning how good the boy had been.

This had angered Wraith even more than the humiliation that he had already suffered. It seemed that she did not wait for her sex partner to even get home before she was describing the performance to her friends. No wonder word had travelled so fast about his lack of worthiness. He had stepped in and disconnected the phone jack with one hand and produced his knife with the other.

After he had slit her throat and carved the word whore into her stomach, he had shoved the used condom deep into her vagina. He then plugged the phone back into the wall and hit redial. Changing his voice to match that of the boy who had left, Wraith had told her friend that his performance was his business and she had better keep her damn mouth shut or she would be next. Then he had hung up the phone and gone home.

The next day he heard that the girl had been found dead after her friend had gotten worried and called the police. The friend pointed her finger at the boy that the whore had been with and his semen was found inside her. In spite of his pleadings of innocence, he was arrested. Later, since the boy was old enough to be tried as an adult, he received a life sentence for murder. Wraith had loved that. This was just the first time of many that he framed others for murder. It was nice to kill people, but it was even nicer to see others punished for the crime.

From that point on, Wraith had only had sex with women as he raped and killed them. It was the only way he could keep an erection without losing his load in the opening seconds. Normal sex was out of the question for him. Generally, he had preferred porn to actual contact with women. This way he could look at their bodies and masturbate without having to worry about them judging him or talking about his failures to others. When he did have sex, the girls were too busy dying to compare him to anybody else.

Vixen had changed that for him. Sort of. He still needed to cause her pain in order to maintain his arousal, but since she fed on that, there was no problem for either of them. Vixen never compared him to other lovers because she had never had a man satisfy her need for pain like he had. She never laughed at him. She never made fun of him to other people. Vixen was the only loyal woman he had ever known.

That in itself was enough reason to maintain his fascination with her. She was not the norm. She was chaos and change. If she had fit the status quo for women, he would have killed her the night they met. Instead, she had become his one and only confidant. Eventually he would punish her for getting too close to him, but in the mean time he liked to know that he could rely on her.

"I am in love." He said, breaking the silence.

"I love you too." Vixen said from behind the steering wheel. Wraith reached over and backhanded her across the mouth so hard that she nearly lost control of the car.

"I did not say that I was in love with you." He spat out angrily. "I merely said that I am in love, you stupid bitch."

"You don't love me?" She asked, through split lips. Her pain was obvious and he cherished it.

"No, I hate you. I will break you. I want to see you die." He said. "I am in love with the girlfriend of James Harper. She is exquisite, graceful, and elegant. My heart pounds when I see her and I lose my breath. I hate her for it."

"You love her, but you hate her?" Vixen asked.

"Yes, and that means that she needs to die." Wraith answered.

"Good." Vixen said. "I want her to die. Slowly and painfully."

"She will." Wraith said. "But I do not trust my own heart. If I was going to try to kill her, I might cave in and spare her. That cannot happen. That is why I need you to do it. You hate her now; I can feel it. Use your hatred to make her suffer as much as you want and then kill her. Maybe then you will be ready to offer yourself up for me."

"Yes." Vixen said, licking the blood that was beginning to trickle out of her mouth. "Thank you. I will make her suffer worse than anything she could imagine."

"Tell me every detail of it when you are through." Wraith said. "I want to know it all. Then I will punish you for it. I will make you feel all of the hatred and anger that I have for what you will have done."

"So much that I will die?" Vixen asked eagerly.

"Maybe." Wraith said. "We will have to see."

Vixen smiled as she drove. She could not wait to hurt the woman that had taken Wraith's heart. His heart belonged to her and her alone. This dumb Witch would not get away with stealing it from her. Maybe then she would finally be worthy of killing herself for Wraith. Then he would know how much she loved him.

"Stop the car." Wraith said, reaching into the back seat for his rifle. She pulled over and he got out and levelled it at a black horse that stood by itself in a large pasture. He took deliberate aim at the horse's head and fired. Blood and bone flew out the other side of its head as it fell to the ground. Wraith got back into the car and set the gun back where he had taken it from.

"I have always wanted to do that." He said. "Now let's get back to town. We have plans to discuss."

Chapter 9

James sat on the edge of the bed with his face in his hands. He could not believe the way his day was going. First, his life was threatened by a crazed man that bore a striking resemblance to him. Second, the police detective that came out to look into it seemed to view him as more suspicious than the man that wanted to kill him. Third, now Jennifer seemed to think that he was crazy. She had not come out and said so, but it was obvious from her facial expressions that she found his story hard to believe.

That much had been apparent when she had decided to stay and complete her shift at the hospital instead of coming with him to pack for an escape. Detective Sweeny had not helped him in that regard. When he had showed up, he spent more time focusing on James than anything else. He even asked Jennifer if she had been concerned about his mental health recently. Jennifer said that she had not, but even James had caught the shift in her eyes as she said it. If he had seen it, surely Sweeny had caught it as well.

This had prompted the detective to ask her if she had known where he was on the previous Sunday afternoon. James had nearly choked at this question. He knew where the detective was going with this, and he did not like it at all. He felt like he had just become the prime suspect for a crime that he did not commit. Sweeny had scratched his face and looked thoughtful as Jennifer had told him that James had been moving his things into her place.

James had been relieved momentarily when Sweeny said that he wanted to look at the security video taken at the time that James had come in to the hospital. He said that he needed James to point out the man that had been threatening him. This had sparked hope into him. If he could have shown the man, then he would no longer be on the hot seat.

Unfortunately, the killer had managed to avoid detection. He must have noted all of the cameras and been careful to stay clear of their range. When James had suggested this to Sweeny, all the detective had done was grunt and scratch his cheek. James had thought that the best place to show his adversary was when he had spoken into his ear. Once again, this hope had been short lived. The camera that would have shown that was currently out of working order. A technician was expected to repair it later that afternoon. By then, of course, it would be much too late to prove anything.

The detective had once again probed James for the name of a company that he provided consultation too, but he had still been unable to do so. He did not know what had come over him, but this strange sense of amnesia had surfaced at a most inopportune time. He just wished that he could have started the day all over again. Then he would have packed all of his things and insisted that Jennifer take a long vacation with him. Maybe by then the deranged killer would have found somebody else to terrorize.

Instead, here he was, sitting on his bed waiting for the woman he loved to come home, and hoping that nothing bad happened to her on the way. Once she got home, he would try his best to convince her that he was not out of his mind. The problem was that he really had

no idea how he was going to do that. Everything she had seen or heard from him in the last couple of days had indicated otherwise.

He was really beginning to wish that he had not told her about the reason for his hesitancy. The darkness, that hovered at the edge of his mind. How crazy had that sounded? The next day he comes raving into her place of work and insisting that somebody is trying to kill him, but nothing shows up on the security cameras. I must look like a total lunatic to her right now, he thought. What a difference a couple of days could make.

He forced himself to turn his thoughts away from how Jennifer must be viewing him and returned his focus to the real problem. If he did not figure out how to avoid the psychopathic killer, it really would not matter what her opinion was of him. It would be very hard to convince her that he was not crazy if he was dead. Of course if he was dead, she would probably be gone as well. After all, he had been told that everything precious to him would be taken away first.

The strange man had said that by the time he was through, James would be willing to take his own life in order to end the suffering. James knew that all it would take would be to lose Jennifer. She was more precious to him than anything. Life would not be worth living if she was gone. He would be willing to lay down his life in order to spare hers. Maybe he could offer to do just that. He wondered if the psychopath would accept that. He doubted it. A man like that seemed to take pleasure from hurting others. Even if James killed himself right in front of him, he would probably still kill Jennifer just for the fun of it.

As James thought, he began to wonder just how he had known so much about the man from such a short encounter. Sure, he had seen the story about the golf course murders that pointed the way toward crazy behavior, but that did not tell him as much about the man as he seemed to know. It felt as if he knew the kind of drive that his predator had. He even knew that the man viewed himself as a predator.

There had to be an answer to that. Just like there needed to be an answer to the man's remarkable similarity in appearance to him. One could almost make the argument that they were identical twins. The idea seemed preposterous, and yet he could not throw it out. He had been an only child. He could not remember ever being around any other siblings. It had always just been him and his mother.

That sparked an idea in his mind. His father had left when he was just a baby, and he had never had any contact with him. Could it be that he had been separated from his twin when the two parents split up? Did his father take his brother and leave him with his mom? Would his mom really have kept that from him his whole life? All of this seemed like wild conjecture, but it was hard to say it was too crazy to be considered. Everything that had happened to him on this fateful day seemed to be beyond belief.

James remembered leafing through an article on twin studies that had been in one of the medical journals that Jennifer had lying around. It had been about a month ago, but she should still have it. She normally piled the things up in her closet for about a year before she would finally throw them away and start a new stack. She still had ideas of becoming a doctor some day, so she liked to study up on all the latest medical advances.

James went to the closet and found the stack. He could not remember which journal it had been in, but he knew that it would not have been the most recent one. He took it and tossed it aside. After this, he began to leaf through every page of each journal in search of the

article. He did not have to go too far back. The August issue had an article toward the back that focused on twins separated at birth.

He pulled it out and read it again; this time with greater interest. He had remembered that it had said something about the uncanny similarities between twins that had been apart for their entire childhood and then reunited as adults. He found that paragraph with ease. It said that in many cases, the two children would be raised in very different environments, and yet end up having the same mental outlook.

In one case, two girls had been separated at birth due to their mother putting them up for adoption. She was a teenage girl that did not want to have an abortion and yet did not want to take on the burden of raising two children while still being a child herself. One girl was adopted by a family that later had children of their own. She was set aside in favor of their true offspring. It was not surprising that she had issues with depression and feelings of worthlessness. Eventually, her depression led to attempted suicide that landed her in a mental hospital.

It was there that she had met her sister. This girl had been adopted by a well off family that was not capable of producing children on their own. She had been doted on and given everything she ever wanted. Both parents had showered her with love and attention. In spite of this, she had experienced problems with depression and feelings of worthlessness her whole life. Her parents had tried everything they could to help her with this and then been heartbroken when she had tried to kill herself. They had placed her in the same mental institute her sister was in with the hope that she would eventually be cured of her insecurities.

The most amazing part of all was that they had both used the same method of attempted suicide. They had both taken an overdose of sleeping pills while they were home alone. They had hoped that they would simply drift off and never wake up. In both cases, a family member came home unexpectedly and called for help.

It was only after the two of them were together again that they came out of their depression. They lived together as adults and eventually seemed to merge into the same person in two different bodies. They had never been able to feel whole until they were together. It was only in each other's company that they could feel like they had something to live for.

Other studies had supported the fact that separated twins had striking similarities in their lives, despite growing up in very different circumstances. They would have the same emotional issues, get married about the same time, get divorced about the same time, and even have the same total number of marriages. Often they would even have the same sexual hang ups as each other.

The most bizarre case that James found was a study out in California where two college students were accused of copying off of each other. An English professor had been very upset when a young man had handed in a short story that he had written for an assignment that matched that of a female student in the same class. The stories had been exactly the same, word for word, and even had the same misspellings.

When he had confronted them on this, they professed that they had never even spoken to each other before. Doubting the truthfulness of this, the professor had placed them in separate rooms and instructed them to write a different story. Again the assignments were exactly the same. Dumbfounded, he had searched deeper into the matter and found out that

they were actually twins. They had been adopted as well, so their last names had been different which had accounted for the professor not initially realizing that they were related.

This was the first case that had shown a mental connection to that degree. It almost defied belief, but it seemed as though the two of them could almost read each other's mind. Perhaps it was just that the two of them were so mentally similar that they appeared to be telepathic.

This was what James had been searching for. If he was actually the twin of the man that wanted to kill him, it would explain why he seemed to know so much about a man that he really knew so little about. It had also seemed as if he could feel the killer before he had actually felt him before he heard him speak at the hospital.

Of course, the idea of being similar mentally to this monster was not a pleasant thought. He could not imagine himself being capable of the sort of atrocities that his counterpart seemed to enjoy. He certainly could not even fathom the idea of killing people for a living the way his adversary claimed he did. Even the thought of it made James feel sick.

On the other hand, perhaps this explained the darkness that dwelled in his mind. Maybe he had the same sort of psychosis lingering in the back of his own mind that dominated the other man's consciousness. It was possible that he was only a small step away from falling into the same sense of derangement. If this was the case, he not only needed to find a way to stay alive, but also to exercise this darkness forever from his mind.

One thing was certain. If he did, in fact, have a twin, his mother would be sure to know about it. It would be too late in the day to talk to her about it tonight, but he would go and see her in the morning. Surely then he could get the answers he needed. Perhaps if he could learn about the man who wanted to take his life, he would be able to find a way to both save his own life, and convince Detective Sweeny that he was not the man to be focusing on.

The phone rang and interrupted his thought process. James looked at the time. He did not know why, but it seemed as though he was more aware of the time of day than he had ever cared to be before. It was four seventeen. Jennifer would be getting off of work soon. He went over to the phone and soon wished that he had not done so.

"Hello James." An all too familiar voice said. "It seems you felt like you could get some help from the police. Tell me, how did that work out for you?"

"Nobody believes me." James said. "I don't know how you did it, but every camera in the hospital seems to have missed you."

"Of course." Wraith said. "Unlike you, James, I happen to be aware at all times. I would never allow myself to be followed the way that you did, and I certainly would not have let myself be caught on video. Only an idiot like you makes himself so visible. I have to say that I am disappointed in you. I had hoped that you would be a worthy adversary, but it seems you are just another stooge. Oh, well, I guess I will have to squeeze as much fun out of you that I can."

"What is your problem?" James asked. "I have done nothing to you. Why do you feel the need to do this?"

"James, this was kind of cute at first, but now it is becoming annoying." Wraith said, as if lecturing an errant child. "You can stop pretending that you do not know what I am talking about. You were stupid enough to steal from me, and now I am going to kill you. You really should stop wasting your time with the police, though. They cannot help you. Nobody can."

You are doomed and so is your precious Jennifer. Have a nice night. The game starts tomorrow."

With that, Wraith hung up the phone, leaving James feeling distraught. He wished that he had more time to figure out more about this man. He didn't even know the guy's name. He had accused James of stealing his identity, so perhaps he called himself James. That did not feel right, though. For now, this man seemed more like a wraith than an actual man. He seemed to come and go without letting anybody know of his presence other than James. It was as if the man were a ghost. Yes, he would refer to the killer as the wraith, for that was what seemed to fit.

At least he knew that nothing would happen to Jennifer yet. The wraith had said that the game started tomorrow. As much as it sickened James to think of this as a game, he knew that he could not change the wraith's mind. If it was to be a game, he needed to find a way to play by his own rules. The first step would be finding out as much as he could about his intended killer. That meant talking to his mother. He hoped that she would be able to shed some light on the subject.

Chapter 10

Twenty years ago.

"Jimmy, I need you to tell me what you see when you look at this picture." Dr. Waters said, in a soothing voice. He was trying to placate the disturbed little child.

"I see black splotches on a piece of paper." Jimmy replied, after a moment of hesitation. He was only seven years old and had never seen a Rorschach test before. He did not know what the stupid doctor wanted him to see. All he saw was that the doctor had carelessly spilled a bunch of ink on some paper. It was messy, but he liked messy. Too much order and tidiness surrounded him. How could a kid have any fun when he was expected to keep everything so damn clean? If the doctor was messy, maybe he wasn't so bad after all.

"I realize what this is, but I want you to tell me what the shapes of the ink blots look like." Dr. Waters responded. "Some people see pictures when they look at these shapes. Do you see any pictures?"

So it was just a test. Jimmy hated tests. Everybody was always trying to test him. Teachers wanted to know how good he could spell. Gym teachers wanted to know how fast he could run. Swimming instructors wanted to know how long he could stay under water. Now this jerk wanted to know if he saw any pictures when he looked at a piece of paper with ink on it.

"It looks like a puddle of ink." Jimmy said. This was a stupid test.

"Yes, Jimmy, that is because it is a puddle of ink. Does the puddle of ink have a shape that looks like anything else?" Dr. Waters tried again.

Clearly the stupid jerk was not going to give up. Jimmy did not want to take this dumb test all day, so he decided to cooperate. He looked closer at the splotches of ink. They really did look like a puddle. It looked like one big puddle with smaller puddles around it. How could puddles look like anything else?

Then it came to him that maybe the problem was that the ink made the puddle the wrong color. Puddles were not black. They were brown if they had mud in them. Puddles on sidewalks and roads were clear. He had seen a different sort of puddle lately, though. This one had been red and resembled the puddle on the piece of paper better than the other kinds of puddles.

In fact, the more he thought about it, the more the red puddle was nearly identical to what he was looking at right now. A fountain of red pouring onto the ground came into his mind's eye. An initial spurt had left smaller spots on the ground, but most of it had been poured into the big puddle. Small red ripples appeared and seemed to move in slow motion as little red drops impacted its surface. It had been beautiful, almost hypnotic. He had almost forgotten the whole thing, but now this test brought it all back.

"It looks like a puddle of blood from a slit throat." He said, involuntarily licking his lips. He could still taste the blood on the blade of his pocket knife. His mother had taken the knife away from him. She was stupid.

"Okay, good." Dr. Waters said, picking up another piece of paper. "Now tell me what you see in this ink blot."

Good. The stupid doctor had said that it was good. Yes, it had been good. So why was he here if the doctor agreed that puddles of blood were good? He thought this stupid doctor was supposed to cure his 'sickness' even though he didn't think he was sick. He was just having fun. Who cared about what he did to stupid animals anyway?

"It looks like a ghost." Jimmy said. "You know, like a wraith or something."

"A wraith?" Dr. Waters asked.

"Yeah, I read these books called the Lord of the Rings, and there were these dead guys called wraiths in there. That ink splotch looks kind of how I think they would look like. See? There are the arms reaching out to get you." Jimmy said, beaming now.

"Do you like these wraiths?" Dr. Waters asked.

"Yeah, they are really cool." Jimmy said. "I wish I was like them. They can't be killed, and they go around killing people to serve their dark master."

"Jimmy, I am surprised that you have already read those books. They are pretty advanced reading for a kid your age. Maybe that is why you didn't realize that the wraiths are bad guys." Doctor Waters said. Jimmy didn't like being talked down to like this. He had understood the books just fine.

"They weren't bad guys." Jimmy said. "They were just trying to get the ring back. It had been stolen from their master and they were trying to get it back. The bad guys wanted to destroy the ring and ruin everything. They finally did. It was a really stupid ending."

"Jimmy, I think you missed the point." Dr. Waters said. "The dark lord wanted to kill everybody. He was a really bad guy."

"They cut off his hand and stole his ring." Jimmy said. "I would want to kill them too. Have you ever killed anything, Dr. Waters?"

"No, I believe everything has the same right to life as I do." The doctor said.

"You're stupid." Jimmy said.

"That is not polite." Dr. Waters responded.

"But it is true." Jimmy said.

"Why do you think that?" The jerk asked.

"You think that you have a right to live." Jimmy said. "Nothing has a right to live. If you can't stay alive, you don't deserve to live. Weak things should die. That is what science says. When you kill something, you make the world a better place."

"I think you are referring to natural selection. The survival of the fittest. That interpretation is not exactly what Charles Darwin meant. He never said that the death of anything was good." Dr. Waters said. He was talking down to him again.

"Every time something weak dies, there are less weak things in the world. That means that when all the weak things are dead, the whole world is filled with nothing but strong things. Weak is bad; strong is good. The world is better off without weak things." Jimmy said. "If you think that you deserve to live just because you are alive, you are stupid."

"Is that why you like to hurt animals, Jimmy?"

Jimmy was quiet. He did not like this doctor. This doctor was dumb. He was weak. He should die, but Jimmy was not big enough to kill him yet. Why should he answer any more of the stupid questions? He was not sick. The world was sick. It was full of stupid people.

"Jimmy, please answer me. Do you hurt animals because they are weaker than you? Do you kill them to make the world a better place?"

Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up. You are stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid. I want to kill you. I will kill you. You will die. You don't deserve to live. You are weak and stupid. Shut up. This was what Jimmy wanted to say, but he remained silent. He couldn't make the stupid doctor understand.

"Jimmy?"

He wasn't even a real doctor. Jimmy had been to see real doctors before when he had actually been sick. He had run a high fever and the doctor gave him medicine to make him feel better. It had tasted awful, but it had worked. This man did not have medicine. He had a couch. What kind of dumb doctor had a couch and made you look at pictures?

"Jimmy, I need you to answer me."

Why was this stupid doctor still talking? He was weak and he needed to die. He needed to shut up and die. Jimmy did not have a sick brain. He knew what he was talking about. He had read books by smart people. Darwin knew that only strong things deserved to live. Darwin was smart. Dr. Waters was stupid.

"Jimmy, I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

Shut up, shut up, shut up. I hate you. I hate my mom. None of you understand. I haven't done anything wrong. You are all stupid. I hate you all. I will kill you.

"Jimmy, you need to answer me."

"Call me Wraith." Jimmy said at last.

Chapter 11

James parked his Mazda and got out. His mother lived just south of North Avenue. Tucked in behind the Hastings Bookstore, she resided at 2515 Teller Avenue. It was a fairly small house, but it was perfect for her. The only other inhabitant was her cat, Rascal, and the house accommodated the two of them quite nicely.

Recently, there was always one more person in the house, however. This was the hospice nurse, Susan. It always hurt James to see her little blue Toyota parked outside. She would not have been there if his mother had been expected to live for very much longer. Susan was only there to make the end of Gloria Harper's life as comfortable as possible. To James, the presence of Susan was a constant reminder that death was near.

This was not entirely fair to the kindly and plump nurse. She was one of the nicest people that James had ever met. She took great care to make sure that Gloria never had any undue stress in her life. On more than one occasion she had even interfered with James' conversation with his mother in order to make sure that the sick woman got her needed rest. That was why James had not come to see her the previous evening. He had known that Susan would not have allowed it.

He hoped that his questions on this occasion would not cause his mother to fret for fear that Susan would put an end to it before he received satisfactory answers. He walked past Susan's car and up the short sidewalk approach to the front door. Rascal was returning from a jaunt through the neighborhood and greeted him with a demanding meow as they met on the front step.

James regarded the cat coolly. The two of them had a formal understanding of each other at best. Rascal did not like James, and James did not particularly care for the cat. While most cats would purr and rub up against people in their search for attention, Rascal was far more prone to latch his claws and teeth into their legs when they were not looking. It was how he had come upon his name.

Gloria had always joked that Rascal was her attack cat. To James, the little butthead had always just been a nuisance. His demanding meow was not a request for attention, but rather seemed like an order for James to declare his business. James did not feel that he needed the cat's permission to come see his own mother, so he ignored the large grey and white tom and knocked on the door.

Susan came to the door shortly after he knocked and regarded him a lot more warmly than Rascal had. She was wearing an apron, and James could smell bacon and eggs cooking in the background. It was already after ten in the morning, but it seemed that his mother was just now ready for breakfast. She was eating less and less these days, and always waiting longer and longer to start her meals for the day.

"Hello James." Susan said warmly. "It is so nice to see you. I am sure your mother will be delighted to have the company. She has been feeling rather morose lately. Come right in. Are you hungry?"

"No, but thank you." James said. "I ate breakfast a while ago, and I am not ready for lunch."

"Yes, it is late." Susan said. "She did not want to eat when she first got up. I have only now convinced her to put something in her stomach. She is in the living room. Go right on in and I will finish preparing her meal."

"Thanks, Susan." James said and looked down at the cat once more. "By your leave, Rascal."

The cat did not seem to grant him permission to continue on, but he moved into the living room anyway. Rascal glared in his direction, but then he moved into the kitchen in order to see what sort of scraps he could secure from Susan. She was one of the few people that he tolerated because she was constantly supplying him with little goodies to increase the expanse of his large belly.

James went into the living room to where Gloria Harper sat watching television. She had developed a love for daytime soaps, which she had once scorned. She used to say that only housewives with nothing better to do than sit around and get fat liked to follow the stories presented by these shows. She had recently changed her mind. The cancer had taken so much out of her that she had found herself confined to the couch when she was not in bed. As she did not have cable, this had eventually led to her watching soap operas with keen interest.

"Hey, lady." He said. He had called her by the nickname of lady since he was a teenager. He could not remember what had started him on this, but only that it had stuck. She did not find objectionable, but rather viewed his name for her fondly.

"Good morning." She said, her face brightening at the sight of her son. She loved him so much. She had experienced many sorrows in her life, but he had always been a source of joy to her. James was such a good son. "What brings you by today?"

"Well, does a son have need of an excuse to see his mother?" James asked, feigning insult. "The truth is that I need to ask you something. I hope it will not upset you."

"What could you say that would upset me?" She asked.

"I need to know if I ever had a brother." James said.

"You know that you were an only child." Gloria said, but there was something in her eyes that betrayed a sense of alarm.

"I know that I was raised as an only child." James answered. "That does not mean that I am an only child."

"Why not?" She asked, allowing a little anger to seep into her voice. "Do you think I would hide anything from you?"

"I only think you would hide something from me if you thought it would harm me in some way." James said as reassuringly as he could.

"What makes you ask such a ridiculous question anyway?" Gloria demanded.

"I have met somebody recently that has given me cause to wonder about it." James said. He was already afraid that he might upset her with his line of questioning, so he decided to leave the manner of his meeting the individual out of the conversation. He loved his mother and did not want her to be worried about his safety.

"The man bears such strong resemblance to me that I couldn't help but feel like I was looking into a mirror." He told her. "After thinking about it for a while, I started to wonder if

perhaps he was either an older brother or a twin. I know it sounds farfetched, but I wondered if he had been raised by dad, while you brought me up."

"That is absurd. Why on earth would I have allowed two of my sons to have been separated?" She asked. James had noted, however, that the mention of a twin seemed to have had a significant impact on her. She was not telling him everything.

"I have no idea why you would do something like that." James said. "I was only saying that it crossed my mind. Look, I really don't want to upset you, but I need to know. I can't really tell you everything, but I feel it is really important for me to know. You see; he accused me of stealing his identity."

"Yes, I imagine that he would say that." Gloria said, her eyes falling down to the carpet. She seemed to have given up trying to feign ignorance of his questions.

"So you know him?" James asked, feeling his hopes rise. If she could provide just a little insight into who this man was, he might be able to use it against his adversary. "Who is he, mom?"

"The wraith." She said so quietly that James was not sure he had heard right.

"Did you say wraith?" He asked as Susan came in holding a small tray of food.

"I am so sorry." She said, and began to cry.

"Mother?" James pressed. "Who is he? Is he my brother? Is he my twin?"

Gloria did not respond. She was really starting to sob now, and James felt regret for pushing her into this. He never liked to see her cry. To think that he had been responsible for it only made him feel worse.

"James, I think you should leave now." Susan said, giving him a stern look. "It is not good for your mother to be this upset."

James nodded and stood. He wished he had been able to get more out of his mother, but it was clear that pressing the matter would not get him anywhere. He said a quick goodbye and then left the house. He did not see a pair of evil eyes watching him as he got into his car. Feeling more despair than ever, he started the engine and tried to think about what to do next.

Wraith watched James leave the house and wondered why the thief had come to see his mother. Was he really so involved in pretending to be Wraith that he even made trips to see his mom? Or perhaps he was trying to learn more about his intended killer. This seemed far more likely to him. The visit had been short, so Wraith did not think that James had been able to learn much from it.

Still, the idea bothered him that James hoped to gain some sort of leverage over him through his sick mother. Perhaps he could not wait for the cancer to take her after all. He knew that it would be granting her favor to end her suffering, and the thought made him feel sick, but sometimes life is about making compromises. Making up his mind, he went to the front door and knocked.

A fat nurse came to the door and looked at him crossly. Wraith did not appreciate her look of judgment. He would have to punish her for that. What gave this stupid nurse the right to look at him so adversely?

"James, I don't know how you changed your clothes so fast, or why you put on that stupid wig, but you really need to leave. Your mother is very upset right now." Susan said. She was very shocked when he yanked the door open and took her by the throat. He shoved her inside and shut the door behind him.

"Shut your vile mouth." He demanded. "You do not get to speak to me like that, you fat, stupid woman. You are weak. The weak would do well to keep silent when predators are about. Otherwise, they draw too much attention to themselves."

Susan's eyes went wide as she struggled for breath. She did not know why James had changed his look and personality so much. She had never seen him act violently at all, but now she was afraid for her life. She tried to scream, but he was too strong. His hand was locked like a vice around her ample throat.

Wraith backed her into the kitchen and saw that she had left some utensils out from the meal she had just prepared for his mother. Among other things, there were a couple of knives. This was perfect as it meant that he would not have to use his own weapons on the stupid woman.

He slammed her back against the counter and backhanded her with his free hand. The blow had such force that it nearly knocked her unconscious. The hit dazed her so much that she went almost limp in his hands. He took her right arm and slammed it down on the counter, pinning it with one hand while he reached for a knife with the other. He stabbed the blade down into her wrist so hard that the point went all the way through and stuck fast in the top of the counter.

Susan was still alert enough to feel the pain and gasped loudly as he did this. She was rewarded with another blow to the face. She did not know why he was doing this, but she was certain now that she was going to die. She was so afraid that she urinated in her pants. She was too scared to be ashamed as she felt the warm liquid trickle down the inside of her pant legs.

Wraith ground his teeth together as he administered the torture. He always did this when he was in the heat of the moment. All of the old feelings of ecstasy, hatred, and power came flooding in. He was breathing hard as he reached for another knife, but this was not from the exertion. He had actually not pushed himself very hard at all. He bared his teeth as he drove the next knife into her other arm, pinning it to the counter.

The fat woman sagged and cried, her weight threatening to pull her free from her state of confinement. She did not cry loudly, only pitifully. Wraith hated and loved her despair at the same time. He could feel her accepting her fate and giving herself over to him. He put his face up close to hers.

"This is why the weak should remain quiet and hidden when killers stalk the area." He said, and then shoved the handle of a frying pan into her mouth as hard as he could. Her mouth had been mostly shut at the time that he did this and several of her teeth were broken off and shoved inward with the handle. The handle itself pierced through the back of her mouth and into the base of her skull.

She was not quite dead. Not yet anyway. Wraith could have finished her off, but he liked the idea of her taking as much time to die as possible. He licked his lips as he looked at her pitiful form. He might have let her live to provide a witness if she had not been so brazen about speaking to him. He hoped that she was aware of the lesson he had taught her as she passed.

With the nurse taken care of, he proceeded into the living room. His mother had heard a commotion in the kitchen and was looking intently in his direction when he entered. She reeled back in shock at his appearance. She knew why he was here.

"Hello, mother dearest." Wraith said, sitting down next to her. He bathed in the feelings coming out of her. She trembled with his every movement. It was altogether intoxicating. His revenge was coming at long last. He licked his lips. "Mmm, bacon."

Chapter 12

James was sitting down at the kitchen table wondering what the real connection was between him and the wraith when he heard a terrible explosion outside the apartment. Instinctively he knew that it had something to do with the crazed man that stalked him. He rushed to the window and felt his heart sink. Below him, his Mazda was a blazing inferno, wreathed in flame and dying right in front of his eyes.

Shattered glass littered the parking lot from when the explosion sent his windows flying outward in small fragments. Fortunately for the other cars, James had parked far enough away from them that they were not in danger of experiencing the same fate. Another thing that James was grateful for was that it appeared as if nobody had been too close to the car when it blew. He could only imagine the sort of injury that could have been incurred by the flying glass alone.

A large crowd had gathered around his car by the time he rushed out the door and down the stairs. One of the neighbors was already on the phone with emergency dispatch. James was glad that somebody had thought to do that. He had been too shocked by the sight of his car in flames to have realized the need to alert the authorities. Even as he stood there with his eyes transfixed on what had once been a nice car, he doubted how much good it would do to have the authorities come.

His faith in law enforcement had been shaken lately due to his encounters with Detective Sweeny. He almost let out a sarcastic smile as he anticipated being accused in a roundabout way of blowing up his own car. He knew that it seemed crazy, but he felt certain that such a thing was imminent.

"Wow, man, what happened?" Jennifer's neighbor, Frank Stewart, asked.

"I have no idea." James said, still somewhat in shock. "I was upstairs in the kitchen when I heard the explosion. By the time I made it down here, the rest of you were already gathered around. Did anybody see it happen?"

"I don't know." Frank said. "I will ask around for you."

"Thanks.." James said and returned his eyes to the funeral pyre of his car.

It did not take very long for the sound of approaching sirens to fill the air. In no time, a fire truck and several police cars had the place lit up with their flashing lights. While the fire-fighters worked on putting out the blaze, police pushed everybody back and set up a perimeter. Once they felt the immediate danger of onlookers getting hurt was out of the way, the police began to question everybody present about what had happened.

James let them know that he had been in his kitchen at the time and came rushing out to see his car in flames. Frank came forward with a young college girl that said she had been walking toward the apartment to meet her boyfriend when the car exploded, but she couldn't remember seeing anybody around it at the time. An officer took their names and statements and then asked them to sit off to the side in case they needed to be questioned further.

After about half an hour, the officer returned. By this time, James' Mazda was nothing more than a soaked wreck. There was nothing left to really identify what sort of make and model it had originally been. James had watched the efforts of the fire-fighters in a sort of stupor. He had known that they would not be able to do anything to save his car, but secretly he had held onto a foolish hope that once they had put out the flames, there would be enough left intact that he could repair it and use it once more.

"Mr. Harper, I have been told that you are a person of interest in another investigation." The officer said. "I am going to need you to stay here and wait for a detective to come and ask you some more questions about this incident. As for you, Ms. Swanson, you are free to go."

The college girl got up from the sidewalk she had been sitting on and glanced warily at James. It seemed that she did not like the idea of sitting next to someone that was considered a person of interest in any investigation. James couldn't blame her. It had not been all that long ago that he would have shared her sentiments. He had no desire to mingle with those who took up residence on the south side of the law either. Unfortunately, he could not explain to her that he was only being thrown into this other investigation because of the stupidity of a detective with an itchy face.

About fifteen minutes later, a tan sedan pulled up, and Todd Sweeny got out. He looked around the area, spotted James, and headed straight for him. He smiled congenially as he approached. If James had not already been on guard, he might have taken the facial expression of the detective to mean that he was only going to say something about the weather and then move on. James knew better by now though.

"You lead quite an eventful life, Mr. Harper." Sweeny said. "It seems like I am no longer able to go about my day without needing to come and see what sort of trouble you have landed yourself in."

"I have already told you that I didn't land myself in any trouble, detective." James answered. "I am being targeted by some sort of madman that you should be spending your time trying to catch rather than focusing all of your attention on me."

"So you think that this was done by the man that threatened you?" Sweeny asked. It was obvious that he knew the answer to that, but apparently he wanted to hear James say it.

"Yes, of course I do." James said. "Who else would feel the desire to blow up my car? I already told you that he said he would take away everything that I held dear."

"So, you view your car as something precious to you?"

"No. Not really. A car is just a car." James said. "I do, however, need to be able to get around town and travel. From that standpoint, I guess you could say that the function of the car is precious to me."

"Did you happen to see this man anywhere around here?" Sweeny asked.

"No. I was in the apartment when it happened. By the time I got down here, there was a crowd of people, but I did not see him. I think he would have wanted me to see him if he had stuck around." James replied.

"Ok." Detective Sweeny said, closing his notebook. "I just wanted to hear you say it. Sometimes I can hear if there is more to a story than a person is saying when I listen carefully. In your case, there is nothing more. Your story checks out with all of the other

witnesses too. They all said that you came down after the explosion and seemed to be struck with panic and shock."

"So you don't think I blew up my own car? I thought for sure that was where you were going to go with this." James said.

"No, I don't think you would do that." Sweeny said. "I know that I told you yesterday that criminals sometimes do strange things that defy logic, but in this case I am inclined to believe you. In fact, I guess you could say that this sort of gives you credibility for what you were saying yesterday. If there really is a man out there that wants to make you suffer, it is within reason that he would want to destroy your car."

"Thank you." James said, somewhat sarcastically. He was relieved to hear that the detective was finally taking him seriously, but he was still frustrated that it had taken this long. "By the way, I have more to tell you about the strange man that wants to kill me."

"Oh?" Sweeny asked, reaching for his notebook again. "What would that be?"

"I think he is related to me somehow. Maybe even twin." James answered.

"How did you come by this idea?" Sweeny asked. "Surely you would have recognized the man yesterday if he was a relative."

"I know it sounds crazy, but the thought occurred to me last night, so I went to ask my mom about it this morning. She has cancer, so I tried not to upset her by telling her all of the details, but even asking her about a brother set her off. She said something about a wraith and then started crying. That was when her hospice nurse kicked me out for upsetting her too much." James answered.

"So you think that she knows more about this guy, let's call him the wraith for now, than she is telling you?" Sweeny asked.

"Yes, I do." James said. "I wanted to press a little more, but I felt guilty."

"Would you mind if I asked her some questions?" Sweeny asked. "She might be more inclined to answer me if I let her know that you could be in danger. Keep in mind that having a police detective asking her about a possible twin may just upset her more than you ever could."

"Actually, I think it would be better if you were the one to ask." James said, feeling guilty for involving his mother like this. She certainly did not need the stress. "As difficult as it might be for her, you could probably think of better questions to ask. You know, being a detective and all."

James gave Sweeny the address and told him the best times to talk to her. Sweeny thanked him and returned to his car. He thought about the explosion some more, and then made a call. James may have relaxed into thinking that he was no longer a person of interest, but Sweeny was not ready to write him off just yet. Something told him that he needed to be paying extra close attention to Mr. Harper. He scratched at the side of his face as he thought about this, and then he turned the key in the ignition and drove off.

Chapter 13

Detective George Anderson sat outside of James' apartment. He had heard that Todd Sweeny had suggested that he place an officer in constant observation of James Harper in relation to the golf course killings and had been very nearly enraged. He hated how it seemed like Sweeny was always trying to move in on his cases. Sure the guy was good, but he really needed to give it a break from time to time. He was so obsessive about solving crime that he often made the other detectives feel alienated. Anderson thought that he really needed to get a life outside of homicide.

When he had been told of Sweeny's 'suggestion', he had known that if he did not take care of it, then Sweeny would. He thought that Sweeny had already butted into his investigation too much already, so he decided to see to it personally. He assigned a number of officers to watch him in shifts, but he had decided to take the first one. If Sweeny was so interested in Mr. Harper, than surely he was a person of significance. That meant that Anderson wanted to set his own eyes on the man.

The last thing he wanted was for Sweeny to be able to solve another one of his cases for him. It was really starting to make him look bad. He really needed to be able to solve his own case. If that meant checking out a guy that Sweeny had listed as a person of interest, then so be it. He really hated even giving in to his insecurities like this, but he really felt like he was up against a wall on this one.

Movement outside of his car brought him out of his miserable mood. A man was walking past his parked car and walking toward the apartment complex. Anderson had to do a double take. James Harper had not left the apartment, and yet here was a man that matched his photograph nearly perfectly. The photo that had been taken by hospital security video showed a man that had a smoothly shaved head, but this guy had a red pony tail coming out of a baseball cap. He also had a thin moustache on his face, while James had no facial hair other than eyebrows and lashes.

In spite of the differences, Anderson was certain of the fact that he was looking and James Harper. He had no idea how James had managed to get out of the apartment without being seen, but clearly he had been out and about. He was also wearing a disguise, so Anderson began to suspect that Sweeny had been right to list him as a person of interest. An innocent man would not feel the need to wear a disguise.

The man walked past the car and looked up at the apartments. He just stood there for a long time without taking his sight off of the upper apartment where James resided. Anderson did not know why he was looking so intently at his own place of residence, but the behavior was certainly strange. After a while, he finally turned and walked back the way he had come. Anderson did his best to look like he was reading a book as James walked past his car once more.

When the suspect had moved beyond the detective's car, Anderson looked up from the book and watched as he moved up to a car parked across the street. He got into it and pulled

out into traffic. Not sure of why he had come back to his place only to look at it and then drive off again, Anderson decided to follow him. He pulled out into traffic a few cars behind so as to avoid detection. He briefly thought about making a call on the radio, but he decided against it. He liked the idea of solving this case all on his own. Making a call might bring Sweeny and that was not acceptable.

Wraith kept a constant eye on the plain clothes policeman that followed behind him. He had seen him and knew what he was doing from the moment he had pulled up outside of James' apartment. Originally he had thought that it would be fun to visit James for a little sit down conversation, but then he had decided that it would be much more fun to toy with the detective. This was only as long as the detective following him continued to play by Wraith's rules, though. So far, he had behaved perfectly. The man had never made any attempt to put the radio or a phone up to his lips.

Wraith drove to Vixen's as he observed the detective. If the man continued to display the desire to be the lone hero, he would lead him right up to her front door. Then the play time would really start. He reached for his cell phone and made a quick call to her so that she would be ready when they arrived. He smiled a shark's smile as he got off the phone. She had been more than eager to play along. He was glad to have someone to share moments like these with. That did not mean that he would change his mind about having her offer herself to him, but he would enjoy her for the time being.

He pulled up outside of Vixen's house and went inside. A quick and discrete backwards glance affirmed that the detective was getting out of his car without making a call for backup. Perfect. The idiot was clearly trying to be a rogue cowboy. The problem was that he obviously thought he was following the sheep like James and not a real predator. The man was blindly following Wraith to his own slaughter and he had no idea of how much danger he was in.

Anderson got out of his car and followed James from a distance to the front door of a small brick house. He could tell that it had a basement and made a mental note to check there if he could not find James right away. He knocked on the door and had to wait a few minutes before an answer came. When the door opened, he nearly fell over with shock.

A young attractive woman stood in the open doorway with pale skin and black hair. On her lips was a bright splash of red lipstick. She wore fake red horns on her head and red high heeled shoes on her feet. Other than this she wore nothing at all. Aside from some weird scars on her body, she looked as if she could be a cover model. In her left hand, she held a red trident. The total image put him at a loss for words and stirred his loins.

Anderson was a lonely man. He was slightly short, and a little overweight. On top of this, he truly had a face that only a mover could love. The only women who were ever willing to be naked with him were the kind that he couldn't stand to look at. Therefore, the only time he saw women as attractive as this woman that stood nude before him was when he looked into pornographic magazines. This was quite often as his physical appearance had naturally led to an addiction to that sort of material. He tried to speak, but he was unable to get his mouth to function.

"Hi." She said in a silky voice. "I was working on my Halloween costume. Do you think you could help me?"

"I...I...I am looking for someone." He stammered.

"Yeah, well so am I." She said winking at him and then turning and walking away slowly. She left the door open to let him watch as she slowly wiggled her backside back and forth. She reached back with her right hand and beckoned him to follow with her index finger. "And it seems as if I have found him."

"W...w... wait a minute m...mm...ma'am." Anderson said, still stumbling over his tongue. "I need to ask you some questions."

"So ask them." She said, turning her head slightly and winking at him over her shoulder. Then she started running her hands over her exposed body in slow caresses. "Oh, I am so horny. Are you going to come help me with this, or do I have to take care of it myself?"

Anderson couldn't even try to hide his arousal. He followed her inside as if he was in a trance. He could not believe that this was happening. This sort of thing only happened in fantasies. There was no way that he could have lucked into having someone this amazing be interested in somebody like him. He knew that he needed to focus on the case, but his physical needs were winning out over his common sense. Before he knew it, he had moved right in behind her and placed his hands around her waist.

Vixen smiled as she moved his hands up to her breasts. She loved his eager clumsiness. Wraith had said that he looked as if he was desperately lonely, and now it was apparent that he had been correct. She kept moving as she let his hands explore her body. She went to the steps leading down into the basement and began her descent. The idiot kept his hands moving as he babbled some nonsense about not believing his luck. She cooed at him as he did this, but inwardly she laughed. He was about to find out that things that seem to be too good to be true usually are.

Once they reached the bottom steps of the basement; she took total control of him. She backed the detective up against a table in the middle of the otherwise Spartan room. She undressed him with her teeth as he moaned with pleasure and need. When he was as exposed as she was, she pushed him up onto the table and climbed up on top of him.

Anderson was in total heaven as this gorgeous creature mounted him and began to thrust back and forth. He could not believe the feeling of pure ecstasy. He had never thought that he could have an experience like this. He knew that he should be focusing on the case, but he couldn't help himself. He figured that even if his fun time meant that James would get away, it wouldn't be too disastrous. He was sure that Sweeny would solve the case anyway. At least this way he got to have a little fun before Sweeny outshined him.

Unfortunately for Anderson, he did not see that Wraith had slipped into a surgical outfit and was coming up behind him with a scalpel in his hand. Anderson barely recognized that he was in danger before his throat was slit. Blood flowed freely from his wound and he tried to raise his hands to stop it, but Vixen had them pinned down. He felt the strength leaving his body and he was not able to fight free of her grasp. He saw darkness moving in and was barely aware of the scalpel slicing into his abdomen even as Vixen continued to grind her hips back and forth.

Chapter 14

Detective Sweeny parked his car outside of James' mother's house and got out. He was not sure if this visit would shed any light on the subject or not. As far as he was concerned, James was not yet in the clear. Sure, it seemed crazy for him to have blown up his own car, so that had most likely been done by somebody else. On the other hand, criminals were known to have done strange things in the past. It was impossible to rule anything out at this point. Since James could potentially still be considered a loony tune, taking a tip from him might not be the most lucrative thing to do.

Still, there was something about talking to James' mom that appealed to him. The more he thought about it, the more he began to get that familiar itch on the side of his face. He had a strange feeling that something would be revealed by a visit to see her. Sweeny scratched in his usual absent minded manner as he walked up to the front door and knocked.

The door was slightly ajar and moved away from his hand as he knocked. He didn't know if he should take that as a bad sign or not. It was possible that the nurse James had mentioned had been going in and out through the door and had simply forgotten to make sure that it shut. He turned and looked over his shoulder. The car that James had said the nurse drove was still parked along the sidewalk so she must still be here with his mother.

No sound came from within the home in response to his knock, so he rang the door bell instead. Still no sound of stirring came from inside. A chill ran through Sweeny as he waited. He tried to tell himself that he was simply being paranoid that his inclination to think of everything involving foul play came from too much time spent investigating murders. At the same time, however, it did not seem likely that a nurse as attentive as James had described would be taking a nap while she was supposed to be watching his mom.

He pushed the door a little further and called inside. There was still no response and Sweeny began to worry. He reached into his jacket and withdrew his handgun from his shoulder holster. Calling inside the house once more and announcing that he had a gun drawn still brought no answer. He kept his eyes peering inside as he called the office on his cell phone. He said that he needed a warrant and some backup.

While he was waiting, he decided to go ahead and have a look inside. He was afraid of what he might find, but he doubted he would encounter any danger to himself. He knew that stepping into the house before the warrant arrived was not really legal, but he just had to know if his suspicions were correct. Keeping the gun held out in front of him, he stepped into the house and moved forward with caution. The smell of death was overpowering and he was glad that he did not have a full stomach. His eyes darted back and forth, searching for either an outstanding clue or the sign of an aggressor.

After the entryway, he saw that he could either continue into the living room, or turn right into the kitchen. An initial glance in the living room showed him nothing, so he turned and pointed the gun into the kitchen. He nearly dropped his weapon at the sight that greeted him. A fat woman was slumped on her knees with her arms pinned to the counter behind her

with knives. A frying pan hung out of her mouth by the handle. Her eyes were closed, but Sweeny doubted very much that she was merely sleeping. He had been around death on many occasions and he knew that this woman was definitely dead.

Just to validate what he already knew, he moved up next to her and knelt down. Keeping one hand on the gun, he reached out his right hand and felt for a pulse. He was not surprised at all to find that she did not have one. Even if he had not known from her appearance, the smell would have told him that she was no longer among the living. It was not just that she had emptied her bladder and bowels, which was rank in its own right, but the process of decay, had already started its slow advance.

This must have been the nurse. James had described her as being overweight. It was hard to imagine her as the cross, yet caring woman that James had told him about. This woman looked pitiful and desperate. Sweeny could only imagine what had run through her mind as she had been overcome by what was obviously a psychopathic killer. The bruises on her neck showed that there had been a struggle at the beginning. Sweeny closed his eyes and forced himself to move on. Sometimes he found himself feeling the same sort of feelings that he thought the victims must have experienced.

There was no point in lingering here as she was beyond help. Since she had obviously been dead for a while, Sweeny did not have much hope of finding James' mother in a better state. He did not believe for a single second that the killer had only come here to hurt the nurse. In fact, the nurse was probably only a victim of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. If she had not been here taking care of the sick woman, she probably would have lived a long and happy life.

Leaving the kitchen, he returned to the entryway and then turned into the living room. It was early evening and the living room was too dark for Sweeny to readily see anything too outstanding at first glance. At second glance, he realized that something seemed to be out of place on the far wall. He wanted to keep his distance until he was sure of what it was, so he risked turning the light on in order to see clearly. He knew that once the other officers arrived with a warrant, every light in the house would be on, but for the moment he was still not legally supposed to be in the house.

Once the light was on, he had to cock his head and look at the far wall for a moment while he ascertained what it was what he was looking at. When he did recognize what it was and why it was out of place, he nearly let his jaw drop in shock. On the other side of the living room, three-quarters of the way up the wall, two legs were protruding outward. They both stuck straight out as if they were mounted by a trophy hunter. The difference was that they were not mounted to a plaque, but rather it looked as though they had been shoved through the drywall from the other side.

Sweeny was not sure that he wanted to go into the adjoining room, but he knew that he had to. He slowly walked across the living room and paused before entering the bedroom on the other side. He had been involved in a large number of homicide cases, but he had never had to chase after somebody that seemed to enjoy killing as much as this particular individual. He had seen the men shortly after they had been found in the golf course bathroom, and had been shocked at the abuse that had been heaped on the bodies. This guy did not just kill people; he mutilated them. The manner in which the nurse had been displayed

showed the same level of psychosis even though it was evident that she was not really his target.

He took a breath and then stepped into the room. He had not eaten anything for dinner yet, but the sight that met his eyes was still more than his stomach could bear. He ran to the bathroom and purged his stomach acid. He had barely been able to reach the toilet before he threw up. Sweeny knew that this would not sit well with crime scene investigators. They hated it when somebody contaminated a crime scene. He doubted, however, that he would be the only person to lose the contents of their stomach when they saw what waited in the bedroom.

Sweeny gathered himself and forced his stomach to cooperate. He returned to the bedroom to make a better observation of what he assumed was James' mother. When he re-entered the room, he was able to focus, and took in everything in detail. The naked woman hung upside down. She was suspended above the floor due to her legs that had been shoved through the wall. Her hands had been cut off and nailed over her mouth in a hushing manner. Sweeny realized that this had been done post mortem as a sign to those that would find her rather than to keep her quiet while she was being attacked.

Her stomach had been sliced open to let her guts spill out onto the ground below her head. Her intestines were still attached, so they gave the appearance of a rope hanging out of her cavity and ending in a sort of coil on the floor. Her blood had been used to paint a message on the wall around her. To her left was the word deceitful, and on her right was the word whore. Obviously the killer had been very upset with her.

The last disturbing detail was that her eyes had been gouged out and placed on the dresser opposite of where she was hanging. It seemed as if the killer liked the idea of the eyes watching the body in its exposed and violated state. It was like he wanted her to see what had resulted from what he obviously perceived as a betrayal. The whole scene was more than simply disturbing to him and he felt the need to leave the house immediately.

Sweeny almost forgot to shut the light off in the living room in his haste to get outside. He placed another call and said that he had a feeling they were going to need a forensics team to come as well. He was told that the warrant and additional officers were on their way and would be there soon. Sweeny had quit smoking a couple of years ago, but he had always kept a pack in his car just in case he needed it. Without even thinking about it, he went straight to the car and opened his glove box. He put a cigarette in his mouth and shakily raised a match up to light it.

As he stood beside his car in the cold evening air, only one thought came to his mind. He was going to get this sick son of a bitch if it was the last thing he did. In a few minutes, he heard the sound of sirens approaching. The hunt had started, and he was damned if he was let his quarry get away from him.

Chapter 15

James looked down at the broken, eyeless face of his mother, and fought back the wave of emotion that overcame him. He hated to see her like this. She had always been such a strong figure in his life, even she was diagnosed with cancer, and it was hard for him to look at her in this state. He had known on a psychological level that she was not going to live much longer, but he had failed to prepare himself for that eventuality. For it to come sooner than expected, and in such a violent way, meant that he was less ready for this than for anvils to come raining down out of the sky.

Jennifer squeezed his hand as she stood beside him. She knew that he was in an emotional whirlpool, and her heart went out to him. She felt bad for having doubted him when he had come to her at the hospital. It was quite clear to her as she looked down at the woman she had anticipated calling her mother-in-law that he had not been exaggerating anything or making anything up. Whoever could have done this to a sick woman was definitely able to be considered dangerous. It was no wonder that James had tried to get her to flee the hospital with him after he had been threatened.

She cursed herself now for making him feel as if she didn't believe him. She should have known that he would not have just made that up out of the blue. He had always been honest and upfront with her, and now she felt like crap for her actions. After he had come to her and raved like a lunatic about a murderer being after him, she had been intentionally avoiding him. She had taken extra shifts at the hospital so that she came home late and left early. She had even slept on the couch when she got home, instead of crawling into bed and cuddling up next to him.

Jennifer knew that no matter how James had acted on the outside over such things, he was obviously hurt on the inside that she was avoiding him. He was not stupid enough to think that she had suddenly had an increase in workload that happened to coincide with his anxiety attack. Now she wished that she could have taken it all back. She wished that she would have left work with him. She should have taken some time off to help him sort out what was going on.

Unfortunately, there was no going back. She could not change the past no matter how hard she wished that she could. All Jennifer could do now was give him as much support as she could moving on from here. He was really going to need it. She couldn't believe it when she had gotten home late and he told her about his car. That was when she had first realized that he was not making anything up. Shortly after that, the call from the coroner's office came in, and James had sunk to the floor.

She had no idea why anybody would target James for this kind of torture, but it made her sick to think about it. James was one of the nicest people she had ever known. He was not the kind of person that got himself involved with murderers, and he would never dream of stealing from anybody. She did not understand why this creep was playing his twisted game

with James like this. Why was he accusing him of stealing and then making his life a living hell?

Surely James had been asking himself these questions all alone in their apartment while she had purposely stayed away from him. She couldn't believe what a bitch she had been. She should have looked at the sincerity in his eyes, and known that she could believe everything that he said. Now as she looked at him, she felt tears rushing to her eyes, not for the loss of his mother, but for the pain that he was going through. She would not allow him to go through it alone anymore.

James squeezed back and looked at Jennifer. He wondered if she knew how alone he felt right now. He had known that she was intentionally avoiding him and using work as an excuse. He wished that she could have trusted him to tell the truth. Now she seemed to believe him, but that was not really all that astounding. If she didn't believe that he had been targeted by a psychopath after his car had been blown up and his mother had been killed, then she never would.

It felt like the killer had already taken her away from him simply because of the rift that he had formed between them. Not that somebody as deranged as the wraith would count that as an acceptable means of taking away everything that he held dear. There was no doubt that he would eventually come for her as well. James couldn't handle the thought of looking down at Jennifer's body the way that he currently looked down at his mother. He had to find some way to protect her.

He heard the coroner clear his throat and he knew that he couldn't hold off speaking any longer. He had been trying to stall. There was a lump in his throat that seemed to block off any ability to be understood. James was afraid that if he opened his mouth, something indiscernible would come out followed by childlike wailing. This was his mom after all. He swallowed and then tried his best to sound like an adult. Crying for his mommy wouldn't bring her back and he knew it.

"Yes, sir, that is my mother." James said shakily. "That is Gloria Harper."

"Thank you." The coroner said softly. He appeared to be in his early fifties, and by the sound of his voice, he had been forced to do this more times than he cared to remember. He was compassionate, and James appreciated that. There were some people that dealt with death so much that they became callous and insensitive to the feelings of others. Obviously he had not allowed that to happen. "I know that this cannot have been easy for you."

"Not remotely." James replied, suddenly feeling weak in the knees and ill at the same time. "Do you have a bathroom that I can...?"

The rest of the sentence never came out. It was replaced by vomit that spewed out of his mouth as he fell to his knees. The coroner had deftly dodged the spray, having anticipated something like that might occur. This was not his first rodeo, after all. Jennifer dropped to one knee beside James and put an arm around him

James had not been eating well ever since his encounter with the wraith, so everything that he had purged out of his system was stomach bile. This was almost worse than if he had eaten as it burned fiercely as it made its way out of his throat. The bitter, burning taste almost made him heave again, but this time he was able to force the feeling of nausea down.

"I am so sorry, let me clean that up." James muttered, completely embarrassed that he had just done that.

"Don't worry about it." The coroner said. "That is not the first time somebody has lost the contents of their stomach after seeing a dead loved one that passed before their time, and I don't think it will be the last. That is why I have cheap linoleum flooring. It is easy to clean up. I will take care of everything in here. You have done your part, now why don't you step outside of this room and see if the detective needs you for anything?"

James nodded weakly and picked himself up off the ground. He knew that Detective Sweeny was waiting out in the main office. He said that he did not need to see the body again, and would allow James what little privacy he could get as he identified her. James no longer felt squeamish about talking to the detective. It seemed as if he finally had some proof that he was not making this crap up. He hoped that the detective would be able to find this guy before anything else happened.

With Jennifer in a fully supportive role, James made his way back out to where the detective sat waiting. Sweeny looked up and saw the look of misery on the young man's face, and knew the pain that he must have been going through. He did not want to make this any worse than he had to. His heart went out to him in a way that James would probably never know. Sweeny had always made himself feel every bit of pain and anguish for both the victims and their families. Death at the hands of another person was never pretty, especially when it was done by somebody as sick as the criminal behind this.

"Was it your mom?" He asked. Sweeny felt lame for even asking the question that he already knew the answer to, but for the sake of formality, he asked anyway.

"Yes, it was." James croaked. "I can't...I can't believe what he did to her."

"We are going to get him, James. I promise you that he will be punished for what he did to your mother." Sweeny said.

"He did it to stop her from talking." James said. "I wish that I had gotten more out of her. I wish that I had called you about what she said as soon as I left. Maybe you would have been able to get over there before it was too late."

"James, it would be too easy to find a thousand ways to blame yourself for what happened." Sweeny said. "But you need to remember that you are not to blame. It is the psycho alone that is responsible for what happened, and nobody else. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." James said, but it was clear that it was not entirely heartfelt. "Do you need me to answer any questions?"

"No, not tonight." Sweeny answered. "It is late, and you have been through a lot today. Go home and rest. I will contact you tomorrow if I need anything."

James nodded and left the coroner's office with Jennifer. Sweeny watched them go with a heavy heart. This part of the job never got any easier. Still, there was something that didn't sit right with him about the whole thing. Everything revolved around James and he needed to figure out what was going on before anybody else lost their lives. Sweeny scratched the side of his face as he thought about it.

Chapter 16

The next morning, Sweeny glared down at the autopsy report that sat on his desk. It was not that the report itself was the source of his anger. It didn't tell him anything that he did not already know. He could tell that Mrs. Harper had been hung upside down with her legs shoved through the wall while she was still alive, so the bruising on her legs in the report was only to be expected. He was also aware that the cause of death was disembowelment. That much had been obvious to everybody that saw her body before she had been taken down.

The report underneath it did not have any new information for him either. The nurse, Susan, had obviously died after a frying pan handle had been shoved into her mouth with extreme force. The killer was strong. Sweeny had to grant him that. The wounds to her neck and wrists had obviously occurred before she had died. The bruising on her cheek was evidence that she had been hit at least twice in the face before she encountered the handle as well. All of this had been known to Sweeny at his first sight of the bodies. None of it gave him any insight whatsoever.

The report underneath both of these was not from the coroner's office, but it was equally as pointless. It was from the CSI group that had gone out and looked for anything that they could use to find this bastard. Sure, they had found plenty of James' fingerprints, but that was to be expected. He had come out and said that he had been there, and amazingly enough modern science had proved that he was telling the truth about that. What the same modern science could not do, however, was tell him anything about the killer. The only proof they had that he had been there was the two dead bodies that had been transferred to Martin's Mortuary.

Apparently he had the foresight to slip on some gloves before doing any of his dirty work. On top of that, he had also been clever enough to think about the possibility that some of his skin could be under his victims' fingernails. Both women's hands had been thoroughly sterilized after the finger nails were expertly cleaned. Not a single scrap of DNA had been left for analysis. There were not even any hairs that did not belong to either the nurse or Mrs. Harper. The killer had left no smudges, foot prints, or anything.

Sweeny had hoped that maybe even the tray of partially eaten bacon and eggs would have just a little bit of the mad man's saliva, but apparently he had only had an appetite for murder. The only person that had been eating any of that food was the sick woman. Well that and her cat that had been smart enough to get out of the man's way. It had come back and had stolen a few bites of egg before one of the crime scene guys had shooed it away. After that, it had sat at a distance and glared at everybody until someone from animal control arrived to pick it up.

None of this, however, was what really had been the source of Sweeny's malice. What angered him the most was the report that was not on his desk yet. It was the autopsy report for Detective Anderson. Stupid George Anderson. It was shortly after Sweeny had finished

up at the coroner's office; he had received a call from the dispatcher saying that Anderson was missing.

Apparently an officer had showed up outside of the Harper residence in order to relieve Anderson, who had taken the first shift, but the detective was not there. At first Sweeny thought that this was because he had followed James and Jennifer over to the coroner's office. He thought it seemed strange that George would not have come in to see him when he saw that his car was parked outside, but then again Detective Anderson was a strange man.

Anderson had never liked the idea of teamwork. He always seemed to resent it whenever Sweeny got involved in one of his cases. He had accused Sweeny on a number of occasions of being a glory hog that tried to make everybody else look bad. The truth was that Sweeny just wanted to catch bad guys. He would have loved to have help on all of the cases that came his way, but he was rarely offered such assistance, and never did any come from Anderson. So it was not too strange that he preferred to stay in his car and wait for James and Jennifer to leave and continue following them.

What was strange about it was that Anderson would have known that he had a replacement coming. It would have been natural to assume that while he would want to keep Sweeny in the dark, he would have at least had the courtesy to let his replacement know why he would not be at his post. Maybe Anderson just did not think all that naturally, though. Sweeny had told the officer to stay at his post and let him know if Anderson or James Harper showed back up.

About twenty minutes later, the officer called and said that James and his girlfriend had returned to the apartment, but Detective Anderson had not. At this point, Sweeny began to suspect foul play. He told the dispatcher to alert all patrol units to keep an eye out for Anderson's car, and let him know immediately if they were able to find him. It had been shortly after midnight when the call came in.

Sweeny had still been dressed and alert due to the case bothering him, so it did not take him very much time to get over to the south side of the Mesa Mall parking lot. Situated about halfway between Chuck E Cheese and Taco Bell, his car sat with him in the driver's seat. Before Sweeny even got out of his car to talk to the patrolmen, an ambulance pulled into the parking lot without even using its siren or lights and a CSI van pulled in behind it. This was not a good sign, but at least it showed that the officers on patrol had good heads on their shoulders. They had realized the need to call for these other units without having to hear from Sweeny first.

When he had gotten close to the car, he had confronted a very pale looking cop. The young man had told him that he had better be prepared for the worst before letting him pass on. This was all the explanation he had been given. It seemed as though the patrolman was not in much of a talking mood as he walked back toward his car and doubled over. From the vomit near the driver side door, this was not the first time he had done this.

Unfortunately, Sweeny was prepared for the worst. In fact, he had redefined what it meant to find the worst lately. Whoever this man was, he was very 'creative' with his kills. He always seemed to be aware of needing to find the right way to display them after he was done. Sweeny took a deep breath and stepped up to the rolled down window.

In spite of feeling ready for whatever awaited him, Sweeny had felt the need to suppress his gag reflex almost immediately. Sitting at the wheel, a naked Anderson gazed out of empty

eye sockets. His hands were nailed down to the ten and two o'clock positions on the wheel. His hands and his face were the only unmolested parts about him though. If you could call having his eyes gouged out as being unmolested. Of course, compared to the rest of him, his missing eyes were only a slight scratch.

The skin of Anderson's anterior torso had been removed to show his chest and abdominal cavities. Everything had been removed. Anderson no longer had anything left inside of him. His heart and lungs, stomach, kidneys, intestines, and everything else had been placed in the seat beside him. The only things that kept his body upright were the large concrete nails that pinned his shoulders to the car seat.

The Detectives genitals had been removed, but they were not readily apparent among his other displaced organs. His legs had been amputated just above the knee and tossed into the rear window. All of the skin had been removed from on top of his thighs as well. Overall it was one of the most disturbing images that Sweeny had ever seen. Finally, a wave of nausea that could not be ignored had overtaken him and forced him to step away.

Thinking about it now only brought a fresh wave of revulsion and anger. He was mad at both the killer and Detective Sweeny. He did not believe for one second that Anderson had been murdered in his car outside of the apartment. Whoever had killed him had lured him away to someplace private where they were able to do their grotesque dissection of him. If Anderson had decided to follow somebody, he should have called or radioed in. They were dealing with a psychotic murderer after all.

He was also furious with this killer that eluded him. He seemed to be simply toying with the police. It was as if he was so confident in his ability to do as he wished without consequence that he was daring law enforcement to come after him. As far as he knew, CSI had not found anything that was even remotely useful in Anderson's car either. He couldn't help but feel as if he was still one step behind.

Anderson certainly hadn't helped with that. When he had seen the killer, he should have called for backup. Maybe they would have gotten their hands on him if the stupid detective had not been so afraid of accepting help. He was probably so into the idea of bringing the man to justice on his own that he walked right into a trap. Now all he had done was allow the sick bastard to send the rest of them a twisted message. Sweeny just wasn't exactly sure what the message was. He wasn't even certain about the cause of death for Anderson. Hopefully the coroner would be able to figure it out from the autopsy.

One thing that he did know, however, was that Anderson had been watching James' apartment at the time that he had been lured away. This meant that James was still at the center of everything. It was hard to imagine that he was the psychopath that was responsible for all of it, though. He had been genuinely upset to see how his mother had met her end. There was no way that he would have been able to act that well if he had been the one to kill her in such a savage way.

On top of that, he was the one who had told Sweeny that his mother might know something about this man. It would have been truly insane of him to send a detective to the place that he had just admitted to being if there was a gruesome murder to be discovered. Besides that, James had not worn gloves when he had been there, as evidenced by the recent finger prints he had left, whereas the knives that had been used on the nurse only bore her own fingerprints.

In addition to all of the obvious things, James was simply not a hardened killer. Sweeny had been around plenty of them to see the signs. James had none of these, but Sweeny still couldn't dismiss him as being truly innocent either. There was still something about the young man that made his face itch.

No matter what skeletons James had hidden in his closet, what mattered most to Sweeny was that he was the key to finding the killer. The man that was responsible for all of these deaths was obsessed with him. This meant that he needed to remain under constant observation. The next time death would come calling at the apartment; more responsible officers would be watching and would make the call.

Sweeny had already made sure that everybody knew how important it was not to go about making moves on their own. In addition to making this clear, he had also insisted that all shifts were made up of two officers. This would prevent one man from being able to be caught off guard and killed. Sweeny was not about to put up with losing any more police officers to this insanity.

A small man in a blue suit walked up to Sweeny's desk as he wondered what the murderer's next move would be. The man was small in every way. He stood only about five foot three inches tall and was pencil thin. He wore wire rimmed glasses that shielded intense green eyes. Sweeny was intimately familiar with him as the two of them had worked on a number of cases before. It was Miles Hook from the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. He was not at all surprised to see him, what with the unsolved murder of a detective and all.

"Hello Miles, heard about our trouble have you?" He asked.

"Yes I have." Miles said. "It seems that you have a serial killer on the loose. I don't mean to butt in on your territory, but with the murder of Detective Anderson, we just became very interested."

"I welcome the help." Sweeny said, still moody, but happy to know that he was not alone in his endeavor. "As much as I value teamwork, nobody around here seems too inclined to lend a hand."

"I have heard that is because they feel like you move in on their cases too much." Miles said, smiling.

"I'm helpful." Sweeny said.

"Yes, so let me be helpful." Miles said. "The descriptions of how the victims had been displayed had really caught the attention of the FBI. They sent a number of unsolved murders my way that have similar attributes. It seems we have a real Picasso on our hands. One that strikes nationwide."

"Really?" Sweeny asked, perking up a bit. "Let me see what you have."

Chapter 17

James sat down on Jennifer's couch and put his face in his hands. She was sitting right beside him, but he had never felt so alone. Family had never mattered a whole lot to him; it had just been him and his mother while he was growing up. He did not have any cousins or aunts and uncles. His grandparents on his mother's side had died years ago. None of that had ever mattered much to him until today. It was only when he had been one of two people at his mother's funeral service that he had realized how isolated it made him.

Sitting in a small side room at Martin's Mortuary and listening to the preacher talk about God and heaven with only Jennifer beside him had made him feel very small and alone. If only there had been more family in his life. Maybe then the end of his mother's time on earth would not have been such a horrible thing for him. Sure, the circumstances surrounding her death would have been the same. He would have surely still been horrified at the brutality with which she had passed, but maybe having more shoulders to lean on after her cremation would have felt better.

Jennifer had done everything she could do to be supportive in the last couple of days, but their relationship still felt strained. He had a hard time feeling like he could trust her. She had chosen to view him as losing his mind rather than put faith in his story about a psychotic killer. Now she believed him, but it only came after his mother had been savaged by the 'wraith'. He knew that Jennifer really did love him, but it was hard to feel like he could rely on her. He was trying not to make her feel his anger toward her, but it was obvious that she felt it anyway.

This thought alone made him want to lash out. Only a very short time ago the two of them had been so much in love that his proposal was considered a foregone conclusion. After his encounter with the wraith, however, it seemed as if they were strangers to each other. First Jennifer had done everything she could to gain separation from him, and now he found himself giving her the cold shoulder. All because of the wraith.

The fact that he had been left alone for the last couple of days did not help. Nothing new and horrific had occurred. Nothing more had been taken from him, but he knew that the game was not over. James did not know why he had not been put through any more hell this time, but he would take all the relief he could get. Maybe even the wraith had a respect for the need to grieve. James almost laughed at the idea. The wraith clearly had no regard for the feelings of others. Otherwise, he would not do the things he did.

There had to be some other reason for why he had been left alone. Maybe it had something to do with the unmarked police cars that were constantly parked outside his place. Maybe it was only because the insane man was plotting something truly horrible that needed time to set up. Who really knew? Sure, James felt at times as if he could actually read the mad man's mind, but it was only for the kinds of thoughts and feelings that he imagined his counterpart was going through. It was not really like he could understand exactly what the wraith was planning.

James wished that he could read his mind. Maybe then he would understand what the real motivation was. He would also know what his connection was to this man. He knew that the wraith claimed he was stealing from him, but he did not believe this to be the real reason. He did not steal from anybody. Maybe he was being targeted for whatever connection they seemed to share. He wished that he could have gotten more out of his mother. She obviously knew who he had been talking about, but it had shaken her too much to say anything before he had been shooed out of the house.

Maybe the wraith really was his twin brother. Maybe he had found out about James and thought that he should have had James' life. It could be that this was the reason for his assertion that James was also stealing his identity. Or maybe he had suffered from some sort of amnesia. If they really were twins, he might have had his DNA tested and been told that he was James Harper. When he came to claim his life, he had seen James and thought that he was being robbed of both money and an identity.

Maybe James was just reading too much into this. Maybe the only answer was that the man was completely off his rocker. He could not remember where he had heard it, but someone had said that the simplest explanation was usually the correct one. The man that he referred to as the wraith had certainly been on the south side of sanity. It did not seem to be overly out of the question that James had simply managed to have the wrong face at the wrong time. Perhaps this freak had noticed their similarities, found out as much as he could about him, and decided to have some fun with him.

James decided not to focus too much on the reason why he had been targeted too much. He was tired and stressed out too much right now. What he really needed to do was rest. He didn't know how he was going to get any of that, but he needed to try. Maybe the next day things would start to make more sense to him. James hoped his police protectors would stop any evil that might try to sneak up on him as he headed for the bedroom.

Jennifer had sat in silence beside the man that she loved. She did not know what to say to him. How could she say anything that would let him know how incredibly sorry she was for not trusting his word. In the last couple of days, she had been with him for nearly every minute of the day as he went about making the arrangements for his mother's funeral. She had tried to show him in every way that she could that she was always going to be there for him, but it had felt as if it was too late for that. He had not come out and said so, but it had been very apparent that he did not trust her enough anymore to put his head on her shoulder. Maybe he thought that as soon as he tried, she would yank it away from him.

She had sat there on the couch with him, wishing that she knew what to say or how to act, but she felt completely shut out. It was as if they were worlds apart even though they were only inches away from each other. She just wanted to take him and hold him close to her, but he was too distant. He was pulling into himself more and more with each passing second. Jennifer did not know if he would ever let her back into his world or if she would spend an eternity on the outside of the wall that he had built up.

When James stood up and moved to the bedroom, she had simply followed him in. She just needed to be wherever he was right now. Jennifer couldn't explain it even to herself, but she could not allow herself to be separated from him. As it was, she could only do this for the rest of the day. She had been allowed to take a couple of days off of work in order to help him deal with the loss of his mother, but since it was not actually a member of her family, she

did not even get the standard three days off. In the morning, she would have to return to the hospital and get back to work.

When James was only a few steps into the bedroom, he turned and faced Jennifer. He wanted to tell her to leave him alone, give him some space. When he looked at her, however, he was overcome by the love and concern that he saw in her eyes. It was not guilt that he saw.

Until now, he had only seen guilt in her face before now, and it had made him feel angry. She should have felt guilty, but to see it in her face only drove the point home to him that she had betrayed him. That had made him want to get away from her. He was sick of looking at her and seeing the evidence of that betrayal.

This time, however, he was reminded of the overwhelming love he felt for her. She no longer hovered over him because she felt she was duty bound because of her sins in the past, but because she really wanted to be there for him. She loved him. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. He could feel her need for intimacy with him and it was a need that they shared.

Without thinking, he reached out to her and pulled her up against him. For a moment, the two of them just held each other with their foreheads pressed up to one another. Then, ever so gently, James brought his hand up to her neck and pulled her face forward. Their lips embraced passionately. Both of them felt a desperate need for tenderness from the other. Almost in slow motion the two of them fell into bed together.

The love they made was sweet and painful at the same time. Their bodies moved together in harmony, fingers searching and finding intimate places. For Jennifer, it was one of the more beautiful moments of her life, and yet it felt as if her heart were breaking as they bonded. She realized this was because she could no longer imagine life without James. He was everything to her, and she felt like she had been on the brink of losing him forever. When they finally fell apart, Jennifer sobbed softly and clung to James as if he were a life raft in a violent sea.

As for James, he finally felt as if he could relax. He was aware of Jennifer's soft sobs and he could feel her tears as she pressed her face into his neck, but he knew that she was okay. They were okay. As much as their sex had always been terrific in the past, this time had been completely different. It was not so much that they were pleasing each other as it was that they were becoming one with each other. She felt like so much a part of him now that it was impossible for him to think of them as being two separate individuals. For the first time in days, James no longer worried about the wraith. All that really mattered in the whole world was right there in bed with him. The two of them never let go of each other until morning came and it was time to return to the real world

Chapter 18

Seven years ago.

Wraith watched as his target, the good senator from Texas, moved through the hotel lobby and approached the front desk. He felt his pulse jump at the sight of his quarry. He was so excited that he had to fight the urge to jump up from the couch he was sitting on and dispatch the politician right where he stood. Mentally he scolded himself for such a rash impulse and reminded himself that patience and precision were what he needed.

He did not want his career as a professional tool of destruction to end as suddenly as it had started. Only two weeks ago he had been working part time at a movie rental store, barely able to afford his rent, let alone the tools he liked to pick up for his favorite hobby. A man in dark clothes that kept to the shadows had materialized out of nowhere after he had finished slicing up a dancer from the topless bar and offered him a job. This job.

The money had been outstanding, but what had caught Wraith's attention the most was the promise of future work if he did this one correctly. Wraith loved to kill people, and he loved to destroy things. He loved adding to the chaos that ran rampant through the world in every way that he could. The idea of making a living out of doing such things had never even occurred to him in his wildest dreams.

That was why he needed to make sure that he did this job perfectly. The Devoted Brotherhood of Anarchy was willing to pay a lot of money to have him be their little windup soldier with a knife in one hand and a bomb in the other. That was, of course, if he passed the interview process. Killing the senator and making it look like environmentalist activists was his interview. If he did this right, the money and the fun would come pouring in.

At first the thought had seemed strange to Wraith. Whoever was behind this organization seemed to have a lot of wealth and power at their disposal. Wealthy and powerful men usually only want to accumulate more wealth and power. The members of The Devoted Brotherhood of Anarchy, however, seemed to view their wealth and power as a means to an end. They did not care to prolong the status quo, but rather seemed intent on bringing it to its knees. Wraith liked their thinking and wanted to have a long a fruitful relationship with them.

First things first, however. Wraith kept an eye on the senator as he stepped into the elevator and ascended to his floor of the Adams Mark Hotel. He was here as part of a campaign to elect his friend and oil partner to the office of President. Grand Junction was one of the many stops he was making throughout the western states in an attempt to secure the vote of both Republicans and Independents. Wraith was sure that they hoped to pick up a few Democrats' votes as well, but that was not exactly their focus.

Wraith did not care about the politics of it all. As far as he was concerned, neither a Democratic President, nor a Republican one would move the country into the anarchy that he longed for. Executing members of both sides and blaming the extremists for it, however, was a nice move in the right direction. He was glad that he was being allowed to play a role in that. He smiled to himself and returned his eyes to the newspaper he had been pretending to read intently.

There was a piece in it about the floundering economy, but he did not care to read what it had to say. His personal economics were about to receive a major boost. Damn everybody else. As far as he was concerned, a poor economy only opened the door to greater opportunity for anarchy to flourish. Class envy runs rampant when there are a lot more poor individuals than rich ones. No matter what the state of the economy was, however, he had much more pressing matters to concern himself with.

He casually stood up and stretched before heading for the stairs. Wraith deposited the paper in a trash can as he made his way across the lobby. He did not even glance in the direction of the elevators as he walked. He knew which room the senator was staying in, and he had a room on the same floor. His surveillance of the lobby had only been in order to see when the good senator decided to grace the hotel with his presence.

Wraith smiled a shark's smile as he began to ascend the stairs. Soon his hands would be covered in the blood of the most influential person he had ever had the opportunity to murder. He kept his pace even as he made his way upward. He did not want to be out of breath when he reached his floor. After all, the senator would not be alone, and Wraith was going to need to subdue a few secret service agents before he could have his way with the politician.

This was not a big problem for him, but he wanted to be certain that he had plenty of energy for the task. He reached the top floor where both he and the senator were staying. Of course, he was not checked in under his real name, nor was he checked in under the name Wraith. He was checked in under the name Charles Dumont. His face currently matched the photo ID for Mr. Dumont, which included a brown handlebar moustache and short brown hair that greyed slightly at the temples. Wraith covered his pale blue eyes with dark brown contact lenses.

Originally Wraith had entertained a number of clever ways that he thought about using to approach the senator and take care of business. One of them had been to dress the part of a hotel employee offering complimentary room service. Another had actually been to dress up as a maid, but he had quickly thrown that idea out. Wraith was not afraid to cross dress to get the job done, but it just didn't seem practical.

Finally, he decided that the best manner would be to get a room on the same side of the hallway as the senator. He would not use any disguises, nor would he use any real subtlety. Instead, he would use the adjoining doors that all the rooms had to make his way to the senator's room without fear of being seen by the hotel security cameras. This would give him the most amount of time to play without having to worry about the police being called.

Wraith stepped into his room and checked his Berretta that had its barrel threaded for a sound suppressor. He had not used it for anything other than target practice before and he hoped that he would be able to handle it right in a situation like this. He also hoped that the sound suppressor that was currently attached to the barrel would not throw off his aim. He had not been able to have it on his gun while he used it at the firing range. A silencer might

have drawn unwanted attention since he was supposedly practicing for the sake of personal protection.

Now was not the time for self-doubt or hesitation, though, so he simply made sure that the weapon was loaded and the safety was off. As soon as he was certain that quiet bullets would be released from the weapon with lethal intent at his command, he moved up to the door that connected his room to the next. It was time to prove himself. It was time to kill people. It was time for fun.

Wraith liked the idea of kicking in the door and stepping into the next hotel room with his gun at the ready. A dramatic entry like the ones in movies. In all reality, though, he knew that this would only cause a lot of noise and arouse suspicion. Instead of using the noisy route, he pointed the Berretta at the locked doorknob and squeezed the trigger. With a slight cough, the gun bit out at the lock and rendered it useless. He then accessed the room as if it were his own and did a quick survey of the interior.

A man was sitting on the bed watching television and was only now beginning to register that he had a visitor. Wraith brought his gun to bear and sent the man over backwards with a bullet in his head. It was such a silent kill. The man had not even had a chance to cry out before he was permanently silenced. Wraith was almost sad that he did not have more time to play with this victim, but he was aware of higher priorities.

Water was running in the bathroom and he went to the open doorway. He smiled at the sound of a woman humming to herself. Under different circumstances, he would have had a lot of fun with her. He still could have a little bit of fun. She needed to die. He could not have let her get out of the shower and discover her husband or boyfriend dead on the bed. That would simply make for a complicated night for him. Wraith did not like complications.

He yanked the shower curtain back and covered her mouth with his hand before she could scream. She looked to be about forty, but she had a nice body for her age. Clearly she had never had any children as evidenced by the flat stomach and no signs of stretch marks as the soapy water ran over her naked form. She had small breasts with pointy nipples that trembled slightly as she shook with fear. She had been in the act of shaving her vagina and had dropped the razor on the floor of the tub with the task half finished.

Wraith was nearly intoxicated as he took it all in. He licked his lips as he relished the sight of her nakedness as well as the terror in her eyes. He raised the barrel to his lips and gestured for her to remain quiet. After this, he moved the gun to where it pointed at her chest. With the sound suppressor pressed against her body, he trailed his weapon along her slippery wet skin. He moved it over her left breast and then snaked it down to her navel. He let it hesitate there and watched her eyes widen.

Instead of pulling the trigger, he moved the gun again. This time he moved it lower until it was even with her half shaved privates. He smiled from ear to ear as he rotated his wrist and slipped the barrel in between her pale legs and up inside her body. He was so aroused that he nearly came in his pants as he raped her with the gun.

"You like that don't you?" He sneered. "You like the way that feels inside you. You are a filthy whore."

With that, he finally squeezed the trigger three times, each time wiggling the gun a little to let the bullets take different paths through her body. A muffled gasp fought its way through his hand and Wraith trembled with excitement. He kept his hand over her mouth even as she

sank down in the shower due to her legs losing their strength. It was only when her eyes fluttered shut for the last time that he finally took his hand off her mouth. She would not be able to raise alarm.

Wraith pulled the barrel out from her and brought it up to his nose. He inhaled her fragrance deeply and then ran his tongue along the wet barrel. It was very erotic for him. He was still so excited that he could have ravaged her mouth until he exploded. He did not allow time for his luxury. He needed to keep moving. Wraith dried the gun and his hands on the towel and then left the bathroom. He moved to the next connecting door and reloaded as he prepared himself.

This room held the secret service agents that had come with the senator. They would not be so easy to dispatch. They were not helpless victims that had only a scream for defense. Wraith went through the door the same way that he entered this room and performed his quick survey. One agent sat on a twin bed and the other one was in the bathroom.

The man on the bed registered the intruder much faster than the civilian had and his hand was reaching for his shoulder holster at the same time that Wraith took aim at his chest and fired twice. The agent grunted with the impact of the lethal bullets as he went over backwards. He fell to the floor and was only able to gasp once before death took him from the bullet that had pierced his heart.

As soon as Wraith saw the impact of the bullets he switched his attention to the agent in the bathroom. He could not afford to focus on the first man when the second was already moving. Wraith hoped that his shots had been true and took aim at the man that was diving out of the bathroom in search of cover behind one of the twin beds.

Wraith sent two rounds through empty air and the agent landed safely on the floor of the hotel room. Wraith had noticed that the man was not armed, but he had a feeling that there was more on the floor beside the bed than simple cover. He did not want to give the man enough time to access his gun and fire back. He jumped up onto the first bed using the springs to propel himself through the air above the second bed.

As he flew through the air, he saw the agent surfacing with gun at the ready. The secret service man was definitely a pro, but he did not have his gun pointed in the right place. He was aiming at where Wraith had been standing as he dove out of the bathroom. He immediately saw Wraith flying through the air at him, but was not able to adjust his aim before a bullet slammed into his forehead. His head jerked backward and he dropped his gun.

Wraith landed on the edge of the bed and rolled off onto the dead agent. Immediately he rose up and checked on the first man he had shot. Once he was certain that they were both dead, he breathed a sigh of relief. These were the first people he had ever killed that had been armed and capable of defending themselves. He hated to admit it, but he had been nervous to face them.

Once these men were out of the picture, the rest of the job was fairly easy. He gained access to the senator's room and shot him in the head. He was not happy with the amount of violence that his gun had been responsible for, but at least he was finally able to use his knife. He whistled to himself and took his time. Once he was done, he stepped back and admired his work. Maybe he would never be compared with Michelangelo, but he was quite fond of his artwork.

An hour later he was handed a large sum of money and told the most beautiful words he had ever heard: 'Welcome to the Brotherhood'. The next day the senator was found by housekeeping. The valley exploded with the news of the senator's insides being spread out on the floor and arranged to form a large picture of a tree. Underneath this picture was the caption 'oil is murder' written in blood.

Federal agents came pouring into the valley and conducted their investigation, but no killer was ever found. Chaos reigned as environmentalists came under fire from Washington. Democrats and Republicans engaged in political warfare. Fingers were pointed and tempers flared. Before the fire was out, however, Wraith was already over a thousand miles away getting ready for his next assignment. Life was beautiful.

Chapter 19

Detective Sweeny looked across his desk at Special Agent Miles Hook as he set the folder down. He remembered the case. It was a number of years ago, but it had really struck a nerve with him at the time. An unsolved murder with massive implications that took place in his home town. Unfortunately, he had not been able to touch it. It was not a matter for local police, they had been informed. Sweeny and every other dedicated homicide detective had been forced to swallow their pride and stand aside while the FBI swarmed all over the place. The only vindication for Sweeny was that the feds had come up empty handed. At the time, he had gloated over their lack of success, but now he found himself wishing that they hadn't.

"If you had let us local 'slack jawed yokels' get involved in this from the beginning, maybe our friend wouldn't have been able to cause as much destruction as he has." Sweeny said. He almost regretted it, but not quite. It was late and he was grumpy. People were dead and their killer roamed about freely, and now he found out that the little shit had been doing this for years. On top of that, it seemed as if he had gotten his start right under Sweeny's nose without him being able to so much as get coffee for the men investigating it.

"That wasn't my decision." Miles said, his green eyes intensifying with the insult. "I was not yet assigned to the Colorado Bureau of Investigation at the time that this took place. If you want to point fingers, you will have to point them in the direction of Washington. All that matters at this point, however, is that we catch this creep."

"I know." Sweeny said, but before he could follow that with an apology, Miles continued.

"In all honesty, I could have booted you off the case as soon as it was handed to me. This is not your jurisdiction anymore." Miles reminded him. "Unlike former federal agents, though, I recognize the benefit of including local law enforcement when it comes to solving a crime that has taken place in their back yard. So from now on, keep your observations about the past to yourself. None of that is going to help us nail this guy to wall."

"You're right." Sweeny said, letting a long sigh escape. "I didn't mean to offend you, Miles, I just wish that this guy had been caught a long time ago. Anderson was an ass, but he didn't deserve what happened to him. None of this guy's victims have. He is a sick bastard and I want to see him dead."

"Or arrested?" Miles asked, arching an eyebrow out of concern.

"If I have to settle for that." Sweeny answered. "Do you really think a guy like this will just throw up his hands and surrender though?"

"He might, and that is the part that can really grate on guys like us." Miles said. "He might come peacefully if he realizes he has no way out. A man like this is likely to plead and be granted insanity. After a while, he could prove himself to be 'cured' and be returned to society. Just because you and I know that he can never be cured, doesn't stop all the socially liberal people from thinking that he can. They would eventually turn him loose and let us mop up the mess."

"Exactly." Sweeny said. "That is why I would like to make surrender impossible for him. I don't want him to have the chance at reform. He doesn't deserve it. He deserves to die in a way that forces him to feel just as helpless as his victims."

"Careful." Miles cautioned him. "We have to walk a careful line on this. I want him just as bad as you do, but neither of us can go all 'rogue cop' with this guy. If the opportunity arises that we are able to take him out in a legal manner, great. If not, we have to rely on the court system even though we don't have a lot of faith in it."

"Why would we have faith in it?" Sweeny nearly exploded. "They let criminals walk all the time. I damn sure don't want to let this creep slip through the cracks of the 'justice' system."

"Look, even if we can't put a bullet through his head, at least we will know who he is." Miles said. "So even if the justice system lets us down, we will be able to keep tabs on him once he is let go. Right now, though, I don't want to think about what will happen after we catch him. I want to focus on the actual catching part. Can I rely on you to perform your duty without letting personal issues get in the way?"

"Yeah." Sweeny said, finally giving in. "I always put duty first. You can count on me. This guy just makes me so mad."

"He makes a lot of people mad." Miles grinned. "Why should you be so different?"

"Okay, so we know this jackass killed the senator seven years ago and made a pretty picture out of his insides. I have read and re-read this file to exhaustion. What else has the bastard done that makes you think we have the same guy?" Sweeny asked. It was late, but he did not want to go home yet.

"Do you really want me to let you know the rest?" Miles asked. "You have been pouring over this one all day and into the evening. I have a lot more where this came from. At the rate you are moving, you will still be sitting here this time next year."

"Yeah, sorry about that." Sweeny said. "I just focused so hard on this one because it took place right here in Grand Junction. Since I was not allowed to take part in the investigation at the time, I was hoping that I could pick up on something from the report that would clue me in on what this guy's real drive is."

"Did you get anything?" Miles asked.

"Not much." Sweeny admitted. "I may have spent too much time on it. It has been seven years after all. That is a lot of time for a trail to go cold. I do have a hunch about his motivation, though, and I want to see if I can back up my theory by looking at his other attempts at artwork."

"What would that be?" Miles asked, leaning forward.

"I think this guy just might be an anarchist." Sweeny answered. "I don't think he was working with Green Peace when he gutted this senator any more than I think he was representing a homophobic agenda when he killed the golfers. All of his killings that I have seen seem to leave a message, but none of the messages are the same."

"And you think this could be related to anarchy?"

"I don't know yet, but maybe the rest of your information on him will answer that." Sweeny said. "If there are more political messages and implications in his other acts, it would sure point to that. Think about it, why would he have so many different political viewpoints that he would be willing to kill for?"

"Maybe he is really into a lot of causes." Miles suggested half-heartedly.

"I doubt it." Sweeny answered. "I would be willing to bet that, at some point, his killings had messages that contradicted with other ones. I have a feeling that he is more about playing different sides against each other than he is about supporting one cause over another."

"He does something that is really shocking and starts a shooting war between different factions." Miles said, feeling like Sweeny was going somewhere with this. "While the fighting ignites, unity is thrown out the window. Chaos prevails. I think you just might have something here. Maybe the files we have on him will support your theory."

"I hope they do." Sweeny said. "Knowing what motivates a killer is the first step in bringing him down."

"What about his most recent killings, though?" Miles asked. "What were the messages in them? Why was the woman called a deceitful whore? What was the significance of the damage done to Detective Anderson?"

"I don't know yet." Sweeny said with a slight shrug. "But I sure as hell intend to find out."

Chapter 20

Vixen did her best not to let her anger show as she stepped into Cactus Canyon. This was where she had met Wraith and discovered true love. This was where her real life had started and this was the first time she had been back here since she had found the only man for her. This should have been nostalgic for her. Too bad the reason she was here was because of her anger and need to vent properly. She was not here to reminisce. She was here to find a victim.

Wraith had not come by or called for a few days now, and it was really starting to get to her. Sure, she was used to him disappearing for days at a time, but that was usually for one job or another. He was not working right now. Even when he was not working he would leave without explanation for days at a time and beat her when she asked him where he had been. This time was different though. This was the first time he had taken off after professing his love for somebody else.

That was why Vixen was angry. She did not think that he had left town. She thought that he was watching her. Watching that stupid bitch named Jennifer. He didn't seem to be focused on James. James was still alive even though Wraith had said that it turned out he was no real threat after all. He should have just killed the piss ant and gotten it over with. No, he was holding off for some reason and Vixen thought it had something to do with Jennifer.

Maybe he did not want to push it further because he had told James that he would take away everything precious to him before he ended his life. That would mean killing Jennifer. Wraith had told Vixen that she would be able to kill the little bitch when the time came for it, so maybe he had decided to call it all off. Maybe he didn't want his precious little whore getting hurt after all.

Then again, maybe Wraith had decided that he would take Jennifer away from James in a different way altogether. Maybe he had decided to woo her away from James and make her his own. This would be entirely unacceptable. If this was what he had decided then he would be in for quite a surprise. Vixen would not allow another woman to have his affection and live. She would complete her assignment whether he wanted her to or not. He had said that she would be the one to kill Jennifer, and she was not going to make a liar out of him.

Maybe when he found his precious little Jennifer dead Wraith would finally finish what he had started. He had promised to do this too, and he damned sure better not prove to be a liar about it. He had told her on many occasions that he would bring the end of her life, maybe even letting her do it by her own hand after he had pushed her to the brink. He had said that he would break her and this was what she wanted the most out of him.

She smiled at the thought. This very night club was where it had begun for him, but her need for pain had started a long time ago. She remembered with relish the first night her father had come home drunk and full of lust. She had only been thirteen for two weeks at the time, just starting to take the shape of a woman. At the time, she had not known anything of sex, but she learned quickly and pain was the tutor.

If she thought about it hard enough, she could still smell the whiskey on his breath as he told her to keep her mouth shut. She could feel the sting on her face as he slapped her across the lips when she had cried out in pain. She had been a virgin and he had not been gentle. Who could have blamed her for crying out? Her father had blamed her and rewarded her with violence. He had not wanted her to wake up her mother and ruin his fun.

It had not ended the first night. If it had, maybe she would not have turned out the way that she did. It had not been on this first night that she had learned to relish the pain. She had sobbed and bled. He had been every bit as fast as he was gentle, which of course was to say that he had not been fast at all. By the time he had finished and left the room, she had thought she was going to die. She had wanted to die. The pain and humiliation had been overwhelming to her.

She had trembled visibly the next night when he came back for more. He had liked the first taste he got and had decided he needed a second helping. She had been so terrified that she had pissed herself out of fear with his touch. This had done nothing to dampen his lust for her, but it had made him very angry. He had ripped off her panties and shoved them into her mouth as a gag. He told her that if she was going to cover him with her urine then she was going to choke on it herself.

The second night had been just as horrible as the first and the third night was no better. He came to visit her nightly, beating her and having his way with her. It was not until about a month of this treatment that she found she had started to like it. She would get horny just thinking about it. She would wait in anticipation for him to get home from the bar. When he would come stumbling into her room, she would already be naked and waiting.

This did not mean that she cooperated with him. If she was too pliant for him, he would not hurt her and she would not be able to get off as well. She did not like it when he was able to come and she could not. Vixen wanted the pain. She needed the pain. In order to get the pain she craved, therefore, she would always fight him and struggle until he beat her into submission.

She loved how confused and angry he would become, ranting about her waiting for him in the nude and then trying to deny him entry. He told her that she was nothing more than a typical slut. A vixen that lured men in and then acted like she didn't want it. He told her that sluts like her deserved whatever treatment they got. She wholeheartedly agreed with him. She certainly worked hard enough to get what she wanted, and she damn well thought she deserved to get it.

As time went on, though, it had not been enough. By the time she was seventeen, he was no longer able to excite her enough to get her off. This did not sit well with her, so she had tried to get the level of violence raised higher. She had pulled a knife on him and threatened to cut his member off. This had been an outrage to him. He had taken the knife and threatened to kill her. Vixen had loved this. She had let him slice her.

The pain was beautiful. She was climaxing on just the pain alone. She was getting more and more excited. Vixen was really beginning to believe that he was going to kill her and she yearned for it. Being brutally murdered was so exciting to her that she was building up to another climax when her mother had walked in and screamed. She ruined everything. He was not able to stop her from escaping the house and crying out to the neighbors for help. Vixen's

father had not been able to finish what he had started before the neighbors had restrained him and called the police.

Vixen had never forgiven her mother for betraying her like that. Her father had been locked up. She was told that he would never be able to hurt her again. That had been extremely disappointing. After this, she had worked her way from one abusive relationship to another. None of them had been satisfactory, however. None of them had been willing to finish what her father had started. It had only been after she had walked into this very night club and found Wraith that she had discovered a man that could get her off and promised to break and kill her.

This thought brought her back to the here and now. She had wandered back to the bathroom and was checking her makeup. She did not really know why she did this; it just seemed like the pre-programmed thing for women to do. She had just applied her makeup before she left her house, and then came straight here, but she still had acted on compulsion and came to make sure that it was perfect.

Of course, it was. Perfect, that is. Vixen stood back from the mirror and smiled. Years ago she had gotten her inspiration from the burlesque model Dita Von Teese, and the look was nearly perfect. Her black hair was down but pulled back over her shoulders. Her pale skin made the black mascara and bright red lipstick add exclamation points to her elegant face. The tight red dress clung to her exquisite figure as if it were more intent on making love to her than covering her. The bottom of the dress barely extended beyond her ass cheeks and gave way to knee high black leg stockings and red high heels.

With the light skin and revealing clothing, she was exactly the way Wraith had described her the first time he had met her. A cross between a vampire and a hooker. It was the perfect bait for leading an unwary and intoxicated man to his demise. That was the only reason that she was here. She was horny and angry and somewhere among the writhing bodies of the night club was a man that was going to help her with both of those issues. After all, Wraith had done more than simply give her the hope of realizing her greatest fantasy; he had also shown her another way of getting off. Murder.

She left the bathroom and made her way to the dance floor, perfectly wiggling her backside as she went. Vixen could feel hungry eyes making their way up and down her body and following her as she went. She smiled to herself, but did not look back in the direction that the stares came from. She would not go to them; she would make them come to her. Once she was in the middle of the dance floor, she began to move erotically to the music, expertly performing the mating dance of a black widow.

Vixen kept her eyes mostly closed as she swayed her backside and ran her hands up and down her body, but she was intimately aware of men moving toward her. She kept dancing on her own until one of the drinkers had enough courage to step right up behind her and wrap his arms around her waist and begin to rub his body against hers. She did not resist. Instead, she guided his hands on a tour of the outside of her clothing.

He was getting excited and she could feel his arousal as he pressed himself against her backside. She reached one of her hands behind her and delicately toyed with his member. It was not as large as she would have preferred, but she would make do. As he gasped in surprise and pleasure, she leaned her head back and pressed it into his neck. Vixen inhaled

the mixture of sweat, beer, and lust that his body gave off and knew that this was going to be fun.

Without waiting for the song to end, she pushed off of him and walked toward the door. She stuck her hand up above her shoulder and crooked her finger at him, signalling for him to follow. Without looking back, she knew that he was hot on her trail. If he had been of the canine persuasion, he would have had his tongue hanging out with his tail wagging. As it was he probably did have his tongue hanging out. She could feel the glares and envious stares that were sent this man's direction as he obediently followed her swaying backside.

Men were so easy. All she had to do was shake her ass at them and they would do whatever she wanted them to. All except the only real man she had ever known. Wraith would never have followed her as blindly as this pig did. Wraith led and she followed. That was what made him special. That was why she was so in love with him. Not only was he willing to fulfil her fantasies, he insisted on doing so on his terms. Everything was on his terms and he did not give a damn what she or anybody else thought of it.

He was a real man. He took charge. Hell, for that matter, he took whatever he damn well pleased. This reminded her that he may just be taking Jennifer at this very moment. Anger shot back through her. As she walked out the door and toward her car, only one thought registered in her mind. 'Wraith, baby, this one's for you damn it.'

Chapter 21

Miles Hook had gone home for the night, but Sweeny just had not been able to pull himself away from the files. The more he read the more disturbed he became. He knew that there was no way he was going to get much sleep after reading about this psychopath's work, so he just kept plugging away. Miles had cautioned him that he would not be able to do much without a clear head. A clear head is only attained by getting the much needed rest for an exhausted mind, but Sweeny just couldn't stop. The more he learned about this man that James referred to as the wraith, the more upset he grew.

He simply could not handle the thought that somebody this sick and twisted was running loose in his city. He was supposed to be a good homicide detective, and yet one of the most depraved killers of all time was roaming his backyard freely. A lot of people had died by this man's hands, and if Sweeny did not do anything about it, a lot more people would die. Not only would they lose their lives, they would lose them in such a horrendous fashion that Sweeny felt ill just to think about it.

The senator had been one of the lucky ones. Apparently the killer had been more concerned with stealth at the time than putting the politician through as much torment as possible. At least that is what the autopsy report said. The cause of death had been determined to be a bullet fired from a gun fitted with a sound suppressor. The autopsy did not determine that the gun had been fitted with a sound suppressor; it was just that in spite of a number of shots having been fired that night, nobody in the hotel had heard gunfire. That added to the theory that stealth had been of a higher priority than pain. This was most likely because the wraith had wanted to have as much time as he needed to make out the display of the senator's insides.

The other victims generally had not fared nearly so well. In a number of cases, the cause of death had not been readily determined due to the overwhelming number of potential causes. It was as if this man considered himself to be an artist and torture was his medium. There had been people that he had literally ripped apart using ropes and pulleys. There had been people that he had crushed one bone at a time.

The paths that each victim took on their way to death were almost all different, so it took the FBI a long time to assign them all to the same person. Having the advantage of looking at all the files together, Sweeny could see the pattern they had eventually recognized. Every single one of his victims had some sort of message that came with their death. Generally it was a hot button political issue and stirred up a hornet's nest in its wake. This supported Sweeny's theory that the guy was an anarchist, especially since a number of the messages he sent were contradictory to each other.

One death would have an anti-abortion message and another would declare pro-choice. One death would be against gay marriage and another would be a statement about the rights of two people who love each other to exchange vows. One death would declare the need for health care reform and then another would support maintaining the current system. All of the

deaths were ingeniously convincing. The different sides of the issues were instantly fighting with each other and nobody gave thought to the fact that somebody might be in the middle, stirring things up.

The other thing that all the deaths had in common was that they were all excessively morbid. Nobody was merely killed in order to send out these messages. They were all savagely destroyed. The first responders to these scenes often found themselves losing the contents of their stomachs in spite of the fact that they had been around death for a long time. There was death, and then there was what the wraith did to people, both before and after their demise.

This was what had really clued the FBI to contact Miles Hook and get him involved in Sweeny's case. The level of brutality that all of the victims had undergone was part and parcel with the killer they had been pursuing for quite some time. Since it seemed that these killings were of a more personal nature and all centered around one location, which also happened to be where the killer got his start, it seemed as if they had a good chance of finally bringing this man to justice.

The wraith did not realize it, but he had slipped the noose over his own neck when he had decided to target James Harper. He was doing too much killing in one area. In the past, he had struck all over the place with no particular pattern. Now he was keeping himself in one location, and the dragnet was moving in on him. As long as James remained alive, they had a chance of getting their hands on this man.

This raised another issue in Sweeny's mind. James had requested protection, but he had told the young man that this could not just be thrown at him over his word alone. After the recent events, the detective had been thinking about giving him that protection after all, but he had been hesitant. Now he was even more hesitant to do so. He needed to dangle James out like a carrot for the wraith. He had felt that this was a necessary evil before he had known the full scope of the man's deeds. Now that he realized just how big this was, he could not afford to lose this man by taking James off the menu.

The phone rang and jolted Sweeny out of his contemplations. He looked at it, and then at the clock. It was getting late, or rather early. The clock let him know how long he had really been at this. It was seventeen minutes after midnight. A rather strange time to be receiving calls. Sweeny couldn't help but scratch at the side of his face as he picked up the phone.

"Sweeny." He said gruffly. Anybody calling this late at night did not need anything resembling a formality.

"Detective Sweeny, what a delight it is to speak to you." A familiar, yet disturbingly strange voice said sweetly into his ear.

"James?" Sweeny asked. "Why are you calling so late?"

"Ah, I see the imposter has you fooled as well." The voice laughed into the speaker with scorn. "No, I am not James. At least I am not the James that you know. Tell me, what do you know me as? The Thrasher, or something equally as lame?"

"No, we refer to you as the psychopath." Sweeny said, cluing into who he was really talking to. He wished that he could get a trace on the call, but there was nobody to signal for this. He was the only person here damn it. Of course, why would this man be calling if he

was not confident that no trace could be established? "Sometimes we call you the wraith because that is how James described you."

"The wraith?" The voice laughed again. "Now that is truly impressive. It is almost as if your little boy James is telepathic. Just between you and me, that is exactly how I refer to myself. So now, detective, how may Wraith serve you?"

"For starters you can turn yourself in." Sweeny grumbled. This man was toying with him and he knew it. Cocky little shit. "I promise I will only break a few of your bones if you take this option. Otherwise, I cannot promise anything."

"Tut tut. That is hardly what I would call an offer I can't refuse." Wraith said. "I have a different idea. I will continue to kill whoever I please whenever I please, and you will stay out of my way. If you do not take this option, well, I can't promise that I won't end up displaying you in a similar fashion to your buddy Detective Anderson."

"Listen here you son of a bitch, I am going to find you, and when I do I am going to shove my gun halfway down your throat before I pull the trigger." Sweeny spat into the phone. He did not like letting this creep know that he was getting to him, but he could not help it. He forced himself to calm down even though he could hear laughing on the other end of the line. "While I have you on the phone, how about you answer some questions for me?"

"An interrogation? How exciting. Go ahead and ask. I may just humor you with an answer or two." Wraith said while grinning from ear to ear. This was fun.

"I see that you like to send out messages with your victims." Sweeny said carefully. He did not want Wraith to know that the FBI was involved in this as well. "I understand the message you sent out with the deaths of the golfers, and I realize the significance of the hands over James' mother's mouth. She obviously knew something that you did not want him to know. I don't suppose that you would tell me what that was?"

"No."

"I didn't think so." Sweeny said. "What I would like to know, however, was the significance of the way you displayed poor detective Anderson."

"I suppose I can oblige that." Wraith answered. "It just so happens that he died while making love to my girlfriend. I, therefore, had to remove his penis. It would not do to let him keep that after he had it inside of her. His eyes had seen her naked body and therefore needed to be removed as well. His legs had carried him through her front door so they could not remain attached. His hands had touched her body, but I did not remove them simply because they needed to be fixed on the steering wheel in the proper place. He was a member of law enforcement after all. It wouldn't be proper to have a policeman without his hands at ten and two."

"Okay, I can understand all of this." Sweeny said. "I may not agree with your methods, but I suppose there is a certain meaning to it. But none of this answers why you removed his insides and placed them in the car with him."

"Mostly that was just for fun." Wraith said. "You see, I have always wanted to dissect somebody while my girlfriend made love to the corpse. After I was finished, I did not see any point in keeping his innards, so I gave them back. I hope you'll understand that I did not want to take the time to put them back inside him."

"One more thing." Sweeny said. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Talking to me."

"Simple. I wanted to have some fun." Wraith said. "You do not have a shot in hell of stopping me. I have eluded much better men than you. After I hang up, I know that you are going to go insane trying to figure out how you are going to be the one to bring me down. I like that idea. By the way, tell special agent Hook hello for me. Goodnight."

Chapter 22

Wraith

"Shut up." Wraith said without cracking his eyes.

Wraith, we need to talk.

"No, we don't. Shut up."

Wraith, this is important.

"Not to me. Leave me alone." Wraith knew it was pointless to argue, but he was not in the mood to put up with any of Link's crap right now.

Wraith, I want to talk to you.

"And I don't want to talk to you." Wraith answered. "Shut up. Shut up. Shut up."

Wraith, you know that I won't go away. Wake up and talk to me.

"God damn it Link." Wraith said angrily. He opened his eyes and looked in the direction of the motel bathroom. "Is it too much to ask for a little peace and quiet? Why the hell do you think I am here? I am here for some god damned peace and quiet. Now shut the hell up."

Who do you think you are talking to, Wraith? You know I will keep this up until you talk to me. This is important.

"Important to you." Wraith said. "Not to me."

What is important to me is important to you. I am you, remember? Come talk to me.

"Shit." Wraith said and sat up rubbing his temples. Stupid Link. Couldn't the idiot realize that he always showed up at the most inopportune times? Of course, if Wraith had it his way, Link would never show up at all. Screw him, and screw Dr. Waters. Schizophrenia. Pain in the ass was more like it. His head hurt and he was really not in the mood for it.

Wraith, I am waiting.

"Just give me one god damned minute." Wraith said. "You win okay. I am coming. I just need to clear my head for a second."

One thousand one...

"Yeah, yeah, very funny. Hold on. I am coming." Wraith got up from the bed and stormed into the bathroom. It was the only place in this dinky little motel room that had a mirror. It was always easier to do this in front of a mirror. It kept the voice out of his head. He hated having the voice in his head. He turned the light on and peered at his reflection.

It was not him that he was looking at. It was Link. Link was an annoying jackass that shared his mind with him. Usually Link was quiet and let him go about his business. Every once in a while, though, he would surface and make life difficult. Link didn't ever just pop in to say hi and then go. Whenever he showed up, things got very complicated.

"That is better." Link said from the mirror. Projection something, or something projection. That was what Dr. Waters had called it. Whatever it was technically, it made Wraith's head feel better. When Link was in the mirror, it no longer felt like the two of them were cramped together inside his brain.

"You're telling me." Wraith responded. "How the hell do you think I feel to wake up and have you crowding my thoughts? Now what is so important that you had to bother me like this?"

"You are making a mistake in your pursuit of James." Link said. "I told you to leave him alone."

"If you wanted me to leave him alone you never should have tipped me off to the fact that he was stealing from me." Wraith said. "You should have known that I could not let that pass."

"I didn't tell you that so that you would go after him. I told you about him so that you would be able to manage your finances better. Sure, you get paid plenty for your jobs, but when you are supporting both him and yourself, it means that you need to be aware, not only of how much money you have been paid, but also how much you can actually spend." Link answered.

"The simple solution then is to kill the imposter and keep the money for myself." Wraith said. "You have stood by and watched me kill time and time again. Why do you care so much about what happens to James?"

"He is your brother." Link said.

"I don't have a brother." Wraith said.

"Yes you do." Link said. "It is too complicated for me to explain to you, but you do."

"Look, even if you are right, why should that matter to me?" Wraith asked. "Did you forget what I did to mom? You saw that didn't you? You see everything don't you? You never popped up and told me that I needed to stop because she is my dear sweet mother. What makes this any different?"

"I wish I could tell you in a way that you would understand, but I can't." Link said. "The truth is that I am the one who set up the account and makes the regular transfers from your account into his. He doesn't even realize that he is stealing from you. He really believes that he makes the money himself."

"Would you care to run that past me one more time?" Wraith asked.

"No, I would not." Link answered. "This is far more complicated than you can possibly imagine. I can take hold of your body sometimes and you know it. That is how you end up in different places without remembering how you got there. I went in a long time ago and set up the account. It is only that recently some of your purchases have gotten high enough that I thought you should be aware of him. You were never supposed to kill him."

"Why did you do this for him?" Wraith asked. "If I could kill you for this betrayal I would. Instead, I guess dear James is going to suffer. What happened anyway? Did he ask you for it?"

"I already told you that James is not aware of the true source of his income. That is why he was not able to come up with an answer to you when you asked him where he got his money." Link said. "James has his own issues. It seems to come with the territory of being a member of this family. He never asked for the money, but he needed it, so I gave it to him. He is too lost in his own darkness to successfully provide for himself."

"And what is his own darkness?" Wraith asked.

"I am not really sure." Link admitted. "Maybe it is something like what you and I have. It would not really surprise me. But I am not inside his mind. I am in yours."

"If he did not ask you for the money, then how in the hell did you know he needed it? Is this some sort of telepathy or something?" Wraith snorted.

"Something like that."

"You're an idiot." Wraith said. "If it is telepathy then you ought to know what his darkness is. This is stupid and I don't understand why you are trying to protect him. If you tell me one more time that it is too complicated to explain, I swear to god I will break this damn mirror and walk out of here."

Would that really make me go away?

"No, I suppose it wouldn't." Wraith said. "But the answer is still no. I will not leave James alone. He is going to die and nothing you say will stop me."

"Fine." Link said. "But if you are going to do something, you need to do it quickly. Why are you wasting your time here when you could just kill him and move on?"

"Cops." Wraith said. "The heat is on, so I have to lay low for a bit."

"Do you really think it is going to calm down any time soon?" Link asked. "Don't lie to me. Just admit the truth. Why are you holding back?"

"He hasn't suffered enough yet."

"And what is the next step?"

"Jennifer." Wraith said. The name sent a shiver through him.

"Yes, Jennifer has to die." Link said. "She is back at work now. Why haven't you sent Vixen after her there? The cops are watching James. She could slip in and kill Jennifer without any resistance from them."

"The timing isn't right." Wraith said.

"Will it ever be?" Link asked. Wraith hated him for it. "Why do you love her? You hate everybody. You don't even know her. Why is it that you love her?"

"She's...special. She had eyes that pierce my soul. I don't really get it, but she makes me feel...different." Wraith could not believe his loss for words. He had never really wondered why he was in love with her. He just knew that he was. It was like when he looked at her he actually wanted to be a good guy. He wanted her to love him, but he knew that she could never love a bad guy. But he could never be a good guy. That is why she needed to die. She made him feel something he had not felt in a long time. Guilt. Remorse. Shame.

"You love her because she is pure." Link said. "She is the ultimate definition of unattainable to you. That makes you crave her and hate her all at the same time. So why can't you pull the trigger and send Vixen in?"

"I am just not ready for it yet." Wraith said.

"Vixen is." Link said. "What makes you think she has not already acted? You have been avoiding her. She is probably feeling really scorned right now. With normal women, this is a bad thing. With her... well you never know what might happen."

"Has she done something?" Wraith asked, feeling stupid even as he asked it.

"How would I know?" Link said. "Look, I am just telling you that you need to quit sitting on the fence on this one. Either finish the job or walk away. The longer you wait, the more likely Detective Sweeny is to come bursting through that door with his gun drawn. It is not like you to vacillate, and I don't want to get shot for it."

"Fine." Wraith said. "In the end you are all about self preservation aren't you? I will do it, but I am going to do it on my terms."

"Works for me." Link said. "Just keep me alive."

Chapter 23

"I don't know about this one." Sweeny said tiredly as he looked up at Miles from where he crouched near what was left of the most recent murder victim in Grand Junction. "It just doesn't feel right. Something about it seems off. Too random."

"I see a body that has been not only killed, but displayed for us as well." Miles answered, as he frowned while taking in the whole scene. They had just arrived a few minutes after eight in the morning. A student attending Mesa State College had been walking past the tennis courts on their way to an early class when they had seen the victim. Shortly after this, the call went out to Sweeny, who was entirely too sleep deprived. In turn, he passed it along to Agent Hook, and the two of them converged on the murder scene.

Tied to the net in the middle of the tennis court was the naked body of a young male, probably about college age himself. Disturbingly, his penis had been removed just like Anderson's. That was not the cause of death, however. It was quite clear that evisceration was the cause of death for this young man. He had been sliced open. Not as wide as James' mother, but enough for the murderer to get their hands on his intestines. The duct tape over the man's mouth indicated that he had been alive at the time of his intestines being accessed.

Apparently they had been on a mission to see just how long his intestines really were, because they had pulled them out and ran them in horizontal rows along the court. Sweeny had once heard that if you did this, it would cover the entire side of a tennis court, and he saw that this was indeed correct. When he had been told this, he had never really pictured it being done, and now that he saw what it looked like, he really wished he hadn't.

There were no other marks on his body, so it appeared as if he had been tied here while still alive. The cut he had been given was not dramatic enough to have killed him quickly, so he must have been able to feel a lot of pain before he passed away. Sweeny could just imagine the kind of horror that this kid must have felt along with the excruciating pain as his intestines were tugged out of his body. The thought made him nearly vomit all over the scene. If nothing else, the recent murders threatened to turn him into a bulimic.

"Yeah, there is no doubt that this poor guy is displayed for us, but it still doesn't feel like Wraith." Sweeny said. He had informed Miles about his late night conversation with their quarry over the phone before they had come out to see this victim. Now they both readily referred to him by his self-proclaimed title. It seemed as if James had been very accurate in that regard and Sweeny intended to ask him about it.

"How many psychos do you think are running around this city?" Miles asked. "I think we should assume that Wraith had at least some involvement in this unless we are able to prove otherwise."

"You are right, but it doesn't really fit with his pattern." Sweeny said. "Maybe there is a message here with the intestines, but I don't see it. It seems more like simple play time more than anything. I know that Wraith is pretty damn cocky, but I just don't see him being foolish

enough to mess around with somebody for fun when he knows about your involvement in this case. He may be a lot of things, but reckless is not one of them."

"I don't know about that." Miles said. "It sure seems reckless to me for him to have called you last night to taunt you."

"Under normal circumstances I would agree with you." Sweeny acknowledged. "But he called when he knew that I would be the only one there. He also must have known how difficult it would have been for me to trace his call on my own while I talked to him. In addition to that, he seems to be quite resourceful. I have a feeling that he was confident that a trace would not be able to be established anyway."

"You mean he called from a public place?" Miles asked.

"I mean he may have an encrypted phone that we are not able to trace." Sweeny answered. "This really scares me."

"There is not much chance of that." Miles said. "He would have to have some serious connections to be able to get his hands on one of those."

"That is why it scares me." Sweeny said. "What if he really is connected? How else would he know about federal involvement in this case? I think he knows, but he really doesn't care. That means that either he is crazier than we think, or he feels his connections run deep enough to get him out of trouble even if we catch him."

"Either of those options is pretty scary to think about." Miles said.

"I know. Which brings us back to this." Sweeny said, gesturing at the grisly display in front of them. "If he is willing to play around for no point at all while we try our damndest to get our hands on him, then we really need to worry about his connections. For some reason, though, this still just feels wrong. It is almost like we have a copycat on our hands. Like this was done by a disciple of his work or something."

"A disciple?" Miles asked. "Now that is a truly terrifying thought."

"No kidding." Sweeny agreed. "I hate to sound morbid, but I haven't had a chance to get a bite to eat yet. I really don't know if I can muster an appetite after this, but at least coffee would be nice. Do you want to swing by Village Inn before we head over to the office and pick up where we left off?"

"Sure." Miles said. He was not sure he could find it in his heart to eat anything either, but coffee did sound nice. Getting away from this gruesome scene also sounded nice. He started to head off to his car. He thought about what Sweeny had said. There really wasn't much of a point for Wraith to kill this guy and display him like this. He certainly did not like the idea that Wraith was well enough connected to kill without concern. The thought of his having a disciple was not all that appealing either. All in all, it was a really crappy start to the day.

Sweeny talked to the crime scene investigators that were swarming the place and told them that he wanted to know immediately when they got a positive identification on the victim. Maybe knowing who this guy was would help shed some light on his murder. In this case, he kind of doubted it, but it would be better than nothing. He took one last look at the morbid scene and then followed in Agent Hook's footsteps.

He was tired. Too tired to deal with this right now. He wouldn't have gotten very much sleep the night before anyway, but after Wraith had called him, he had gotten even less. He needed coffee in a bad way. What he really needed was a lot of sleep and maybe a vacation,

but he did not think either of those would come his way for quite some time. First he needed to nail this bastard to the wall. Bullets would make excellent nails for that. This thought allowed him a brief smile. So did the thought of the cup of coffee he would soon have to his lips.

Chapter 24

Vixen moved through St. Mary's hospital in her nurse scrubs and badge that made her look like any number of the nurses that actually worked there. She got the occasional questioning glance, but she moved on with purpose, so she was not stopped by anybody. The hospital was large enough that people could work there for years without ever getting to know each other. The different departments did not really mingle all that much, so the fact that none of the doctors or nurses she passed by did not recognize her was not really any cause for alarm to them. Fortunately, Jennifer did not work in the emergency room because that was the only place that was closely guarded and her badge would have come under scrutiny.

After all, this was not like the T.V. hospital drama shows where everybody seemed to know everybody. This was real life. In real life, if you do not belong to a specific department, you probably don't even exist as far as that department is concerned. Real life worked great for Vixen. In real life, she could walk in like she owned the place and steadily gain on her quarry without having to answer a single question.

She could see the back of Jennifer's head now. She had not seen a picture of Jennifer, but Wraith had told her what department she worked in and had more than adequately described her. In fact, he had used entirely too much detail for Vixen's liking. She would have much rather have had him be vague on the details, as if he had not memorized Jennifer's face and body perfectly. As she thought about this, she slipped her hand into the right pocket of her scrubs and felt the scalpel she had deftly removed from a tray of instruments she had passed in the surgical wing.

Vixen had been unsure about bringing a weapon with her. If she had been stopped for any reason, it would not have been very beneficial to her cause for them to find a big ugly knife in her pocket. She would have had a hard time talking her way out of that and then be allowed to continue on her way with deadly purpose. Once she was sure that she could move freely through the place, however, she had taken the first opportunity to get her hands on a blade that she had come across. She wanted Wraith to see that he had taught her well when it came to inflicting violence with a sharp edge.

She wanted to show Wraith a lot of other things as well. She wanted him to see that she was the one for him and nobody else. At least not until he decided to finish his work with her. He was not allowed to find love with another woman. She had not been able to offer herself to him in the fullest capacity yet. He had not broken her, and she could not bear the thought of leaving it incomplete just as her father had. Somebody had to finish the job and Wraith was the man to do it. Maybe once Jennifer was dead he would finally be able to give her the focus she deserved.

The thought spurred her on almost as much as killing the man from the club had the night before. He had been nice practice. She had not actually killed very many people herself. When she had, Wraith was always beside her for it. Last night had been the first time she had

done everything herself and she had loved it. It had been a great confidence builder. The time for practice was over now. Now it was time for a kill that actually meant something. She did not know how much time she would get to work with Jennifer, but she intended to make it as fun as possible.

Vixen watched as Jennifer turned into a room to check on a patient and closed the door behind her. This would be perfect. Two for the price of one. She kept her hand on the handle of the scalpel and approached the door. Nobody even seemed to notice as she turned the knob and stepped inside. Cameras, doctors, and nurses were everywhere in this place, but nobody would be even slightly aware of the danger sweet Jennifer was in before it was too late to do anything about it.

Once Vixen had closed the door, she turned around and confronted Jennifer, who was looking at her strangely. She did not have any alarm on her face, she just seemed intrigued as to why Vixen had entered the room. Taking a page from Wraith's playbook, she smiled sweetly and stepped forward as if she was supposed to be there.

"Can I help you?" Jennifer asked as she changed some bandages on the patient who appeared to be a burn victim.

"Are you Jennifer?" Vixen asked. "My name is April. I was told to come find you. This is my first day and they wanted you to show me the ropes."

"That is not how we usually do it around here." Jennifer said, but she shrugged. "Of course they would do this to me though. I am behind as it is. The last thing I needed was to be given babysitting duty. I am sorry. I am not normally this grumpy. I have just had a rough time lately."

"That is perfectly okay." Vixen said. "Is there any way that I can help you?"

"Yes, actually there is." Jennifer said. "Could you please come over here and hold Mr. Barnes' arm for me while I work these old bandages off?"

"Sure thing." Vixen answered. Wraith had often spoken of his certainty that God wanted him to do his work because of the way he handed the perfect circumstances to him. Right now she felt as if she was receiving the same sort of divine approval. She walked up next to Jennifer, but instead of grabbing the arm, she pulled out her scalpel and drove the blade into Mr. Barnes' throat. Jennifer's eyes went wide with shock, but she could not speak before Vixen cut her air off with a vice grip on her throat.

"Jennifer, sweet Jennifer." Vixen cooed. "I need you to be quiet. I really don't want to have to slice your pretty little neck open."

With that, she shoved a wad of gauze into Jennifer's mouth as she struggled for air. With Jennifer sufficiently gagged, Vixen let go of her throat and backhanded her. Jennifer fell to the ground and tried to cry out, but the gag muffled her scream. Vixen grabbed medical tape and ran it around Jennifer's head quickly to keep the gauze in place. This was not easy because Jennifer struggled with her as she did it. More severe hits had made the pretty nurse a little more pliant.

Once her mouth had been sufficiently silenced, Vixen had turned her attention to the rest of her body. With more struggles that decreased with each blow driven into her body, Jennifer finally found herself sitting upright in chair that was provided for visitors. Her arms were taped down to the armrests and her legs were secured to the base of the chair. She still

fought as much as she could, but she had really been no match at all for Vixen. After all, Jennifer was not in the least bit prepared for violence, unlike her adversary.

"Shhh." Vixen said in a mock attempt to sooth her. She stroked Jennifer's face with her hands as if she was trying to calm down, like an infant. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I promise."

She stood up straight and delivered a swift kick to the left side of her captive's face. Jennifer's head jerked with the impact. Her eyes took on a glossy look for a brief moment, but then clarity came back. She looked like she wanted to cry, but somehow she was able to restrain the tears.

"Oh, dear, I am so sorry." Vixen said as sweetly as she could. "I fear that I may have lied. I am going to hurt you. A lot. Oh, I am going to some real fun for you. You think you can just strut your stuff in front of my man and steal his heart away? Well I have news for you. He may have fallen for you, but that is a bad thing. You see, nobody is allowed to claim Wraith's love. It makes him mad. He called me this morning and gave me the green light to kill you."

As she spoke, Vixen began to remove her clothing. Death and pain were such erotic experiences for her that she really did prefer to be nude for them. She had anticipated this and was not even wearing anything under her scrubs. When she was finished stripping down, she leaned forward and pressed her breasts into Jennifer's face and wiggled them back and forth. Jennifer tried to lean back and escape this, but Vixen only pressed her chest further forward. Jennifer could only lean so far back and so she was forced to endure the perverse treatment.

"I am sure you can imagine how delighted I was to finally be given the green light on this." Vixen said as she turned her attention onto Jennifer's clothing. It needed to be removed as well if she was really going to have some fun. "I have been waiting for so long."

Vixen took the blade of the scalpel and ran it down the center of Jennifer's top. She did not pull the clothing out to do this, but rather she let the blade pierce into the skin. The blade was very sharp and it cut through both her clothing and her bra. Vixen finished the cut and ripped the clothing open. Jennifer's perfect breasts were exposed and an angry red line ran down from her collar bone to her navel. The cut had not been deep, but it had been very painful. Now Jennifer's eyes were filled with tears and she wept softly.

Vixen's next target was the scrub pants. Instead of going down the middle this time, she ran the blade across each thigh and shin. Using this technique, she was able to get the front of the pants removed without having to worry about the backs. The blue panties that Jennifer had been wearing had been cut as well and Vixen peeled these back and stared intently at what they used to cover. She licked her lips and then drove her tongue into Jennifer.

"Mmm, so sweet." Vixen said as she pulled her head pack. "I will have to do my best to describe what you taste like to Wraith. He will want to know."

Jennifer's head dropped in shame and she squeezed her legs together as best she could. She was so embarrassed. This was so much worse than if she had simply been killed. It seemed as if she was going to suffer total humiliation before the deed was finally done. Vixen straddled her and ran her tongue from her right nipple up her throat and onto her face. She licked away the tears that were running down Jennifer's cheeks.

"What is the matter, honey?" Vixen asked. "Aren't you having any fun?"

She raised the blade to Jennifer's face and inserted the scalpel into her cheek. She ran the blade through her skin in a swirling motion. She giggled and then moved the blade down to the nipple she had just licked.

"It is a pity I am going to have to ruin these." Vixen said, laughing.

Chapter 25

Link moved through St. Mary's Hospital with every bit as much ease as Vixen had. He did not bother trying to go in disguise though. He was wearing a long sleeve t-shirt and jeans. He did not have on one of Wraith's wigs or any of his makeup. He also did not care about any of the cameras as he moved down the hallways. He was not on a mission of stealth. He was on a mission of self preservation. Wraith was an idiot and he was damned if he was going to let his obsession with James ruin everything.

He did not move with the urgency that he felt because he did not want to raise too much alarm. Not yet anyway. He did manage to keep a consistently quick pace, though, so anybody who was in his way stepped out of it as he approached. He was obviously a man on a mission and since this was a hospital that usually was not a good thing. They figured he was headed to either receive bad news, or he had already been given such news.

Little did they know that he was here in the hopes of delivering some bad news himself. He smiled at the thought of how Wraith would react to this little game he was playing. The best part was that there really was nothing the psychopath could do about it. This was one case in which it really was impossible to shoot the messenger. If Wraith could have done anything to eradicate Link and therefore essentially cause his death, he would have done so a long time ago. The opposite was true as well. Link wished that he could have ended his relationship with Wraith without having to be the one to go, but it simply couldn't be done.

He thought about the irony of what he was about to do as he moved to the wing that Jennifer worked in. He had always wished that he had been in James' head instead of Wraith's and now he was about to act in James' favor once again. It seemed as if he was always doing something to keep James covered and as a result, Wraith got shafted each and every time. It was only recently that Wraith even knew about it. Link wished that he could rewind the clocks and not let Wraith know about James. None of this would have been necessary.

It really was a shame that he was here on this specific purpose. Wraith did not know it, but he had experienced Vixen a few times himself. She was fantastic in bed. He would hit her and cut her as if he was the man that she loved, so she had never realized the difference. He was going to miss that. But then, there was always Jennifer. Who knew, if she was still alive maybe there would be more opportunities to have fun with her. James did not know it, but Link had taken her to bed from time to time as well.

Both women were exquisite in their own right. Vixen was exotic and dangerous. She was into the kinkiest of things and sex with her was an adventure to say the least. Jennifer was the ultimate definition of what it meant to make love. The passion that she conveyed with her lips and searching hands was the stuff of dreams. Both of them had let him bed them down whenever he pleased because they both genuinely believed that he was the man they loved. Wraith did not realize how much he had taught Link about the art of convincing acting. It also helped that his face was identical to the men he impersonated.

Link walked up to the nurse's station in Jennifer's wing and asked where she was. Normally, this was not exactly the sort of thing that would be readily handed out to somebody, but all the nurses were familiar with James, so they told him where she had gone. The head nurse was on break anyway so a little slip in protocol could be allowed. He smiled graciously at them and said thank you before continuing on his way. There was no need to do anything that might make them regret telling him that Jennifer had gone to replace the bandages on Mr. Barnes in room 625.

Link realized that he was holding his breath as he approached the room. The door was closed, but that did not necessarily mean anything. A lot of the doors were closed. He let out his breath and tried the knob. It was locked from the inside. He did not even know that hospital doors had locks. It seemed like a stupid idea. What if somebody was in real trouble on the other side and needed medical care? He wondered if anybody had died while hospital staff waited for a locksmith.

One thing was certain. In this case, somebody really could be dying on the other side of the door and he was not about to go ask for help. That would take too much time. He looked at the door. It was solid. There was no way that he could hurt it. The frame was metal, but the weak point had to be at the handle. If anything would give that would be it. He took a step back and then kicked as hard as he could. This drew the attention of everybody in the hallway, but the door did not budge. Following the adage of try, try again, Link delivered another hard blow with his foot. This time something snapped and the door flew inward.

When he looked inside, he saw a naked Vixen pointing a scalpel in his direction. Obviously the first kick had been enough to let her know that she was about to have company. Unlike most women, she did not care that she was thoroughly exposed, and so had made no attempt to cover her more intimate parts. Jennifer was taped down to a chair that had been tipped onto its back. She had been stripped as well. If not for the seriousness of the occasion, Link might have thought about closing the door and inviting himself to be the meat in between these two slices of bread.

The position that Vixen was in only added to the erotic nature of the situation. While she was pointing the blade in his direction, she had not gotten up from where she straddled Jennifer's face. It seemed as if she had been smothering the other woman with her vagina while she carved designs on her stomach. Link fought down the erection in his pants at the sight of the blood that Jennifer was covered with. She was still trying feebly to struggle, so she was alive, but inaction on his part would not keep her that way.

"Wraith?" Vixen asked uncertainly as recognition dawned on her. "What are you doing here? You said that I could do this. You promised."

"Sorry, but you have the wrong guy." He said, stepping up and kicking the blade out of her confused hand. Link then lifted her by the throat and hurled her across the room. Jennifer's eyes went wide once she was no longer blinded by Vixen's nether region and could see what was happening. She was not able to say anything due to the gag, but Link could tell that she was both relieved and embarrassed all at the same time.

Vixen scrambled to her feet as a crowd began to form at the doorway to see what the commotion was all about. Link did not let her gather her wits before he was on her. He grabbed her left breast with his right hand and squeezed as hard as he could, relishing the

look of absolute pain register on her face. Her eyes watered and he found a little more strength to squeeze even harder as he pulled her over to the window.

Vixen began to struggle in earnest now, but she was no match for Link. He was far stronger than her, and he was used to violence. Usually this was from sitting in the backseat and watching Wraith go to work. He had learned plenty from that man and he was willing to use all of it on Vixen. Link used his left hand to drive her face through the window. The glass made a loud sound as it shattered, but Vixen did not cry out at all.

She knew this was going to be the end and she looked forward to it. She was ready. She had been near climax with Jennifer, and she felt herself coming with absolute pleasure as her man pushed her neck down on a jagged piece of glass that had remained upright. There was some pressure and then both pain and joy as the glass sliced through her neck. Vixen never once cried out, but her body shook with the climax and her juices ran down her bare thighs. She gurgled softly and a single tear ran down her cheek. It was a violent end to a violent life. She was finally at peace.

Link released her when he was sure that she was dead and turned to look at the horrified faces in the doorway. These people were used to death. They saw it every day. What they did not see every day, however, was death through horrific violence. Nor were they used to seeing the kind of treatment that Jennifer had been subject to. Link grabbed a blanket off the patient's bed and covered Jennifer's exposed body. From the looks of things, Mr. Barnes was not going to need it anymore.

He removed the gag from her mouth and looked down at her with his best loving expression. He really wanted to sell this. To him she was nothing more than a good screw. To James, she was the love of his life. She needed to see James when she looked at him. He could tell by her eyes that she did.

"James..." She managed to croak out.

"Shh." Link said reassuringly. "Don't talk right now baby. Everything is going to be all right. You are in a hospital after all. They are going to take care of you."

With that, he stood up and looked back at Vixen's body. It was such a shame. She really had been beautiful. And a demon in the sack. Of course, she had always wanted to die, so all he had really done was grant her wish. Wraith had been dragging his heels on the subject for too long. Link did not think Wraith would ever admit it, but deep down he had loved her too much to kill her. Link just loved having sex with her and he was going to miss it.

"Somebody get her some help!" He demanded as he pointed at Jennifer. "For god's sake isn't this a hospital?"

His words finally moved them to action and he strode out of the room declaring that he was going to call the police. He did not call anybody. He left the hospital as fast as he could. The last thing that Link wanted was to be around when Detective Sweeny showed up. The man was a damned bloodhound. Always scratching his face and asking all the right questions. One sentence escaped his lips when he was too far away to be caught.

"Take that Wraith."

Chapter 26

James rushed to the side of the hospital bed that Jennifer was laying in. He was nearly hysterical with grief and concern. He could not believe it when the police officer that had been camped outside his apartment had knocked on the door and told him that Jennifer had been attacked. Knowing the kind of man that the wraith was, he had been certain that her entrails had been scattered all over the place. In spite of the reassurances he had been given that she was okay, he refused to be comforted until he could see her. The cop had generously offered to drive him to see her since he was not in a good enough mental state to drive.

Jennifer cracked her eyes open and looked at him. She had bruises and bandages on her face and it broke his heart to look at her. She looked weak and broken. He did not even want to know what the rest of her body looked like. He was filled with anger at his lack of ability to protect her. He was the man, damn it. He should have been there. She should have been able to rely on him. He felt so helpless. The wraith had seen that he was being guarded, so he went after Jennifer instead.

"James, where did you go?" Jennifer asked. She had not seen him since he had saved her from that awful woman.

"I didn't go anywhere." He said. "I have been at home. I came as soon as I heard. I am so sorry that you got hurt."

"You came when you heard? James, you saved me. She was going to kill me. She was so horrible. You came and you...you...killed...her." Jennifer said. It was so hard for her to say the words. She remembered seeing him shove the woman's head through the window, but it just was so hard to believe that he could have killed somebody. She was so grateful to him, and yet it was as if she had seen something from him that she had never seen before.

"I don't know what you are talking about." James said. "I wish that I had been here for you, but I was at home. I would have never left your side if I had been here earlier."

"But you were." Jennifer insisted. "You came and...and..."

"You said her." James said. He could tell that she was still in some sort of shock, but he wanted to know just a little bit more. "A woman did this to you?"

"I think I might be able to answer that a little better at the moment." A familiar voice said. James turned to find Sweeny leaning against the doorframe. "I think maybe we ought to let Jennifer get some rest right now."

James squeezed Jennifer's hand lightly and stood up. He smiled as best he could at her as she closed her eyes. He was so thankful that she was still alive. He simply could not imagine life without her. If she had died, the wraith would have surely convinced James to end his own life in order to escape the pain.

"Hello detective. Do you have any idea what happened?" James asked.

"Yes, James, I do." Sweeny said. "It seems that our man Wraith has a disciple. A woman that we have identified as April Pensicotti. She was either asked by him to come and

attack Jennifer as a way of hurting you, or she decided to act on her own accord. We would love to ask her about it, but as Jennifer said, you killed her."

"I didn't kill anybody." James insisted. "I haven't left the apartment all day. I didn't know about any of this until your officer knocked on my door."

"I know. He verified that for us already." Sweeny said. "The only problem is that we have you on camera and a number of witnesses place you as not only being here, but attacking the woman that was trying to kill your girlfriend."

"I don't understand." James said.

"I do." Sweeny responded. "Or rather I should say that I both do and I do not, all at the same time. It wasn't you. It was Wraith. I just can't figure out why he pretended to be you and stopped the execution. If he had not interfered, Jennifer would have surely been dead long before anybody knew what had happened. Now why would he do that?"

"I have no idea." Now James' head was really swimming. He could not believe that he actually had the wraith, or rather Wraith to thank for the fact that Jennifer was still alive. None of this made an ounce of sense. Wraith had promised to take away everything that he held dear. He did not hold anything dearer than Jennifer. Had he changed his mind? Did he decide that he no longer needed to torture James?

"Neither do I." Sweeny admitted. "I do intend to find out, though. The man I am after is not the type to rescue anybody if he did not have some sort of motive behind it. One more thing before I let you go. I need you to take a look at the woman that attempted to kill Jennifer. If you can recognize her, even as somebody that you only saw once, it might be able to help us out a lot."

"Sure, detective." James said. "I would be willing to do anything that can help you get your hands on him."

"Great." Sweeny said and led James down the hall. They went down to the basement of the hospital where bodies were kept before being transported to morticians. On a gurney with a sheet over it was the body of Vixen. Sweeny walked up and removed just enough of the sheet to allow James to see her face. There was no need to let him see the rest of her body.

"I am sorry, but I don't recognize her." James said. The woman that he was looking at appeared to be very attractive, but he had never seen her before. "I am sorry that I couldn't be more helpful."

"It is okay." Sweeny said. "It was a long shot. Thanks for looking."

"How did you already know her name?" James asked.

"Hospital security cameras in the parking lot caught her getting out of her car." Sweeny said. "When we searched it, we found her license. It was a lucky break. Otherwise, it usually takes a while to get a positive ID on an individual that doesn't have anything with them. In her case, she wasn't wearing anything at all, so we would have had a hell of a time."

"She wasn't wearing anything?" James asked. "You mean she was naked?"

"Yes. She wore scrubs into the hospital with a fake badge, but she didn't have anything on underneath. Once she was alone with Jennifer, she removed her clothes and then cut them off of your girlfriend too. It seems that she was not only trying to kill her, she was having some sort of sex with her in the process." Sweeny informed him.

"What?" James nearly lost control of his voice.

"Yeah, it wasn't pretty." Sweeny said. "Look, James, she is going to be in a bad way for quite some time. I don't just mean from her injuries, but also mentally. Nobody can go through something like that and come out unscathed on the other side of things. You might want to consider getting her some counselling as soon as she is up for it."

"Okay." James said. His voice was still shaky. He could hardly bring himself to believe that Jennifer had not only been nearly killed, she had been sexually abused by another woman. All of this was simply too much to take in all at once.

"Hey, I know this is a lot to handle, but you need to be there for her okay?" Sweeny said and the concern was evident in his voice. "I will make sure that we have armed officers watching over you guys. Oh, and you might want to go ahead and let her believe that you did, in fact, rescue her. I would hate to think about how she would react right now if she knew the truth."

"I will. For now anyway." James said. "Eventually I will let her know the truth. I don't think I can handle her thinking of me as a killer."

The two men shook hands and James went back to see Jennifer while Sweeny stepped out to make some phone calls. Sweeny thought about it all some more. None of it made any sense. James had not left the apartment, but he was wearing the same outfit as Wraith had been wearing in the video surveillance. He knew that Wraith was thorough, but how could he have known what James was wearing without being seen by the officer watching over the young man? For that matter, why had he impersonated James in the first place? Sweeny scratched his face and then raised the phone to his ear.

Chapter 27

Wraith screamed in total frustration as he drove. He pounded the steering wheel, the dashboard, and even himself. He was in such a rage. All he wanted to do right now was kill every person on the planet and burn their bodies. Twice over. This was an outrage. The worst part about it was that there was nobody to punish directly for the travesty that had been dished out upon him. He could not kill the culprit without killing himself. He made other people kill themselves, he did not hurt himself. If Link could not be made to suffer, then the whole world would feel his wrath. He bellowed again, punching the roof of the car several times as he did this.

His violent outbursts caused the young woman in the passenger seat to shriek. He rewarded her reaction with a blow to the side of her face. Her head jerked with the impact and slammed into the passenger window with nearly enough force to render her unconscious. This was not enough for him. He pulled a knife out of his jacket and rammed it into her thigh, twisted it and yanked it back out. Stupid bitch. Didn't she know better than to get into a car with a stranger?

"Please! No, please!" The woman cried after recovering from the screams of pain that had shot out of her at his attack. She had her hands pressed to the wound and her eyes were streaming with tears. "Please let me go! I am so scared. I just wanted to have a good time."

Only a few minutes ago, Wraith had been smiling running his hands along her body as they left the bar called Event Horizon. She had thought that he was going to take her back to his place for some fun in the sheets. It was only after they got under way that he had changed into this monster filled with rage. What had begun as a promise for sex had turned into a total nightmare.

"You aren't having fun? I am having a ball." Wraith laughed out loud, but there was no mirth in it. "Baby, tonight you and I are going to have some real fun! Now shut the hell up!"

He hit her again and again and again until she went limp in the seat beside him. What a stupid bitch. She had been too loud, too whiny. He couldn't stand her. He couldn't stand anybody right now. They all needed to die. Every stinking human on the planet needed to just die. He hated them all. The world needed to burn.

Wraith, you need to calm down.

"Shut up!" Wraith screamed. "You did this! You! Don't tell me to calm down! I am calm. Can't you see how damn calm I am?"

If you keep this up, you are going to get us caught. How many have you killed just tonight?

"Five and I am just getting warmed up." Wraith said. "I will kill this whole damn city one person at a time if I want to."

They will never let you do that. If you keep this rampage up, Sweeny and all of his buddies will come swooping down on you. After all of this attention, do you think your friends

are going to help? They will forget they ever knew you. You will get the death sentence and you will take me with you.

"Well, damn, Link. I guess I just didn't think about that." Wraith mocked. "I mean it is okay if I die, or Vixen dies, or anybody dies. Just as long as precious little Link doesn't die. Do you really think I give a rat's ass about you? I hate you. I really, really hate you."

I know that, but there is really nothing you can do about that. Getting yourself killed isn't going to change the fact that I killed Vixen. Do you want me to tell you what it felt like? Do you want to know how it smelled when she came all over herself right before she died?

"Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up." Wraith repeated over and over again. He knew that Link had a point. He did need to find some way to calm down and end his killing spree. He had been taking women from different bars instead of going back and getting somebody to kill from a place he had already been at, but he was running out of new places. He knew he should probably call it quits once he was done with this bitch, but he didn't want to. He wanted to kill everybody.

You know that you want me to tell you about it. But I won't. I will never give you that sort of pleasure of knowing. You will forever be robbed of the chance to have killed Vixen yourself. You will never be able to watch her die.

"Go to hell." Wraith said. Amazingly enough, he could feel Link withdraw from his mind. Apparently he was done taunting him for now. For about the millionth time, Wraith found himself wishing that he could reach inside his brain and extract Link once and for all. He reached over and hit the unconscious woman beside him one more time. It really didn't do anything that she could feel, but it made him feel a little better.

He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. He needed to focus. He had to stop raging and start thinking more rationally. He slowed his breathing and began to concentrate. Now was not the time to let his emotions get the better of him. Now was the time to focus on finishing the game. All that had happened was that his queen had been taken. He still had his king and he was still in the game. He had taken more of their pieces than they had taken of his. The match was not over; it had simply gotten more interesting. A thought came across his mind and he smiled a wicked smile. He took out his phone and dialed.

"Sweeny." A gruff voice said into the speaker.

"Well, well, detective. It seems as if I have lost somebody." Wraith said.

"Wraith? How did you get this number? This is my personal cell." Sweeny asked.

"Don't worry about that." Wraith said. "I just want you to know that I am furious about the loss of Vixen, and I am taking it out on your town tonight. Have fun with the body count."

"Why are you going to kill more people over this?" Sweeny asked. "You are the one that killed April."

"April?" Wraith asked. "No, I didn't kill an April. I have killed a Susan, a Katie, a Jessica, a Samantha, and Heather. I am about to kill another one named Kate. I think it is somewhat redundant since I have already killed a Katie, but they look different enough that I think it will be acceptable. But no, detective, I have not killed anybody named April."

"Yes you did, and I am still trying to figure out why." Sweeny said.

"No, I didn't, so quit wasting your time."

"Wait, what did you call her, Vixen?" Sweeny said, realizing where Wraith was confused. Of course, he would not think of her by a normal name. Wraith certainly was not a normal name. "Why did you kill Vixen? Wasn't she doing you a favor by going after Jennifer?"

"I didn't kill Vixen." Wraith said. "That would be an absolute bastard named Link. He thought that by killing Vixen, he could get me off my mission to kill James. All it really did, though, was anger me. Now, not only James is going to suffer, but a whole lot of innocent people too."

"Wraith, you need to stop this." Sweeny said. "All you are doing is digging a deeper hole for yourself. Stop killing and turn yourself in. It is the only way we can get you the help you need. It sounds like you need even more help than I already thought."

"Help? What makes you think I want help?" Wraith asked. "The only problem I have in my head is the presence of Link. I can't get rid of him and neither can you. In spite of what you may think, I am not sick in the head. You are. You and everybody else that thinks they need to conform to the system. I did not call to get into a philosophical discussion though. I just want to give you a heads up that you will have some bodies to find. At least I did you a favor by letting you know the 'who done it' part of your investigation. Cheers."

Wraith hung up and smiled to himself. He was feeling much better now. Sweeny had to be absolutely going out of his mind right now. The detective already wanted him so bad. Knowing that there were going to be six women to find had to make it so much worse. He was back on his game now. All he needed to do was finish off Kate and then he could go back to his motel room and rest peacefully.

He turned down the gravel road at the north end of 26th road and drove into the desert. When he was out a good distance, he pulled off to the side and got out. Wraith pulled the unconscious Kate out of the car and laid her out on the ground. He whistled to himself as he went about removing her clothing. She had a nice body. It was almost a shame that she was not awake. Otherwise, he would have raped her before sending her out of this world.

Instead, he simply slit her throat and watched the blood pour out. He cut off her nipples so that he could add them to his collection of random body parts. If she had been awake and alive at the beginning of her treatment, he might have bitten them off instead. He loved the kind of pain that women experienced when he did that kind of thing, but it was lost on a dead woman. If it did not cause his victims pain, what was the point?

He supposed that he could have let her wake up before he began, but now that he had calmed down, he just wanted to go to bed. It was late and he had been through a lot of stress. A little bit of rest would be nice. All he wanted to do was mangle her body a little and then get out of here. He paused in the middle of his work, as he noticed a small lump in her belly that he had not paid any attention to before. Shit. Shit. No, it can't be. Shit.

He carefully inserted his knife and worked her belly open so that he could see inside without causing any damage to what he was afraid he would find. Sure enough, she was pregnant. She was not very far along yet, just barely starting to show. Tears came to his eyes when he looked upon the embryo of a baby that had been growing inside her. With the utmost care, he removed it and closed her up as gently as he could.

Wraith propped Kate up against a rock and gave her back her baby. He positioned her arms in such a way that it looked as if she was giving it a loving embrace. He did his best to

keep his emotions under control as he carved out 'I am so sorry' in the ground at her feet. Once this was done, he looked at the scene one more time before he fell to the ground in uncontrollable sobs. Babies were off limits. He cried and rocked himself gently until the sun began to creep up in the west. Finally, he was able to gather himself up and head back to town.

Chapter 28

It was nine in the morning and Sweeny's eyes were bloodshot from the lack of sleep. It seemed almost as if sleep had become something foreign to him ever since Wraith had decided to make his life a living hell. Like it was some sort of abstract thought that could not quite be brought into focus. He had been up all night searching for Wraith's latest victims. Every available patrol car had been sent out to look for bodies and get people off the streets. It was almost as if they had locked down the town.

So far they had found four murdered women. Susan Beatty had been found with her head completely removed and placed in the goal of a soccer net at Canyon View Park. The rest of her body had been laid spread eagle and naked in the center of the field. One of her shoes had been shoved into her open neck and the other one and been inserted into her rear end. It had not been a pretty picture by any means, but at least it was not as thorough of a massacre as Wraith typically performed.

Heather Mayfield was found suspended by her intestines from the monkey bars of Nisley Elementary School. She too had been stripped of all her clothing. It seemed to be a theme with Wraith. The only reason that identifying the women had been so easy was that Wraith had left their clothes nearby in piles with their identification on top. It was as if he was trying to make it easier for the police. Taunting them was what he really was doing. He did not care if they knew who he had killed or who had done it.

Jessica Sanders had been an awful one. Wraith had taken her to a subdivision that was being constructed in Clifton and used the sheep's foot compactor to roll over the top half of her body after shoving a shovel handle so deep inside her vagina that only the head protruded out. Sweeny had not seen the autopsy report, but he suspected that Wraith had inserted the handle before he killed her by crushing her with the large roller. Not much had been left of her upper body, but identification had been easy due to the bundle of clothes.

Samantha Shears was the last one that had been discovered. Apparently Wraith decided to take her last name a little too literally. He had broken into a sheet metal shop and used their industrial shears to slice her to pieces. None of the patrol officers had found her. It was the owner of the shop that had come to open up in the morning that had stumbled onto this little treat. Sweeny was not sure if the man was ever going to stop vomiting. He really did not seem to have the stomach for that kind of thing. Not that anybody really had the stomach for what Wraith did to his victims.

That meant that the only two victims that Sweeny knew about that had not been found yet were Kate and Katie. It seemed somewhat ironic that they should be last since their names were essentially the same. With Wraith's need for chaos, Sweeny was actually surprised that he had been willing to kill two women with the same name on the same night. But then he did say that they were not at all the same in appearance. Sweeny rubbed his tired eyes and looked across his desk at an equally tired Miles Hook.

"Do you think he stopped with the Kate's?" He asked, reaching for a half empty cup of coffee.

"Hard to say." Miles said. "Just because he called you when he was about to kill the second one, doesn't mean that he decided to stop there. But then again, you put the town on lockdown mode right after you got off the phone, so he may have had a hard time getting another victim."

"Wraith doesn't have a hard time with anything." Sweeny said. "I wouldn't be surprised if he walked right in here, shot one of our officers in the head and walked right out again without repercussions."

"I think that may be a little extreme even for him." Miles said. His eyes were still intensely green in spite of how tired he appeared to be. He had not been up with Sweeny all night in search of murder victims, but it looked like the investigation had still been taking its toll on him. Obviously he had not been getting a lot of sleep lately either. When he had joined up with the detective in the early morning hours, he looked as if he had been drug through hell and back.

"You need to get some rest." Sweeny said, looking at his friend with genuine concern.

"I think that would be the proverbial pot calling the kettle black." Miles replied. "Have you seen yourself? I bet you haven't gotten more than a couple hours worth of sleep in the last couple of days. How do you expect to catch our boy when you can't keep your eyes open?"

"How do you expect to help me when you can't either?" Sweeny responded.

"Touché." Miles said. "So what are we going to do now?"

"Keep looking." Sweeny said. "It really is the only thing that we can do. Keep looking for the victims. Keep looking for Wraith. Keep looking to see if James is somehow able to leave his apartment without being seen by our officers watching his place. I hate to say it, but right now Wraith has us by the balls. Until we find a way to get to him, we are stuck waiting and watching."

"Those files I gave you don't give you any of your famous insights, huh?" Miles asked.

"They give me plenty of insight into what drives him to kill, but they are not helpful other than that." Sweeny said. "In fact, they make me think that getting my hands around his neck is going to be extremely hard. He is not predictable. He can strike anywhere for any reason or just vanish off the scene for a long time. He is not limited to time or money. He has no addictions that he must feed. He does not have any close friends that could give us an upper hand on him. The only person we know of that has had any sort of connection to him got her throat slit by some glass."

"Maybe that is our angle. Maybe this April woman can give us a clue without actually speaking to us." Miles said.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Sweeny asked tiredly.

"We haven't gone to her place yet." Miles pointed out. "She might have had something that we could use. Maybe she had a way of contacting him. Maybe we could get our hands on some of his DNA finally. He seems to be able to go about on his killing sprees without leaving any sort of trace. He might not have been on his guard around somebody of a similar mindset."

"Jesus, why the hell haven't I thought of that?" Sweeny smacked himself in the forehead. "I guess I really am too tired. That should have been at the forefront of my mind on a case like this."

"So you want to go check it out?" Miles asked, reaching for his jacket.

"Let's go." Sweeny said as he stood up. "We sure as hell aren't doing anybody any good by sitting around here. If it looks like we might have something, we can send for a forensic team to come and tear the place apart. Hot damn, Miles. I think you just might be on to something."

"We can always hope." Miles said. "Who knows? It may turn into nothing. I just don't think we can afford to leave any stone unturned."

With that, both men left the office in hopeful expectation. Too bad Sweeny did not notice that Miles was just a little bit taller today.

Chapter 29

Sweeny knocked on the door of Vixen's house and listened intently. It was a habit of his. He did not expect anybody to answer since the resident was currently in the morgue. Still, he had his gun ready and his ears perked. If there had been movement inside due to his knock, he would have heard it and come bursting in with his gun drawn. Walking in like he owned the place was not a well advised route when there was a serial killer on the loose.

"I don't think anybody is home." Miles said from behind him.

"Yeah, me neither, but it never hurts to check." Sweeny said. He put his gun back into its holster, but he did not secure the strap. He wanted to be able to draw it again quickly if necessary. The detective reached down and tried the door knob. It was locked. No real surprise. While it would not have been wise for a burglar to break into this particular house while the resident was home, even murderers could not protect their belongings while they were away.

"I guess we have to play the role of burglars today." Miles said, producing a set of lock picks. He was an expert at this sort of thing and Sweeny let him do his thing. This was not the first time that the two of them had stood outside a locked door while Miles worked his magic. In even less time than normal, Miles swung the door open and bowed slightly as he extended his hand in Sweeny's direction.

"After you sir." He said.

"Thank you." Sweeny replied. He thought it odd that Miles was acting so cavalierly, but they were both tired, so he let it go. It was not like he always acted like himself when he was sleep deprived. He stepped past the bowing Miles and into the house. He did not see anything out of the ordinary. The decorations were not too old, but they were not brand new either. Some of the surfaces had a thin layer of dust, but for the most part the house was clean and well kept. He was about to say that he was not sure how fruitful any of this was going to be when he saw the door to the basement.

The door was hanging open slightly as if it had recently been used. For some unknown reason, Sweeny felt a chill run down his spine as he contemplated seeing what was hidden at the bottom of the steps. Voices seemed to call out to him for help, screaming and crying for salvation. Sweeny shuddered. He did not know what had come over him and he did not particularly like it. He scratched at the side of his face and walked toward the open doorway.

"Hey, Miles, I don't think there is much to see up here." He called over his shoulder. "I am going to check out the basement. Maybe we will find something of value down there."

"Okay." Miles called from the kitchen. "I will be there in a minute. Just give me a call if you find something."

Sweeny started down the steps and heard a loud squeak from the first one he put his weight on. His pulse jumped at the sound. Without even thinking about it, he pulled his gun out and kept it at the ready. He had a really bad feeling and he didn't know why. It was almost as if he was afraid that the ghosts of Wraith and Vixen's victims were going to attack

him. He told himself that this was stupid. He did not believe in ghosts and he did not even know for certain that anybody had actually been killed in this house.

Maybe this was where Anderson had died. Didn't Wraith say something about that? He couldn't believe himself right now. He could hardly keep his mind focused. He really should have caught a quick nap before coming. Sweeny knew that he really needed to get some rest soon. He was slipping too much and he knew it. It was just that this bastard Wraith was really getting his goat. He could hardly sleep just knowing that the psychopath roamed free. It made it even harder when he knew that Wraith was actively racking up a body count.

He reached the bottom of the steps and found a light switch. When he turned it on, however, he nearly turned it right back off. There was somebody down in the basement, but they were in no position to be a threat to him. In the middle of the floor, there was a table that had a naked body strapped to it. It was a man, but that was really only discernible due to the fact that his penis was the only thing that had not been severely mangled.

Keeping his gun at the ready, Sweeny stepped up to the body and was sickened to realize the person was still alive. The chest moved up and down in shallow breaths and a low moan escaped from the victim's mouth. Sweeny choked down the bile that rose in the back of his throat as he looked at the way that most of the body had been stripped of its outer layer of skin. The face in particular was wretched. All of the skin had been removed. Even the eyelids had been removed and the man looked up at Wraith with pain showing in his intense green eyes.

"Miles get down here!" Sweeny yelled. He was really having a hard time fighting off the revulsion now. The face sputtered and it seemed to try to say something to him. The absence of lips made it difficult to understand, but it sounded like it said 'seeny'.

"What?" Sweeny asked. It was almost as if this pitiful creature knew him.

"Seeny. Luk ot. Srath." The green eyes burned with both pain and determination. There was something about those eyes. Sweeny felt like he should know them somehow. But the only person he knew that had green eyes that intense was... shit. He tried to raise his gun as he heard footsteps on the steps behind him, but as he turned he heard a small cough and his hand exploded in blood. His gun fell uselessly to the ground.

Miles Hook stood at the base of the stairs with a Berretta fitted with a sound suppressor pointed in his direction. Except that it was not Miles Hook. Miles Hook was strapped down to the table in a terrible state. It was Wraith in disguise. Sweeny could not believe how easily he had passed himself off as Miles. If he had not been so damn tired, he would have noticed that he was too tall. He felt like an idiot. He had promised himself that he would not go off half cocked and wind up in the same state as Anderson. Now his hand was useless and Wraith had the drop on him.

"Wraith." Sweeny said, doing his best not to give Wraith the satisfaction of seeing his pain. He did not succeed entirely. His face was contorted into a grimace and his voice sounded strained. Still, for having been shot, he felt he did the best he could.

"Sweeny." Wraith said, dropping his impersonation of Miles' voice. "How good of you to drop by to see your friend. You know, I was almost certain that you would see through my disguise. I could match your boy's face and voice, but the height was not easy. I had to hunch all the time and hope you wouldn't notice. Also, the contacts should have been recognizable to a man with an eye for detail. I guess it was good for me that you were so exhausted."

"You son of a bitch, just get it over with will you?" Sweeny spat. He did not want to give this bastard the chance to gloat over his victory. Wraith had him dead to rights, but he wasn't pulling the trigger. If he could make it to his ankle holster... well, he just might have a chance. Not much of one, but a small chance.

"No." Wraith said. "You might find this hard to believe, but I am not going to kill you. Not yet anyway. At least not directly. I am going to put you in a position to save yourself. If you get out, then I will continue to have fun with you. If not, well then I hope the next detective is going to be good enough to give me a run for my money. I rather doubt it, so I do hope you survive."

"What are you talking about? Just pull the damn trigger. If you don't, I swear to god I will kill you." Sweeny said as he doubled over while holding his ruined hand close into his body. He was close now. All he had to do was drop his hand down and grab his revolver.

"I do not take orders, I give them." Wraith said. "You won't kill me. You are too much of a good guy. If our roles were reversed, you would be reading me my Miranda rights. You don't have what it takes to pull the trigger. You are weak and that is why you will lose. In the mean time, you will be fun to play with. Unfortunately, I will eventually kill you. No toy is fun for forever."

Sweeny decided to act. He reached for his ankle and heard three more coughs. His remaining good hand was not injured, but his revolver was destroyed by the first shot. The next two went right into his shin just above the holster. Sweeny yelled out and fell over. He was near the gun that he had dropped and he thought about reaching out for it. Before he could do so, however, Wraith stepped over and booted it far away from him. Then he delivered another kick to his ribs. The blow was quite fierce and Sweeny gasped for air.

"Stupid. Really stupid." Wraith said. "You just made survival that much more difficult for yourself. I was only going to hit you hard enough to stun you for a bit. You might have been able to get both yourself and your unfortunate friend out of here before I burn the house down. Now you will have a hard enough time just dragging your own sorry self out of here. However, knowing you, you will probably try to save him anyway and just end up dying with him. I don't like that idea."

Wraith walked over to Miles and shot him in the head. He walked back over to where Sweeny was awkwardly clutching at his ankle and glaring at him. He crouched down near the enraged detective and smiled. This was great. The man was really starting to hate him. He probably already hated him, but now his hatred must have really reached a whole new level.

"Now you don't need to worry about him. It serves him right for coming around yesterday afternoon on his own. I was just stopping in to see how Vixen had done with her attempt at killing Jennifer. See that was before I found out that Link interfered. He had just finished picking the lock and had let himself in. I greeted him with the best hospitality that I could muster. You can see what a great host I am." Wraith said, pointing at the table where Miles lay dead. "Now I think it is time to see how well you can move."

He walked back to the stairs and picked up an object that Sweeny hadn't noticed when he had first looked back. It was a gas can. Wraith picked it up and poured it on the steps as he ascended the stairs. He did not bother to pour any gas in the basement. The floor was concrete so it would not have done much good. It didn't matter though. Once the house was in

flames, the basement would fill with enough smoke to asphyxiate anybody that was in it. Provided that they were alive to breathe in the smoke.

"You had better get a move on. I already soaked everything up here while you were discovering your buddy." Wraith called from the top of the steps as he tossed a lit match to the bottom step. Flames instantly ignited and Sweeny could hear Wraith laughing madly. He struggled to his good leg and hopped to the steps as fast as he could. He did not like the idea of being barbecued alive.

The stairs were raging with flames that bit at him as he struggled upward. He could hardly stand the pain, but he knew what stopping would mean. His clothes were on fire and his hair was burning but he kept going. The whole house was a raging inferno and the smoke was already thick by the time he reached the top of the stairs. Sweeny already felt burned and broken, but he would not give up. He was determined to make it out alive so that he could hunt Wraith down and make him suffer.

He crawled low on the ground to keep from inhaling too much smoke as he made his way to the front door. It hurt so badly for him to put any weight on his bad hand or leg, but he forced himself to grit his teeth and do it in order to move quicker. At the rate the house was burning around him, he might not make it if he only used his one good hand and leg.

Sweeny's eyes watered and his throat burned when he finally reached the front door. He felt his strength waning from the combined efforts of the smoke inhalation, gunshot wounds, and his own overwhelming exhaustion, but he was able to lift himself up to open the door. Once the door swung inward, he fell out onto the front step and rolled out until he was on the lawn. Sweeny coughed and choked and even threw up, but he was alive.

He rolled over onto his back and tried to breathe as steadily as he could. He wanted to call for help, but he couldn't even find it in himself to reach into his pocket and grab his cell phone. He had never felt so weak, so broken. Rage filled his heart, but even that was not enough to keep him from slipping under. In his last thought before darkness consumed him, he thought he heard the sound of sirens in the distance. Good. Somebody had called the fire department.

Chapter 30

James tilted his head back and let the hot water assault his face in order to wash away all of the sweat and strain from his workout. The shower felt so good and it seemed to cleanse both body and mind. Water mixed with soap ran down his sculpted muscular physique and onto the tiled floor. While he was not a killer like Wraith, he had done everything he could to keep himself in top physical condition. He was stronger than most men and had managed to keep his belly from going soft like a lot of men his age. One of Jennifer's favorite things to do was run her hands up and down his stomach and talk about how he had missed his calling as an underwear model.

Thinking of her brought him back to reality. He felt so bad that she had been put through her ordeal. If it had not been for Wraith interfering, there was no telling how badly she would have been hurt before the psychotic bitch finally killed her. As it was, Jennifer was pretty cut up and it would be a while before she would be ready for very much physical activity. Once again he cursed himself for not being there. He had all of this muscle, but it had been utterly useless in protecting the one that he loved. The only reason he had let himself leave her side in order to workout was because she had two armed policemen keeping watch over her at all times now.

It seemed like a case of too little too late though. James did not think that Jennifer would be attacked again at the hospital. He did not know what the reasoning was for Wraith to stop the execution, but whatever it was; he hoped that she would not be targeted again. If, for any reason, Wraith did decide to kill her after all, he would probably wait until she was home from the hospital, which according to the doctors would be the next day. She had been pretty cut up, but she was no longer really serious enough to warrant a hospital bed. Mentally, who knew when she would be okay?

James finished his shower and stepped out into the men's locker room at Crossroads Gym off of Horizon Drive. He had been working out at this facility for years, and yet he still felt it slightly awkward to walk naked through the locker room like many of the men did. It was not that he felt inferior to the wrinkled old men that seemed quite content to sit on the benches with their stuff hanging out for lengthy periods of time, it was just that he had never really been comfortable with public nudity. Sure, it was only men in there, but he still was not an exhibitionist and did not like the thought of other men looking at his balls. Once there had even been an openly gay man changing at the same time and this had made him very uncomfortable. He would have preferred for it to be a woman with the way the eyes had rolled over his body.

He quickly wrapped a towel around himself before he even opened his locker. With this makeshift clothing, he felt much more at ease. He went about his usual post workout routine. He applied his deodorant and grabbed his razor. James had found that his facial hair grew at a much quicker pace than he cared for. It seemed he always had stubble that made his face rough and scratchy. Jennifer did not like it when he would rub it on her neck. She said it gave

her goose bumps. With that in mind, he went to the mirror and shaved as quickly as he could without cutting himself. He was going to go see her when he got dressed and he wanted to be nice and presentable.

The razor was for more than that, though. He also used it to keep his head free from all stubble. He did not know why he kept shaving his head like this. He had only started doing it because it was his way of showing support to his mother. She was no longer suffering from cancer, so his continued practice of this seemed to be unnecessary. James couldn't bring himself to stop though. It was like he was keeping her alive in his mind by doing this. Maybe eventually he could finally let go and allow his hair to grow back, but not today. Not when the rest of his life seemed to be in pieces.

James finished his routine in front of the mirror and got dressed quickly in order to get back to the hospital as soon as he could. He still felt somewhat guilty for leaving her, but he had really needed this. Working out had always been a nice outlet for him to vent his frustrations. It was as if he could pour all of his emotions into his muscles and then exercise the demons by burning them out. After the last few days, he really had needed an outlet. Now that he felt a little better, he would be in a better position to give Jennifer the support that she needed.

He walked out of the locker room whistling a tune from Ramstein. James waved goodnight to the girl working the front counter and received a shy giggle and wave in return. Girls like her bothered him. Always giggly and immature. He knew that she ogled his body and it made him uncomfortable. While he had always liked to keep fit, he had never liked being viewed as a piece of meat. That was one of the great things about Jennifer. She liked his body, sure, but she valued him as a person first and foremost. And she had a brain in her head. She was not all giggly and airheaded like this bimbo.

He got into the car that the insurance agency had provided him with and headed back to the hospital. James could not help but smile a little to himself. Clearly Wraith had taken away his car in order to prevent him from being mobile, but that inconvenience had been short lived. Unlike a serial killer, James had easily purchased insurance to deal with just such a thing, and his monthly payments had turned out to pay off for him. The little Honda was not exactly what James would want to drive on a permanent basis, but it worked for now. If for nothing else, it served as a great way for him to extend a middle finger in Wraith's direction.

James parked the Honda in the hospital parking lot and went in. When he made it to Jennifer's room, he nodded at the two policemen and went in. Not too surprisingly she was sleeping. She had slept a lot since the ordeal. James hoped that eventually all that rest would help her to mend both mentally and emotionally. Jennifer tossed and turned a little and a small whimper escaped her lips. The sound broke his heart. No doubt she was reliving the nightmare of thinking she was going to be cut into little pieces until she finally succumbed to death.

James sat down beside her bed and rested his face in his hands. He wished there was something he could do to make it all just go away, but he did not know how to do that. This was no doubt the darkness he had been aware of. This man Wraith had been coming for him for a long time even though neither man had known it until recently. James' biggest fear was that whatever it was it would find some way of hurting Jennifer and it turned out that he had been right on the money. If only he had known, he would never have talked to her like he did

when they first met. He would not have confided in her and let her confide in him. He would not have let her fall in love with him.

He could not imagine what his life would have been like without her in it, but he would rather have had that be the case than allow himself to be the catalyst of her demise. Jennifer moaned and her hand shot up in a defensive manoeuvre. This jolt brought her out of her sleep and she opened her eyes in terror, scanning the room for her attacker. James put his hand on her raised arm and she looked at him, first in alarm, and then in recognition.

"Hey." James said quietly, trying to reassure her with the sound of his voice.

"Hey, there." Jennifer replied hoarsely. "How is my knight in shining armor?"

"Scared and concerned." James answered honestly.

"Don't worry about me." Jennifer said. "I have two cops waiting for anybody to try something. I am worried about you. Who is going to protect you from this creep or any more of his friends?"

"I will be okay as long as you are okay." James said. "Without you I have nothing to live for. It just scares me to think that all of this seems to be so easy for him and the police seem to be inept at finding him."

"Sweeny is a smart man." Jennifer told him. "I think he will find your tormentor."

"I hope so." James said. "I already lost my mom to this freak. I would die if I lost you. You need to rest some more. The doctor thinks you will be able to come home tomorrow, so you need to get your sleep. I will be right here."

"Good." Jennifer said as she closed her eyes. "I can sleep better knowing that my savior is here with me."

Chapter 31

Twenty years ago.

"Jimmy, I want you to talk to me about the short story I had you write for me."

"My name is Wraith."

"Okay then, Wraith, I want to talk to you about your story." Dr. Waters said again.

"Why?"

"I want to understand it better."

"You are too stupid to understand it." Wraith said. "You are an idiot that spills ink on your paper and asks people what they see. You think people deserve life even when they are as stupid as you."

"Jimmy, I mean Wraith; we are not going to have that discussion again." Dr. Waters said, as patiently as he could. "At least not at this appointment. Maybe later we will talk about it some more. I just want to ask you about your story. You wrote it after I asked you to, so you must have known I would ask you about it."

"I wrote it because it is true." Wraith said. "I only do what I want to do, not what you 'ask' me to do. I don't care if you understand it or not."

"Fine. But let's talk about it anyway." Waters said. Wraith knew that he was not going to win with this idiot. The doctor just did not get it. He did not understand life so how could he understand the truths behind it?

"Go ahead and ask your stupid questions." Wraith said.

"I asked you to write about a monster, which you did, but it is not at all what I expected." Dr. Waters said. Of course, it was not what he had expected. He had thought that by having Jimmy write about a monster he would show his fears and maybe provide some insight into why he liked to kill animals. What little Jimmy had written, however, was a disturbing tale of a monster that came out of the closet and killed a little boy's parents. Together then the boy and the monster ate the parents over a candle lit dinner. It was so vivid in detail that Dr. Waters nearly lost the contents of his stomach simply reading it. He was beginning to doubt that he could help this boy.

"What did you expect?" Wraith asked. "That everybody would play patty cake and live happily ever after?"

"I suppose I expected for the monster to be presented as more of a villain than a hero. At the very least, I expected the monster to go after the boy rather than his parents." Dr. Waters said.

"Why would he try to kill the boy?" Wraith asked. "The boy was innocent. The parents were the ones that had shown themselves to be betrayers. They were the ones that needed to die. The monster was just protecting the boy from the real monsters."

"Why do you say that they were betrayers?" Waters knew the answer, but it was clear that he wanted to hear it from the little boy that seemed to be quite sick in his opinion.

"They sent him to bed without his supper." Wraith answered. "They were starving him."

"I think they were simply punishing him for misbehaving." Waters said. "You wrote that the little boy had been told not to kick the dog anymore and so he stabbed it instead."

"There is no such thing as misbehavior." Wraith said. "There is only behavior. It can be good or it can be bad, but it cannot misfire altogether unless nothing is done at all. Everybody does something, so there is no misbehavior. The boy did not disobey his mom. She told him not to kick the dog. He didn't. He obeyed his mother and she punished him for it."

"I think it could be reasoned that when she told him not to kick the dog she meant that she did not want him to hurt the dog at all anymore." Waters suggested.

"But that is not what she said." Wraith argued. "She told him not to kick it and he didn't. How can anybody obey implied instructions? If you told me to eat the sandwich on a table, and there was a drink beside it, I would both eat the sandwich and drink the drink. Just because you did not tell me not to drink the drink is no reason to punish me for it."

"So you don't think it was bad for the boy to kill the dog by stabbing it?" Waters asked.

"No, the dog was making the boy mad. When he couldn't kick it anymore, he still needed to do something to get it to stop irritating him." Wraith reasoned.

"So he killed it. Doesn't that seem a little excessive?" Waters asked.

"Why?" Wraith responded with a question of his own. By his facial expression, it was evident that it made perfect sense for the boy to kill the dog. Waters surrendered the point for the moment and decided to move on.

"Let's just keep going for now." Dr. Waters said. "When the monster came out of the closet, why did it not go after the boy?"

"There was no reason for it to kill him." Wraith said. "The boy was innocent. The monster felt bad for him. He had obeyed his parents and they punished him for it. They sent him to bed without his supper and he was hungry."

"Why would a monster care about how the boy felt?"

"Do you think that monsters do not have a sense of right and wrong?" Wraith asked. "Just because you may not agree with their perspective does not make them incorrect or unable to have their own morals that they decide to stick to. If the boy had kicked the dog, maybe the monster would have eaten him too."

"So why did the monster kill the parents instead?" Waters asked.

"Because they were bad people. They told the boy what was expected of him and then they punished him for doing what they said. If they had not been killed, the poor boy would have grown up confused and never knowing if he was going to be punished or not. He might have turned into a bad person too. The monster was protecting him from that." Wraith said. His voice was filled with exasperation. He really did not understand why he needed to explain what should have been obvious.

"So the monster was acting in the boy's best interests by killing his parents?" Dr. Waters asked in order to clarify exactly what little Jimmy was trying to get across.

"Yes." Again there was nothing but conviction and irritation in Wraith's voice and facial expression. He could not believe how incredibly dense this doctor was. How could somebody this stupid possibly have a degree?

"But why did he feed the parents to the boy?" Waters asked. "Doesn't that seem to be a little grotesque to you?"

"The boy was hungry." Wraith said. "The monster wanted to take care of him. He did not know how to cook or make anything else. He knew how to eat people that were bad and so he fed the bad people to the boy."

"Don't you think that it would be hard on the boy emotionally to eat his own parents? After all, they were the ones that had given him life." Waters was trying to find the slightest hint of humanity in his patient.

"Why?" Wraith asked again with confusion. He did not understand what was so hard to understand. "They were starving him and confusing him. What was wrong with eating them?"

"First, it is both wrong and illegal for humans to eat other humans." Waters said. "Second, they were not just any people, they were his parents. Wouldn't it make the boy sad to see his parents killed, let alone to eat them alongside their killer?"

"You are an idiot." Wraith said. "There is nothing wrong with eating when you are hungry. A lot of things are illegal that are stupid. The governments that make stupid laws are just as bad as the parents. They need to die too."

"If there were no rules and no governments, what would there be other than chaos?" Waters asked.

"What is wrong with chaos?" Wraith asked. "Chaos is fair. Chaos does not set rules and then change them at its leisure. Chaos kills those that deserve it because they are too stupid to survive. People like you would be the first to die and that would make the world a better place."

"So your monster is presented as the hero because it is an agent of chaos?" Waters asked.

"Yes." Wraith said. "He took out those that were deserving of death and ignored stupid rules. He made everything right for the boy. The boy would be able to grow up right because of him."

"Right in your opinion." Waters said. "Did you not say that just because something is right in one person's mind it does not make it right in somebody else's?"

"Yes." Wraith said.

"In my mind, nothing about your story was right." Waters said. "So now we both have different views of what is right and what is not. How do you reconcile this? How do you decide who is actually right?"

"I am right because you are stupid." Wraith said. "You don't believe in violence and I do. I will kill you and then your opinion won't matter. That makes me right."

"I do not think you could kill me." Waters said, referencing their obvious size differences.

"Not yet." Wraith shrugged. "When I am big enough I will kill you. You can think you are right until then. When I come for you and you die, then you will see that you have been wrong all this time. I am patient enough to wait for that."

Chapter 32

Detective Todd Sweeny opened his eyes and surveyed the semi-darkness that his hospital room presented. He was not in intensive care any longer. His stay in there had been fairly short. He had managed to get out of the burning house before his lungs had been burned, and surprisingly he had also lucked out in not having his skin burned beyond measure as well. All in all, considering both the gunshots he had endured, as well as the fire, he had been fairly lucky. Stupid, he thought, but lucky. He could not believe that he had once thought Detective Anderson to be so foolish for getting himself into a compromising situation and then ended up letting Wraith get the drop on him too.

Sweeny had been moved to a normal hospital room after the bullets had been removed from his leg and his wounds had been treated. There had been no bullet to remove from his right hand since it had passed all the way through. Sweeny did not know if he would ever be able to use that hand again. He did not have nearly as much hair as he once did, but it would grow back as would the damaged skin. The ultimate result of Wraith's attack was not that Sweeny had been left crippled and unable to continue his pursuit of the madman so much as that it had instilled in him a greater burning hatred for the killer.

It took Sweeny a moment to recognize the shadowy outline of his visitor that sat completely still in the chair beside him. He knew that the presence of this person was the reason for him to have woken up from his disturbing sleep. Call it cop instinct, or maybe just the natural instinct that comes to all people who feel as if they are being watched. Whatever it was, it had brought him to alertness and now he stared intently at the dark figure that sat in silence.

"Wraith." Sweeny rasped.

"Bless me father, for I have sinned." Wraith said with amusement in his voice.

"I am not your damned father." Sweeny said. He felt an aching in his stomach at the thought of it.

"So you are claiming that you didn't know Gloria Harper twenty seven years ago?" Wraith asked, his voice smooth as silk.

"No." Sweeny said, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. "I didn't."

"Why does everybody think they can lie to me?" Wraith asked in mock exasperation. "Come now, detective, do you really think I am ever ill prepared for my adversaries? Oh, wait, I forgot. Dear old mom did not go by Gloria back then. She preferred her middle name. I don't suppose Jessica Harper sounds more familiar?"

"J...Jess?" Sweeny swallowed hard. No, this couldn't be. Was it really Jess that he had seen hanging upside down and mutilated? Jess Harper? His first love? No! No! This was all wrong.

"Oh." Wraith said savoring the emotions pouring out of Sweeny. "That name rings a bell does it? The woman you knocked up and then abandoned as you went about earning your

badge in police academy. How ironic for it to come back on you now. Talk about sins of the father."

"I didn't abandon her." Sweeny said, feeling himself getting defensive. The thought that he needed to justify his actions to this man of all people was just ridiculous. "I never knew what happened to her. I was getting ready to go into police academy and she called me up to tell me that she didn't want to see me anymore. She said that I did not need her and her issues in my life. She said that I had my career to focus on and that she would have only gotten in the way. I tried to get her to talk to me about it, but she just said goodbye and hung up. After that she would never answer her phone or even her door when I would come knocking. I finally gave up."

"You gave up?" Wraith asked incredulously. "From everything I know about you, you never give up on anything. Is it really that you knew she was pregnant and you did not even want to try? It's okay, you can tell me. It won't really change anything between us. I am still going to kill you when I am done with James."

"Shut your mouth you little insect." Sweeny rasped through his raw throat. "I loved her more than anything, but she wouldn't let me in. She wanted to go through it all on her own. She never even told me that she was pregnant. She ruined me. After her, nobody could compare and no relationship would last. I became married to my work because I could never be married to the only woman I could love. Damn it, I would have done anything for her. She never told me she was carrying my child."

"Well she told the hospital." Wraith said. "She put you down as the father on my birth certificate. So I hope you will forgive me for not believing you knew nothing about this *dad*."

"Don't you dare call me that." Sweeny spat out angrily. "*You* are not my son. *You* were not her son. James is her son. You are nothing but a sick freak on the outside looking in."

Wraith reached over and backhanded Sweeny across his face. The detective did not give him the satisfaction of even so much as grimacing in pain. Instead, he just regarded the young man as coolly as he could. Wraith could not stand the way Sweeny looked at him. He felt like he was being looked down upon. Like he was nothing more than an errant child. It enraged him even more than being told that he was the imposter.

"Shut up. Shut up. Shut up." Wraith hissed with pure poison on his breath. He knew that he sounded like an errant child for this outburst and that made him even angrier. He forced himself to calm down and breathe easier. It was not like him to let people get to him like that. Link was one thing, but real people were something else altogether.

"That pathetic little man is not your son. He is not your precious little Jessica's son either." Wraith said much more smoothly. "You know this. He is too weak to be your son. I am the strong one. I am the only one that could have come from your bloodlines. Link says he is my brother, but I do not have a brother. I would not have put up with the presence of a rival. Not even in my mother's womb. I only put up with Link because there is no way for me to kill him."

"You are not my son." Sweeny said, regarding Wraith like an insect. "No son of mine could do the things you do."

"Oh, but I am your son." Wraith grinned, showing his teeth like a shark. "Search your heart. You know it is true. Ironic isn't it? You gave me my life and I am going to take yours just like I took my mother's. The great circle of life in a whole new light."

"What are you waiting for? Get it over with. It won't change anything. You will always be nothing more than a freak. Always on the outside looking in. Never knowing what it is like to have the love of your parents. Just finish it you little puke." Sweeny growled at him.

"You have goaded a response out of me once, but it will not happen again." Wraith said calmly. "Do you think I ever wanted your love? All I ever wanted was your death."

"Then just do it already. Do you think you are going to break me? You can never break me. I am stronger than that. I am stronger than you and I always will be. Just kill me already." Sweeny wished that he had not been in such a weakened state or he would have lunged at Wraith instead of just laying there waiting for his end to come.

"No." Wraith said. "I did not come here to kill you. If I wanted to kill you when you were helpless, I would have done so in Vixen's basement. I came here to see your pain at knowing who you brought into this world. I came here to let you know what a horrible death your first love experienced at my hands. How very sad that you did not even recognize her as she hung upside down from her own wall."

"If you walk out of here without ending me, I swear to god I will hunt you down and kill you. I don't care how long it takes or how far you run. I will follow you to the ends of this earth in order to make sure you never hurt anybody ever again." Sweeny promised him.

"I am sure that you will." Wraith said as he stood up and looked at the clock. It was nineteen minutes after ten o'clock. Perfect. "In fact I am counting on it. Now if you will excuse me, I have some loose ends to tie up. So many people to kill and so little time."

He moved to the door and let one more evil smile part his lips and show his predatory teeth as he turned to look back at his estranged father. In an instant, he was gone and Sweeny was left alone in the room once more. It was only after Wraith had left that Sweeny realized he could have hit the button on his bed to call for help. Not that it would have done anything helpful. All that really would have happened would be for an innocent nurse to get murdered right in front of him. A few seconds after Wraith disappeared out of the room the clock turned to ten twenty, and Sweeny was left to ponder everything he had been told.

Chapter 33

Twenty two years ago.

Jimmy.

"Who said that?" Jimmy asked, lifting his head up from the dead kitten. He looked around quickly. He had thought that he was alone. If somebody had seen him strangle the kitten to death, he was going to be in a lot of trouble. His mom would never let him touch another animal again. He couldn't let that happen. He needed to do this again. It was the best thing that he had ever experienced. Whoever had seen him needed to be forced into staying quiet. It had sounded like a kid so he knew he could handle it.

Jimmy, why did you kill the kitten? I liked the kitten.

"Who are you?" Jimmy asked as he spun around in a circle. "Where are you hiding?"

Who am I? I don't know how to answer that. I always thought I was you. I guess I am not. I would not have killed the kitten. I wish that you hadn't killed it either. I want to tell mom.

"You can't be me." Jimmy said. He was exceptionally smart for his age, but this did not make any sense at all. He couldn't figure out where the voice was coming from. He could hear it, but at the same time it did not sound like it came from anywhere. It seemed as if it came from his head, like an echo inside a well. It made his head hurt. "I am me and nobody else is."

Then who do you think I am?

"I don't know. A ghost?" Jimmy did not believe in ghosts, but he could not really offer a better explanation for the voice he heard.

I am not a ghost. I have always been with you. I watch you. I watch the other one too. I think you could say I am the link between you both, filling in the voids. Yes, that sounds right. Call me Link.

"What are you talking about?" Jimmy asked. "What other one?"

I can see that this is really confusing to you. I will not elaborate on who I am or who the other one is. I would not want to upset you. But I still want to know why you killed the kitten. I loved the kitten. Now what will I snuggle with? I want to tell mom, but she will just punish me too. Why did you have to ruin it for me?

"I don't even know who you are. Why would I care about somebody that I don't know?" Jimmy demanded. "I don't care what you thought about the kitten or what I did to it. I killed it because it was fun and I want to do it again. I don't give a damn if you don't like it, and I don't care what you snuggle with. Now go away."

Do you think that it really works like that? You think you can just wish me away? You are stupid. You can't get me to just leave whenever you want me to. I come and go when I

want to. There is nothing you can do about it. What can you do? Are you going to try to choke me to death too? Can you choke yourself?

Jimmy was so mad that he could barely see straight. Nobody had ever called him stupid before. If he could just figure out where this kid was hiding, he would teach him a lesson. Except that he was alone. It both made sense and confused him at the same time that this boy Link was inside his head instead of being outside of it. How could he get after a boy that was inside his head? Could he choke him out? No, he would only hurt himself. Just thinking about it made his head hurt.

"Please go away." Jimmy tried a different approach. Sometimes when he was dealing with adults, they would change their minds about things if he decided to use manners. Maybe by asking Link to leave nicely he would be left alone. He almost crossed his fingers in hopeful expectation. It did not work. While Link was quiet for a moment, Jimmy did not feel the pressure in his head decrease. He did not need to be told that this indicated that the strange and inexplicable presence of another in his head had remained.

Why? Am I making you mad? Get over it. You made me mad by killing the kitten. If you bring the kitten back to life then I promise I will go away and quit bothering you.

"I can't do that." Jimmy said in despair. If he had known that killing the kitten was going to bring about this much trouble, he would have killed something else instead. Now that he had killed it, he knew that he needed to kill something else. He also knew that it had been inevitable that he would end up killing something. It had only been a matter of time. Too bad he had chosen a target that Link had been fond of. Now he had to put up with the irritating voice in his head.

Then I am going to stay and bug you. If you couldn't bring it back, you shouldn't have killed it. Now you have to deal with me. I can't wait to say things in your head all the time and make people think you are crazy if you try to talk back. You thought it was fun to kill the kitten, but you have no idea what kind of hell you have brought on yourself. You are going to hate the day that you killed it.

"I asked nicely. Go away or I will kill every kitten I come across. If I can't get to you, I will show you what I am capable of." Jimmy declared. He did not want Link to think that he could hold leverage over him. He was not used to being threatened by anybody, let alone himself. "You are going to hate the day you decided to pop up and bug me."

Fine. I will go for now. I know that you will kill other kittens anyway. Other puppies, too. Maybe even other people. You are evil. One day, though, I am going to have my revenge on you.

Jimmy felt a rush in his mind and then a feeling of pressure being relieved. He still looked around and tried to find anybody that might have been hiding, just to make sure that none of this had been a cruel joke. If he found somebody, he was really going to hurt them. Jimmy looked everywhere he could think of, but he neither heard a sound, nor saw any trace of this boy Link.

"Hello?" He called out and received no reply. Good. He was finally alone again. Now he could figure out what to do with the dead kitten and what he was going to tell his mom about it. As long as Link could not take over his body, then maybe Link would not be more than a nuisance.

Chapter 34

Dr. Waters stepped cautiously down the staircase that led from his master bedroom down to the main floor of his house. His wife, Adele, had heard a noise and asked him to go and investigate. He did not really know why he was indulging her like this. They had a state of the art security system that was automatically armed every night at nine and it was well after midnight. He had not heard anything at all, but she was a lighter sleeper and insisted she had heard a noise come from downstairs.

He did not really know why he moved with any caution at all. He had firm faith in the security system to keep any intruders out. If he had believed for one minute that some criminal was down below with mal-intent, he would have never dared to make this voyage to find them. He was not a hero or a thrill seeker. He was a man of the mind. Violence was not his forte. He would have rather picked up the phone and called the police if he was doing this for any other reason than to satisfy his wife's nervousness.

Perhaps he could get a late snack while he was down there anyway. He lost his small sense of trepidation as he thought about this and journeyed much more freely to the foot of the stairs. In order to still have a minor sense of being the brave protector of the house, he did look around casually on his way to the kitchen. Nothing seemed to be out of place, and he boldly went into the kitchen to make himself a sandwich. He would let Adele know that she was safe after he satisfied his hunger.

It did not take him long to polish off his sandwich, which consisted of pastrami on rye bread with a few slices of pepper jack cheese for an extra little kick. Waters was about to head back up the steps, but he thought perhaps he really ought to make a more thorough inspection of the downstairs. Knowing Adele, she would ask him about each and every room before she was satisfied with their overall security. He had never been a good liar, so if he told her that he had been in a room and had not, she would surely call him out on it and make him return to investigating.

He left the kitchen and went into the living room. Nothing was even slightly amiss in this room. Every last couch pillow was neatly in place and the coasters sat perfectly stacked on the coffee table. The novel he had been reading about genetic engineering gone wrong on a family man still sat in the rocking chair where he had left it. If he had not been tired, he might have returned to it and read another chapter. He found the mental state of the protagonist to be fascinating.

Forcing himself to move on from this new temptation, he moved into the room that Adele called his playroom. He preferred to call it his study, but he had to admit that she might have had a point. While the room did have a desk and several books on psychology, the main feature for him had always been the world war two action figurines and buildings that he liked to collect. From time to time, he would take them off his shelves that lined the room and place them out on the floor in simulations of battles that actually took place. Waters had

always known that this would look to others like a little boy playing war, but he loved history and this war in particular.

The day earlier he had simulated one of his favorite battles, the storming of Normandy, but afterward he had cleaned up and placed every vehicle, soldier, bunker, and building back in its proper place. Waters was anal about not leaving a mess behind him when he was finished. It was simply slovenly to leave items all over the floor like that. What kind of professional in the field of mental medicine would allow himself to behave in such a way?

When he stepped into the room to do a quick look at the study, however, he immediately noticed that something was terribly out of place. There were figurines all over the floor in a mock battle that he had not set up. Adele never messed with these things and they did not have any children or grandchildren that could have disturbed his study. He turned the light on and was stunned to see British soldiers engaging in running lines into German bunkers. All of the German soldiers inside the bunker were lying on the ground as if they had been killed by what was in the lines.

He knew that this portrayed the action of pumping hydrogen sulfide into the bunkers to subdue and kill the Germans, but he had never set up such a scenario. He did not know who had managed to get past his security alarm and set this up, but, for the first time since coming down the stairs, he truly believed that he and Adele were not the only people in the house. Waters reached for the phone on his desk in order to call the police. Just like in the thriller movies that Adele liked to watch, however, the line was dead.

Without a second thought, the once brave protector of the house turned and fled for the stairs. He wanted to get up to Adele and let her know that they needed to get out of the house immediately. His eyes were wide with panic as he reached the steps and ascended them two at a time. Any and all thoughts of bravery were as foreign to him as thoughts of flying to the moon using his arms as wings. Mentally he was aware of the fact that his mad flight was not very stealthy and would surely draw the attention of the intruder, but his intellectual side was severely outmatched by the human tendency to act on impulse when in danger.

Waters ran through the open doorway to his bedroom and came face to face with his greatest failure. He had thought it had been his greatest achievement until this very moment. The boy he had known as Jimmy, and then Wraith, and then back to Jimmy had grown into a man and was standing at the foot of the bed holding a knife that dripped crimson blood onto the Persian carpet. The breath halted in Waters' throat and his racing heartbeat came to a nearly crashing halt. While he had been eating and exploring the downstairs, his old patient had been up here carving on Adele.

"Hello stupid." Wraith said with an evil grin on his face as he stepped aside to let Dr. Waters see his handiwork. "As you can see, your wife and I have been having one hell of a time. How was your sandwich?"

Dr. Waters stood transfixed as he stared down at the blood soaked sheets he only recently been lying in when Adele had asked him to go investigate. The covers were thrown back to reveal her naked and ravaged body. She had been wearing a night gown that had been cut off of her and tossed aside. Her panties had been ripped off and piled on top. Adele's eyes were wide with a look of terror, but they could no longer see anything. Wraith had gutted her from her navel to her sternum and from side to side, peeling her open and exposing her insides.

Amazingly enough, Wraith did not appear to have a drop of blood on him. Even the gloves he wore looked to be spotless. The only thing other than the sheets and the floor that had her blood on it was the knife that had been used to do the deed. Waters could not bear to look anymore and he sank to the floor in desperation and horror. He knew that his end was coming too. The little boy had promised that he would kill him someday and it seemed to be a foregone conclusion that the day had come. His mind screamed at him to run, but his body would not cooperate. He just sat there in submissive stillness, waiting for the stroke of the knife.

Wraith studied his former doctor for a long time, but did not bring the knife down on him. Waters began to feel incredibly unsettled. He did not know why he was not being ripped apart like his wife. After all, he was the reason this man had come here tonight, not Adele. She had only been a victim because she had the misfortune to be married to the doctor that had tried to cure this man of his mental illness. Finally, Wraith stepped closer and knelt down by the doctor. While he still held the knife in his hand, it was not pointing in Waters' direction at all.

"You are not crying." Wraith said, with a slightly questioning tone.

"No." Waters was amazed to find that he could actually speak.

"Why not?" Wraith cocked his head to the side as if he was an animal trying to understand human behavior. The small part of Waters' mind that could still reason found this to be appropriate. Wraith was not a human; he was an animal, a vicious predator that stalked mankind.

"I am waiting." Was all he could say.

"Waiting for what?" Wraith asked, raising his knife after a short pause. "For this?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Wraith asked in amusement.

"Because you came here to kill me." Waters responded. He felt like he was in a trance or deep under water. His mind kept screaming at him to run or strike out at Wraith, but he could do nothing but sit there in total submission and wait for the inevitable.

"Yes I am." Wraith said. "But I do not intend to do so with a knife. Don't get me wrong, I love knives. They are so much more personal than guns. Anybody can shoot another person. All it takes is a quick flex of the finger and a life is ended. But who can really take a knife and ram it into human flesh? Or maybe take a blunt object and swing it into another person with enough force to kill them? Yes, death by this means is such a better rush of emotion and ecstasy. I love to watch the eyes of my victims as they realize their hopelessness. But this is not for you. I have something special for you."

"Please, just kill me." Waters said.

"What was that?" Wraith asked, pretending he did not hear what the doctor had said.

"Please, just kill me." Waters repeated.

"What about your 'right to life'?" Wraith mocked. "Isn't that what you believe in?"

"Please, just kill me." It was really all Dr. Waters could say anymore.

"I will." Wraith said, as he produced a taser and pressed it into the doctor's neck. "Or rather you will."

Waters felt the jolt run through his body and he fell backward and started to convulse violently. He was aware through his spasms of being drug through the hallway and down the

stairs, but it was hard for him to focus on anything. Another shot of the taser went through him as they reached the front door. This was enough to get to him fade out altogether. He did not know what was going to happen, but he was certain that more pain was on its way.

Chapter 35

Dr. Waters was aware of a sharp pain in his head as he opened his eyes and tried to focus. It took him several minutes to register why he felt so groggy. It all came rushing back to him and he sat bolt upright from the position he had been lying in. He remembered going to investigate the sound his wife had heard and seeing what had been done to his war figurines. Waters remembered rushing upstairs and finding Adele's body with her cold blooded killer. The thought made him want to retch. Grief mixed with a total sense of helplessness overtook him and even managed to drown out the incredible pain that he felt throbbing in his head.

"Well, hello there sleeping beauty." A terrifying and familiar voice said from behind him. Waters turned and focused on the shadowy figure of the boy he knew as Wraith. It did not even register to him to think of the young man as Jimmy. Jimmy was a good kid. This man was a monster. He realized that while Wraith was standing up, he was stooped over a little. His mind was still struggling to wake up, so he had not noticed at first that he was inside a tent. It was only when he had seen how Wraith was standing that he recognized what sort of structure he was in. He almost asked why he was there, but he had a feeling he would be finding that out soon enough anyway.

"How long was I out?" He asked instead. It seemed like a better question. Not really all that relevant, but it was something that Wraith might not have told him on his own. Mostly it was because he wanted to know how much time had passed since his wife had died. He wanted so badly to join her. It was not her fault that this man had come calling and he did not want her to get too much of a head start on him at whatever it was that waited in the next life, if anything.

"Not long." Wraith replied. "Only a few minutes. If it had been much longer, I would have woken you up. I don't have all night after all, and I really wanted to have a chance to talk to you before you kill yourself."

"Kill myself?" Waters felt like kicking himself. He was trying not to ask questions that would be answered soon anyway. He did not think that he had very much longer to live and Wraith would no doubt let him see it coming.

"Yes. One way or another. I think it will become obvious shortly." Wraith said dismissively. "In the mean time I thought it would be nice to have one more session with you. That is assuming you are still willing to talk to me. Reach deep down inside yourself doctor. Can you be professional with the man that killed your wife?"

"Please just kill me and get it over with." Waters pleaded. He did not know if he could even try to be this man's psychiatrist.

"I like your attitude." Wraith said. "Don't worry. It is coming. But I still need you to answer my question."

"You want me to treat you? You are beyond treatment. You always were." Waters said.

"Well then I guess you should never have given me a clean bill of health." Wraith said, flashing his evil grin again. "How could you even call yourself a psychiatrist and let yourself be fooled by a seven year old with a penchant for killing small animals?"

"So that is what this is about?" Waters asked in total disbelief. "You killed my wife and drug me to this tent all because I didn't cure you? Now you think that we can have one more session and it will make everything better? There is nothing that can change the fact that you are nothing more than a sadistic monster."

"I am not a monster. I am balance. You are the monster. You and everybody else that tries to live their little lives satisfying the status quo. I am not the monster of the story. I thought you would have figured that out a long time ago. I am the one that saves the child from his evil parents. Did you really learn nothing from my story?" Wraith explained, calm and cool as if he was talking about the weather. "The world is the child and you and your kind are the parents. You withhold what is good in order to fit your own preconceived ideas about what is right and what is wrong."

"And what makes you the one that gets to decide what is best?" Waters asked. "Do you think that killing people somehow makes you superior to them?"

"Yes." Wraith answered. Waters had to hand it to the man; he had never shown any signs of a lack of conviction in his own ideals. "See how much fun this is? I have really missed our little chats like this. Haven't you?"

"I have never missed you." Waters said. "But as long as you insist on playing this sick little game, let me ask you a question. Why did you kill Adele? She did nothing to you. She never even knew about you."

"That is simple, good doctor. I killed her to make you suffer. It would have been too easy just to kill you and move on with my life. I wanted to break you. I wanted to show you how wrong you always were. That nobody had a right to life. That life is only earned through the blood of others. Would you have seen that if I had simply slit your throat? Would you have begged for death as you did after seeing your wife? I do not think so." Wraith said matter-of-factly.

"You like to make people give in to your line of thinking?" Waters asked.

"In a way. I prefer to think of it as showing them at the end of their lives how very wrong they were about life." Wraith shrugged. "None of this is really what I wanted to talk to you about though. You have already acknowledged your lack of a right to life through your pleas for me to end it. I wanted to talk to you about something I did that was actually bad."

"You feel bad about something?" Waters could not even fathom what sort of deed would make this unsettled young man have a guilty conscience. What did he do, help an old lady cross the street? Stop a mugging? Pet a kitten without sticking a knife through it? Only a good deed could have upset a man this sick in the head.

"Yes." Wraith acknowledged, and his voice actually wavered a little. It was clear that he was still emotional about whatever it was. Strange as it seemed, Waters found that he was fascinated to know what could possibly upset him so much that he felt the need to get it off his chest. "I killed a pregnant woman. The fetus was too young to survive on its own. That means I killed a baby."

"I have a feeling you have killed a lot of people. Why should a baby be any different?" Dr. Waters asked, feeling an inexplicable interest bubbling forth from his grief.

"I have killed a lot of people. I will kill many more. But I have never killed a child. Children are off limits. They have not done anything deserving of death yet. They do not have a right to life as you believed, but neither should they have a contract with death. It is wrong to kill a child before you know what it is going to be like. For the first time in my life, I have done something that I am ashamed of. I guess I just needed to talk to you about it because I really don't know how to feel about it." Wraith told him.

"You should feel bad about it. You took an innocent life." Waters said. "But I really do not see how this is any different than all the other innocent lives you have taken."

"Because none of the rest were innocent." Wraith interjected. "All of them had done something deserving of death and I was the reaper. This baby had not even taken its first breath yet. I should not have killed it. I cried for the first time since my mom betrayed me to you. I was the betrayer this time. I betrayed the baby by not giving it the chance to become as in tune to the world as I am."

"Personally, I think that the death of the baby was the least lamentable death you have caused. In the minds of many, it would not even qualify as having been alive." Waters said.

"Then you will never truly understand." Wraith said. "Those people are idiots, and I kill them without remorse for their views. I had hoped that this would be helpful, but it seems I was just wasting both of our time. I don't see any reason to put this off any longer."

"So now you are going to kill me?" Waters asked.

"No. You are going to kill yourself. How many times do I need to say that? Do you remember what you found in your study?"

"The war figurines?" Waters asked.

"Precisely." Wraith said. "What were they doing?"

"The British soldiers were pumping the German barracks with gas to kill them."

"And that is exactly what I am going to do. I happen to have secured a nice amount of hydrogen sulfide that I am going to pump into this tent. It is definitely going to be enough to kill you in a short period of time. Now here is where you get to choose how you are going to die. You can either wait inside and let the gas shut you down and kill you, or you can choose to make your exit out this Velcro door. As you know, the gas is extremely flammable and the friction you create by opening the Velcro will be more than enough to ignite it."

"So how am I killing myself by staying in the tent?" Waters inquired. He was almost more interested in how Wraith had come to this reasoning than he was in the fact that he was going to be dead very shortly. It was like he had become detached by the notion of his death.

"I think that is fairly obvious." Wraith answered. "If you choose to remain in the tent, then you choose death for yourself. I am not going to be in here keeping you from escaping. That means it will be a form of suicide. If you decide to exit the tent once the pumping starts, it will mean that you are still trying to live. Unfortunately, there is no way for you to be fast enough. I am going to be pumping it in at a great rate. Either way you will be making a choice, and will die. Like I said, you will be killing yourself."

"If you are not going to keep me inside the tent, what is to stop me from exiting right after you do? Before you can start pumping it in."

"Oh that part of it is really simple." Wraith answered, as he proceeded to deliver a quick strike to the doctor's jaw. It was not enough to knock him out, but it certainly did the trick of stunning him and knocking him to the ground. Wraith exited the tent and turned on the pump

that was hooked to the small tank of hydrogen sulfide. Waters could smell the rotten egg smell associated with the gas as he struggled off the ground. For a very short while he thought about just sitting there and letting the gas do its thing.

After a short pause, though, his human survival nature kicked in over both reasoning and grief. He knew that it would mean death to open the tent, and he knew that he really did not want to go on without his wife. Ultimately, however, the desire to live outweighed all of it. He reached out for the door and yanked it open in an insane attempt to get out faster than the fire could consume him. He never stood a chance. The gas was already in his lungs and all around him. As the tent opened, the gas ignited and instantly burned him both inside and outside. His lungs were incinerated before he could even realize his mistake.

Wraith did not even watch the fireball. He had started walking away as soon as he turned the pump on. He knew that the doctor would open the tent. That was why he had hit him in the first place. In spite of the fact that the doctor had begged for death earlier, he knew that Waters had never fully realized how wrong he had been about his idea of every living thing having a right to life. The heat on his back did little to affect the cold that he felt inside. It was not that he had enjoyed doing this. It had simply been necessary and he had put it off for far too long. Now that the loose ends were tied up he could finally focus on James.

Chapter 36

Detective Todd Sweeny could not sleep. He did not like the hospital bed. It was not even remotely comfortable. He did not like the nurses coming in to check on him. He could not stand the food. He hated the sounds that came from the hallway outside. Keeping the door shut did not help. It did muffle the sounds, but that only seemed to make it worse. He could still hear voices and foot traffic. To not be able to clearly hear the conversations only made him more interested to know what was being said. Why was there so much conversation going on outside his room? Was there something he needed to know? No, with all of this, there was no way that the detective could sleep.

More than any of the external factors, though, the real reason that he could not sleep was because of the mad thoughts racing around inside his own mind. He could not believe that Wraith was his son, and yet the young man did not seem to be the type to make things up. But Gloria Harper was James' mother, not Wraith's. It was hard enough to think that he could be James' father without knowing it for all these years. But James was the right age to be the child his sweet Jessica had been carrying when she quit being willing to see him. So unless she had been cheating on him, and he had to admit that he had always wondered if she had left him for another man, then that would mean that James really was his son.

The more he thought about it, the more he could see a resemblance between James and how he was as a younger man. There really couldn't be much doubt. The boy was the right age and had the right looks to him. Now that he knew who James' mother really was, he had to admit the truth. He was the young man's father. He wished that he could have had more to do with his son's life up to this point, but maybe he could make up for it now. It was a long shot, but Sweeny couldn't help but crave it. The aging detective had never had a family and while he did not have any choice over Jessica's decision to keep him out of the loop, there was still time to try and rectify it on his part.

Sweeny felt an itch on his face as he contemplated the fact that he had been unaware of the boy's relationship to him. At first he could not understand why this would be the case. He only got these itches when he felt like he was on to something. Usually if his face itched like this and he was not actually thinking about something case specific, he had only to retrace his thinking until it occurred to him where there was a break to be made. Sweeny decided to do this and replayed both his line of recent thought as well as his conversation with Wraith until it hit him square in the face. Ironically it was something that he had been pursuing at the onset of the case and had dropped.

It was thinking about the similarity between himself and James that really started his thinking on the right track. That was what had set his face itching. Wraith seemed to view James as an imposter and claimed to be the real son of Gloria Harper. Sweeny did not know how much stock could be placed in that idea, but what really resounded in his mind was the fact that Wraith and James were very similar to each other. In fact if it were not for Wraith's ability to disguise himself, the argument could be made that the two of them were identical.

The idea of twins came to mind, but Sweeny did not put too much thought into it. Both men claimed to have Gloria Harper as their mother, and neither of them said anything about having any other siblings. An identical twin would definitely be something that would have caught the notice of somebody while they grew up. That meant that either one of them was lying about who they really were and were playing on the uncanny resemblance to put themselves into a family they did not belong to, or they were the same damn man.

Sweeny had no idea why Wraith would target himself for all of this destruction and misery, but it seemed pretty clear that he was not aware of sharing a body with another personality. James was not aware of Wraith either. Perhaps it was just a random coincidence that Wraith had decided his next target would be a man he thought was stealing from him, but was actually just another manifestation of his own self. It was actually a pretty funny thought. Sweeny wondered what would happen if Wraith figured out all of his recent work had been in vain. That his beloved Vixen had died at his own hand while attacking somebody that he also loved.

This was a very troubling thought in spite of the humor to it. When Vixen had died, Wraith's reaction to it had meant the deaths of a number of women in horrible ways. There really was no telling how somebody as deranged as this young man would react to this. In spite of his lack of mental stability, Wraith was incredibly smart so he could be capable of nearly anything. The body count could rack up to a level that the Grand Valley would never recover from. As it was, the news sources were beginning to press for information on the number of dead bodies that had been turning up. It was only a matter of time before sensationalism took over and fear of Wraith consumed the city.

It also did not help that the death of Agent Hook had brought the feds in. Once again they were taking over and Sweeny was not sure that he would be allowed to continue pursuing the killer that might actually be his son. He was damned if they would keep him out of it this time. Everything was entirely too personal right now. He knew on a purely logical level that it was best for him to step back due to the possibility of his emotions getting in the way of responsible police work, but he was not in the mood to be completely logical. People were dying in his town. His town, for god's sake. Horrible deaths. And he was the father of the killer. Or at least it seemed to be the case.

Feds or no feds, gunshot wounds or not, he was going to track Wraith down and put an end to his murderous ways. He knew now that there would be no way to bring him in. Wraith would never throw up his hands and surrender. Even if he appeared to be doing so, it would only mean that he was looking to get into close quarters in order to draw more blood. There was only one way to deal with the young man. He needed to be brought to justice in the old way. He needed to have his blood spilled on the ground in order to wash away his filth. Sweeny has seen similar men before, but nobody as ruthless and uncaring as Wraith. Even with those men, death was the only way to stop them from inflicting their poison on the public.

The real question was if Sweeny could bring himself to do it. He was a very good detective, hell he was the best. He had put down and arrested countless fiends, but he had never had to go up against his own flesh and blood in order to do so. He knew what had to be done, but he was not sure that when the moment came, when he was looking into the eyes of his boy, could he pull the trigger? He knew for certain that if he did not, Wraith certainly

would. There would be no way that he would keep Sweeny alive for any more of his games. The detective was fairly certain that Wraith had milked him for all the fun he thought he could squeeze out and their next encounter would surely end in the death of one of them.

Sweeny could see no point in continuing to mull this over from a hospital bed. Nothing productive could be accomplished lying around without being able to sleep. He rolled out of the bed and nearly fell on his face. He had not really been prepared for the amount of pain that would shoot through him from trying to put weight on his injured leg. This was not nearly enough to discourage him, however, and so he grimaced but remained on his feet. The first move was to get out of the ridiculous hospital gown and put on his clothes that were sitting on a chair next to the bed. With his damaged hand and leg this proved to be a difficult, yet not an insurmountable task.

With a lot of pain but even more resolve, Sweeny moved out the door and into the busy hallway. He would not even bother with trying to check himself out. There was no way that they would let him stroll out of here just yet. Instead of getting himself into a debate with a doctor or nurse, Sweeny elected to just move as nonchalantly as he could down the hallway. He knew that the feds would come up empty handed, and he did not have faith in the rest of the police force doing any better. No, if Wraith was going to be brought down, he needed to be the one to do it. It was time to perform a father's duty.

Chapter 37

28 years ago.

Jessica Harper fidgeted with the results of the pregnancy results she had gotten from her doctor. It was as she had feared. She was definitely carrying a child. Todd Sweeny's child. While she loved him and a huge part of her was happy to have his child, she was also worried, stressed out, and confused. She did not know how Todd would react to the news. He was becoming a cop and she did not want to distract him from what looked like it would be a bright future. In addition to this, she did not yet feel like she was ready yet for the commitment it would take to raise a child with somebody. That would mean letting herself be vulnerable in a way that she did not think she could handle.

As far as Jessica was concerned, people were fallible and they let other people down. If she never allowed herself to be vulnerable, nobody could really hurt her. This was a philosophy that had protected her up to this point, and she did not see any reason to abandon it now. Still she could not help but wonder what kind of a father Todd would be. He certainly seemed to like kids and he was a very nice man in general. Maybe it would not be such a bad thing to have him help her to raise a kid. The battle raging in her mind over whether to be strong or vulnerable was nearly unbearable.

If she chose not to let Todd be a part of this, there was still another question that she couldn't bring herself to analyze too closely yet. But it was there, eating away at her. Testing her conscience with subtle pokes and prods. Could she abort the baby? Could she write this off as a mistake and move on with her life? Todd wouldn't even have to know. She could just complain of being sick or something until she recovered and then she could continue to see him. As far as he would be concerned it would be no harm no foul. He would never know that she had murdered his child.

Oops. There was the word that gave her pause and forced her to shy away from the subject again. Murder. That is what it would be wouldn't it? She and Todd had created a life and it had already begun to grow. Could she really bring herself to kill it off without giving it the chance to show what kind of a life it could have had? This was such a hard thing to think about. She wished that she could just go back in time and prevent herself from making this mistake. Jessica was not very good at worrying about anything other than herself.

She put the results back in her pocket and fished out the coupon that she had found under windshield wipers after she came out of the doctor's office. It had seemed almost eerie when she had found it, but at the same time it couldn't have found its way onto her car at a better time. She had always wondered about fortune tellers and if there was anything to them or if they were just a bunch of bull. Jessica shrugged slightly. Now was as good a time to try and find out as any. She really had no idea what to do and maybe she would get some helpful

insight on that subject. Or maybe she would get nothing, but could at least say that she had checked it out.

With this in mind she approached the small shop on Main Street that declared itself to be the purveyor of all things mystical and mysterious. Amongst all the goods the emporium had to offer, it also supplied fortunes to be told in the back of the store. This was all Jessica was interested in as she entered the dark and slightly creepy store. Only a few other customers were in the place and they all looked like they belonged to some sort of cult or other. Their eyes fixed on her as she moved through the place. She did not know if this was because she looked so out of place or if they were sizing her up for some sort of sacrifice.

At the counter, an overweight woman sat reading a tabloid magazine that declared to have pictures of some interbreeding between aliens and cattle. She looked like a cross between Japanese and some sort of Native American, but Jessica could not be sure. The woman, who appeared to be in her early forties, looked up as Jessica approached the counter and smiled revealing broken, uneven teeth. In spite of her homely appearance, she had a pleasant disposition that made Jessica feel much more at ease than the patrons eyes had.

"You are here to get your fortune told?" The plump woman asked. Although the sentence came with the standard slight raise in voice that indicates a question, it sounded much more like a statement.

"Yes. How did you know?" Jessica asked, slightly taken aback at the way the woman had read her. Or maybe it was because she had been expected. Like you see sometimes in movies.

"Because you are holding one of our coupons and you don't look like our typical clientele." The woman laughed. "Come to the back with me. My name is Madame Ruisha. I will tell you your fortune."

Without another word, the woman stood up and walked further into the store. Jessica followed with some hesitation. She still was not sure that this was going to be helpful and the store really did give her the creeps. She felt as if any number of the things she saw on the shelves might come alive and attack her. Or perhaps the real danger was in the people roaming the aisles. Either way, she really wanted to turn around and flee the place and never return. But in spite of her misgivings, she still felt herself following behind the fat woman with a need to know about the future of her child.

"Sit down here, my dear." Madame Ruisha said and pointed to a small chair across a round table with a gaudy looking purple chair on the other side. This is the one that the fat fortune teller settled herself into. Jessica obediently sat down at the indicated seat and looked meekly at Madame Ruisha.

"I came here to ask about..." Jessica began, but Madame Ruisha raised a hand and cut Jessica off.

"I am the fortune teller, remember? Let me tell you why you are here."

"Ok." Jessica said, still slightly suspicious yet intrigued.

"Now, let me see your palm, my dear." The older woman said. Jessica held it out to her and Madame Ruisha studied it very closely for a long time. Finally, she looked up and gazed into Jessica's eyes. "You are very concerned about what you should do about something troubling. You have come here for answers to questions you are afraid to ask. You think that if you know the future, you won't have to make a decision."

All of this was true, but then it could be said of anybody that came to see a fortune teller. So none of it really impressed Jessica and she was starting to think she had wasted her time. The woman continued to ramble on without giving any actual details for a while and Jessica found herself rapidly losing interest. Suddenly, though, all of that changed. And it changed so fast that Jessica almost screamed out in fright. The fortune teller's eyes went milky white and she jolted in her chair as if she had been struck with electricity. Her voice lost all signs of femininity and took on a growling deep voice like something out of a nightmare.

"Beware the wraith that stalks the gates and the quiet voice inside him." The voice boomed.

"What?" Jessica managed to stammer.

"The evil twin that lies within, a killer is what you'll find him." This time, Jessica, asked nothing, but listened out of fear and a sense of wonder. "The gentler son, the softer one, a source of comfort find. It's up to him, his life to mend before the wraith does bind. Take this and keep it, hidden, secret from the father who must end him. And do not stop the itchy cop for a father's duty compels him."

The seizure Madame Ruisha was under came to a sudden end and her eyes and voice returned to normal. The plump woman looked rather shaken by the ordeal and made a number of small gasping sounds. Her shock was nothing compared to that of Jessica Harper. She could not believe what she had just heard and seen. None of it made very much sense, but it had definitely rocked her to her core. What could those words have meant?

"I...I have never had that happen before." Madame Ruisha said haltingly.

"What does it mean?" Jessica asked, barely able to find her own voice.

"You are pregnant?" The older woman asked.

"Yes."

"And have you been questioning whether or not to tell the father?" Madame Ruisha inquired. She was still shaken, but it seemed that she knew the direction to take this.

"Yes, that is why I am here." Jessica said. "I don't know what to do about this anyway. I don't even know if I should keep the baby or not. Let alone what I should tell the father."

"You must tell him nothing." Madame Ruisha said. "Did you not hear? If you tell the father of the child that you are pregnant, you will be in violation of the words that were spoken. Do not anger the spirits. Variation from what they have spoken can only bring about terrible things."

"What if I abort the baby?" Jessica inquired. "Then there would be nothing to tell. And besides, the voice said something about an evil twin being a killer. I think it sounds best to make sure this child is never born."

"Bad idea." The fortune teller said. "Once again, you must heed what they say. Who knows what sort of evil might befall us all if you do not carry this child to term? And if this child is to be born, do you really think that you would be able to stop it? Do you think the abortion would even be successful? You would be wrong to think so. Neither you nor I have a stronger will than the spirits."

"So I need to have this child all alone and watch it grow into a killer?" Jessica asked. The whole thing was entirely too bizarre to her.

"Focus on the part about the gentler son. It said that you would find him to be a source of comfort. It also said that it was up to this son to mend his life. Just find enough strength to go through with this knowing that you will have a nice source of comfort as you raise a child on your own." Madame Ruisha responded.

"Children." Jessica corrected her.

"Excuse me?"

"Children." She repeated. "You said child, but the voice that came out of you said there are twins. How am I supposed to know which one is the killer?"

"I am sure you will be able to tell from either part of the prophecy. Maybe one will be a rotten person, and the other one will seem to be a lot gentler. Either way they will be born and it sounds as if they will have a manner of contention between them. Just remember to keep what you have heard and seen, and even the fact that you are pregnant from the father. It sounds as if he is in law enforcement." Ruisha said.

"Yes, he is going to make detective someday. At least that is his plan."

"Well then heed what the voice said." Madame Ruisha said. "If all else fails and you have your killer son on the loose, it certainly seems like he is going to be the one that needs to bring the evil twin down. He might have issues with that otherwise."

Jessica thanked the plump woman and hurried out of the store. Her mid-section was still reeling from what she had experienced. The woman had told her not to anger the spirits and to have this child without Todd knowing, but she could not help but wonder exactly what kind of spirits she was dealing with. If they had evil intent then of course, they wanted the children to be born. They would want a killer out and about in the world. Still, she could not bring herself to kill off the one that was said to be a source of comfort. The only thing she knew for certain was that she could not tell Todd Sweeny about any of this.

Chapter 38

James was sleeping in the chair beside Jennifer's bed having a restless nightmare. He was running from a shadowy figure, but he seemed to be moving in slow motion. He could not escape, could not even cry out for help. The evil shadow kept drawing closer and closer. It was not moving impossibly fast, just at a measured and consistent pace. Due to his own lack of ability to move with any speed at all, this was enough to allow it keep closing the ground between the two of them. He ran as hard and fast as he could, but it was just not enough. There was no escape and no hope.

Suddenly a house appeared in front of him. The shadow was close, but not close enough to stop him from gaining entrance. He found the door unlocked and stepped inside. He locked it right when the shadowy figure reached the door and started to bang up against it. James knew that it would come through. It would never stop coming until it killed him. He backed away from the door and moved into the interior of the house, looking for anything to use as a weapon. He went from room to room without finding anything. He stepped into one room and heard a voice that sent a chill right through him.

"I have been waiting for you."

James turned the light on to see where the voice had come from. He was in a bathroom and there was nobody else there. Then he realized that was not entirely true. There was a man in the mirror pointing a gun at him. It was Wraith and he was smiling the smile of victory. James tried to back out of the room, but there was no longer a doorway to escape from. He backed into a wall as blank and smooth as all the rest.

"No escape. This is the end of the road." Wraith said from the mirror and began to climb out of it. James was in pure terror. He tried to reach out and hit Wraith, but he was too slow and weak. Wraith simply laughed and blocked the feeble attempt. Then he raised the barrel of the gun and pointed it directly between James' eyes. The muzzle flashed and James felt his head jerk backward.

James jolted out of his nightmare in a cold sweat. It took him several seconds to realize that it had only been a dream. In spite of the unrealistic slowness he had been moving at and the fact that his surroundings had changed randomly, the dream had seemed so real. He admitted to himself that the most realistic aspect of the dream was that there had been no escape. Wraith was coming. There was nothing anybody seemed to be able to do about it. He was able to slip in and out of places and kill at will. Now he had his sights set on James and there was nothing to stop him from winning.

The phone rang in the hospital room and brought James out of his dreary thoughts about his dream and what it meant. He looked at Jennifer, but she did not stir at all at the sound of the phone. That was good, she needed to rest. As he reached out for the phone to see who was calling, he noticed the time on the clock. It was nine minutes after three in the morning. He did not know why, but that seemed to be significant. James raised the phone to his ear and went stiff. He began to wonder if he had indeed come out of the nightmare after all.

"No escape. This is the end of the road." Wraith said, on the other end of the line. James tried to speak, but he could not find any words.

"This is how everything is going to play out." Wraith continued, as if he knew James was struggling to put a reply together. "You are going to run. You are going to take Jennifer because you know if you leave her behind I will kill her on my way to you. You will try to escape from me, but I will find you anyway. I will kill both of you and I will move on with my life. You have already taken up too much of my time."

"You won't get away with this." James finally managed to rasp into the phone. It came out barely above a whisper.

"Don't be stupid." Wraith laughed into the phone. "There is nobody that can stop me. Don't you get it? I have already won. I won before you and I ever met. God is chaos and I am his agent. Think of me as a divine angel of darkness. There is nothing you or anybody else can do to keep me from fulfilling my purpose."

"Why are you doing this?" James asked in a voice that made him feel very weak.

"Tick tock." Wraith answered. "Time is not on your side. You can sit there asking me questions, or you can run. Either way I am coming for you."

That was all the motivation James needed for action. He placed the receiver down and gently shook Jennifer. She opened her eyes slowly and looked up at him with a glazed expression. Once she saw the urgency in his face, she brought herself to a more alert state.

"What is it?" She asked.

"We need to go." He said.

"Now?" Jennifer was confused. She thought that they were not leaving until the morning.

"Right now." James answered. "Wraith is coming."

"He is?" Jennifer sat bolt upright in her bed and swung her legs over the side. She was wide awake now. Apparently her recent encounter with Wraith's friend had gone a long way in convincing her of how dangerous the man could be. James helped her into her clothes and they left the hospital room in a matter of minutes. They tried not to show the absolute horror and panic that both of them felt as they moved along the hallway. Jennifer kept her head down to avoid recognition as they walked. The last thing they needed was for somebody to stop and ask them what they were doing or why she was out of bed.

Jennifer couldn't help but feel a shiver of terror run through her. She could still feel the absolute horror and helplessness she had felt at the hands of that sadistic woman. From the sounds of it, this man Wraith was even worse. If he was able to catch them, what sort of demonic torture did he have in mind? The only comfort came from the fact that James was at her side. If it had not been for him, she would not be alive. He had showed up in the nick of time and saved her life. The fact that he had been able to kill somebody so easily was something she could find a way to overlook. After all, he had only done so in order to save her.

Now she took comfort in his previously unknown ability to act violently. It might be the only thing that could save both of their lives. She had always known that he was strong. He was very muscular and he worked out a lot. But he had always seemed like a total pacifist. She used to joke around with her friends that in spite of his excellent physique, a ten year old girl would be able to mug him in a dark alley. This new side she was seeing was a little scary,

but it was also reassuring. Jennifer had the upmost confidence now that he would do whatever it took to keep her safe. She supposed that she had always felt this way, but now she really knew it.

On the other hand, she was still not sure that it would be enough. She had fortunately not had any dealings with the man herself, but everything she had gathered about Wraith was that he was incredibly dangerous and used to violence. Just because James was able to act effectively against a violent woman did not mean that he could protect either of them from the man that hunted them. Wraith had a man's strength, and an unfathomable ability to kill anybody he wanted to. As much as she wished she could trust Detective Sweeny to stop the monster, neither he nor the rest of the police force seemed to be very effective at tracking him down. If they could not stop the man, how could James?

She was still trying to let her feelings of confidence outweigh her overwhelming urge to panic when they got into the rental car and left the hospital parking lot. James told her that they needed to go by the apartment briefly in order to pack lightly, and then they would head out of town. Even this one stop frightened her. She was not sure that there was any place they could go where he would not track them down, but he was certain to start at their home when he realized that they had left the hospital. Jennifer just hoped they were able to get out of there before it was too late.

Both she and James were so wrapped in thought that neither of them noticed the bald man that was staring intently at them as they drove past his parked car. They also did not notice that he started his car and began to follow them from a distance. He was far enough back to remain as inconspicuous as possible, yet close enough to follow their every move. He almost grinned at how easy they were to track. Like innocent prey blissfully unaware of the lion that stalked them through the brush.

It was only a short drive before they reached the apartment complex and ascended the stairs to their place. It did not feel like home, however. It felt like a trap. Like some place to find a monster lying in wait. For a brief second, James feared trying to turn on the lights and having them not respond. This was how many of his childhood nightmares had started. The lights turned on readily and he was forced to admit to himself that he was not in a scary dream that he could wake up from. He was in a real nightmare where the monster did not reside under the bed, but rather in the shadows. A dangerous monster with an uncanny resemblance to him. A monster that would have frightened off anything he had dreamed up as a kid.

James quickly threw some belongings into a small pack that he kept in the closet. Jennifer was rushing but taking longer. For some reason, women always seemed to think that the bare necessities entailed a lot more than what men would find acceptable. Normally this would have been something for him to laugh at, but with a killer on their trail, James could not help but feel anxious over the time she was taking to get the essentials. He had quit smoking a long time ago, but he still had a pack stowed away. With the serious need for stress relief, he stepped outside to light up for the first time in a long time.

James had barely taken his first drag when he saw a bald man moving through the shadows and toward the stairs that led to Jennifer's apartment. The cigarette dropped out of his mouth as he gazed at the figure. Every fiber of his being told him that this lumbering, almost limping man was Wraith coming to get him and Jennifer. Everything seemed to be

moving in slow motion for him. He turned to flee back inside the apartment. In spite of his feelings of moving while under water, the cigarette had not yet reached the ground before James was back at the door grasping desperately at the knob.

Chapter 39

Wraith kicked in the door to the apartment that James and Jennifer shared. He was mildly amused at how easily they had let themselves be found. If he had not been tired of this game, he might have actually been disappointed. He did like a challenge after all. Now that he knew everything about James though, he was not at all surprised at the ease with which he had found him. If it had not been for Link, James would never have been able to get his hands on Wraith's money anyway. Wraith still was not entirely sure why Link had chosen to disclose the fact that he had provided James with access to the money. But then Link's motives had always eluded him.

When he first entered, Wraith heard a shriek come from his left. He turned and saw Jennifer with a suitcase packed. She was just walking into the living room that was visible from the front door when he gained access. He thought about shooting her right away, but since she was in a state of paralyzed shock, he stepped up to her and hit her hard enough to drop her and keep her senseless long enough to deal with James. He hated her for it, but his odd feeling of love for Jennifer remained, and he was not certain he would be able to kill her. Better to take James out first and then tackle the issue of Jennifer.

Wraith sped into the bedroom with his gun drawn and eyes ready for any sign of movement. He was not going to give James even one second to react to his presence. On the far side of the room, he saw James look at him in surprise. Wraith quickly squeezed off two rounds from the silenced handgun. He saw the bullets impact into James and the look of horror register on the imposter's face. But something was wrong. There was no blood and James did not sink to the ground like he should have. Instead of gaping holes with blood seeping out, there were strange cracks reaching out and away from the entry wounds.

Wraith studied this with his head cocked for a second before he realized what the problem was. He had not shot anybody. He had shot a damn full length mirror. But the look James had given him after being shot had certainly seemed genuine. Wraith knew that he had not made that expression into the mirror. It was only when Link appeared in the mirror and looked at the upright dead body of James that everything started to make sense to him. He almost wanted to scream at the horror and irritating poetic justice of it all.

"You have got to be kidding me." Wraith said to Link.

"Nope." Link said. "I told you to leave him alone. I told you he was your brother. And with you being an only child that should have meant something to you. But you are just too damn stubborn to listen. Now look at what you have done. You have chased yourself fruitlessly. At the cost of Vixen and however much money you would have been making by performing your job instead of taking all this time off. Was it fun for you? It has been a blast for me. I knew you would take the bait I put out for you. I set the trap for you and watched as you ran in circles. I have been waiting to watch you destroy yourself ever since we were kids. I am glad to say it was not at all disappointing."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up." Wraith said, his voice getting louder each time he said the words. He pulled the trigger again. Hitting the image of Link in the mirror. It did no good.

Link simply smiled at him as if he was looking at a mentally challenged person that had just done something stupid.

"I will deal with you later." Wraith said and stalked back out to where Jennifer was trying to pick herself up off the ground. He kicked her in the shoulder, knocking her back down onto the carpet. Jennifer squealed slightly with the impact. She looked to be on the verge of a total breakdown. Wraith raised the barrel of the gun and pointed it squarely between her eyes. All it would take would be one slight flex of his finger and she would cease to exist. Just another one of his many victims. Dead and gone. Forgotten.

He tried to pull the trigger, but as he looked into her eyes, he found that he could not pull the trigger. Wraith's hand trembled slightly and he half lowered the gun until it pointed more or less at Jennifer's abdomen. He shook his head and tried to focus. What the hell was his problem? He had never had any trouble killing. It was what he did. It was who he was. Wraith was a killer, a destroyer, a harbinger of chaos. He never hesitated to do what must be done. Yet here he was, unable to do something so simple as pulling a damn trigger. It was not like he was planning on ripping her apart like he did to other victims. He did not want to mutilate her body and make a statement. He just wanted to shoot her in the head and rid her of his mind.

"Fuck." Wraith said, with genuine frustration. Jennifer's eyes were wide as she watched him wage his internal struggle. He lowered the gun and she started to rise. The movement caused him to bring the gun back up and retake aim on her face. Finding the gun pointed back at her head, Jennifer froze in mid movement. Once again Wraith was fighting with himself. Every fiber of his being told him to kill her and get out of there. After all, there was still a police car parked outside. They had not stopped monitoring this place, and they might have seen him kick the door in. He needed to deal with her and leave before the place was surrounded by flashing lights. His hand shook as he tried to force his finger to pull the trigger. It was no good. He lowered the gun again.

Jennifer did not know what to do. She had seen James step out of the apartment to smoke even though he had told her that he had quit. She did not really approve, but she could not really blame him under the circumstances. Jennifer had been completely shocked, however, when he had kicked the door in and rushed in with a gun in his hand. She didn't even know he owned a gun, and found it even more disturbing that he had it on him. Jennifer had been about to say something about it to him when he had hit her and knocked her down. She had been knocked nearly witless, but she had heard a few muted coughs coming from the bedroom. She took this to mean that the gun was silenced, but she had no idea what he was shooting at in the empty room. He talked to himself briefly and then came back out and kicked her. Jennifer did not know why he was pointing a gun at her, but she feared to speak. He was obviously both upset and violent right now.

"James?" She finally ventured. She did not know if talking would make it worse or not.

"No." Wraith said, aiming the gun once more at her face. "Not James. Do I seem like James? Damn it. Damn it all. James is nothing. He is a fucking worm. How in the hell did I not know he was in here?"

This last question came with him pointing at his head with his free hand. He was clearly upset and Jennifer was very confused. She had seen him act with violence in the hospital when he had come to her rescue from that horrible woman, but then it had been a controlled

violence and he had done so in her defense. She had never thought that he could have been capable of acting so violently toward her. But then, what was it he had just said? That he was not James? And then he had pointed at his head as if it were something vile. So if he was not James, then who was he?

The answer came to Jennifer as she watched him vacillate back and forth about whether or not he was going to kill her. This was not James. Or rather it was his body, but James was not at home. This was the monster that they had been running from. The man that her and James had been afraid of. This was Wraith. The man that had been on a killing rampage and that had sent the crazy woman to kill her. And yet it was James too. The thought was so crazy that she had a hard time wrapping her head around it. How could the man she loved possibly have another personality that she had never seen before? Especially one as murderous as Wraith?

Wraith still stood over her locked in his internal struggle when a bald man entered the apartment through the broken doorway and pointed a gun at him. Wraith did not immediately take the gun away from being pointed at Jennifer, but his eyes shifted slightly in the direction of the newcomer. He appeared to have visibly calmed down from his internal battle over whether or not to kill Jennifer. While his outward appearance gave the impression that he was so at ease he could fall asleep on his feet, his muscles were tightly coiled, ready to turn and fire with deadly accuracy and speed.

"Stop, Wraith. You don't want to do this." The bald man said. "Just put the gun down and we can get you the help you need."

"I don't need any help." Wraith replied, as serenely as he would discussing the weather. "And I really do want to do this."

As soon as he finished speaking, Wraith spun, dropped to a kneeling position, and took aim. The man in the doorway fired his gun, but missed entirely. The speed with which Wraith had moved had thwarted the first attempt of the intruder to put him down. His aim had been trained on where Wraith had been standing and he was not able to correct his aim quickly enough. The bullet impacted harmlessly into the wall on the opposite side of the room.

Unlike his opponent, Wraith did not waste a hasty shot. He brought the gun to bear, took quick yet careful aim, exhaled, and squeezed the trigger. Once, twice, and then a third time for good measure. All three nine millimeter rounds found their mark and the man crumpled to the floor. He had tried to move when he realized he had missed his target, tried to get a better aim and put Wraith down, but he had simply not been quick enough. Once again, Wraith proved that there really was no match for him when it came to his ability to kill. Wraith simply smiled at the crumpled body and returned his attention to Jennifer. The newcomer had not been considerate enough to use a sound suppressor on his gun, so he had precious little time. He needed to take her out of this world and make his exit.

Chapter 40

Sweeny had left the hospital building, but he had not left the parking lot. He knew that he needed to post his own form of a stakeout. Jennifer was going to be released from the hospital in the morning, and he wanted to be ready to follow her and James as soon as they left. If he was in his hospital bed, he would never have a chance to do that. From his car he could monitor the entrance and be ready to roll out behind them. He was certain that he was right about the true connection between James and Wraith and he kicked himself for not focusing on this train of thought when it first occurred to him. He should have paid more attention to his instincts. His itchy face had never let him down and he had failed to give it due heed.

He wondered how many lives could have been spared if he had been more perceptive. Sweet Jessica, known to others as Gloria Harper would not have been so savagely torn apart. His friend Agent Hook would not have been tortured so badly before his death. Even the incompetent Detective Anderson would still be alive, blundering cases. Not to mention all the random women that Wraith had murdered after his temper tantrum at April Pensicotti's death which had somehow come at his own hands. Then there was the man that the Pensicotti woman had killed. If he had been able to recognize who Wraith really was from the beginning they would have most likely been able to get their hands on the woman called Vixen before she had been able to do that little piece of handiwork.

Those were just the ones that he knew about. Sweeny had no way of knowing if that was truly the limit of the body count. He doubted he would ever get a full confession out of Wraith so that he could fully appreciate how many lives had been shattered due to his own lack of understanding. He kicked himself mentally for doing such a piss poor job of detective work. He was the best there was damn it. He should not have let something so obvious slip right from his mind. He had let his compassion for James block out the facts that were screaming for his attention. It had been a very costly mistake. One that he could not let continue to collect interest.

Sweeny pulled himself out of his funk. He knew where he had gone wrong, but rehashing it over and over in his mind was not going to help at all when it came to focusing on the task at hand. One thing he had taken away from his experience with Wraith was that nothing was predictable. He could not afford to find himself thinking too heavily on the past and miss something happening in the present. Sure Jennifer was supposed to be released in the morning, but would Wraith wait that long? He was such a lover of chaos that he just might try something tonight in order to raise his middle finger in Sweeny's direction.

While the primary suspect in Sweeny's mind sat beside her bed, the detective did not believe that he would kill her right there in the hospital. He had already killed one person in the hospital and would most likely not repeat that. On top of it all, everybody knew that James was in the room with her. If she was found dead and he was missing, there would be no doubt about his true identity. Wraith was too smart to leave behind such a blaring trail.

No, Wraith would want to move her if he wanted to finish off what Vixen had started. There was not much doubt about that. So Sweeny sat in silence and watched the entrance. If Wraith went to move her tonight, he would be ready.

At three twenty one in the morning Sweeny saw what he had been expecting. James and Jennifer walked out of the hospital and moved toward the rental car that James had been driving. The two of them kept looking around nervously as if they expected somebody to come out of the shadows and attack them at any second. My god, Sweeny thought to himself, James really is one hell of an actor. He even has Jennifer believing that Wraith is somebody else.

He ran his hand over his bald head as he watched them climb into the car and get under way. He was not used to having no hair, and he hoped it would eventually grow back. Not being a doctor, he had no idea of whether or not his aging scalp would be able to recover from the damage the fire had done and let him get back his once full head of hair.

The two of them seemed to be so wrapped in thought that neither of them noticed that Sweeny was staring intently at them as they drove past his parked car. They also did not notice that he started his car and began to follow them from a distance. He was far enough back to remain as inconspicuous as possible, yet close enough to follow their every move. He almost grinned at how easy they were to track. Like innocent prey blissfully unaware of the lion that stalked them through the brush. Except, of course, that only one of them could truly be called innocent prey. And the real predator was not Sweeny, but rather the man at the wheel of the car he was tracking.

As he drove, Sweeny reached for his phone. He had been giving it a great amount of thought and had decided that he really owed it to his son to do everything in his power to bring him in alive and try to get him the help he needed. He was not sure he really had what it took to kill his son anyway. If he was able to merely incapacitate Wraith/James, he might be able to convince a criminal psychologist to sit down with the boy to see if he could ever be able to function normally in society. It might seem like a long shot, but he had to try. If he had been around in James' life when he was growing up, maybe he would have turned out completely different. It was too late to fully make up for that now, but no effort at all would be a death sentence for his son.

He dialled the number of the criminal psychologist he had worked with on a number of cases and expected to get her voice mail. He was actually very surprised to hear her answer without sounding the least bit groggy. He had forgotten that she had once told him that she was an incurable insomniac. It probably had something to do with her being a psychologist. Especially with the kind of people she dealt with. Nobody could really dive into the inner workings of the mind without coming out of it a little off. He ran her through what was going on and she agreed to head to the hospital in anticipation of the young man's arrival. Sweeny half joked that if he was not able to gain control of Wraith, she might just need to be there to identify his body. She did not find it funny, but then neither did he.

The truth was that Sweeny was not altogether sure he would be able to take Wraith down in any sort of capacity even if he did his best and did not focus on the fact that it was his son he was up against. If his experience in April Pensicotti's basement was any indication, Wraith was fast, accurate, and entirely too lethal. He needed to have his A game going full force if he was going to pull this off. Being barely able to stand upright was not really a good

sign. That could not be helped, though, so he did his best to convince himself that all of his experience in police work would pay off and his instincts would enable him to come out the victor. Then it would all be in the hands of Dr. Stephanie Farnsworth.

Sweeny followed the young couple to their apartment building and noticed the police car that sat outside monitoring the place. It looked as if the officer on duty was actually sleeping instead of keeping an eye on the comings and goings of the building. He shook his head in disapproval. What kind of man can look at himself in the mirror or feel like he deserves to wear a badge when he can't even perform the most basic of tasks? It was infuriating. He half wanted to wake the man up, berate him, and then use him as backup. Sweeny chose not to do this however. He was afraid that if he showed his face to any member of law enforcement he would be forced back to the hospital and reminded that the feds had this whole thing under control. Jennifer's life was in danger and he would not allow for anything to keep him from being there to protect her.

Gingerly, the detective got out of his car and began to hobble up to the building. James and Jennifer were already inside and he tried to hurry as best he could in order to get there before anything bad happened. His leg was killing him, and the burned skin was miserable, but he tried not to let either slow him down too much. He was almost to the stairs when he saw James step outside and light a cigarette. After a few puffs, James looked down and saw him approaching. In a look of wild panic, James turned and fumbled for the door knob. Instead of turning the handle and entering, though, he stepped back, shook his head, and then pulled out a gun equipped with a sound suppressor. He had kept it well hidden tucked into his waistband, but now he held it high for Sweeny to see and kicked in the door. Sweeny increased his pace at this new development, but he seemed to be moving in aggravating slow motion.

By the time he finally reached the top of the stairs and entered the apartment, he could see Wraith/James standing over a frightened Jennifer pointing the gun down at her. He needed to do something fast if he was going to save her. Holding his gun in his left hand, he pointed it squarely at the young man. Sweeny really didn't want to pull the trigger, but he did not know how much choice he had. Wraith did not move, but his eyes seemed to flicker in Sweeny's direction. He was clearly aware of the gun trained on him. Deciding that the lack of movement might give him the opportunity he needed, Sweeny sought to talk him down.

"Stop, Wraith. You don't want to do this." He said. "Just put the gun down and we can get you the help you need."

"I don't need any help." Wraith replied as serenely as if he was discussing the weather. "And I really do want to do this."

As soon as he finished speaking, Wraith spun, dropped to a kneeling position, and took aim. On instinct, Sweeny fired his gun, but missed entirely. The speed with which Wraith had moved had thwarted the first attempt of the intruder to put him down. His aim had been trained on where Wraith had been standing and he was not able to correct quickly enough. Wraith was impossibly fast. The bullet impacted harmlessly into the wall on the opposite side of the room. Realizing his error, Sweeny tried to adjust his aim and dodge the barrage that he knew was coming. His injuries hampered him, and he was not sure if he could have avoided the bullets that smashed into him even if he had been in perfect health. Wraith was clearly in a class of his own.

Utterly defeated, Sweeny crumpled to the ground. Nothing seemed to work and he knew that he was dying. If Wraith had used hollow points, he would have been dead already, but instead he had to lie in this crumpled state and wait for death. It would come quickly enough. Sweeny did not see any light, nor did he experience watching his life flash in front of his eyes. All he saw was his son walking back to Jennifer and focusing his attention on the scared young woman. She was going to die and there was nothing he could do to stop it. His body was broken and dying and he was useless.

In a last surge of defiance, Sweeny forced himself to move. Nothing wanted to respond, but he could not, would not surrender to death so easily when Jennifer needed his help. Amazingly enough his left hand still held the handgun. He brought it to bear on Wraith and pulled the trigger. The bullet impacted on his son's right shoulder and spun him around violently. Wraith lost his balance and fell backward into the coffee table head first. There was a sickening thud with the impact, and the young man's body went still. Unbelievably Sweeny found he was able to crawl over to his son's body while the blood drained from his own.

"I am so sorry my son. I am so damn sorry." Sweeny said, as he laid his head on Wraith's chest. He was happy to hear shallow breathing and a heart beat from that strong chest. His boy was alive. Hopefully he could get the help he needed. Sweeny closed his eyes for the last time and died on top of the son he had never known.

Chapter 41

James cracked his eyes open and tried to figure out where he was and what was going on. He was aware of the fact that he was laying down in a bed somewhere. Attempting to look around at his surroundings did no good, though. His vision was blurry and his head was swimming. Where was he? What had happened? Nothing made any sense to him. He tried to think, to puzzle it out, but his thinking was too sluggish. It felt as if his head was underwater. James tried to raise his hands to his face and found that they were bound at the wrist.

Blinking several times and forcing himself to clear his vision, James was finally able to gain sight of his surroundings. Everything still had a blurry surreal look to it, but he could at least make out and identify objects. Now that he could do this, he looked down at his hands and realized why he been unable to lift them. Each wrist was handcuffed to the side of the hospital bed he found himself lying in. He had no idea what he was doing here or why he was restrained like this. James could see the nurse call button but in his handcuffed state, he was unable to reach it.

Struggling for the button anyway, James became aware of an incredible pain in his right shoulder. It hurt to try and move his right arm at all. He looked and saw that the shoulder was heavily bandaged. James tried his hardest to think and figure out what had happened to him. Slowly things began to come back. He remembered going to the apartment in order to pack and escape Wraith. The image of the bald man heading toward the stairs came to his mind. James remembered turning and running into the apartment. Thing lost focus here, but then he recalled being in the bedroom and seeing Wraith come in and fire his gun at him. He must have been hit in the shoulder and went down.

That did not explain why he was handcuffed though. If he had been shot by Wraith, why was he being restrained? Surely everybody knew that he was not a bad guy didn't they? After all, he had been shot in his home. Why would there be a need to cuff him as though he were a criminal? It was frustrating beyond all thought. Did they always put people in handcuffs when they had been shot in their own homes?

Another thought then occurred to him that gave him a severe burst of anxiety. Wraith had been in his home, and it had not just been the two of them. What about Jennifer? He felt sick to his stomach to think about it. James did not know how he had ended up in the bedroom, but he had been alone in there. Wraith would have had to go past Jennifer to get to him. He did not for one second believe that the sick bastard had simply smiled and nodded at her as he moved on to his ultimate quarry. James felt himself on the verge of outright panic. He both needed to know what had happened to her and dreaded the knowledge as well.

James couldn't take it any longer. He began to call out for somebody, anybody, to come and offer explanation. Yet another pain came with this outburst. His head felt like it was going to explode. James did not know why, but it felt like his head had been used as batting practice for the Colorado Rockies. In spite of the pain, he continued to call out until a nurse finally poked her head in to see what the commotion was. She was followed by police

officers that regarded him warily as if he might somehow remove the cuffs and attack them both. James thought this seemed utterly ridiculous.

"Can I help you?" The nurse asked without coming close enough for him to stand a chance of touching her or preventing her from retreating out the door.

"What the hell happened?" James asked, barely managing to keep his voice under control. The pain in his head and shoulder teamed up with his anxiety to make it very difficult. "Where is Jennifer? Is she okay? Why am I cuffed to this bed?"

"Calm down man." The cop said, his right hand subconsciously resting on the butt of his gun. "Just calm down."

"Calm down?" James regarded the policeman incredulously. "You are the one with your hand on a gun. I can't move and I have been shot. What the hell can I do? Now answer the damn question. What happened to Jennifer and why the hell am I being restrained like this?"

"Um, hold on." The nurse said looking very nervous. "I will go get a doctor. They will be able to let you know more."

With that she left very quickly with a look of relief on her face. James was very confused by all of it. They were acting like he was some sort of dangerous criminal. He had never been a bad person, and yet he was being treated as if he was of the same caliber as Wraith. It was infuriating, humiliating and bewildering all at the same time. More than anything, though, his frustration and anxiety over not knowing Jennifer's fate was dominant. He would never forgive himself if anything had happened to her. He loved her more than anything and if his weird connection to Wraith had caused her harm or death, he would lose everything he had to live for.

The police officer remained and kept his hand readily on his gun. He looked so nervous James did not dare move or say anything else to him. He had a feeling that anything at all would give the cop an excuse to shoot him, and he really did not want to give him such an excuse. The pain in his head and shoulder were enough that after a minute, James did risk lowering his head back to the pillow. Surely that would not be construed as an aggressive manoeuvre. The officer seemed to relax just a hair to have him back in a more inert state, but his hand still did not leave the butt of his gun.

After what seemed like an eternity, an older man in a white coat came in followed by an attractive woman in a business suit. The doctor was mostly gray, slightly balding, and had a bit of a belly protruding out of his open coat. The woman was exceptionally pretty with full lips, makeup on the heavy side, and short hair with red highlights mixed in with her natural black hair. They both looked at him with much less concern than the nurse and cop had. That was a little comforting to James. At least there were some people in this damn hospital that did not seem to be scared of him.

"Go ahead and wait outside." The woman said to the cop. "We will be fine."

"But he is dangerous..." The cop started to say, but he was cut off by a wave from the doctor.

"Not right now, he isn't." He said. "Don't worry. We will call if it seems like he gets too upset."

With that, the officer gave one more uncertain look in James' direction, but his hand dropped away from the gun and he moved toward the door. Clearly he did not like the idea of

leaving the newcomers unprotected. Still, he went ahead and obeyed their wishes. The doctor looked down at James and smiled a kindly smile as if he was looking upon his own child.

"Are you feeling a bit confused?" He asked, never breaking the smile.

"Very confused. I don't know what happened, and nobody will tell me about Jennifer. Is she okay?" James was afraid of the answer, but he still needed to know.

"She is fine. A little bruised, but otherwise unharmed." The doctor replied. "Other than wounds she received earlier. She was just released and is talking to the police. Do you not remember what happened at all?"

"I think I remember being shot by a man that calls himself Wraith." James said. "But there is a lot that is blank too."

"That is to be expected." He said. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Alexi Romanov. You can call me Alex. I am the neurosurgeon here at Saint Mary's Hospital. You received a severe head trauma and we discovered quite an amazing anomaly. This lovely woman with me is Doctor Stephanie Farnsworth. She is an accomplished criminal psychologist. We would like to talk to you about this man named Wraith."

Chapter 42

James studied the results of the MRI that had been taken when he had first been admitted to the hospital. He did not remember this, but apparently he had been unconscious from a blow to the head at the time. Looking at the image, he felt as though he were in some sort of science fiction movie. It simply did not seem remotely possible for what he was seeing to be real, especially coupled with what the doctors were telling him.

"Cranio... what?" He asked as he peered intently at the picture of his head with two brains inside it.

"Craniopagus parasiticus." Dr. Romanov replied. "Or at least that is the closest thing we can relate this to. It seems to be a cross between that and fetus in fetu. And something else entirely. To be perfectly honest, it seems we are looking at something that has never before been documented in modern medicine."

"Can you explain that a little better to me?" James asked. "I am not really familiar with those terms."

"Certainly." Dr. Romanov cleared his throat and frowned slightly as he thought of a way to put into words that James would understand. "Fetus in fetu is a condition that develops from a twin pregnancy in which both fetuses share a common placenta. One of the fetuses wraps around and envelops the other one. The enveloped twin then becomes what we call a parasite. This is because its survival depends on drawing upon the host twin's blood supply. The parasite twins have always been anencephalic, which means without a brain, and lacked some internal organs. The 'normal' twin usually dies before birth because of the need to feed the parasite through nutrients share from one umbilical cord."

"So how does that relate to me?" James asked. "The picture I am looking at shows two brains, and no extra organs. I don't see how this fetus in fetu idea applies."

"It applies because the extra brain in your head is completely enveloped," Dr. Romanov said. "Which brings me to craniopagus parasiticus. This is a condition in which a parasite twin head with an undeveloped, or in some cases, underdeveloped body is attached to the head of a developed twin. Only ten cases have been documented and of those, only three have survived birth. What separates you from these other cases is that your extra head is attached inside your skull instead of having any outward and readily visible attachment, which is the reason for the fetus in fetu comparison."

"And your reference to something completely different?" James inquired; feeling like his head was going to start spinning.

"What we are looking at is something that we have never before seen. It seems as if both brains are fully functional, while we can clearly see that one is smaller than the other and is, therefore, the parasite. They are joined at the medulla oblongata where motor functions are controlled. It is my belief that both brains are able to take hold of your body at different points in time to use it for their own purposes. This would be why you were

unaware of the man called Wraith and his activities. While it was your body performing the work, you were not behind the wheel."

"So you are saying that this other brain, this parasite is the guy that has been trying to kill me?" James asked incredulously.

"Well that remains to be seen." Dr. Farnsworth said, finally adding something to the conversation. "I am going to be examining you, and hopefully I will get a crack at Wraith too. I need to try and figure out if this other brain of yours really is as functional and controlling as Dr. Romanov believes. If not, then you will be for multiple personality disorder, and will have to face the crimes committed by your alter ego."

"And if it is decided that this other brain is Wraith?" James asked. He did not know how much of this he could take.

"Then you will have a choice." Dr. Romanov answered. "You can opt for a very dangerous surgery to remove this other brain, or you can go ahead and face the legal ramifications of what has been done by your hands."

"How dangerous is this surgery?" James already knew the answer, but he still felt the need to hear it.

"There is a very strong chance you would die." Dr. Romanov said. "Most neurosurgeons probably wouldn't even want to attempt such a thing. The odds of survival are almost as great as winning the lottery. Twice."

"And what are the odds of me ending up with two functioning brains in my head?" James asked.

"Astronomical." Dr. Farnsworth said.

"So I take my chances." James answered. "It would appear that I am lucky and get those one in a million sort of chances. I would rather die on the operating table than go through life sharing a body with a murderer."

"It might not be much of a life anyway." Dr. Farnsworth put in. "Chances are high that this Wraith would get a death sentence. So opting out of the surgery would probably mean consigning yourself to die anyway."

"I would rather die on my terms than for the murders of countless people." James said. "I would almost be willing to take a pick to my head in order to get this monster out of it. I will take the surgery."

"You will take the surgery once I approve the idea." Dr. Farnsworth said. "This is all hypothetical until I decide whether this other brain is the killer, or if the killer is just another personality residing inside your brain. Don't think we will be throwing you on the tablet today and cutting your head open. It may take some time for me to properly ascertain how it all works. Just try to be patient and bear with me through it all. I am not in favor of tossing your life away alongside a killer's, but neither am I willing to let a killer get free just because an unnecessary surgery was done."

"I know, but I am really banking on the idea that I am not just totally crazy." James said. "So I hope you will excuse me if I view this surgery as imminent."

"Fair enough." Dr. Farnsworth replied.

"Dr. Romanov?" James said. "You said that most neurosurgeons would not even attempt this surgery. Why are you willing to do it?"

"For a number of reasons really." He answered. "I truly believe I am capable of pulling it off. I have all the confidence in my skills as well as those of my assistants. I am not worried overmuch about failure. I agree with you that a life shared with this man Wraith is not a life at all worth living. And of course, it will make medical history. Every surgeon dreams of getting their name immortalized for doing something nobody else has. It would definitely be a defining moment in my medical career."

"Sounds like good enough reasons to me." James said, and glanced at Dr. Farnsworth. "If Dr. Farnsworth will forgive me for sounding optimistic, let's make some history."

Chapter 43

Six months later.

James cracked his eyes open and took in the sleeping form of Jennifer laying beside him. He smiled at her peaceful expression. There had not been much peace the night before. But then wedding nights were not known for being quiet and restful occasions. He still could not believe they had tied the knot. He loved her so much, but he did not feel like he deserved her. Especially after all the madness she had been put through.

It was amazing to him that she had stuck with him after finding out that he was the one who had been guilty of such incredible atrocities. Sure she really did believe that it was not him that had been in control at the time that the killings took place, but it was still his body and hands that had done it all. That knowledge alone seemed like it should have been enough to send her running for the hills. Instead, she had been the one that had been waiting for him to wake up from his successful surgery. She had been there for him to make sure that he made a full recovery. She never even brought up what she had gone through at the hands of Vixen, or the beating he had inflicted upon her. It amazed him that she was so willing to put it all in the past and focus on their love during the present.

He still remembered all of the extensive grilling he had gone under for Dr. Farnsworth. She had spent a lot of time with him both before and after the surgery to make sure that he was James and the other brain was Wraith. It had been gruelling, but he was up for it. He wanted his freedom and to put everything from the past behind him. A life away from being associated as a killer was all he could think about. A life with his love Jennifer was worth all the questioning in the world.

Dr. Romanov had indeed become famous for the surgery. Jennifer was still a nurse and always got medical journals. James liked to look through them from time to time, and he had gotten used to seeing Dr. Romanov's picture in them. It seemed that the medical community had just about sainted him over his accomplishment with the surgery. It was something that many doctors still believed to be improbable. After he had recovered, James had gotten used to being hounded by reporters that wanted to get the inside scoop into all of it. He preferred to let Alexi Romanov take up all of the limelight though. He did not want to be viewed as some sort of wonder. He just wanted to live his life and be happy with Jennifer.

He had barely gotten home from the hospital before he proposed to her. She was the best thing that had ever happened to him and he could not wait to spend the rest of his life with her. There were no dark thoughts when she was around. There was nothing but happiness and contentment. He was thrilled when she said yes and jumped into his arms. When he held her then, he never wanted to let her go. It was as if he had been afraid that

releasing her would mean seeing her slip away out of his reach. He could not imagine a life without her light.

James rolled out of bed, careful not to disturb her. He liked how blissful and content she looked and he did not want to do anything to change her serene expression. James edged out of the bedroom and into the adjoining bathroom of the suite they were staying at in Cancun. He brushed his teeth in order to be able to kiss her without his morning breath fouling it up. James looked at the mirror and studied his reflection looking back at him. It was hard for him to believe that his face had ever belonged to somebody else as well.

He almost laughed to himself when he thought about how he should play the lottery. James felt like it would be a walk in the park for him to win. Out of all the billions of people on the planet he had been the one 'lucky' enough to end up with Wraith Parasiticus as it had been named. The only person to ever be diagnosed with such a condition. He had survived a surgery that many doctors would have never even tried or thought possible. Most of all, though, he felt lucky to have the love of a woman like Jennifer. That was something that continued to amaze him on a daily basis. In all his life, in all his dreams, he would never have imagined it. Even a year ago, he would have laughed if somebody told him that she would be his wife.

The image in the mirror changed. The face was no longer his smiling reflection. It turned serious and leaned forward. James rolled his eyes and put the toothbrush in the sink. Really? Why here and now? It had been such a nice start to the day. He really didn't want to deal with this prick. At least it was in the mirror instead of in his head. There was less pressure that way.

"Wraith, did you forget about me?" Link asked. "It has been so long since we have talked."

"Yeah it has." Wraith answered. "And I would prefer to have made it even longer. What do you want? Am I not doing what you would prefer? I am not killing anybody and I have no desire to start again. I am happy and content."

"You are content pretending to be somebody else? You like being married to a woman that really belongs to somebody else?" Link asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Look, it isn't my fault that James insisted on the surgery. He should have known that he was the parasite. He always was the imposter. That means that he should never have been with Jennifer anyway. She is my love, my destiny. He just got in the way for a little while." Wraith responded. "But he is gone now and I am James. The real James. I always was. Just because I have called myself Wraith in the past does not mean that is who I am anymore. Jennifer has tamed my heart and I am putting Wraith behind me."

"She has tamed you for the moment." Link countered. "Do you really think you will remain content? I don't think so. I know you too well. I have been with you always and I know your ways. You cannot change. You can only keep this up for so long before you need to kill again. When that time comes, when you feel the itch again, what do you think will come of Jennifer? How will she die?"

Wraith turned his head and glanced at the bedroom where Jennifer was still happily sleeping off their wild wedding night. He could not stand to think about anything happening to her. But he had to admit to himself that there was probably some truth to Link's words. Link did know him better than anyone. If he said that Wraith would get the itch, then Wraith

probably would. Link always seemed to know what he was going to do and was thinking much better than he had ever been able to figure Link out. Link remained a bit of an enigma to him, operating out of his own interests that had always eluded Wraith. In spite of his distaste for the topic, therefore, he considered Link's question very seriously.

"Jennifer?" Wraith said slowly and with much deliberation. "I think she feels like a suicide."

Other Titles by John J. Archer

- **Like A Suicide; Redemption** (by John J. Archer)

Like A Suicide; Redemption is book 2 of the Like A Suicide Trilogy.

How does a former serial killer find redemption?

In Redemption, the world's most successful serial killer, Wraith, is at a crossroads. While he still loves his now wife, Jennifer, there is an ever increasing urge to commit violence and go back to his old ways.

Wraith decides he has finally figured out a way to not only quench the urge of violence but also redeem himself things seem to be going well... until 'the brotherhood' come calling... in his local neighbourhood no less.

With his former employers now after him, Wraith must decide whether he wants to find redemption in his new ways, his old ways or through the ultimate sacrifice, death.

- **Like A Suicide; Inheritance** (by John J. Archer)

Like A Suicide; Inheritance is the third and final book in the 'Like A Suicide' series.

Why would anyone want to 'inherit' the mantle of the vicious serial killer 'Wraith'?

Maybe because it was their destiny from birth. Maybe they never wanted to. Maybe because they have no choice.

Detective Alastor is just like his Father. Stephanie Hook is even more like her Father. In time they will both discover their dark ties to the man and myth known simply as 'Wraith'. As they learn about their past, fear and excitement takes hold of them, each in their own special way.

They will soon enough learn about their futures and only then will they realise the 'gift' their Father had has to be inherited. The problem is only one of them can inherit the 'gift'. For the other 'death' awaits...

- **Stealing Life** (by John J. Archer)

KIDNAPPED. BETRAYED. WHY?

In a second, he's gone. Kidnapped by the deadliest gang in Mexico City, Fernando's life in his father's hand. Problem is; his father doesn't want to pay up.

Miguel is Fernando's older brother. He wants his baby brother back, and with help from only his girlfriend Tania he is left to chase the leads and find his brother's kidnappers—before they put a bullet in his head.

As the body count rises and the hours tick by, one question remains: *Why?*

Why won't his father pay up? *Why* kidnap Fernando? *Why* does a member of the police know the name of the kidnappers? *Why* does the ransom letter arrive without the dozens of bodyguards spotting the writer? *Why* do the kidnappers know Miguel's every move?

Why?

- **Undesired Consequences** (by John J. Archer)

Undesired Consequences is an action/suspense short story. (5100+ words)

When Luka Maximilian is released from jail he only has one thing on his mind... REVENGE. He has had too many years spent in jail for anyone to stop his plans. He still hasn't forgiven the ease with which his father had allowed him to go to jail despite having political and judicial influence. Sure, he deserved to be punished for what he believed was a mistake, but years of his life for a youthful mistake had fostered anger and now his father was going to pay in a big way.

Luka is ready to risk his own life to get the REVENGE he wants.

What Luka didn't take into consideration was the fact that sometimes even when we get what we want 'Undesirable Consequences' are part of the outcome. Sometimes these 'Undesirable Consequences' are worse than death itself.

- **Coincidental Death?** (John J. Archer)

'Coincidental Death?' is a suspense/mystery short story. (10,100+ words)

When Ella is excused from class to go to the bathroom the last thing, she expects to see is the basketball team carrying what looks like a dead body from the gym to the bushes at the far corner of the school. Upon inspection of the large black bag that had been tucked into the far corners of the bushes Ella discovers a body. A still, lifeless one. With so many questions in her mind Ella ultimately has to find out who the killers are. She could just hand them over to the police... it's just that her boyfriend is part of the basketball team and could end up being part of the guilty party.

What has Ella worried is that the girl found dead just happens to have an eerie resemblance to herself. Coincidence? Maybe

What is Ella to do?

This can't be a 'Coincidental Death?' Or can it?

- **Tangled Web of Love & Lies** (John J. Archer)

'Tangled Web of Lies & Love' is a short story. (5800+ words)

When Norman Bronn dies having achieved superhuman feats the media jump on the story that he may have discovered a pill 'HBe' which helped him maximize his potential.

His Brother Richard is even summoned by the president of the United States of America, who seems to have an over the top interest in the matter. Maybe it's the pressure of the job. Maybe it's the fact the economy is failing. Whatever the reason Richard doesn't like it. After all he is the only one aware that Norman's life was a fraud.

Even Sally, Normans surviving girlfriend is in the dark of what made Norman such an extraordinary man. Richard has refrained from letting her know. Even if he does love her. Norman never did love her.

As the secrets of Norman Bronn continue to get exposed, a web of lies and love is entangled.

If you enjoyed reading “Like A Suicide; The Wraith”, please consider leaving a review wherever you may have purchased the book and help spread the word

Thanks,
John J. Archer

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