

The Genesis
of
CHTHON

By: Norrin J. Powell



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*This book is dedicated
to ALL those
to whom, at one time or another,
I've had to say goodbye*

FOREWORD

HEROES. What makes a person a hero? Is one a hero simply because they do good deeds? Is one a hero because they save another's life or perhaps sacrifice something or someone, in some cases even themselves, for some greater good?

Some may say a hero is an individual that expresses love for their family, a wife, a husband, or a child, someone who provides for both the emotional and physical needs of his or her loved ones. Another may say a hero is someone that embraces a friend during a crisis and stands by them until that storm subsides.

You might agree that these are ALL characteristics of a hero.

But, what if a person you consider a hero takes a false step? Or what if they commit an act of malice? Is that person who may have lived an upstanding life and even been considered a hero, now a villain?

Who decides who is considered good and who is considered evil?

George Washington, the first president of the United States of America, is venerated as a hero and the father of his country. However, Britain considered him a traitor, treasonous to the crown, a crime punishable by death during the time of America's Revolutionary War. Was he a hero or a villain?

Christopher Columbus is credited for discovering the Americas. Grade school children are often taught this by memorizing the rhyme: "Columbus

sailed the ocean blue, in fourteen hundred and ninety-two.” A national holiday has even been named in his honor. One might say Christopher Columbus is truly a hero. But what if further facts were shared regarding the exploits of Christopher Columbus; such as his approval of slavery or that he had committed an act of genocide against the native population of the Caribbean Islands? Would he still be considered a great man and a hero? Or should he now be labeled a villain?

David, the second king of Israel according to the Jewish and Christian holy texts, is known for slaying the Philistine giant Goliath and writing many of the Psalms. David, although hunted and threatened with death by Saul, Israel’s first king, chose to spare Saul’s life when an opportunity presented itself to kill him. David felt that killing Saul would show an utter lack of respect for Saul’s position, even though Saul had attempted to kill him multiple times. One might say, David of Israel was truly a hero. But after becoming king, David chose to have an adulterous affair with the wife of one of his soldiers. When the woman, Bathsheba, became pregnant with David’s child, he attempted to trick the soldier into leaving his post and returning to his wife to sleep with her. In doing this, when the child was born it would be thought to be the offspring of the soldier. When the soldier refused to forsake his post and honorably stayed to fulfill his duties, David rewarded him by having him murdered. So which would you consider David, a hero or a villain?

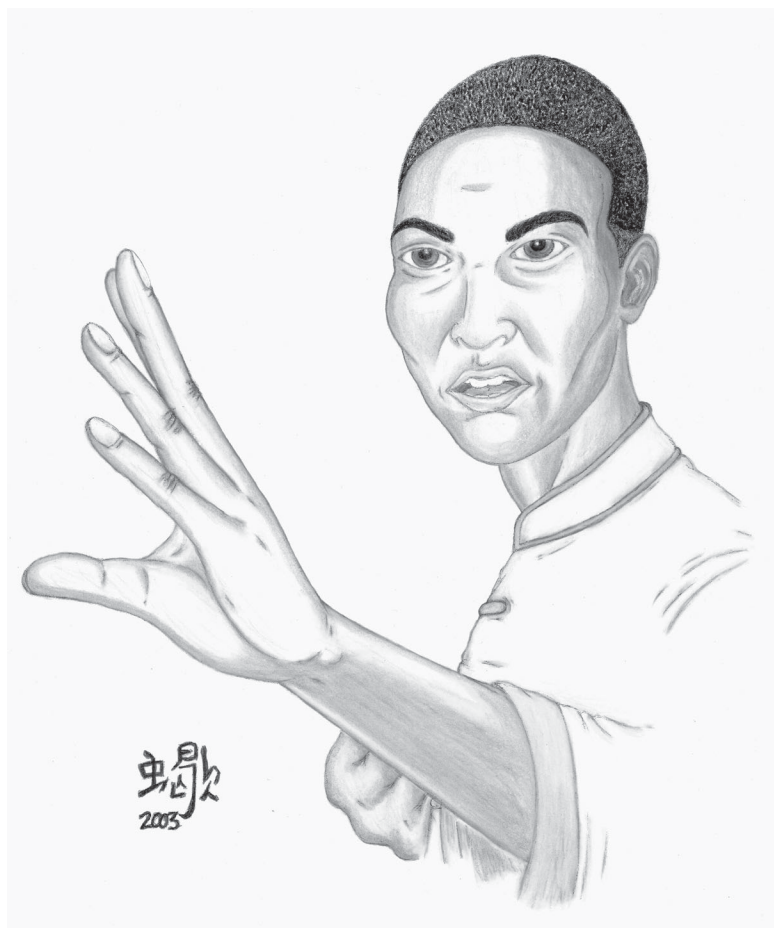
These examples may perplex your thoughts. You may find yourself straddling a fence saying, “I don’t know. I can’t give a black or white answer to those questions.”

What is a hero? What is a villain? Can one act of evil constitute a hero a villain? Can one act of good turn a villain into a hero?

I will share one last example before our story begins, though at the time of this writing it may be thought somewhat controversial.

Imagine a man or a woman who is a patriot to their government, who loves his or her family, volunteers time to aid others less fortunate, and works hard to provide for the family’s material needs. What if that person were to strap a bomb to himself and detonate it in the midst of his or her government’s enemies, or crash a projectile, such as an airplane, into the lands or properties of their government’s enemies for what they believe to be some greater good? Is that person a hero and a patriot or a villain and a terrorist?

Heroes and villains are labeled by those who win wars and write history. At times the lines that separate the two may seem blurred or indistinct. Each person must evaluate the facts regarding a situation and make the determination for themselves as to what constitutes a hero and what constitutes a villain.



CHAPTER I

In the Beginning...

“You’re slow and undisciplined.” Sam’s words cut as deeply as his sharpest *katana*. So far, he had blocked every attack hurled toward him by his pupil. Not only blocking the attacks, but doing so with only one hand.

Sam knew his opponent, Norrin, could easily be riled by his taunts. Norrin would fight sloppily when using anger to assault an adversary. Even though Sam had taught him that skill would win out over anger every time, Norrin still relied on anger to gain victory.

Now to an average fighter, anger may earn an aggressor a battle. The intimidation factor alone could frighten one’s opponent into submission. Only Sam was no average fighter. His skills had been achieved by rigorous training over several years.

“Be still!” growled Norrin.

“Will your enemy be still? Will he stand in one place while you prepare your strike?” Sam replied, while demonstrating various *katas*.

Norrin thought to himself, “I’ll rarely face an enemy that’s my equal, much less one as skilled as you.”

“True,” Sam replied aloud, “But wouldn’t it be in your best interest to be prepared in case you do?”

Sam had barely finished his sentence when Norrin had thrown a kick toward his head. The kick was not precise. Sam was able to duck, and with a quick spin, he swept the foot Norrin had left planted on the ground. His 215-pound frame crashed to the floor with great force.

"I told you, never fight in anger. It causes you to react slower and your attacks become sloppy," instructed Sam, with the same degree of arrogance he always seemed to have when assuming the role of mentor.

"And I told *you*, never invade my thoughts without permission," Norrin sternly insisted, annoyance in his eyes as he glared up at Sam from the floor.

One might have thought the two men rivals or at the very least assertive competitors, but that would have been inaccurate. True, they did enjoy friendly competition with one another from time to time, but they were by no means rivals. They were best friends. They might go as far as to consider one another brothers, not by blood, but in every other way that mattered.

Sam returned Norrin's stern stare and said, "When we train, I am the teacher and you are the student. Students do not bark orders at their mentors."

Norrin's expression had not changed and Sam knew that even though he had been Norrin's mentor in both martial arts and the gifts he possessed, he would allow Sam to push only so far. Norrin was gifted with the ability to increase his strength 20-fold, and Sam had seen Norrin's fingernails slash through concrete and his teeth bite through steel.

He had seen Norrin completely lose his temper only once, and in that situation wound up using his own telekinetic gifts to subdue Norrin. It had taken nearly every bit of inner strength he possessed to do so, and three days of rest to recoup from the experience.

"A'right, okay. I shouldn't read your thoughts without your permission. I'm sorry."

Norrin's countenance softened. "Don't be a mind rapist. I don't take rape lightly. I'd hate to have to put you behind bars," he said, with a smirk on his face.

Sam smiled and rolled his eyes as Norrin rose to his feet.

"That's enough for today," said Sam, while dabbing beads of perspiration from his forehead with a towel he had lifted from a wooden peg on the wall. "Are you going to shower here or wait until you get home?" he asked.

"I did bring a fresh change of clothes," replied Norrin. "I might as well shower here. Nanci went to a movie with her sister tonight, so there's no rush to get home."

"Which one?" asked Sam.

"Tiffani," Norrin replied.

“No, which movie?” responded Sam, annoyed as if Norrin should have understood he was referring to which movie, not which of Nanci’s sisters she’d gone out with.

“Oh! They went to see *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*.”

“*Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*?” Norrin could hear the tone in Sam’s voice as though he were thoroughly disgusted. “That is such a Californian’s movie.”

“I know, but Nance saw an advertisement on TV two days ago and has been talking about it ever since. She hasn’t spent much time with her sisters lately, so I told her she should give them a call and have a girls’ night out. Melani couldn’t make it. She had some dinner to attend at her husband’s company, but Tiffani was free.”

“I’m sure Tiffani will thoroughly enjoy that movie,” remarked Sam, while brandishing a smile. “She’ll probably think it’s Oscar-winning material.”

“You are so wrong,” replied Norrin, secretly, though, thinking, *but, you are so accurate*.

Norrin and Nanci had been married four months and were the couple everyone thought of as “the cool married couple.” Some people, when they marry, become distanced from friends or even each other after a period of time. In some instances one partner seems to dominate the other. Norrin and Nanci’s marriage suffered from none of those qualities.

On the contrary, both treated the other as a complete equal. There was never an overbearing attitude by one toward the other, nor were there any feelings of unjustified paranoid jealousy. Each one trusted and respected the other. They spent time as a couple with mutual friends, as well as time individually with their personal friends. Everyone was welcome in their home. It wasn’t a big home but it was a warm one.

Tiffani was Nanci’s fraternal twin sister. Although Tiffani had been born first, Nanci took great pleasure in telling others that she had completed forming in her mother’s womb before her sister. Sam had jokingly shared with Norrin that this was the reason for Tiffani being a bit slow-witted. “She was slow growing inside her mother and she’s been slow ever since,” he’d say.

Tiffani was known by those who interacted with her on a regular basis as, “moving to the beat of a different drum,” when it came to using common sense. Some, referred to her as an airhead or ditzy. Norrin often felt somewhat perplexed and even annoyed with some of the things that had come out of his sister-in-law’s mouth. But, for the sake of his wife, he rarely commented on them.

After the two men had showered and left the *dojo*, they proceeded into the

sala. Sam's home was immense. It was built resembling an old Spanish style *villa*. He had personally hired an architect from Barcelona, to draw up blueprints for the house. Five times, the architect was required to modify the designs over a three-month period before Sam gave his final approval for the blueprints.

When construction began, Sam hand picked the entire crew. He had searched the whole of Maryland looking for that "just right" plot of land on which to build. Sam wouldn't settle for anything less than perfection.

The exterior of the house was captivating. The lofty walls were a sallow shade of yellow. The roof's tiles were a warm terra cotta color. Large picture windows surrounded the home in its entirety. Looking up from the ground one could see a terraced balcony, accessible only by way of the master bedroom. A cherry colored front and rear veranda accentuated the house. A large, three-tiered fountain added considerably to the home's frontal view. A circular driveway surrounded the fountain and connected to an asphalt road, which stretched a quarter mile to the gates of the estate. Several cherry trees had been planted around the house, as well as four willows, one in each of the four corners of the estate. A single oak stood proudly some 35 feet from the rear veranda. Hedges adorned with honeysuckle bordered the entire property. The house's interior was just as grandiose.

All efforts put into making this home a place like something out of a fairy tale, or a scene one might observe in an elaborate painting was with one goal in mind; that goal being to please Sam's wife, Cyndi.

Sam was not one to give into great outbursts of emotion, nor did he share his feelings with just anyone. But Cyndi, Cyndi was that twinkle in his eyes; the life force that caused the blood to flow through his veins. Even though they had been married for more than a year, his heart still pulsated quickly when she looked at him with those deep beautiful brown eyes and smiled that smile he knew belonged only to him.

Cyndi's family had moved to Maryland from Colombia before she had been born. She held a deep love and fervent pride in her Hispanic heritage. In designing the home where she and her husband would build their family, Sam wanted a place where Cyndi would always know tranquility.

Sam and Norrin lounged in the *sala*, both immensely enjoying their rest. When the two were in their early teens, the boys could spar for hours, jog for miles and expend energy almost limitlessly, rarely seeming to tire. But, they were no longer in their early teens. Sam was 20 and Norrin 19. Although most young men around that age still feel fairly energetic, the stamina of these two had dwindled slightly. It wasn't that they were lazy or didn't work to stay fit. Quite

the opposite. Since the ages of 12 and 13, Norrin and Sam had decided that since they both possessed extraordinary abilities, they should use those abilities to help those unable to help themselves.

However, the past seven years had taken their toll on the pair. Both had received more blows to their bodies than they could remember. Battle scars decorated their bodies where cuts and contusions had once resided. Norrin had been fortunate to have suffered no more than a fractured wrist once, whereas Sam had experienced a broken arm, a fractured kneecap, a broken leg, and two broken fingers on his left hand.

With experience and wisdom, the boys learned as they grew into men that aggressive charges and overenthusiastic attacks were not always the best way to confront an adversary. Sometimes, a well- thought-out plan and a strategic defense worked more to their advantage. Nonetheless, wear and tear on their bodies had matured them both.

Sam's approach to an altercation had become avoiding physical contact whenever possible. With his use of telepathy and telekinesis, he was usually able to do so. On the other hand, when he engaged someone in hand-to-hand combat, Sam fought as though he were fighting for a title. "To be the best, you've got to beat the best," he'd say, "and I'm the best." When Sam faced an enemy it was as though he was not looking at him; instead, he was looking through him. At times he'd smile a smile of confidence and superiority, in an attempt to intimidate his opponent. Other times he simply gave a cold, unflinching stare. The worst expression Sam would share with an adversary was a thinning of his lips and an almost frowning appearance on his mouth. Anyone that knew Sam well or had fought him and seen that particular expression on his face, had no doubt that when it appeared, anything or anyone in his path was about to be pummeled. Sam was truly an artist when it came to fighting. That being said, he did live his life by one decree; never to take a human life. He fervently tried to instill that rule into the mind and heart of his friend and pupil.

Norrin, on the other hand, had a different perspective when it came to battle. He loved physical confrontation. The ability to increase his physical strength and durability made him the perfect fighting machine. He literally felt offence when attacked or confronted by someone. Although even tempered in all other aspects of his life, Norrin felt a real disgust toward anyone foolish enough to attack his body. He possessed the ability to extend and retract both his finger and toenails in a way similar to that of a cat. With the swipe of his wrist, he could effortlessly decapitate a man. Norrin did not hold to Sam's "no killing" edict. He felt that should someone attempt to take his life or the life of his loved ones, that

that individual deserved worse than death. He even felt disappointment that death was the most severe punishment he had the ability to dole out to an enemy. Norrin and Sam argued this point many times over the years, each sharing logical reasons for their personal point of view. Sam had notified Norrin that were he to take a human life, he would personally see to it that Norrin spent the remainder of his days behind bars. Norrin often wondered if Sam was serious and whether he was referring to a mental barring of his ability to activate his superhuman gifts, or an actual fortress of iron and concrete. There was no doubt that without a mental barring of his abilities, Sam may as well imprison him in a fortress of tissue paper. In the end, though, Norrin chose to obey Sam's ordinance, as he had accepted him as mentor and leader.

After sitting motionless in a mutually enjoyed peaceful quiet for 20 minutes, Norrin broke the silence.

"Wanna get something to eat?"

"Where?" questioned Sam.

"Ginos."

Sam slowly turned his head toward Norrin with a smile of approval on his face. Before he could verbally respond...

"Uh-ah. Not tonight," said the figure entering the room.

It was Cyndi. She was wearing a simple white turtleneck shirt and a pair of blue Guess jeans, but still, she looked radiant. Cyndi possessed a very elegant beauty. She embodied class. Not snobbery or an air of superiority, but definite sophistication. There was nobility about her, even in jeans.

"I've made a very nice dinner for my husband this evening. Ginos will be there tomorrow," she said, as she looked at Sam. Then turning her head toward Norrin, "You, of course, are welcome to join us if you'd like. There's plenty of food."

Norrin knew better than to debate with Cyndi once she'd made up her mind. In addition, Cyndi had worked very hard to prepare a nice meal for Sam and herself and going out for burgers and fries would have simply been inconsiderate. Moreover, she was a fantastic cook.

As the three walked toward the *comedor*, Norrin could smell an unfamiliar yet pleasing aroma. As he approached the table, Sam first stopped at Cyndi's chair to pull it out for her. After sitting down, Sam scooted her under the table and kissed her on the cheek. As he walked to his seat, Cyndi was smiling at him. Dimples had formed in her cheeks, and she even appeared to be blushing. Norrin could clearly tell that Cyndi's love for Sam emitted deep from within her soul. That pleased Norrin because he too loved Sam. The fact that Sam had

found someone who cared as much for him as he did for her was deserved.

Three place settings were positioned on the table. Cyndi had surmised Norrin would be staying and had already set a place for him even before inviting him to stay. The plates were beautiful, fine china, which had been passed down from Cyndi's grandmother. The inner portion of the plate was a glossy ivory and the outer portion was royal blue with white orchids encircling the outer edge. The silver utensils on either side of the plate had been a wedding gift from Sam's maternal grandmother. Lastly, a cream-colored linen napkin rested in the center of each plate.

"This is a Colombian dish called *Conejo Guisado con Coconut*," explained Cyndi. "For our Hispanically challenged guest, that translates to rabbit stew in a coconut sauce."

Norrin smiled. He had begun learning Spanish when he was 12 so that he and Sam could converse without the majority of others understanding what they were saying. Sam, too, had begun learning Spanish at the age of 12 and had continued on through High School. Sadly, Norrin did not. After two years he'd had enough. He remembered a few words and key phrases, but that was all.

Cyndi took Sam's plate and served him first. Although she currently led a privileged life, Cyndi was from a traditional Colombian family. As far back as she could remember, she was taught, "A good wife always serves her husband first, then her family and guests, and lastly herself." After handing Sam his plate, she then took Norrin's. She served him a very healthy portion because she knew Norrin to be a hearty eater. Finally, she served herself.

Both Sam and Cyndi had enjoyed this dish before, but this was Norrin's first taste. The meat was tender and melted in his mouth. The sauce tickled his palate and complemented the taste of the meat perfectly.

After Sam took his second bite, he stood up and walked into the *cocina*. He returned with a bottle of 1945 *Chateau Latour*. After removing the cork, he sniffed it. "I should probably pour this into a decanter and let it sit awhile—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Cyndi interrupted. "No baby, pour it now."

Yielding to his wife's wishes, Sam began filling her glass, then Norrin's, and finally his own. After sitting down he raised his glass. "To my oldest friend," he said, gesturing toward Norrin. Then motioning toward Cyndi, "And my closest friend."

The dinner conversation consisted of news about each of their careers. Sam was the owner of an incredibly successful book publishing company. It was a new house and Sam had been especially selective when signing authors. He was

always looking for passionate new talent. It was also important to him to give those with that rich talent their first breaks. Some Sam had signed had made the *New York Times* Best Seller's list after completing their first book.

Sam particularly sought out a variety of authors from various ethnic backgrounds, realizing that many of America's minorities often struggled to make their most minute dreams come true. Although born into wealth, Sam knew what it felt like to be treated like a second-class citizen because of his color. He was a black man. He also felt pride in the Cherokee blood coursing through his veins, reflected in certain distinctive Native American features, such as high cheekbones and a reddish tone to his skin. Several authors that Sam had signed were also black but he had also signed Asian, Jewish, Hispanic, Arabic, and authors of various other ethnicities. He also extended a deliberate effort to sign female authors. Sam knew women to be incredibly brilliant and descriptive writers, such as Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Mary Shelley, The Baroness Emmuska Orczy and Amy Tan, to name only a few.

Cyndi owned a theater in downtown Baltimore where she directed and produced plays. Of course Cyndi did not need to work, but she'd always had a passion for the theater. From the time she was in Junior High School, Cyndi had always been involved in some facet of her school's productions. While in Junior High, she had volunteered to be on a panel for selecting actors to play specific parts during tryouts. She was also a consultant for set design and costume. By the time she had reached High School, Cyndi had begun work on her own script. Throughout High School, she continued to take on more responsibilities in regards school productions, all the while continuing work on her own project. Whenever she had free time, she attended plays at various local colleges such as Essex Community College, Towson State University, and Maryland State University. By the time she had reached her senior year of High School, Cyndi had finally completed her own script to satisfaction. Not only did it become the school's production during that final semester, but Cyndi was asked to direct as well. Currently, she was in her junior year of college. Juggling school, work, and a home life would seem somewhat stressful to anyone, but Cyndi managed to do it with such finesse that she made it look effortless.

Norrin was an artist. He was not materially wealthy by any means but he always seemed to have work. Whether it was illustrations for magazines or books, simple sketches for business logos, or painting portraits or gallery pieces, he kept busy. From time to time, Sam would have an author that needed artwork for a cover to their book or illustrations for the inside. Norrin would always take the work because when you're an artist, work is work. Between he and his wife,

they lived comfortably. Not the lavish lifestyle Sam and Cyndi had known, but all of their needs and some of their wants were met. Most importantly, the two loved each other. With each looking out for the other's welfare, their marriage would remain successful.

After the meal, Cyndi walked into the *cocina* and returned with three saucers. After placing them on the table, she again disappeared from the *comedor*. This time she returned with a cake. It was a white fluffy cake with cherry vanilla frosting she had baked earlier that morning.

Sam was not big on eating desserts, so when Cyndi cut his piece it was fairly small. Again, knowing Norrin's healthy appetite and love for desserts, she made sure to cut him an extra large slice.

"See, she likes me better than you. Look at my piece," Norrin declared, taunting Sam.

Sam gave a half smile and rolled his eyes.

Cyndi also smiled. She found it somewhat humorous when the two men engaged one another in adolescent competitions. "Would you like some coffee or milk, Norrin?" she inquired.

"Milk, please." Norrin wasn't a coffee drinker.

As Cyndi walked away to get Norrin his milk, he playfully continued his taunts toward Sam. "See, I told you she likes me better. She asked *me*, if I wanted milk or coffee. She didn't ask you anything."

Sam stared at Norrin saying nothing, while chewing the inside of his cheek. Whenever Sam chewed the inside of his cheek he was annoyed. Not upset or angry, simply mildly annoyed.

"She already knows what I want," said Sam, under his breath.

"Have you two been telepathically talking all night? You have haven't you? You've been humoring me by speaking and having your own little private personal conversations right in front of me," accused Norrin.

"Fool," Sam replied. "We've been married over a year. We've known each other longer than that. She doesn't need to use her telepathic powers to know that I like milk with my dessert. I always have milk with my dessert!"

"Excuses, excuses. I still say she likes me better."

"I'll be sure to ask her tonight, while we're in bed."

Norrin smiled and let out a little chuckle. Sam had won that debate and there was no reason to take it any further.

After dessert, it was time for Norrin to return home to his wife. He stopped in the *sala* to pick up the gym bag he had dropped there after his sparring session. As he bent down, he could hear and feel the cartilage crackling in his back. He

grabbed the bag and the key ring he had left on the coffee table and headed toward the front doors.

Sam and Cyndi stood at the doorway waiting to bid him good night. Sam had Norrin's coat in his hand. It was a London Fog long black trench coat. Norrin took the coat, put it on and said his farewells.

"Cyndi, thank you for the lovely meal. It was wonderful." Gently he kissed her cheek.

"You're welcome," she replied. She reached toward a banister by the door and lifted two plates she had prepared for Norrin to take with him. "Here's some dinner and dessert for Nanci once she gets home from her movie. If she's already eaten, then maybe she can have it tomorrow."

Norrin's smile showed he was very thankful for Cyndi's usual degree of thoughtfulness.

"Are you going out tonight?" inquired Sam.

"I'm not sure," Norrin answered. "It depends on whether Nanci wants to talk or if she wants to spend some time together."

"If you do, be careful," admonished Sam.

"I'm always careful," replied Norrin, in a cocky manner.

"I'm serious. I've been sensing something—well I'm not sure what it is. But, if anything gets out of hand or you need back up, contact me or Wade. Don't go playing the lone soldier."

"I will, *if*, I need your help."

Norrin then said his final goodbye, walked to his car and got in. After turning the key in the ignition, he waived one last time toward Sam and Cyndi. Then he drove down the asphalt path which led to the gates of the estate. Departing the gates, he turned right and headed toward home, toward Nanci.

CHAPTER II

Mason

“So what’s up for tonight, Mike?” asked Paul.

“We’re gonna make a few drops, score some cash, then have a little fun,” replied Mike.

Michael Mason was an independent *entrepreneur*. Another description might be that he was a drug dealing, flesh peddling, murderous low life. He was known from Las Vegas to Philadelphia as the man to call when you had a job no one else would take. No job was too big or too small as long as the paycheck was just the right size.

If you wanted someone dead, Mason was your man. If you needed a party catered with enough drugs to drop a herd of elephants, you called Mike. If you were a businessman in town for the week and had a taste for 13-year-old blonde virgins, be assured, you would be taken care of.

Mason didn’t care about ethics. Morals were something that belonged to some guy standing behind a counter content with earning minimum wage. He felt that if anyone wanted to get ahead in life, they had better be prepared to break every law and check their scruples at the door. “The world’s a tough place,” he’d say, “And if you plan on making it out on top, you’d better be tougher.”

Mason's services were expensive but you got what you paid for. No client ever walked away dissatisfied.

Paul was Mason's right-hand man. His hair was sandy blonde, and he stood six feet three inches, about five inches taller than Mason. He was also fairly muscular and weighed roughly 230 pounds. Although visually Paul was an impressive man, intellectually he was an imbecile. Not one original thought had ever worked its way into his head. Every idea he had ever come up with was either planted there by Mason or was something Paul had seen on television or in a movie.

He was one of Mason's primary distributors of cocaine, and also one of his best customers. Mason had warned Paul on multiple occasions not to get hooked. Occasionally treating one's self to a good time was fine, but to allow their lives to become the filth that some of their customers' lives had become was just stupid.

Needless to say, Paul did not listen. He hadn't quite deteriorated into the gutter-dwelling crack smoker, but what little sense he had was further diminished after snorting a few lines. He tried to hide his addiction from Mason but his pathetic attempts were in vain.

Reaching toward the stereo's volume button, Mason pressed his thumb against it exerting his car's speakers. "Nothin' but a Good Time" by the rock group Poison happened to be playing at the time. The radio's dial was tuned to 98 Rock, a local heavy-metal radio station, and Mason rarely changed the dial.

"Hear that, Pauly?" said Mason. "We don't need nothin' but a good time."

"Yeah! Nothin' but a good time," Paul parroted, then began to continuously nod his head.

Though Paul was a complete moron, Mason kept him around. He had his uses. Paul was impressively strong for a normal human. He could easily bench press 350 pounds and seemingly effortlessly squat twice that. When Mason required someone beaten either nearly or completely to death, he would use Paul. When he wanted someone shot, and didn't feel like doing it himself or didn't want to chance things being traced back to him, he would have Paul take care of it. Paul was Mason's subservient follower. He never asked questions, he never argued when told to do something, and he was always there to take the fall if necessary. These were the only reasons Mason kept him around.

After a 25 minute drive, Mason pulled into an alley near the corner of Cedonia Parkway and Northeast Boulevard. This was a rather rough part of Baltimore City. It was a place where one could readily find illegal drugs and weapons being sold anywhere within a ten-block radius. Prostitutes regularly

patrolled the streets from seven at night until four in the morning.

The area was predominately a black neighborhood but you would occasionally see some white people there. A few actually lived in the area but the majority were usually there to either buy or sell something. Most white people did their best to avoid that neighborhood altogether. The few that actually ventured in, whether purposely or by mistake, earned hardened stares in their general direction endeavoring to make them feel as uncomfortable as possible.

The exact opposite happened when Michael Mason drove into the neighborhood. Sure, he was white and drove a brand new Corvette, but everyone knew better than to try to intimidate him. Mason's reputation preceded him. He was the primary source and supplier for 90 percent of the illegal goings on in that and the surrounding neighborhoods. He brought in the coke, the heroine, the pot, and speed; as well as the AKs, Uzis, and the automatic handguns. It was all quality merchandise. The drugs were pure and the hardware untraceable. Most of the prostitutes in the area were sure to cut Mason in on their earnings. It was protection money. No one dared to bother a girl that worked for Mike Mason unless they didn't enjoy breathing.

People were afraid to cross Mason because they knew that if they did, either they themselves or someone close to them would wind up dead, or worse. Mason was especially fond of making examples of boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands, wives, children, and parents. Fear kept all those who came in contact with him in line. Expressions of angst and aggression turned to sheepish glances and smiles of acceptance when Mason entered a rough neighborhood.

Upon reaching their destination, Mason and Paul opened their car doors and stepped into the alley. Between their shirts, slacks, coats, and shoes, they were wearing about one thousand dollars a piece. This of course did not include the jewelry they were wearing or the Rolexes on their wrists.

The two began walking toward a six-foot-tall, well-built black man, wearing a La Coq Sportif sweat suit, a baseball cap sitting sideways on his head, and a pair of Jordans.

"What's up, Cash?" Mason was the first to speak.

"Not much, man. How you been?" replied the man, flashing a crooked smile.

"You know me. As long as business is good, everything's cool." Mason returned Cash's smile.

"I ain't seen you in a while." Cash rubbed his nose with his thumb. "I was thinkin' somethin' mighta happened to you. I said to my boys, 'dawg, I hope Mike's a'right'."

Mason continued smiling. "I had some out of town business that needed

attending to. It took a bit longer than I'd expected."

"Cool," Cash replied. "Ev'rything cool?"

"Oh yeah, everything is very cool." Mason paused, but did not continue discussing that particular topic. That was his cue to Cash that, whatever had happened was none of his business and to refrain from asking anything further regarding it. "So, I brought some product by for you to move."

The three men walked to the rear of the Corvette where Mason opened the trunk. Inside were five neatly wrapped bricks of cocaine. Each brick weighed roughly five pounds. Street value for the drugs was approximately 45 thousand dollars per brick.

"Go ahead, take one and bag it." Mason gestured to a small stack of grocery bags next to the cocaine. "I'll be back to collect 30 grand in three weeks. Anything over that is yours." Mason always made sure to give those that conducted business for him a little extra bonus. This way they would continue moving product for him and also remain relatively loyal.

"Cool." The smile on Cash's face had seemed to fade away as he bagged the brick. Something was clearly bothering him.

"What's wrong? That cut not big enough for you?" asked Mason.

"Nah, man, the cut is more than fair. It's jus' that lately, lately there's been a lot more cops in the area. They're all over my distribution route. They been comin' out at like nine and ten o'clock. It's been makin' it harder for me to do bid'ness."

At that point Mason's smile had also turned to a more serious expression.

Cash continued, "But I don't think it's jus' cause they're lookin' for dealers, or hookers, or people rippin' stuff off. I heard they been asking people if they seen anyone around the streets in costumes. Like Halloween costumes or somethin'. I talked to my boy Johnny, and he said he saw some guy in a costume jump off a five-story building and land on his feet. He also said he saw a different guy with a high-top fade, wearin' a costume, rip a car door off a car near Druid Hill Park."

"Johnny smokes crack, Cash," interjected Mason, with a look of utter disbelief on his face.

"That's true. That's true. But he said those nights he was straight."

"Uh huh."

"All I'm sayin' is now I gotta look over my shoulder twice when I'm makin' a deal. Once for the cops and once for *Freddy* and *Jason* on steroids."

Mason could tell Cash was visibly concerned by the recent goings on in his turf. "Look, you worry about moving my merchandise and I'll look into these

Halloween characters of yours.”

Cash interrupted, “What about the cops?”

“I have a few cops on my payroll. I’ll talk to them about keeping off of your back for the time being. By the way, these ghouls of yours, do you have names or descriptions of them? Besides the guy who raps for Kid ’N Play of course.”

“All I know for sure is—”

The three men were so engrossed in their conversation that they had neglected to keep an eye out for police cars that might take an interest in their *rendezvous*. A siren sounded, and red and blue lights flashed atop a police car as it pulled into the alley. After stopping his cruiser, a policeman opened his driver’s side door and stepped into the alley, joining Mason, Paul, and Cash.

Cash could feel his chest tighten. He was extremely nervous and that was apparent by the look in his eyes. Why wouldn’t he be? He was standing in front of an opened trunk with four bricks of cocaine inside. In his hands was a grocery bag with another brick inside it. The evidence was there. The situation was crystal clear. There was absolutely no way to talk his way out of this, nor to convince the cop standing in front of him that this wasn’t what it looked like.

“Is there something I can do for you, Officer?” Mason questioned. He was cool, calm, and collected. There was no cracking in his voice or fear in his eyes. He looked as though everything was fine. As if this was no different than if he had simply suffered a flat tire, or stalled his car and the policeman had stopped to make sure everything was under control and being handled.

“What exactly is going on here?” asked the policeman, in an authoritative manner.

Cash looked at Mason and Paul. Paul looked at Mason and, as usual, waited for his response.

“Well,” replied Mason, “earlier this afternoon I neatly packed five bricks of exceptionally pure cocaine and placed them in the trunk of my car. Later, I drove to the home of my associate,” Mason gestured toward Paul, “picked him up and drove here, to conduct business with my other associate,” this time motioning toward Cash. “Upon arriving, I opened my trunk and advised my associate,” again motioning to Cash, “to take a brick and place it into a brown grocery bag. As you can see, that bag is currently in his hands.” Mason looked toward Cash. “Cash, raise the bag a little higher so that the officer can see it.”

Cash’s eyes were so widely open that it looked as though they might pop out of their sockets. His mouth, too, hung open. His mind could simply not fathom that Mason had just said every word that his ears had just heard. His facial expression did not change but his eyes, still wide open, glanced toward Mason.

“Go ahead, Cash. It’s okay. Lift the bag,” admonished Mason, a grin on his lips. Then he slightly repositioned Cash.

Cash slowly lifted the bag, holding the top with his left hand and cradling the bottom with his right.

At that point, the policeman stared in disbelief at Cash and, then, looked back at Mason.

“Now, Officer, my friend here has drugs to sell, and I have four more deliveries to make tonight. It’s already,” Mason glanced at his watch, “would you look at that; it’s already 8:30. I appreciate your concern, but we’re fine here. By the way, my friend mentioned something about local law enforcement increasing their patrols in this area lately, making it difficult for him to sell his drugs. I was wondering if you might be able to arrange for that to stop as soon as possible?”

The policeman could not believe what he was hearing. He wasn’t sure if the man who had just spewed out this unbelievable story was mentally deficient or insane. Either way, he decided to take control of the situation.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to pull here,” he said, pulling his service revolver from its holster. “But, you’re not funny. Now all three of you, put your hands on the car and do not move. I wanna see what’s in that trunk and in the bag.”

Mason’s expression hardened. His eyes squinted and his brow lowered. He then turned his head toward Paul.

“Do you believe this?”

Paul raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders.

Mason turned back toward the policeman. “I mean, this guy asks me a question, completely interrupting my business transaction, and I not only take the time to answer him, but I do so with eloquence and courtesy.”

“That’s enough, mister!” the policeman commanded. “Mouth shut and hands on the car! NOW!”

“You see. There he goes again barking orders and being intolerably rude. My entire business meeting is ruined and now, I’m in a foul mood.”

As those final words were spoken by Mason, distracting the policeman, Paul slowly put his right hand into his pant’s pocket. Revolver drawn, the policeman began moving closer to the Corvette. He had become so fixated on Mason that he had taken no notice of Paul or Cash.

“I’m gonna tell you one last time, Smart Guy, hands on the car and shut up.”

When Mason had prompted Cash to show the policeman the grocery bag he was holding, he had also managed to maneuver him just enough to block Paul’s

entire right side. Cash was far too afraid to move and Mason knew that. The entire set up was unfolding just as he had planned.

He had distracted the officer by continuously talking to him, not disrespectfully so as to alarm him, but very calmly and with articulation. He had made no sudden movements and he was sure that Paul would follow his lead. Cash of course was a statue. Then very carefully, he positioned Cash in front of Paul, giving Paul the opportunity to prepare for his cue.

“Well, gentlemen, the officer has insisted I put my hands on the car and shut up.” Mason slammed the palms of his hands onto his car. “Now my hands are on the car.” Mason smiled and looked directly into the policeman’s eyes. “But, before I shut up as you’ve demanded, Officer Rudeness, can I say one more thing?”

The policeman moved next to Mason and began patting his pant pockets with one hand, his revolver still in the other. “Sure, Smart Guy. What do you have to say?”

Mason lifted his head, “Paul.”

The officer turned his head toward the other two men. Paul had moved Cash aside with his left hand, and stood there pointing the Berretta he had pulled from his pocket toward the policeman.

The officer wanted to react. He wanted to swing around and shoot the man that was pointing a gun at him, but there was no time and he knew it.

Paul wore a grin from ear to ear as he pulled the trigger. The bullet exited the gun and within a fraction of a second, impacted against the policeman’s chest. His body hurled toward the alley’s brick wall, smacked against it, and fell to the ground slumped over.

Mason removed his hands from the car and looked at the pitiful man lying on the ground in his uniform.

“Well, Officer-I-Just-Got-Shot-Smacked-Against-the-Wall-and-Pissed-My-Pants, is it okay if I move my hands now?” Mason waived both hands in the air.

Paul looked at Mason with his crooked grin nodding his head, gun still in his hand. Cash was still standing there just as frozen, mouth open, holding his grocery bag, and eyes still bulging.

Mason began to walk toward the policeman. “You can lower your arms now, Cash, and close your mouth. You look ridiculous,” he said.

Upon reaching the man still doubled over, Mason kicked him in his side.

“AAAHHH!” the officer cried out in pain.

Mason had noticed that although there was a hole in the man’s shirt, no blood was spilling out.

“You still alive, cop? Paul, this guy is still alive. I think he’s wearing a bulletproof vest. Is this how you do your work, Paul? It’s incomplete. It’s half done.”

“I’m not done yet, Mike. I was just restin’ my trigger finger,” replied Paul.

The policeman was barely coherent, and it took what little energy he had left to speak. Writhing in pain he managed to mumble, “Pah-Please, I have a wife and seven-year-old little girl. Please! Please!”

“Ya know what’s more pathetic than an out-of-shape middle aged man dressed in a fancy security guard outfit, begging for his life?” asked Mason.

Paul chuckled, “I don’t know, Mike. What?”

Mason looked down at the man on the ground and sneered. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his gun. “Nothing,” he said, pulling the trigger and shooting the pathetic man, who had been on the ground begging for his life, in the head. He died instantly.

Cash was still standing there, eyes and mouth wide open. He was so gripped with shock and fear that he could not move.

“Cash? Cash!” Mason tried to break Cash’s focus.

“Huh?” Cash could barely speak.

“You okay? Did you piss your pants?”

“I’m good.”

Clearly, Cash was not good. He looked as though he had just seen something unbelievable, like an alien ship landing or a ten-story monster walking down the middle of the street.

“Cash, I want you to take the bag in your hands and put it in your car. Then drive home and get some rest. You’ve had a very busy night,” admonished Mason.

Only Cash’s eyes moved to look in Mason’s direction. His body was still frozen.

“Nod if you understand me, Cash, so that I know you’re not catatonic.”

Cash nodded.

“Good. Now I’ll give you a call in three weeks to arrange a time to pick up the money you make moving my merchandise.”

Cash nodded again.

Mason then walked toward the driver’s side of his car, after closing the trunk. Paul followed his lead and walked toward the passenger side. Before getting into the car, Mason looked back toward Cash.

“Oh, and Cash?”

Cash’s eyes were intently fixed on Mason.

"We were never here, if anyone asks. Don't forget that."

Cash nodded again.

"Have a good night, Cash," said Mason with a smile.

"Yeah, later, Cash," said Paul, also exhibiting a smile in imitation of his master.

Cash used every bit of willpower he had to force a smile and nod his head. Mason and Paul then got into the Corvette and drove away.

After driving about five minutes, they saw two police cars speeding in the adjacent lane headed in the opposite direction. They were traveling toward the area Mason and Paul had just left. Their sirens were blaring and the red and blue lights on top of their cars were flashing.

Paul spoke up. "I wonder if someone found that dead pig already?"

"Someone might have heard the shots and called 911," suggested Mason. "Even if anyone by chance saw anything, no one in that neighborhood is stupid enough to mention we were there."

"Yeah, unless they wanna wind up hangin' from a meat hook in a freezer with their tongues cut out."

"Ya know, Paul, you're really a very violent man. You should work on that," Mason commented sarcastically. "Now we have four more drops to make tonight, and I'm hoping they're all considerably less eventful."

After a short drive, Mason pulled into a parking garage near Baltimore's downtown Inner Harbor. There he met an Asian man named Hideo, who, in exchange for a briefcase filled with 35 thousand dollars grouped in small bills, he provided a brick of cocaine. There were no unexpected occurrences during that transaction.

From there they continued on to the third drop which was to take place at the White Marsh Mall. Mason had made arrangements the previous day to meet this client at about 10:00 P.M., in the parking lot closest to Woodward and Lothrop. They were six minutes late, but so was the client. The mall had already been closed a little over a half hour. The few remaining vehicles in the parking lot belonged to mall employees. Mason and Paul had barely been parked for two minutes when a security guard in a small cart began driving toward them.

Mason began to shake his head after placing it in the palms of his hands. "What is it with these guys? Does everybody wearing a badge have a death wish tonight?"

Paul reached for his gun.

“No, no. Not yet,” Mason waived his hand as he spoke. “Let’s see what he wants first.”

After pulling up next to the Corvette, the security guard stepped out of his cart and approached the driver’s side of the vehicle. While he was walking toward the car, Mason rolled down his window. “Hi,” he said in a friendly manner.

“Howdy,” said the pleasant-looking older gentleman approaching them. “Are you boys waiting for somebody?”

“Yes, sir. My sister works there at Woody’s,” said Mason, pointing toward Woodward and Lothrop. “She’s closing tonight so we’re waiting for her. She’s gonna follow us to a friend’s house that lives not too far from here.”

“Oh, okay,” replied the man. “I’m sure she’ll be out soon,” he said with a smile. “Those folks like to get outta there as quick as they can.”

“Thank you,” said Mason. He had mastered the art of sounding sincere and faking courtesy.

“No problem. You boys have yerselves a good night.” The security guard continued smiling. Then he nodded once, got into his cart, and drove away.

Mason’s smile melted from his face as he rolled up his window. He then turned to Paul.

“Hopefully we’ll have no further interruptions. As long as that guy doesn’t come back, he should live through the night.”

Suddenly, a silver colored *Saab* pulled up next to the Corvette. An alluring woman with red hair and green eyes exited the vehicle. At that, Mason stepped out of his own car.

“You’re late, Amber.”

She walked up to him and pressed her body against his. “I know, Mikey, but you’ll forgive me, won’t you?” She began running her fingers through his well-groomed spiked hair.

Mason smiled, “I’ll let it slide this time, I guess.”

The two began to kiss passionately for a short time before Mason pulled away. “As much as I’d love to continue this in a place less public, I still have work to finish tonight.”

“Ohhh,” she began to pout. Then she slid her finger down his cheek and to his chin, while gazing into his eyes.

“I know, I know. But no work and all play, makes Mike a poor boy. I could stop by later, though. Say about one or two in the morning?”

“Mmmm, I’ll be waiting in your favorite negligee.”

“Sounds yummy, but for now, I have something for you.” He opened his

trunk and handed her a grocery bag, after putting one of the bricks into it.

"Is this your contribution to my party next weekend?" She looked into Mason's eyes, trying further to seduce him.

"Nice try, but like I said, business first. That little package is worth 45 grand on the street. Since I'm such a nice guy and you look so tasty tonight, I'm willing to let you have it for 35. I can pick it up when I stop by later tonight or if you need time to move it, I—"

"We'll both be waiting when you get there," she interrupted.

As she turned to get into her car, Mason ran his hand down her back and across her behind. She turned her head and gave him a wink, then got into her car. After she had driven away, Mason sat down in his seat and turned toward Paul. "We have to hurry up and make these last two deliveries," he said.

"Man she looks so hot you should've gone with her and let me take care of the rest of these deliveries," encouraged Paul.

"Nah, that's all right. Like I told her, business before pleasure, my man, business before pleasure."

Mason had simply said that to pacify Paul. He would have gone with Amber in a second if he had felt that Paul could handle the last two deliveries without any incidents. There was still 90 thousand dollars worth of powder in the back and Mason liked to handle those transactions personally. Besides, after what had happened earlier with the cop, Mason couldn't help but wonder; had Paul been there by himself, would he be under arrest or dead right now? Mason knew Paul needed him to jump-start his thought process and feed him hints or cues when it came to handling difficult situations. Without his lead Paul was inept.

The fourth delivery was made in Owings Mills at the home of a very successful real estate agent. When the two arrived there was a party in full throttle. Mason told Paul to stay in the car, as he would only be a few minutes. After that, he went to the front door and rang the bell. Within seconds the door was opened.

"Hi," greeted the large-breasted, slender brunette standing in the doorway.

"Hello," Mason said, as he extended his hand.

The woman then extended her hand and shook Mason's. "Bill's upstairs with everyone else. Come on in."

Mason entered the house with a bag under his arm and then proceeded up the stairs. When he reached the top, he saw a room filled with Yuppie men and women ranging in ages from 20 to 30-something. Half were drunk and the other half high. Mason started to think to himself, how funny this was. Here he was

in a prestigious neighborhood and inside this huge stunning home. The owner was some 30-something-year-old white guy that easily made six figures a year. For the most part, all of his guests, except for the token black and Hispanic, were white and looked to range from middle- to upper-class themselves. Yet they were, all partying the same way the ghetto blacks did in the Projects downtown. If one of these people were to cross paths with some sad ghetto resident, they'd either look the other way or cross the street, so that they wouldn't have to walk on the same sidewalk. And that included the token black and Hispanic! Yet here they were, all getting drunk, all doing the same drugs that some welfare junkie was doing downtown. Mason couldn't help but chuckle to himself. Before he knew it there was a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, bro. Good to see you." It was Bill, the owner of the house. "Sit down, man. Have a drink."

Mason removed Bill's hand from his shoulder. He didn't like Bill. He felt Bill was a corporate stooge willing to act like a complete idiot, just to sell some land and make a few bucks. Bill didn't understand the concept of taking what one wanted by strength or force. He was a weak, simple, pathetic, and insignificant man, content with bartering, negotiating, and pleading for the things he wanted. Nothing would have pleased Mason more at that moment than to pull out his gun and blow Bill's head off. But, Bill was a client and a good paying client at that. So Mason dismissed the thought and continued being cordial.

"That's okay. I've got another appointment in 20 minutes, and it'll take almost that long to get there from here."

"Suit yourself," Bill responded.

The two men walked into the master bedroom and into the walk in closet where a safe sat. Bill then opened the safe. Stacks of cold clean crisp hundreds sat in stillness, unaware of the purpose for which they were intended.

Mason pulled out his brick and laid it on the safe. "Fifty grand," he blurted out.

Even though the value was actually five thousand less, Mason figured this guy was wealthy enough to afford the mark up. Five pounds should last him a good long time, and he also had the option to sell some of it to those idiots dancing badly in his living room.

The Yuppie filled Mason's bag with 50 thousand, large, and thanked him for the delivery. Then Mason grabbed his bag, said goodbye, and left. When he got out to his car, Paul had fallen asleep.

"Wake up, Pauly. You're still on the clock. Sleep on your own time, not mine."

Paul rubbed his eyes. “Aw, I wasn’t asleep, just restin’ my eyes.”

It somewhat annoyed Mason that Paul had fallen asleep. What if a cop had driven by or had been called to the area because the party had gotten too loud? If one would have come into the house to see what was going on, there could have been havoc. Mason may have had to kill two cops in one night. Not that that would have been breaking any of his records, but he really didn’t want to deal with any more incidents that night. He was tired and just wanted to finish his deliveries so that he could go to Amber’s apartment and relax. Paul was lucky that there had been no problems and that everything had gone smoothly.

Mason started the engine and backed his car out of the driveway. He then, headed toward Towson for his last drop.

The last individual on Mason’s courier list was a 21-year-old man named Derek. Derek was a cocky Michael Mason wannabe. He dressed in the most expensive outfits he could buy at the popular well-to-do clothing stores like Macy’s or Woody’s. His wardrobe primarily consisted of Guess, Polo (or some other knock off by Ralph Lauren) and occasionally he’d pick something up from the Benetton or Oak Tree. He also wore a grey trench coat, even during the summer, and two Swatch watches on the same wrist. The pronounced smell of Polo cologne was always detectable to those that stood within ten feet of him. His hair was blonde, and he always wore it shaved around the sides and back but full on the top. Especially long bangs regularly fell into his eyes and he often tossed his head back to get them out of his face.

Derek stood in a parking lot near a business district, nearly two miles from the Towson Town Center Shopping Mall. He waited no more than five minutes before a sleek black Corvette pulled up, after which Mason and Paul simultaneously exited the car. Derek wore a silly schoolgirl grin on his face.

“Hey guys,” he said eagerly, wanting to be accepted as an equal.

“What’s goin’ on Derek?” replied Mason.

“Not much, man, not much. Actually, I was talking to these guys that go to Towson State on Tuesday who like to party. They mentioned they knew a few people itching to get their hands on some *primo* stuff. I told them I could probably hook ’em up, if they could wait ’til Saturday.”

“Great, Derek. That’s great,” said Mason, forcing himself to say it with a smile. It was important to retain good relations with the clientele.

“Yeah, totally! And ya know they said they would—wait ’til Saturday. So I definitely have some of this stuff sold already.”

“Good work. You keep it up and I’ll be competing with you as a major

supplier.” Mason was completely patronizing Derek; however Derek had taken the words as a sincere compliment. “So, I have a package for you. A man of your caliber shouldn’t take any longer than a month to distribute it all.” Mason was offering Derek a week longer than he’d offered Cash. He knew Derek’s connections and skills were in no way on a par with those of Cash; not the same ballpark, not the same zip code. “I’d love to stay and play ‘catch up’, but I have an incredibly sexy lady waiting for me, and I’m looking forward to quite a fulfilling night. You understand.”

“I gotcha, man,” Derek replied. “I don’t like to keep my women waiting either.”

Mason thought to himself, “Would that be your hand or the neighborhood strays?”

Derek was the type of guy who would completely embellish every story that he would ever tell. He would exaggerate so immensely, that anyone he spoke to would know he was lying. He always tried to make himself sound more knowledgeable, more popular, and more interesting than he actually was.

“I’ll call you in a few weeks to see how things are going. Then we can set a time to meet, so that I can pick up my money,” said Mason, as he walked toward his car.

“Great!” Derek replied with enthusiasm. “I’ll wait to hear from you. Later, guys!”

“Later, Derek,” said Mason, while opening his car door.

“Later,” Paul chimed in, trying to sound as important as his boss.

Before they had driven away, Mason looked down at his watch. It was 11:47 P.M.. He was happy because he would be getting together with Amber earlier than expected, now that all business transactions were complete.

As he pulled out of the parking lot, Mason happened to glance into his rearview mirror and back toward the road. Quickly, he looked back into the mirror because, for a second, it appeared that something was hanging from the side of the two-story building behind him. Taking a second look, he saw nothing. He turned and looked over his shoulder through the rear window. Again he saw nothing. It had been a long night. He chalked up his eyes playing tricks on him to fatigue, not to mention his mind wandering on thoughts of Amber.

Derek had opened his car door and everything seemed to be fine. There was no sign of any cops coming to spoil the final deal of the evening. Mason took one last look around and drove away. First, he would drop Paul off at his house and then meet Amber at her apartment, for a delicious end to a very long evening.

CHAPTER III

A Different Perspective

The drive home was a relaxing one. Norrin had driven back roads home purposely avoiding the Beltway. It would take a little longer but since he wasn't sure if Nanci had gotten home yet, Norrin wasn't going to rush. He tossed around the idea of whether or not he would suit up and go out patrolling the streets of Baltimore. It was fun playing super hero, but as of late it hadn't seem to give him the same thrill that it once had when he was younger. These days it was no longer a matter of stopping a mugging or unexpectedly surprising a burglar. It was more along the lines of rescuing a battered child from its abusive parents, or intercepting some foreigner who had kidnaped an eight-year-old girl, planning on selling her into prostitution in his homeland. The worst was finding some poor kid dead and either raped or hacked into pieces. Sometimes both.

Norrin hated seeing children suffer. It was just wrong. As a child he had watched his mother battle cancer and eventually die from it three weeks before his sixth birthday. He recalled the grief he had felt at that time and how it had subconsciously stayed with him into adulthood. It didn't matter when it was or what had happened, a traumatic experience as a child always seemed to leech onto a person and eat away at them throughout their entire life.

From his point of view, Norrin felt that it was one thing for an adult to

undergo hardships or suffer. Adults were usually more mature and emotionally stable than most children. In fact, more often than not, the difficulties and adversities adults faced were typically brought about by their own actions or lack there of.

If an adult died of a drug overdose it was because they had made a conscious decision to misuse drugs. There were several avenues in which to seek help and get clean if one truly wanted to. No, if an adult died due to an overdose, it would be due to the life choices that they had made.

But a child, a child doesn't wake up one morning and decide that he or she wants to start abusing drugs. Most kids, although they may hear about drugs in school, from friends, or on television, haven't the first clue how to find or purchase them. They have to be shown and taught by someone older than themselves. In the end, children usually are too naïve or inexperienced to realize the harm they're doing to themselves until it's too late.

Abuse, be it mental or physical, is also a misery several suffer from. Men and women are often prisoners in their own homes due to some form of spousal abuse. As disheartening as that may be, Norrin could not understand why people in those types of situations didn't simply leave their abusive partner. There was no law prohibiting them from doing so. On the other hand, an abused child does not have the law on his or her side. Sure, if the child is being physically abused and a responsible adult actually finds out and does something, the child may be removed from that environment. But of course, then the state steps in and sticks the child in a place where now they're no longer being physically abused, just emotionally neglected. If the child should happen to live in a home where they are being mentally abused, the law doesn't care. So, there they stay until they're old enough to leave. By that time, they've become so screwed up that now they're the next generation of abusers, armed robbers, rapists, drug dealers, and murderers.

Thinking about this thoroughly upset Norrin. He made the conscious effort to stop thinking about these things, so as not to be in a bad mood when he arrived home to his wife.

To change his focus, Norrin reached toward his car stereo and raised the volume. His top three music choices were pop, soul, or R&B. Usually he kept his dial tuned to B104, a local pop music station, whether at home or while in his car. Nanci, however, was a rocker girl. She would listen to pop, soul, or R&B but her true passion was for rock and heavy metal. From time to time, she would change Norrin's radio station when driving in the car by herself. When it came time for Norrin to use the car again, he would turn the ignition only to find the speakers

blaring Metallica, Skid Row or some other rock group. Before meeting Nanci, Norrin was ardently opposed to that type of music. But after dating her and being married to her, it seemed to have grown on him.

It took about 30 minutes to get from Sam and Cyndi's house to his own. Norrin and Nanci lived in an area of Baltimore known as Carney. As he pulled into the parking lot to his townhouse complex, Norrin breathed a sigh of relief. He was home and could now relax and spend a little time with his wife.

As he stepped out of the car, Norrin's hair scraped against the top of the door jam. He didn't care. He liked his high-top fade hairdo. For the most part, Norrin wasn't big on the latest trends when it came to fashion or hairstyles, but he did like this one. Sam had mentioned that when in costume, Norrin could be easily recognized. However, Norrin argued that he wasn't the only guy in Baltimore wearing a high-top fade.

"There may be other guys wearing high-top fades," Sam would say. "But, how many are your height, your build, and a light-skinned black man like you are?"

Norrin's nonchalant retort was that people might think he was Christopher Reid from Kid 'N Play. To that, Sam responded, "He's far too thin for you to pass as him."

After grabbing the two plates that Cyndi had prepared, Norrin walked to his front door and unlocked it. The entry way to the home was dark.

"Nance? Are you home?" he called out.

"Yeah. I'm upstairs in the bedroom watching TV," she replied.

"Are you hungry? Cyndi made a plate for you."

"Is there any dessert?"

"Yeah."

"Bring the dessert and leave the rest in the fridge. I'll have it tomorrow."

"Okay."

Norrin walked into the kitchen and dropped the dinner plate in the refrigerator, and then grabbed a fork and headed upstairs with the cake.

"Hi," he said, as he entered the bedroom.

"Hey, you," said his wife, looking up at him with her rosy cheeks and tender smile.

"I have some cake for you."

"Mmm, Mmm!" she exclaimed, rubbing her stomach.

Norrin removed the foil and revealed the piece of white cake with cherry vanilla frosting. "Cyndi baked this today. It's really good."

Nanci cut a piece with her fork, skewered it, and placed it into her mouth. It

was exceptionally moist and fluffy, and the cherry vanilla frosting complemented the cake perfectly. “Oh, God, this is so good,” she said, with her mouth still full.

“So, did you have a good time with Tiffani? How was the movie?”

After swallowing the bite, she answered, “It was nice. The movie was so cool.”

“And Tiffani liked it?”

“She loved it! She said it was the coolest movie she’d ever seen.”

“Good,” said Norrin, with a smile. Nanci’s words brought to mind the conversation he’d had with Sam earlier. “I’m glad you both had a good time.”

After removing his shoes, Norrin got comfortable, reclining on the bed with his back against a pillow between he and the wall. Nanci had positioned herself between his legs leaning her back against his chest. Norrin began massaging her shoulders and kissed her cheek as she ate her cake.



"I know what you want," she said tauntingly.

"What do you mean?" he questioned innocently. "I'm just massaging my wife's shoulders because she's had a long day, and because I love her so much."

"Liar," she remarked snidely.

"What do you mean, muffin? I do love you!"

"Yes, but that's not why you're massaging my shoulders. You'd like to think I don't know what you want. But, I do."

There was a brief silence as Norrin bit the left side of his bottom lip, flared his nostrils, and waited for Nanci's response.

"You want to go out patrolling tonight and play super hero, don't you?" she questioned. Then she turned her head, looking over her shoulder out of the corners of her eyes at him. He was grinning nervously like a child who had just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Well, uh, kinda, yeah. That'd be nice," he replied.

"Ya know most husbands like to come home after a hard day's work, have a nice meal, maybe watch a little TV, and then spend the rest of the night making love to their wives." She paused. "Okay, maybe they simply enjoy a quick one and then fall asleep. But at least it's something they look forward to. My husband looks forward to getting dressed up in his little super hero costume—"

"Uniform," he interrupted. "It's a uniform."

"Fine, 'his uniform,'" she gestured, making quotes with her fingers, "And go out beating up bad guys."

"You say it like it's a bad thing. Besides, you love getting into 'your costume,'" he said sarcastically, mimicking her quotes, "and going out beating the crap out of bad guys just as much as I do. More in fact! I think it's some sick woman thing, getting pleasure from beating up men."

Nanci smiled and cocked her head to the side. Then she put her plate down, crawled across the bed, and stood up on the floor.

"I'm just kidding. I'm a little tired anyway." She walked to the bedroom closet and grabbed the hanger with Norrin's costume on it. Then Nanci's hair, which reached the tops of her calves, came to life. A lock of it reached out and grabbed Norrin's mask.

"Your uniform, Scorpion," she said, in a mockingly serious tone.

Norrin smiled. "Thank you, Gorgon," he commented, returning her sarcasm. "You can come with me, ya know, if you want."

"Nah. I've got a full stomach and I'm kinda tired. I don't wanna be out there and wind up putting you, myself, or someone else in danger because I'm not operating at my best. But, you can wake me up when you get home if you want,"

she said, smiling her little seductive smile.

"I can do that," he quickly responded.

"Shower first. Okay?"

"Shower first. Not a problem."

Norrin had been changing while the two were talking. He was wearing a one-piece red uniform. The uniform had a zipper that ran from the neck to the crotch area. It was well hidden by two thin flaps on either side of it. The costume's feet were similar to *tabi* boots. The gloves had thin slits for his fingernails to protrude through. There was also a small scorpion insignia on the left pectoral. His mask overlapped his uniform around the neck and collarbone area. It covered the majority of his face except for his mouth and chin. There was also a hole in the top large enough for his hair to fit through.

"Oh, how I do love a man in uniform," Nanci asserted.

"And oh, how a man in uniform does love you," responded Norrin, before passionately kissing her.

"That was nice. Yeah, definitely wake me up when you get home."

Norrin smiled at her and the two said their goodbyes to one another. After that, Norrin turned and headed downstairs to the living room.

Glancing at the clock as he walked into the living room, Norrin noticed that it was 10:55 P.M. He grabbed the red remote sitting on the coffee table and pushed the button. An opening appeared in the floor revealing stairs, which lead to a narrow tunnel. The tunnel stretched a quarter mile to a small cavern where a red 1987 *Porsche Carrera Targa* was parked.

He then descended the stairs and began walking the length of the tunnel, after pushing the remote's button a second time. Pushing it again caused the carpeted floor, which had revealed the passage to the tunnel, to return to its previous position. Simultaneously, lights were activated, which stretched from the stairs to the cavern.

Once he had reached the cavern, Norrin approached the *Porsche*. It was unlocked of course. Why lock a car in an underground cavern? The key was waiting in the ignition to be turned. Norrin opened the car door and sat down in his seat. He then opened the glove compartment and pulled out another remote control. He placed the first remote into the glove compartment and closed it. The engine purred as he turned the ignition. Then he turned the knob that activated the headlights and taillights. After pushing the button on the remote which he had just removed from the glove compartment, a portion of the top of the cavern began opening downward creating a ramp.

Norrin sat in wonder for a few moments thinking of how amazing this all

was. The hidden passage, the tunnel, the cavern, and the secret entrances weren't incredibly impressive in themselves. But, the work that had gone into creating them was what awed Norrin.

When he and Nanci had moved into the townhouse, soon after they were married, there was a need for a secret entrance to their home. Walking in and out of one's house in full costume somewhat defeated the purpose of having a secret identity. There was also a need to house the *Porsche*. Sam and Wade had both created secret entrances in their homes that led to underground lairs. But this wasn't Norrin's house. It was a townhouse, connected to six others, he was renting monthly. Both Sam and Wade had land surrounding their homes, so doing any kind of digging or construction would likely not raise too many eyebrows. But, doing any kind of digging around or especially inside of the townhouse would not only raise eyebrows, but likely, draw the local authorities as well.

So, when the three men designed the entrance and passage that would lead directly into Norrin and Nanci's home, they needed to keep it simple and small. Sam had hired a crew to begin digging around Grove Road, a small street that had one house on it and dead-ended near a large forest. The men dug a small cavern where the *Porsche* would be stored. They did this under the guise of repairing a sewage rupture, or so Sam had planted in their minds. Once they had completed the dig, Sam paid them and removed the fact that they had ever done the job from their memories. Wade, who worked in the construction industry, had a few connections of his own. He used them in creating a false asphalt covering for the cavern. The false covering was then placed on a hydraulic beam, which could be raised and lowered, doubling as a ramp for driving up onto the street. In its raised position it blended into its surroundings and kept the cavern well hidden.

Later, a tunnel was constructed which ran from the cavern to a spot directly beneath Norrin's living room. Norrin and Wade handled that themselves. Once Norrin's superhuman strength was active, the digging was easy. Wade also possessed superhuman strength. However, his strength did not require activation. It was present with him at all times. Physically, Wade was nearly as powerful as Norrin, once Norrin's adrenaline factor was active. He also had impenetrable skin. Blunt objects such as a baseball bat or club, or sharp objects like knives or even bullets, could not even scratch Wade's skin. On one occasion when he was about 17, a car had sped toward Wade attempting to run him down. Planting his feet into the ground, Wade braced himself, prepared to take the bulk of the impact. When the car crashed into him, its entire front end was destroyed

causing the two individuals in the front seats to go flying through the windshield. Not only was Wade unharmed, he had not moved an inch.

Once complete, the tunnel was seven feet tall and four feet wide. A layer of concrete was applied from ceiling to floor. Wade then wired the lights. The last thing to do was to create an opening from the living room to the tunnel.

Wade brought in a special tool he had often used for cutting through concrete. The home's foundation would have to be broken through. Unfortunately, that could be very loud. So, Sam created a telekinetic barrier around Wade and the concrete base, after removing the carpet from the area where Wade would be busting through. There was absolutely no noise nor vibration while he worked. Then a sliding hatch was installed. It was set up to open and close by remote control.

Considerable work went into creating this small passage but it was a necessity. Protecting their identities was a prime concern for all three men. Primarily, due to the fact that parading around town playing vigilante wasn't exactly legal. Likewise, it was imperative that those who had become their enemies not be able to attack them by way of their friends and or their loved ones.

Finally, Norrin shifted into first gear and drove out of the cavern. He again pressed the button on the second remote control causing the cavern's false covering to close. The car had a license plate and all of the other necessities required by the state of Maryland to register a vehicle. Of course all the information in the DMV's records was forged. If things appeared legal, it would be less likely that Norrin would attract unwanted attention from the authorities.

Driving away, he debated on which way to go. Downtown, Essex, Owings Mills, Overlea, and Towson were all possibilities. Norrin recalled Sam mentioning something about a guy in the Towson area moving cocaine. He decided to drive around Towson, at least for a little while, to see if he could find anyone dealing. Perhaps he wouldn't find the guy Sam was referring to, but whomever he did find, if anyone, might know something about that guy. It was worth a try.

The *Porsche's* windows were tinted so that people could not easily see inside, especially when it was dark. Should the need arise to leave the car when making rounds; it was always good to park as close as possible to the area being patrolled on foot. This way, should it become necessary to conceal one's self from local authorities or make a fast getaway, it could be easily done.

Once he had arrived in Towson, Norrin kept his eye out for any activity that might offer him the opportunity to use his talents. It wasn't long before he

noticed three men standing in a parking lot in one of the business districts. It looked as though the men were having an in-depth conversation, which in itself was fine. Then, Norrin noticed one man pass another a grocery bag. The bag might have had clothes, books, or even groceries in it. But, Norrin thought to himself, "Why would three guys that looked to be in their early twenties, no older than 30, hang out in a business district of Towson trading groceries on a Friday night?" Not to mention the fact that there were bars, restaurants, movie theaters, and various other businesses and stores in the general vicinity, but no grocery stores.

It may have been nothing. Nonetheless, Norrin decided that he would try and eavesdrop on their conversation, and from there decide as to whether or not to get involved. After driving past the parking lot, Norrin pulled into an alley where several establishments kept their dumpsters. Before getting out of the car, he removed the key from the ignition and slid it into a small pocket sewn into his uniform on the right forearm. He then exited the vehicle, locked the door, and quietly shut it.

Carefully, he scanned the area. It was important not to lose the element of surprise. Having some pedestrian point and make loud comments, drawing considerable unwanted attention to him, would pretty much destroy any hope of surprise. After the coast was clear, Norrin made his way around the building, moving slowly and sticking to the shadows. It took just a few seconds to get close enough to be within earshot of the men.

"I'm looking forward to quite a fulfilling evening. You understand," said the man with spiked hair.

Norrin wasn't sure what was meant by that.

"I gotcha, man. I don't like to keep my women waiting either," replied the man wearing the trench coat.

For some reason, Norrin could tell by the tone in his voice and the ridiculous smile on his face, that the man was lying. He reminded Norrin of Anthony Michael Hall in *The Breakfast Club* trying to convince Judd Nelson that he wasn't a virgin. This guy had no women. As a matter of fact, Norrin would've given five to one odds the guy was still a virgin.

Norrin continued his stealth observation as the man with the spiked hair moved toward his car, followed by the strong looking blonde haired man.

"I'll call you in a few weeks to see how things are going. Then we can set up a time to meet, so I can pick up my money," said the man standing by the driver's side of the car.

"Great! I'll wait to hear from you. Later guys!"

Norrin thought to himself, "This dweeb must be the biggest loser on the planet. If he's moving drugs, I'm gonna beat the crap out of him just for kicks."

"Later, Derek."

"Later."

The two men had finally gotten into their parked Corvette Coupe. From a distance, it was obvious that the driver and his companion definitely had a taste for the finer things. Their shirts and pants appeared to be silk. The driver's shoes weren't some 65-dollar pair of Sebago's. Instead, it looked as though they were some sort of leather or animal skin, perhaps snake or alligator. His partner wore something resembling a cross between a wing tip and a loafer. And of course, they were getting into an '89 Corvette Coupe, which didn't exactly come a dime a dozen.

Cautiously, Norrin made his way to a two-story building directly across from the one by which he had been standing; using the cars as cover and crouching low while making his way across the parking lot. Surmising that he might get a better fix on which way the Corvette was traveling once it departed the parking lot, Norrin decided to scale the structure. Once atop the roof, he could focus more on the events taking place and less on concealing himself.

Upon reaching the two-story building, he raised his right arm and extended his fingernails. Thrusting his hand toward the brick wall, his nails penetrated it as though it were made of clay. His second hand quickly followed suite. Prudently, he began scaling the wall, all the while keeping his eyes on the Corvette and the man in the trench coat.

He was about half way to the top, when he noticed the driver in the Corvette peek into his rearview mirror, then look back toward the road. Norrin knew he had little time to get out of eyesight; now possibly discovered, and facing the prospect of the man taking a second glance. Speedily, he ascended to the top. Once on the roof, Norrin laid flat on his stomach so as not to be seen.

Peering over the edge, he waited to see what the driver would do. Norrin watched in silence while holding his breath, as the driver took that second glance into his rearview mirror Norrin had hoped he would not. The driver then turned and looked over his shoulder. Feelings of anxiety coursed through Norrin as he resolved to himself that he had been made. To his amazement, the driver took one last look around and departed the parking lot.

Norrin breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed as though he had not been spotted. He kept his eye on the Corvette as it drove north, all the while keeping sight of the man on the ground wearing the trench coat.

The man in the trench coat stood next to his open car door and paused

before getting in. Lifting his head, he flung it to the side, so as to remove the bangs that had fallen into his eyes. As he did that, a dark silhouette soared across the sky, originating from the two-story building to his left. The man could not believe his eyes, as the figure came crashing to the ground directly in front of him.

“AAAAHH!” he screamed, slamming his body backwards up against his car.

The figure on the ground tilted its head to the left while staring up at the man from a kneeling position, grinning eerily. It wasn’t a friendly grin or a smile one might have after a good laugh. It was more like the wide toothed grin of a mental institution escapee. Before jumping from the roof, Norrin had extended his canine teeth, appearing all the more frightening.

“What’s in the bag, pretty boy?” he said in a shrill tone, allowing a small string of spittle to slide from the corner of his mouth.

The young man was petrified. His eyes were wide open as gasps of air made their way from his open mouth. His arms were raised, bent at the elbows, with his hands spread wide in the air. He wanted to speak, scream, or cry out, but at that moment, his lungs and diaphragm would not allow it.

Norrin realized that he had put the fear of God into the man standing before him, so he retracted his teeth, stood erect, and tried to appear less menacing.

“I asked you a question. What’s in the bag?” He spoke using his natural voice, again trying to lessen the fear factor.

Still visibly moved by what he had just seen, the man managed to barely squeak out, “Na- Nothing.”

“Look, preppy, we can do this the nice and friendly way, or we can do it the mean and nasty way. Me, I prefer the mean and nasty. But, since I’m not positive about what’s in that bag there, I’m giving you a choice.”

The man slowly began to relax his arms. “Who are you?” he asked.

“You don’t get to ask questions yet. Not until I know what that extra from Miami Vice that just drove away in the Corvette gave you.”

It must have been the fact that Norrin had reverted to his normal voice or that he was attempting to appear less frightening, that caused the man who had just been gripped with fear to begin acting pompous.

“Are you a cop? You don’t look like a cop. Do you have a warrant to search my car? Lemme see it.”

Although not visible due to the mask he was wearing, Norrin raised his eyebrows in disbelief. This guy had just witnessed him jump from a two-story building and not just straight down, but a good 35 feet away from it without getting as much as a scratch. Now, he was acting foolishly and copping an

attitude because Norrin had decided to treat him in a somewhat more civil manner. Clearly, it was time to take control of the situation again.

"Excuse me," said Norrin, shoving the man to the aside. He drew back his arm and punched a hole directly through the driver's side door. Drawing back that same arm while bent at the elbow, Norrin tore the car door from its hinges. He then removed the door from his arm with his free hand and handed it to its owner. "Hold this."

In an almost involuntary reaction, the man grabbed his car door. As the man stood silent once again and in disbelief, Norrin reached into the car and snatched the grocery bag. He then opened it and looked inside.

"Is this what I think it is?" he asked.

The man remained speechless.

Norrin stared through the translucent lenses of his mask directly into the man's eyes, and said, "I asked you a question. Is this what I think it is?"

The man dropped the door barely missing his own feet. Norrin looked back into the bag and put his hand in. Using one of his extended fingernails, he sliced open the foil covering of the cocaine. He raised his head and began scowling.

The man immediately began to panic and took off running. He wasn't headed in any particular direction; just away, anywhere but where he was. Dropping the bag, Norrin jumped into the air, executed a half turn, and landed directly in front of the man. Unable to stop in time, he slammed into Norrin's chest. The impact knocked him backwards and he fell to the ground. Then he jumped to his feet and began running back toward his car.

Norrin knew that time and time again, Sam had encouraged him to remain low key and to be subtle. He had also advised Norrin of the importance of not drawing too much attention to himself. But, when he was in the thick of things, out on the street, adrenaline pumping, Norrin found that being subtle tended to be difficult. It was especially difficult when some punk was smarting off or not cooperating with him. Norrin had reached his limit.

He leaped into the air and came down right next to the fleeing man's car. Norrin glared at him then turned toward the man's car.

"You're going to jail," he said sternly. Then he kicked the car beneath the frame on the passenger's side. Instantly, the car launched upward, flipped over, and landed on its roof. "Now do something else to piss me off! GO AHEAD!"

The man was frozen in his tracks.

Norrin walked over to him and grabbed the lapel of his coat. "What did that guy call you? Dirk, Dork, Derek, yeah that's it. He called you Derek."

Derek's eyes opened wider.

“Now, Derek, you’re gonna tell me who those two guys were, how long you’ve been selling this trash, and any other useful information you may feel compelled to share with me, to help you stay in one piece.”

Norrin began moving his left hand towards Derek’s face, nails drawn. Derek’s eyes grew wider as they followed Norrin’s hand toward his face.

Suddenly, the sound of screeching tires rang through Norrin’s ears. A spray of bullets aimed in his direction caused him to immediately release Derek and dive for cover.

“Move! Move! Get over here, Derek! Now!” Norrin could hear a voice coming from the direction of the car but opted to stay down and avoid getting shot. He could hear fast-paced footsteps running away from his vicinity. Slowly, he lifted his head looking over the trunk of the car he had chosen to duck behind. Again, a spray of bullets fired, this time striking the car that Norrin had hidden behind. He realized that he had better move away from the car, before whoever was shooting at him hit the gas tank.

Keeping low, Norrin scurried toward the building where he had parked his car. Again, he heard the sound of screeching tires speeding away from the scene. He could also hear the sound of sirens getting closer and closer. It was time to make a speedy getaway. Running toward his car, Norrin removed the key he had hidden in his forearm pocket. After unlocking the door, he got in, started the car and drove away as inconspicuously as possible.

“Aw, no,” he said as he drove away, remembering that he had forgotten to collect the bag full of drugs. Going back for it now was not an option. At least the police would have it and, with any luck, lift those guys’ fingerprints from it. Norrin didn’t worry about his fingerprints being found. He was wearing gloves.

It was close to midnight, so Norrin decided to call it a night and head home. Usually he would stay out a bit later, especially if he was with Sam, Wade, Nanci, Cyndi, or Rachel. But, this situation had not ended the way he would have liked, and he knew that the police would be out in force after finding an overturned car missing one of its doors, and a grocery bag with cocaine inside. Tomorrow, he would regroup with Sam and Wade to discuss what had happened.

After parking the *Porsche* in its secret cavern and walking the length of the tunnel, Norrin pressed the button on the remote control in his hand. He then walked up the stairs and into his living room. All the lights in the house were off. He pressed the remote’s button again and dropped it on the coffee table. After that, he hiked up the stairs to the bathroom, removing his costume along the way. Once he had reached his destination, Norrin dropped his costume on the bathroom floor, stepped into the bathtub, and turned on the shower. The warm

stream of water against his aching muscles felt so good. After 15 minutes, he turned off the water and proceeded to dry off.

After placing the towel across the shower's curtain rod, he walked into his bedroom. Nanci was asleep and looked so peaceful, like an angel. He knelt by her side and began to tenderly kiss the small of her bare milky-white back. After a few seconds, she woke up.

Nanci was somewhat in a daze, still in that place between sleep and consciousness. "Hi. How'd everything go?" she mumbled.

"Not as good as I'd have liked," responded Norrin.

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," he said, while drawing circles on her back with the back of his finger.

Slowly, she sat up causing the sheet to uncover her bare body.

Norrin leaned in and the two began kissing. Gently, he continued stroking her back with his fingers, while holding her close to his body.

Nanci gradually leaned back, and said, "Thank you. Thank you for being my husband."

Norrin smiled and kissed her forehead. "We may not have as much money as Sam and Cyndi, but I think we're just as rich as they are."

Nanci smiled and the two continued where they had left off.

CHAPTER IV

Reprimand

“So, essentially what you’re telling me is that you destroyed a car, drawing considerable attention to yourself, and let a confirmed drug buyer and or dealer get away. Oh, and you also left a grocery bag with a brick, not a baggy or vial, but a brick of cocaine in it. Does that about sum it up?” questioned Sam.

Norrin sat in silence.

“I’m sure he didn’t plan for things to happen quite that way,” Wade interjected.

Wade was the third member of this virile trio. Sam had known Wade about as long as he’d known Norrin, but had spent more time with Norrin while growing up. Wade was the peacekeeper of the group. He also doubled as the comic relief. He could always be counted on to lighten the mood when things got too serious by using humor, sarcasm, or by making some quick-witted remark.

“Don’t come to my rescue, Wade. You’ll be the next one in the interrogation seat if you do,” replied Norrin, while staring down at the floor.

“He’s right, Wade. Don’t come to his rescue,” Sam shot a look toward Wade and then glared back at Norrin. “Norrin always wants to do things his way. No matter how many times he’s told his way isn’t always the best way. He never

listens, and because of that, things like this happen. Maybe once somebody dies, like me or you, because he has to do everything his own way, maybe then he'll start to think before he acts."

Norrin immediately raised his head and gave Sam a cold stare.

"Maybe it'll cost you your own life," continued Sam, shooting a stare of his own right back at Norrin. "Who knows," he said, while shrugging his shoulders and lifting his right hand into the air, "Maybe some poor innocent bystander will have to pay the price because he always insists on doing things his way."

Norrin turned away.

"Okay, I think you've made your point," Wade chimed in. "Unless of course, you want to send him to his room or give him a spanking." Wade reached toward the belt around his waist and patted it. "Ya know, I just bought this a week ago and it hasn't been broken in yet."

There was a dead silence.

"Are you finished, or do you want to whine a little more?" Norrin said aloud, not looking at either of the men.

"You'll never change," said Sam, irritation clearly in his voice.

"You think you're so smart. You think you know—everything," Norrin countered.

"I do know everything. I'm a telepath."

"What you are is an a—"

"Ho! Whoa! Whoa, whoa!" Wade interjected, cutting Norrin off. "Let's not be reduced to name calling."

"Listen to me, Norrin," said Sam, using an uncompromising tone. "Who was there for you and taught you how to develop and control your abilities, when your father wouldn't? Who's taught you, since you were 12, how to quiet the primal thoughts and feelings you'd have when you activated your added strength? And who did you accept as mentor and leader of this team, group, band, or whatever you want to call us?"

Norrin's heart began to soften. "You," he answered.

"Then don't you think that I deserve a degree of compliance and implementation, when I give you counsel?" Sam's tone was not accusatory or one that implied he was talking down to Norrin, but that of earnest guidance.

"Well, yeah. I mean, sometimes I don't think before I act, I know. And I know it's important to keep a low profile when we go out. I mean, we don't just have ourselves to worry about anymore. We have our wives, too. It's just that when I activate my adrenaline, you know, my added strength, and extend my teeth and fingernails, instinct seems to take over. I guess sometimes I let it really.

I mean I have the ability to control myself. You helped me to do that. I guess sometimes it just feels good not to. I shouldn't be so quick to act on that feeling," Norrin said somberly.

"Well, I don't think we'll have to break in Wade's new belt just yet," said Sam while smiling, trying to lighten the mood a bit. "Just promise me you'll try harder to use your mind before using your muscle."

Norrin smiled and sheepishly nodded his head in compliance.

"Now let's all hug and tell each other how much we love one another," Wade added.

The three men chuckled. It was a welcome change from the tone that had enveloped them not two minutes before.

Norrin and Wade had joined Sam at his house that morning. It was Saturday and the three of them usually gathered every Saturday morning to discuss the happenings of the week. Whether they'd gone out patrolling alone or had ventured out in groups, it was tradition to get together and revisit the experiences of each person. Occasionally, the girls would join them. But, they had each made it abundantly clear that they were not interested in becoming full time vigilantes. Yes, they did have special gifts and abilities of their own, just as the men, but both Cyndi and Nanci were wives and wanted to focus primarily on their families. Rachel was in college and her goals included attending med-school and then one day, hopefully, a very successful practice.

Rachel was like a surrogate sister to the three men. They had all known each other since their pre-teens. Sam and Rachel had even dated for a short while, but decided that they were better off as friends than lovers. Truth be told, they were far too similar in personalities to be a couple. Rachel was an attractive woman with fiery orange hair and lots of freckles. Her eyes were a very deep brown. She was usually in good spirits and enjoyed making humorous quick-witted comments just as Wade did. She too possessed certain extraordinary abilities.

Rachel was not a telepath like Cyndi. Nor did she have the use of her hair as a living appendage the way Nanci did. Rachel was a spontaneous combusive pyrokinetic. She had the ability to create fire by igniting molecules of oxygen in the air. She could create flames as small as a match or as large as a bon fire. She had the ability to control the fire mentally and form it into anything she could imagine. She could also use it as a projectile weapon. What was most interesting about her talent was that not only could she create fire, but she could also draw it into herself, even extinguishing it if necessary. Rachel also had the ability to fly using her pyrokinesis, the same way Sam was able to fly using his telekinesis.

When they were in their mid-teens Sam, Norrin, Wade and Rachel would

often embark upon new adventures together. They were an inseparable quartet. But, as Rachel grew older, she realized that she would rather save lives wearing scrubs instead of wearing spandex. Likewise, her break up with Sam made it difficult for the two to be around one another for a period of time. Fortunately, after the pain had subsided and the wounds healed, they were able to remain great friends.

The week had proven uneventful for both Sam and Wade. Neither had much to share during the discussion, regarding their activities that week. Norrin's Friday night pursuits were the highlight of the meeting.

Weekly meetings usually took place in a lair located directly beneath Sam's home. It was impressive. Unlike the Spanish style structure and decor above, this subterranean stronghold exhibited an Asian flair.

Wooden planks covered the walls throughout the lair. It was divided into five rooms, three of which were resting areas. Each of the three lounging rooms was complete with a bed, a chest of drawers, an end table, with a small reading lamp, and a small stereo, equipped with a tape deck as well as an unfamiliar new device called a Compact Disk Player. The beds had wooden frames that sat low to the ground with mattress pads large enough for two people to lie on. The chests of drawers were wooden with intricate carvings and bamboo segments to accentuate them. The end tables were similar in appearance. Both had been stained a few shades darker than the wooden walls. The reading lamps had a quaint ancient lantern design and the doors were constructed of rice paper which slid open and shut.

There was also a bathroom in the lair. It was equipped with a large shower and an even larger Jacuzzi style bathtub built into the floor. It had dual sinks, a toilet, and a urinal. It also contained a storage closet for linens, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and several medical supplies and medications.

All other components involved in aiding Sam in his nightly escapades were housed in the remaining room. Being the largest, it was three times the size of the other four rooms combined. Along the walls were posted four large scrolls. They were written in Japanese characters and read, Truth, Honor, Strength and Temperance. There were also various types of swords decorating the walls. Multiple weapon cabinets were placed around the room which housed throwing knives, *shuriken*, *nun chucks*, quarter staves, *manriki* chains, bows, crossbows and arrows. Other items such as utility harnesses, handcuffs, earpieces, mini microphones, and smoke bombs were stored in cases near each weapons cabinet. A network of computers had been assembled to store files on allies, enemies, and both open and closed cases. Hacking into other computer systems

was also a benefit to having the network.

In the center of the room was a mannequin, which wore Sam's costume until he needed it. The costume was very similar in appearance to Norrin's, although there were some differences. Sam's costume was a soft green and had an insignia of a praying mantis on the left pectoral. The gloves were completely enclosed. There was no need for apertures for his fingernails. His mask did reveal his mouth and chin, but was completely enclosed around the skull portion. Also, the lenses, which covered his eyes, were three times the size of the lenses which covered Norrin's eyes.

Toward the end of the lair a pale green 1988 *Lamborghini Countach* LP500 was parked. Just as Norrin's *Porsche* was seemingly registered with the state using false information, so was Sam's *Lamborghini*. Sam had actually hacked into the DMV's database and, under false names and addresses, generated three sets of registration information. Then, for mailing tags and registration documents, he used a post office box address in Overlea.

Various other items adorned the room such as suits of *samurai* armor, statues of warriors, and a picture of Sam's mentor and friend, David. David had taught Sam to develop and control his abilities just as Sam had taught Norrin. He had also instructed Sam in martial arts, specifically *Kung Fu*. On his wedding day, David presented Sam with a seven-hundred-year-old Japanese *katana* as a gift. It was the sharpest of his blades. Sam took great care in the swords preservation, making sure it was always well oiled and displaying directly below David's picture.

Sam stood up from his seated position and grabbed a pencil and pad of unlined paper sitting on top of one of the computer desks. "I'd like to get a picture of the guy that you terrorized last night," he said jokingly.

Norrin rolled his eyes.

"I'd have you draw it, but being the perfectionist you are when it comes to your art, I'd be waiting a week," stated Sam.

"I take pride in my work. There's no shame in that," returned Norrin.

"Well, Mr. Prideful, will you allow me to borrow a few of your memories from last night, so that I can sketch out a picture of this Derek person?"

"Uh, well, okay. Just be sure you stop scanning before I get home."

"Not a problem. And thanks for the heads up. I'd hate to get an unexpected surprise because I probed a little too far."

Norrin gave a big-toothed grin.

Sam began sketching the face of the man Norrin had encountered the night previous. Sam, too, was a very talented artist but had chosen not to pursue it as

a career. With the image he was able to pull from Norrin's mind, he had completed the sketch in less than five minutes. Wade had passed behind Sam when he was almost finished sketching and began to snicker. As he finished, Sam, too, had a smile on his face. Turning the pad, he showed the picture to Norrin.

"This our guy?"

Norrin began to laugh. Sam had drawn a picture of Derek right after he had seen Norrin jump from the two-story building and land next to him. Derek's eyes were bulging out of his head and his mouth was wide open.

"Yeah, that's him," Norrin replied with a snicker.

"Lemme do another one. I'll see if I can find a less startled looking view of him," commented Sam.

Sam began to scan Norrin's thoughts further. "Ah—" Sam paused and began to chuckle. "Is this guy crazy?"

"I know!" Norrin cut in. "You see! You see why I got so ticked off! The guy's a moron."

Sam shook his head while smiling and returned to sketching. While sketching he shared the experience with Wade, allowing him to watch the entire scene as though he were watching a movie. There was a silence for a few seconds, and then Wade's eyes grew larger, right before he burst into laughter.

"No he did *not*! No he did *not*," Wade interjected. "Whoa boy! This guy's lucky he can still walk. The look on his face when you tore his car door off," Wade had difficulty finishing his sentence because he was laughing so hard, "Priceless. Priceless."

Sam flipped the pad around and showed both men.

"Yeah, that's him," said Norrin, no longer smiling. He had exchanged his smile for a look more resembling irritation.

"You didn't get a good look at either license plate did you?" Sam questioned.

"No. No I didn't."

"I tried to see if I could get a good view of one from your memories of last night but I couldn't."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Let's do this, Cyndi mentioned this morning that she was meeting Nanci and Rachel for shopping around 10:00A.M. We're all supposed to get together for lunch afterward at Dave's restaurant. After lunch, we can come back here and prepare to go out this evening. Tonight we'll patrol Towson and see what we can find out about this Derek, either from his personal contacts or from people who may have seen or heard of him."

“Wake up.”

Derek felt a slight nudge to his side. He had barely woken up because of it and the image standing above him was still out of focus.

“Do I have to ask twice?”

This time he heard the sound of a hammer being drawn back on a gun. Immediately, he jumped up.

“What? Where? Oh, Mike,” he said, while rubbing his eyes.

Mason was there standing over him. He had a gun in his hand and his finger on the trigger.

“You passed out in my car last night. I had Paul carry you into his house so that you could sleep it off here,” said Mason.

“Oh. Thanks, man.”

“Don’t thank me yet. One, I’m kinda T-ed off that I had to stay here last night because I was worried your friend might come lookin’ for you.” Mason began to pace around the room, gun still in his hand. “Ya know, I was supposed to have a very nice evening after I left you. But that all got tossed out the window.”

“Oh yeah. You were supposed to meet your girlfriend or something, weren’t you?” said Derek, still somewhat groggy.

“Yeah, something like that. But instead, I wound up babysitting. You can imagine, given the choice of babysitting or spending the night with a beautiful woman,” Mason made gestures as though his hands were a pair of scales, “I choose B.”

At that point, Derek began to recall the events of the evening past. “I know! So would I! I had no idea that the Ghost of Christmas Future was gonna show up and try to eat my face!”

Mason interrupted. “First, it’s too early to listen to you squeal like a three-year-old girl. Second, what do you mean the Ghost of Christmas Future? I barely caught a glimpse of the guy. It looked like he was wearing some red jogging suit and had a high-top fa—” Mason stopped himself in mid-sentence, recalling his conversation with Cash. “A high-top fade.”

“I don’t know. All I saw was teeth, and drool, and claws, and—” Derek was gesturing frantically, tears almost welling up in his eyes.

“Okay, wait. Your car: it was upside down. What happened to it?”

“I’m telling you! The guy, or monster, or whatever it was kicked it over!”

“Kicked it over?”

“Kicked it over! And that, that—that was after he tore the door off!”

“Derek, are you high? You’d better not be high.”

“No! No! No, I’m not high! You weren’t there! You didn’t see!”

“Again the yelling. It’s too early for that. Please don’t make me ask you to stop that again. Now, before I pulled out of the parking lot, it looked like I saw something on the side of the building. It was the one you were parked closest to. When I looked back it was gone. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong so, after driving a few miles, I doubled back to make sure everything was okay. Needless to say, it wasn’t.”

“You saw him! You saw him and you left!” Derek shouted.

Mason slowly turned his head toward Derek with a stare that would have melted ice.

“Sorry. I’ll stop yelling now,” said Derek, at almost a whisper.

“I saw something. I couldn’t determine what it was. That’s why I came back, you sniveling, pathetic woman. If I hadn’t, you’d probably be dead right now.”

Mason placed the gun’s hammer back into its standard position and, then, tucked the gun into the front of his pants. At that same moment, Paul walked out of his bedroom wearing only a pair of briefs and rubbing his eyes.

“What’s all the noise?” he said, while yawning. “Too early for that.”

“That’s what I said,” Mason concurred. He then happened to glance downward in Paul’s general direction. “Aw, Paul! Go to the bathroom for God’s sake,” he demanded, with a look of disgust.

Paul looked downward and then laughed while walking toward the bathroom.

“So what now?” asked Derek.

“What now? What now?” Mason mocked. “Ya know, you’re lucky you were smart enough to grab that grocery bag before you jumped into my car last night. That pretty much saved Paul’s couch from being ruined, due to a massive bloodstain, and your head from being ruined, due to a massive hole in the middle of it.”

“Heh-heh,” Derek forced out a fake laugh. “You’re just kidding, right?”

“Don’t take it personal. It’s simply business. Forty-five grand is a lot of money to just toss to the wind. I can’t let people just piss away my money and let it slide. I’d lose all credibility doing business that way. But, like I said, that’s not a problem you have to worry about because you were smart,” said Mason, while gesturing, his arms bent at the elbows and hands shaking in the air.

A cold chill ran down Derek’s spine. He had finally realized what he’d gotten involved with. This wasn’t a just summer job or a way to attain popularity and make some quick money while scoring chicks. This was an illegal business where life and death could come at any second, depending on your behavior and the

way in which you performed your given tasks. He was so happy that he had grabbed that bag. Quite honestly, it didn't feel as though he had made a conscious decision or put very much thought into it. It just happened. It was similar to the experience he'd had when he automatically grabbed the car door, after being admonished to do so by the creature that had torn it from the hinges of his car.

Mason plopped down on the couch next to Derek. "So, did your friend give you a name?"

"No," Derek quickly answered. "I asked him but he wouldn't tell me."

"How rude of him. How about his face, did you get a good look at his face?"

"Sort of. I could see his lips."

"You were staring at the guy's lips? Didn't you mention something last night about not keeping your women waiting? Are you sure it's women that you don't like to keep waiting?"

"No! I mean yes! I mean, I think he was wearing a mask or something. I couldn't see his eyes. They were like, glazed over and all black. I couldn't see his nose either. It was covered by the mask."

"How about the hair. Did you see the hair?"

"Uh, yeah, I think so. Yeah! Yeah I did! It was tall. Tall like that rapper guy, Flava Flave."

"You mean Kid 'N Play."

"Yeah, him, too."

"So, our mysterious comic book character is a nigger."

"Who's a nigger?" Paul asked, as he walked out of the bathroom scratching himself.

"Cash's Freddy Krueger, with the high-top fade," replied Mason.

"Yeah! Freddy Krueger, Freddy Krueger! His fingernails were like that! Like Freddy! I watched 'em get longer, grow right out of his fingers! Right by my face!" Derek insisted.

"Are you yelling again?" questioned Mason. "I swear, if you don't stop, I'm gonna put a bullet in your face."

Derek instantly shut up and nearly began to quake with fear.

"You say he kicked your car over and tore off the door? You know that's not possible."

"Hey, you saw the car. Obviously I'm not making this up," said Derek, in his own defense. "I mean, you saw," Derek began gesturing his hands in a forward motion, "the car."

"Yeah, yeah, I saw the car."

“It didn’t get that way by itself,” interrupted Derek.

“I wonder if the guy was strung out. I’ve heard of people doing some pretty amazing stuff when they’re totally strung out. One time, I saw this bum who was strung out. A car hit him as he was crossing the street. The car had to be doing at least 30 miles an hour. The guy driving slammed on his brakes but it was too late. BAM! The bum goes flying and then hits the ground. Everyone runs over to see if the guy, by some miracle, is still alive. After about a minute the bum opens his eyes, looks around, stands up and continues on his way. It was like nothing had happened to him. He was probably so blasted he barely felt a thing.”

“That guy in the costume did show a major interest in my bag. He kept asking me, ‘what’s in the bag, what’s in the bag?’ Maybe he was hoping there were drugs in it.”

“I swear. Addicts will do anything for a fix.”

“But, he did jump off of a two-story building.”

“Yeah, and he probably broke all the bones in his feet. The skin around those bones is probably hamburger right now. Not to mention, one or both of his shins most likely are shattered.”

“He seemed to do pretty well for a guy with broken feet and shins.”

“He won’t once his high wears off.”

Mason wasn’t sure how much of Derek’s story was true and how much was bull. He knew that Derek always made everything that came out of his mouth seem to be more elaborate or grandiose than it actually was; expanding fingernails, jumping off of a two-story building, kicking over a car—unlikely. The truth was more likely some sort of switchblade or stiletto, opposed to extending fingernails. Instead of jumping from the top of the building, most likely, he jumped from the fire escape ladder, ten feet from the ground. And the idea of kicking the car over? Maybe lifting it up high enough so that it rolled over and tore the driver’s side door from its hinges rang closer to the truth. The guy was in a costume to try to keep the people he stole from, from recognizing him. He was obviously a moron, because he allowed one of his most noticeable features, his hair of all things, to be paraded out on public display.

“Paul. Paul?” called Mason.

“Yeah. What’s up, Mike?” Paul asked.

“I need to find out a little more about this guy. The one that Cash and our friend Derek here have told us about. I need to find out if he’s some retard, in the wrong place at the wrong time, or if he’s really a threat.”

“How do we do that?” Paul again waited for Mason’s lead, before initiating his own thought.

“Put the word out to all of your connections and or clients to keep an eye out for a guy in a red jumpsuit with tall hair. Tell them you need any info they may have or can find regarding a description, a name, or any places they may have run into him. Tell them not to approach him, though. He seems to be dangerous, and if anything happens to our clientele, I don’t think I’d be able to sleep at night,” Mason said sarcastically. “This guy’s costing me money, and as you well know, people who cost me money tend to have a nasty habit of winding up dead.”

CHAPTER V

Rifts

It was shortly after 1:00 P.M. when Sam, Norrin, and Wade pulled into the parking structure closest to Downtown Baltimore's Inner Harbor. They were late. They were supposed to have met Cyndi, Nanci, and Rachel at exactly 1:00 P.M. outside of The Silver Dolphin, a popular seafood restaurant owned by their friend and Sam's mentor, David. The girls would understand of course, at least they hoped they would. Sometimes Saturday weekly briefings ran long.

As they walked briskly toward the restaurant, Sam, Norrin, and Wade noticed the women standing out front waiting for them. They each had shopping bags in their hands and, of course, Cyndi packages were the largest.

Hers weren't the largest simply because she loved to shop or because she was the wealthiest of the women. That was a given. In truth, the primary reason that Cyndi's were the largest was because every time she bought something for herself, she made it a point to pick something up for her husband. Even if it was just something small, which it rarely was. Cyndi believed that thinking only of herself and neglecting her husband reflected selfishness; and those that knew Cyndi knew she didn't have a selfish bone in her body. Sam was always bringing her gifts and doing little things to surprise her, which is a very difficult thing to do for a telepath. Of course, these were simply material possessions. But, being

given in the spirit of love was what made them all the more special.

"You're late." Cyndi was the first to speak up.

"It's Norrin's fault," Wade blurted out. "He screwed up big time last night, so Sam had to give 'im a beatin' before we left," he said smiling.

"Shut up, Wade," protested Norrin.

"Sam, were you being mean to my husband?" said Nanci, joining the conversation.

Sam began to bite the corner of his lip while looking up into the sky. Then, after getting his composure, he looked back at Nanci and said, "I gave him some brotherly counsel that I felt, if put into practice, could not only benefit him but those closest to him." Sam specialized in diplomatic responses.

Unable to hold her tongue, Rachel entered into the conversation. "God, it's getting deep out here. I wish I had brought my boots."

Norrin looked at her with a huge grin on his face.

Uninterested in continuing the conversation, Sam recommended everyone go inside and enjoy a well-prepared lunch. After filing through the front door, one by one, the group was greeted by a hostess. She instantly recognized the party as close friends of the restaurant's owner.

"Hi, everyone," she greeted them. "How are all of you this afternoon?"

"Hungry!" answered Wade.

Everyone, including the hostess, began to laugh.

"Well then, let's get you all seated and get some orders from you," she offered. Looking toward the ladies, she asked, "May I take your bags and keep them in our break room until you're all ready to leave?"

"That'd be great," they all replied.

The hostess immediately motioned to two bus boys to come over. She then instructed them to take the bags to the break room until the party was ready to leave. As the bus boys were leaving, the hostess directed the group to their table. It was the best table in the restaurant. It wasn't too far from the kitchen and the view it offered was superb. Glass windows surrounded the restaurant, so that the patrons could enjoy the beautiful view of the harbor while eating their meal. It wasn't long before a waiter appeared, took everyone's order, and then disappeared as quickly as he'd shown up.

As the group was talking, mostly about bargains the girls had found earlier that morning, David approached them with their drinks.

"Hi, everyone. Okay, who gets what?" he asked.

"David! Dave!" they all shouted.

"I see you're waiting tables now, Dave. What happened? Did your employees

organize a coup and take over the place because yer paying them such lousy wages?" inquired Wade, with his usual degree of sarcasm.

"Ha-ha, Wade," responded David. "I need to remind your waiter to spit on your plate before he brings it out. Which is yours again?"

"Mine's the Chesapeake Bay Crab Cakes," he quickly answered, which was actually Norrin's order.

"Keep it up and we'll be looking for a replacement to fill your spot in our group. Due to a small case of death," warned Norrin.

"Well, if you'd done what you were told, I'd have been enjoying my lunch right now. Instead of listening to old Reverend Sam here's sermon on, Payin' attention to those takin' the Lead," said Wade, doing his best old black preacher impersonation.

"That's it!" said Norrin, reaching across Nanci trying to get to Wade.

"Hey, if you boys can't behave yourselves, I'll have you thrown out of my restaurant," said David jokingly.

"Stop it!" said Rachel, smacking Wade's hand.

"Ow!" he cried out, while rubbing his hand.

"You're next, Norrin, if you don't behave," she said, glaring at him.

"He started it," Norrin commented, under his breath.

"I swear, if the two of you don't start acting your age, I'm going to thoroughly embarrass the both of you," said Sam, while glaring at the two men.

Instantly the two sat at attention. They knew Sam well enough to know that he'd follow through on that threat if they continued. Of course he wouldn't cause them any physical harm, but their egos would thoroughly be beaten and bruised. Causing them to pour an entire glass of water into their lap, walking around for the rest of the day looking as if they had wet themselves, or having them strip down to their underwear and serenade the crowd outside, could be considerably humiliating.

"You know, you really have a way with them," David complimented Sam.

"Well you know, I try to emulate my mentor's teaching methods to the best of my ability," said Sam, looking at David with respect and admiration.

"Dave?" Nanci called out, pulling a camera from her purse.

"Yes, ma'am. What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I bought this camera today because we needed a new one," she said, looking at Norrin. Then turning back toward David, she continued "I was wondering if you'd take a picture of us, so that we'd have something to commemorate this outing together?"

"I'd be happy to."

"Does anyone even have a picture of us all together?" asked Rachel

"I don't believe so," responded Cyndi. "I know we don't."

"You'll have to get us copies, okay, Nanci?" asked Rachel.

"Sure," she answered.

"Okay guys, huddle around together," instructed David.

Everyone at the table huddled in as close as they could, squeezing together.

"Cheese, everyone," said David.

"Cheeeeesel!" they all shouted while smiling and, at that moment, David snapped the picture.

"Okay. One more for posterity," encouraged David.

Before snapping the second picture, he glanced toward a woman who was exiting the restaurant. Waiting to be seated was a man, unknowingly standing in her path and reading his newspaper. David had both telepathic and telekinetic abilities equal to that of Sam. After motioning with his head in the direction of the exiting woman, he telekinetically reached out and pinched the woman on her bottom. She squealed as she jumped into the air, then turned to the man who had been accidentally blocking her path and smacked him in the face. She then stormed out of the door. The poor man not only had no clue what was going on but, in the excitement, he'd lost hold of his newspaper, causing it to unravel and fall to the floor.

"I can't believe you just did that," said Sam, with a look of shock coupled with amusement.

"You guys were having so much fun behaving badly, and I didn't want to feel left out," responded David, as he began to snicker.

The entire table burst into laughter and, at that moment, David snapped the picture. Then he returned the camera to Nanci.

"Thank you, Dave," she managed to get out, while still laughing.

"No problem," he said, smiling at her. "Now if you'll all excuse me, I'm going to go check on your food and make sure the rest of my guests are enjoying their meals. If I don't see you all before you leave, enjoy your lunches; they're on the house."

"No, no," they all protested. "You don't have to do that, man."

"Guys, it's done. Now enjoy, and I'll see you later." David waved goodbye as he walked from their table.

"He is so sweet," Cyndi commented to Sam.

"He's the best," Sam responded confidently.

"To Dave," said Norrin, lifting his glass of Diet Coke.

"To Dave," everyone at the table agreed, lifting their various beverages.

After enjoying their meals, each other's company, and conversation, it was time to leave. They all stood up and headed toward the exit. Sam, Norrin, Wade and Rachel each left some money as a tip for their waiter. When they reached the exit, the hostess handed each of the women their shopping bags, which she had retrieved from the break room. Thanking the hostess, they all bid her goodbye and walked out of the restaurant.

As they walked down the steps, which led to the sidewalk that ran along the water, Sam spoke up. "So, why don't we regroup at my house tonight at about 9:00 P.M.? We can review—"

Cyndi interrupted. "Are you serious? You guys are going to get together tonight? It's Saturday. Can't we all just enjoy the weekend and be normal for once?"

Norrin and Wade remained silent. Cyndi hadn't raised her voice, but they could tell by her tone that she wasn't thrilled with what Sam had just suggested.

"Yeah, Norrin," said Nanci, seemingly siding with Cyndi. "You went out last night. Wouldn't it be nice to either do something fun with our friends or as a couple, like normal people do on weekends?"

Trying to lighten the mood, Wade jumped in. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm not crazy about this inference that I may not be normal. I like to think I'm normal."

Rachel quickly looked at Wade, nudged him, and shook her head as if to say, "Don't get involved in this one."

"Sweetheart," said Sam, "I appreciate your feelings on the matter, but something's come up that requires our attention."

Cyndi rolled her eyes and took a deep breath. "Doesn't it always, though?"

"Yes!" answered Nanci, even though the question had not necessarily been directed to her.

"Look, why don't you girls go out to a movie tonight or maybe rent something from the video store?" suggested Norrin.

"Because, you are our husbands, and you should be spending time with us, your wives, instead of going out playing—" All eyes were on Nanci waiting for her to finish her sentence, as she paused. Each hoping that she didn't say something that might reveal their late night activities to anyone, who may be within earshot. "Instead of doing the things you do," she concluded.

The tension was somewhat high at that moment. So looking to break the ice, Rachel spoke up. "Hey, it's been awhile since the six of us actually went out together for neighborhood watch. Why don't we all get dressed and go out together tonight?"

"I thought you said you had to study for a big test on Monday?" Cyndi inquired.

"I do. But a couple hours of exercise and a change of focus will do me good," she replied. "Okay? Sound good to everyone?"

They all looked at one another and either nodded or vocalized their approval.

"Good," Sam said aloud. "Then, like I was saying, we'll meet at my place at nine. Bring whatever you need to bring and I'll supply the rest."

They all said their goodbyes and headed off in separate directions toward their cars. Both Rachel and Wade had parked in the parking garage closest to the Inner Harbor so, they to walked together.

"That almost got ugly," commented Rachel.

"Yeah. Nice save on that let's-all-get-together-and-play-nice idea," acknowledged Wade.

"Thanks. I've never seen them argue before. Have you?"

"I've seen Norrin and Nanci get a little perturbed with one other once or twice, but that's it. Sam and Cyndi, I've never seen them argue. I mean *never*. They might have telepathically, but never verbally and definitely not in front of me."

"I can sympathize with Cyndi and Nanci, though. If I were married and my husband wanted to go out dressed in his little costume putting his life on the line night after night, I'd be pissed, too. I'd be real pissed. If things had worked out between Sam and me, and we'd gotten married—Oh! He and I would be having that same argument right now."

"Argument?" said Wade drawing his head backward. "Argument nothing! You two would be divorced. D-I-V-O-R-C-E-D. The two of you are way too much alike. You'd be two incredibly strong personalities continuously clashing all the time. That, my friend, spells divorce."

"Yeah, you're right," she agreed. "We're better off as friends. This way, when we disagree, we can yell at each other and tell one another exactly what we think. Then, after we cool down, apologize and continue being friends, instead of signing divorce papers."

"Exactly! So, you'll be there tonight, right?"

"I said I would. I'll pull my costume out of that old moth-ball-filled trunk and dust off the cobwebs." It had been more than six months since Rachel had last suited up.

"You want me to pick ya up? I can swing by," offered Wade.

"Nah. That's okay. I'll drive over myself. Thanks, though."

By that time they had reached the parking structure. Wade was parked on the

third level and Rachel on the first. They waived goodbye and told one another they would see each other later on that night. Then, Rachel got into her car and Wade walked up the structure's stairs leading to his.

As Norrin and Nanci made their way to their car, Norrin tried discussing Nanci's feelings on what had just taken place.

"I don't want to talk about it," she replied.

"Yes, you do. Otherwise you wouldn't have reacted the way you did back there."

She remained silent.

"Come on, Nance. We're not like those couples that refuse to talk to one another and grow apart. We're up front and honest with each other. We talk about our feelings and what's bothering us."

"No we don't! Not when it comes to this! Sam calls and you and Wade go running. Then the three of you traipse off into the night, trying to right all the wrongs in the greater Baltimore area. Well, I'm tired of it, and so is Cyndi. We're not kids anymore, Norrin. We're adults with families, and jobs, and responsibilities."

"And helping others isn't part of that responsibility? Even though we possess abilities the majority of people on this entire planet don't? It's not our responsibility to help those not able to help themselves? Is that what you're saying?"

"No. That's not what I'm saying at all. But, there are other ways that you can help people. Look at Rachel. She's gonna be a doctor and probably, a freakin' good one. She's more powerful than I'll ever be. But does she get dressed up in her little costume and go out trying to fix everything?"

"She used to."

"But she doesn't anymore! That's my point! She grew up. She wants to be a real super hero. She's gonna make a difference by saving lives in the E.R., where it counts."

"So you're saying what me, Sam, and Wade do doesn't count?"

"That's not what I meant."

"It's what you said."

"It counts. Of course it counts. You three have saved more lives from burning buildings, car accidents, muggers, rapists, and murderers than I can begin to count, but—"

"But what? Isn't that the point? We have these abilities. We didn't ask for them, but we have them. We were born with them. Should we keep them to

ourselves and use them only to benefit ourselves and say, ‘screw everyone else?’”

“No, you shouldn’t! You shouldn’t say, ‘screw everyone else’, especially your wives! You and Sam run out into the night trying to make the world a better place all the time. But, do either of you ever once, just once, think of how it affects me or Cyndi? Do you even care?”

“Of course we care,” said Norrin, in a soft tone.

“Really? The two of you go out and put your lives on the line night after night, with no gratitude, no reward, no nothing from the community you keep safe. While Cyndi and I, who love you and are grateful to have you both in our lives, are waiting at home hoping you’re okay, hoping we don’t get that call or visit from one of you saying Norrin or Sam is dead. God forbid a cop comes knocking on my door, telling me they’ve found my husband’s dead, costumed body lying in a gutter somewhere. And that now I have to go down to the city morgue and identify the body. Do you have any idea what that would do to me?”

Norrin had no comment.

“Do you know that sometimes I stay up crying waiting for you to come home? Playing out different scenarios in my mind on how I’ll be able to handle it when I get that call? Then when I hear you come through that stupid trap door, I lie down and pretend to be asleep, so that you won’t have to see me like that.” At that moment, Nanci began breaking down.

Quickly, Norrin put his arms around her and held her tightly. Then, after kissing the top of her head several times, he attempted to comfort her.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I didn’t know how strongly you felt or how much all of this bothered you. I just figured, that since you have extraordinary abilities of your own, you wanted to put them to use just as much as I did.”

“Woo-hoo,” she said, as the tears rolled down her cheeks. “My hair comes alive. I can end world hunger with that,” she continued sarcastically.

Norrin began to chuckle and, after a few seconds, so did Nanci.

“You are the most wonderful, perfect wife in the world. You know that, right? You’re way more than I could ever deserve. I’m sorry. I’ve been so preoccupied with this life that I’ve lived for as long as I can remember, that I didn’t take the time to think about whether this was something you wanted. I just assumed. I’m really sorry. I love you very much. None of this matters without you. None of it.”

Nanci’s tears had stopped and Norrin wiped the ones still rolling down her cheeks with his fingers.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked. “Because if that’s what you really want, if that’ll make you happy, I will.”

“Yeah, and you’ll hate me for the rest of your life for making you stop doing something you love.”

“I love you! Everything else is second.”

She turned, looking up into his eyes after resting her head against his chest. She could see he was serious. It calmed her heart to see her husband’s attentiveness to her needs.

“No. I don’t want you to stop. Just cut back a little. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Then I will,” he responded, without hesitation. “I’ll let Sam know tonight that I won’t be as available as I’ve been in the past.”

“Now he’ll think I’m some nagging, overbearing, wench of a wife that made you do this,” she said, while embracing Norrin tighter.

“Honey, he already knows those things about you. He won’t think that’s anything new.”

She began laughing. Then, after lightly striking her fist against Norrin’s chest, said, “Yer dumb.”

“No, I’m incredibly smart. I married you didn’t I?”

The two had been standing near an old wooden ship called *The Constellation*, permanently docked in Baltimore’s Harbor. After being reassured that his wife was feeling better, Norrin put his arm around her and the two walked to their car.

As Sam and Cyndi walked to their car, Sam could sense Cyndi’s tension.

“It’s not healthy to keep negative emotions bottled up inside, you know,” he projected his thought to her.

“I don’t want to communicate with you that way right now,” she said aloud. “I’m not entirely happy with you at this moment, so I have no intention of sharing my mind with you.”

“Cyndi?” again Sam projected his thoughts toward her.

“I’m not listening,” she again said aloud.

“Fine, we’ll do it your way,” he began speaking aloud. “Are you angry because I told Norrin and Wade they should come over tonight?” He already knew the answer to the question, but he was playing her game now. “You hadn’t mentioned us having any plans this evening.”

“We don’t have any specific plans this evening. It’s just that the three of you spent the entire morning together discussing your extra curricular activities. Do you really need the evening, too?”

“Well, we’re planning on going out, babe. We weren’t just sitting around shooting the breeze this morning. Norrin had an experience—” Being in public

Sam chose his words very carefully, due to the fact that Cyndi had opted not to communicate telepathically, “last night with an individual in the Towson area. This individual has chosen to involve himself in activities that are beneficial to no one. It’s of the utmost importance that we locate this individual and persuade him to rethink his course of action.”

“And if he chooses not to be persuaded?”

“Then we take the necessary steps in which to ensure those activities are terminated; not only for his own safety, but for the safety of any others who may be involved.”

“Sam, you’re a husband now. Not to mention, the owner of an incredibly successful publishing house.” At that moment, Cyndi began communicating telepathically. “Don’t you think it may be time to hang up that costume permanently and focus on those things now? I mean, we’ve been talking about beginning a family. But, I am not going to bring a child into our lives if its father isn’t going to be around.”

As those final few thoughts passed from Cyndi’s mind to Sam’s, she immediately wished she hadn’t projected them. It was the wrong thought to pass and she knew it. Sam’s parents had divorced when he was a toddler, and sadly, his father had chosen not to play very much of an active role in Sam’s life. To share that particular thought, in exactly that way, hurt Sam and that was not her goal.

Quickly, she grabbed his arm and turned him toward her. She could see the pain in his face and felt it in his heart. “I’m so sorry. God, I don’t know what I was thinking,” she continued mentally. “I didn’t mean that in a way that would hurt you. You know that.”

Sam was staring toward the ground.

“Look at me,” she continued, moving his head with her index finger, so that his eyes met hers. “I love you. There is no possible way you don’t know or can’t feel that. I didn’t mean you would act toward your son the way your dad did toward you, while you were growing up. I simply meant it might be possible that you’d be so engulfed in making the world a better place for him to live, that you might forget the reason you were doing it and who you were doing it for. I know you’d never neglect your child. You’re not capable of that.”

Sam nodded his head, again not looking directly at Cyndi.

“Hey, look at me,” she insisted. Sam finally looked into her eyes. “You know I’m being honest with you. Reach into my mind, deep into my heart, and feel what I feel.”

"I don't need to," Sam said aloud, at last extending a slight smile. "I know. I know."

Cyndi wrapped her arms tightly around him, trying to confirm her deep love all the more. He put his arms around her, rubbing her back and holding her close, so that she would know he would be okay.



CHAPTER VI

Rendezvous

The drive to Sam and Cyndi's house was a peaceful one. Norrin had again taken back roads to avoid the hustle and bustle of the Beltway. Neither Norrin nor Nanci spoke very much during the course of their trip. They held hands and simply enjoyed the silence.

Norrin glanced at Nanci and tried to decipher the thoughts and feelings she might be having. She had a slight smile on her face and when she noticed Norrin staring at her, it broadened. He wasn't sure if she had simply done that for his benefit or if the smile reflected her genuine feelings.

Norrin's own heart was weighing heavy. The conversation that had taken place after leaving The Silver Dolphin and the discussion he'd had with his wife afterward, was in the forefront of his mind. It was true that he loved his wife and wanted her to be happy. He especially did not want to be the cause of her anxieties or sleepless nights. But, his passion for late night patrols and efforts to make Baltimore a safer place, for the decent people, was an important part of his life as well.

He had told Nanci that he would quit; stop being Scorpion if she really wanted him to. Even though he did mean it, a part of him feared that if she took him up on that offer, he would always feel a slight resentment toward her. Maybe

only on a subconscious level, but it would be there. It wasn't that he loved his life in the Scorpion costume more than his wife, but that costume had become a part of him. It was like a member of his body, similar to an arm or a hand. Perhaps, like a leg, or a foot, or even an eye or an ear. Asking him to throw it away would be similar to asking him to cut off or tear away one of those body parts.

He squeezed Nanci's hand slightly as a gesture of affection. She, in turn, rubbed the top of his hand with her thumb. After brushing her thumb across his skin a few strokes, droplets of rain began spattering the windshield. Quickly, Norrin released Nanci's hand and turned on the windshield wipers.

"Oh, man. This rain is gonna make it hard to go patrolling tonight," he commented.

The first thought that had come into his mind was that this change in the weather would make it hard to patrol the neighborhoods. This annoyed Nanci. For a brief period, they were enjoying the drive, sharing a moment, taking in the scenery, holding hands, and even though in the back of her mind she knew their destination and why they were headed there, she had let it escape her thoughts. That was all dissipated in an instant with the simple phrase, "This rain is gonna make it hard to go patrolling tonight."

With an inane expression while looking out of her window, she replied, "Yeah. Yeah, it probably will."

Soon they had reached Sam and Cyndi's house. Norrin punched in the code that Sam had given him to open the estate gates. After the gates had open, Norrin drove along the path that led to the *villa*. Once he had pulled up to the fountain, he turned off the engine. It was still raining.

"We're here," said Norrin, with a soft voice.

"I know," Nanci responded. She sat motionless, hands folded in her lap, and looking out her window as the rain rhythmically tapped against it.

"You gonna get out?"

"Yeah," she answered, remaining still.

"Hey, you okay? Nance?"

"Hmm?" she mumbled, as though not fully paying attention. "What?"

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." She forced herself to smile though she really did not want to.

"I'm telling Sam the minute we walk in that door. I'm telling him that I won't be as available as I've been in the past."

Nanci nodded, letting him know that she understood. At that moment Wade pulled up next to Norrin and Nanci, followed by Rachel. Both exited their cars,

gym bags in hand, running toward the veranda. Norrin and Nanci also grabbed their bags, after getting out of their car. Then they slammed the doors shut and ran toward the house with the bags over their heads.

"This rain sucks!" Rachel blurted out.

"Tell me about it," agreed Wade.

As he extended his hand to ring the doorbell, the door opened. There was no one to greet them, the door had simply unlocked and opened on its own. At that point Norrin and Nanci had reached the veranda. Lightning flashed and thunder shook the ground while echoing through the air.

Wade looked at Norrin, his eyes wide open. "I don't know, man," he said. "Big mansion, rainy night, lightning and thunder. I'm not sure I want to go in there. That door just unlocked and opened by itself."

Norrin looked at Wade, rolled his eyes, and shook his head. While they were standing there, a voice began speaking inside of their minds. "Come on in everyone. We're in the lair."

"All right! Now I know I'm not goin' in there. I just heard voices tell me to come inside. You know what happens in horror movies when the white kids go inside some place they know they shouldn't. Anyone got a Bible or something holy?" jested Wade.

"Get in there, ya dork," ordered Rachel, shoving him through the doorway.

After they had gotten inside, Norrin turned to close the door and lock it. Before he could reach the handle, the door closed and locked on its own.

"Yer really creepy, ya know!" announced Wade. "Doors opening and closing by themselves, locking and unlocking by themselves. I tell ya, when the statues start movin', lookin' at me and stuff, I'm outta here."

"Are you afraid of things that move on their own, Wade?" asked Nanci, flailing her hair about as though a strong gust of wind had entered the room.

"You're freaks. All of you," accused Wade.

Rachel and Nanci began to laugh as Norrin grinned from ear to ear.

As they walked through the home, they made their way to Sam's study. French doors closed off the room. Inside was a half circular shaped marble desk with a computer, printer, and fax machine on it. There were other supplies as well such as pens, pencils, scissors, a tape dispenser, white out, and stackable plastic shelves. An original Kahlo painting hung on the wall parallel to the French doors. There were also two bookshelves inside. One was directly behind Sam's desk. The other was on the wall parallel to it.

After entering the room, Norrin approached the bookshelf behind the desk and removed *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Alex Haley. Then, after

placing his hand in the space where the book had been sitting, he pressed his palm against a small panel on the wall. The panel depressed and the bookshelf slowly inched backward, revealing a secret walk space. Behind it was a passage which led to a ramp that reached down to Sam's lair.

After the four had walked through the entrance, Norrin replaced the book he had removed. Once everyone had cleared the shelf, Wade flicked a switch on the interior wall causing the bookshelf to resume its standard position. It also activated the lights leading down to the lair.

At that point Wade ran to the head of the line, hunched over, and began walking with a limp. "Thees way, Maester, thees way," he said, dragging his right foot.

"You do that every time we come here," said Norrin.

"I know," responded Wade. "Count Sam's secret dungeon reminds me of Frankenstein's castle and secret laboratory."

"It doesn't look anything like that," commented Norrin. "What it looks like is a freakin' *dojo* in the front, and an authentic Japanese house in the back."

"Real authentic, with that Jacuzzi tub and those glass cubes surrounding the shower," added Rachel.

Norrin shot a sour expression in her direction, "Well, it's *almost* authentic."

After a deep decent, they had reached the lair's main room. Sam was sitting at one of the computer tables and Cyndi was preparing tea.

"About time you all showed up," expressed Sam, with a grin.

"Well, no one was there to greet us when we arrived," Wade retorted. "And I swear, if you don't stop opening and closing doors when you're not there—"

Sam began opening and closing the bathroom door and the sliding doors in the rear of the lair, while still seated at the computer table.

"Keep it up, and I'll pee in your fountain," Wade continued.

"You pee in my fountain, Wade, and you'll be minus one appendage," threatened Cyndi.

Wade shifted his hips away from Cyndi's direction.

After raising her eyebrows, still looking at Wade, she asked, "Tea, anyone? I just brewed a fresh pot."

"Yes, please," requested Rachel. "It's raining cats and dogs out there. I hate when it rains."

"Yeah, I know. Not the best night to go patrolling," commented Cyndi, while pouring Rachel's tea.

Not wanting another heated discussion, Sam, quickly changed the focus. "Everyone, grab a chair and gather around." The girls all grabbed chairs. Wade

knelt next to the computer table and Norrin remained standing.

Sam had hacked into the Baltimore County police department's database. After reviewing several mug shots, he had found Derek. The record listed Derek's driver's license number, his birth date, a physical description, a home address, and a brief history of violations and arrests.

"Here's our boy," announced Sam. "His name is Derek King, born July 15, 1967. He's five foot eight, 164 pounds, blonde hair, blue eyes, and he needs corrective lenses when driving. He lives in the apartment complex on Rossville Boulevard, right past the graveyard and YMCA."

"I know that place," commented Norrin. "I have a friend that lives there."

Sam continued reading. "For the most part, his record is pretty clean. He has had two parking tickets, one speeding ticket, and—oh! Look at this. He was arrested once for marijuana possession."

"Are we going to pay Mister King a visit this evening?" asked Rachel, while sipping her tea.

"You betcha," Sam answered. "I had the manager of the rental office fax me over a map of the complex earlier." Sam pulled the map from a folder he had marked Derek King and handed it to Wade. "His apartment is highlighted. I was thinking Norrin and Wade could stake out the apartment. Norrin, you take the front door. Wade, you hop up on the balcony, just in case our little perp tries to make a run for it."

"He's on the third floor. You really think he'd go that route?" questioned Rachel.

"Yeah, possibly. People do stupid stuff when they get caught actively participating in illegal activities," answered Norrin. "You really have been away too long, haven't you?"

"That's a matter of opinion, Caterpillar, I mean Lady Bug. Wait, no, I'm sorry. Scorpion, Scorpion's your name. That's what happens when yer away *too long*. Ya start forgetting people's names," commented Rachel, again sipping her tea.

Norrin flared his nostrils, stuck out his tongue, and then turned his attention back to the map.

"As I was saying," Sam resumed delegating duties, "Norrin and Wade take the entrance and exit. Cyndi and Nanci, you two monitor the entrance to the complex. There's only one way in and out, and I want to be aware of anyone coming or going. If Derek should elude us, it's up to you to detain him. Rachel and I will take watch from the roof."

Rachel interrupted, "You're nuts, if you think I'm gonna fly all over the city

and sit on top of some roof, while rain pours down on my head. Plus, to fly, I have to keep an aura of fire around myself. Last time I checked, rain extinguishes fire. Sure, I could make my aura bigger, badder, and stronger, but that would also make it brighter, and make me incredibly visible for miles. Besides, I wanna sit in the car where it's nice and warm, and out of the rain."

"I'll keep my telekinetic shield around you so that you don't get wet," offered Sam, although it sounded more like an order. "I need you with me to keep an eye on the ground. Should our boy try and escape, or any unexpected visitors show up, we can swoop down and take them by surprise."

Everyone seemed to approve of the idea. Sam walked to the case that stored the earpieces and microphones and pulled out six of each. After assembling them and tuning them to the same frequency, he handed one to each person. He also gave each person a harness like utility belt, equipped with throwing knives, *shuriken*, a pair of handcuffs, and four smoke bombs. "Grab your costumes; we can all change in the back," directed Sam.

As the women walked to the back of the lair followed by Wade, Sam put his hand on Norrin's shoulder, signaling him to stop.

"Wait a minute," he said, waiting until the others had completely left the main room.

Norrin looked at him with a confused expression.

"I've been feeling waves of anxiety from you since before you walked into the house. What's wrong?" inquired Sam.

"Nanci and I had a talk earlier, about me going out on patrol all the time. She said it really upsets her sometimes. Has Cyndi ever mentioned anything like that to you before?" asked Norrin.

Sam's eyes widened slightly. "Cyndi and I had a conversation of our own before we left the Harbor. She mentioned us starting a family. Ya know, having kids. She basically said she wasn't willing to do that unless I stopped putting on the Mantis costume."

"Well, I promised Nanci I'd tell you I'd be cutting back. Lately, I've been going out four or five nights a week. Now, I'll only be available two or three. It kinda sucks but, I didn't like seeing my wife in tears and knowing I was the cause of it."

"Yeah. I hear that."

"Anyway, I told her I'd tell you, and now I have. I guess I'll go suit up now."

Norrin started walking toward the back of the lair. Sam again stopped him, putting his hand on Norrin's shoulder.

"Does Nanci have any vacation time at work?" asked Sam.

“Yeah, two weeks I think. Why?”

“Because, once we finish this case, which will hopefully be tonight, I want to take us all away for a week or two. Maybe Rome, maybe Paris.”

“That sounds like an expensive trip. I don’t know if we have the—”

“I said it’s on me. Think of it as my apology to the girls.”

“Cool. Thanks. That sounds good.”

“No problem. Now, go suit up. Everyone else is ready.”

Cyndi, Nanci, Rachel, and Wade emerged from the rear of the lair in full costume, as Sam and Norrin walked toward them.

“I hope you two don’t plan on going out dressed like that. You look ridiculous,” commented Rachel, as she adjusted her mask and smoothed out her flame-covered costume.



“We’re going to change,” informed Sam. “We’ll be right out.”

As they walked away, Rachel started to look herself over. “It still fits like a glove,” she commented, running her hands down the front and the sides of her costume. “Yeah, I look good.”

Cyndi and Nanci both smiled. It was good to see Rachel in her costume again. Something about it just seemed right. Still, they did not condone their husbands continually doing so on a regular basis.

Wade, on the other hand, could not let the opportunity pass to take a cheap shot at Rachel. “I dunno,” he blurted out. “You look like you’ve put on a little weight to me. Is your butt supposed to hang out the bottom of your suit like that?”

Both Cyndi and Nanci gasped and reflected expressions of disgust.

“Oh! You big jerk!” said Nanci, rushing to Rachel’s defense.

“You wish you looked half as good in your costume as she does in hers, Toad boy,” expressed Cyndi.

Rachel was wearing a golden sleeveless outfit, similar to a one-piece swimsuit. It extended midway up her neck. A zipper ran from the neck to the abdomen. She wore palmless gloves that reached to the center of her upper arm. Both the costume and gloves were covered in bright red flames. Lastly, a mask covered her eyes, temples, and the bridge of her nose, concealing the majority of her freckles.

“Actually, Wade,” asserted Rachel, while rubbing her thigh, “I wear this costume showing off a little skin on purpose. It reminds little boys like you of what they so badly want but, never seem to get.”

“That’s right!” agreed Nanci.

“You go, Rach! Put Toad boy in his place.” Added Cyndi.

Toad was Wade’s call sign or code name. His costume was similar to Sam and Norrin’s. It differed in that the insignia on his chest was a toad, and his costume’s color was a dull muddy brown with a white underbelly. He too wore a mask that covered the whole of his head, with an opening for his chin and mouth. The lenses that covered his eyes were roughly the same size as the lenses that covered Norrin’s.

“That’s Toad man,” he retorted. “Toad man.”

“What’s that, Pollywog?” queried Norrin, as he walked into the main room fastening his harness.

“What’s that, Lobsterman? Did you say something? You perpetrate with that roach on your chest, but everyone knows what you’re really supposed to be,” continued Wade, clamping his hands together as if they were lobster claws.

Sam, too, had finished changing and was walking toward the rest of the group, shaking his head. "If you're all done acting like three year olds, we can go."

Looking at Sam, Wade batted his eyelashes while sucking his thumb. Within seconds, he felt a smack against the back of his head from Rachel's hand. Although it did not even faze him, he started rubbing the back of his head as if the smack had actually hurt.

After rolling his eyes and shaking his head, Sam began instructing each individual as to what they should do. "Cyndi and Nanci, you take the *Lamborghini*. Norrin and Wade, you two take the delivery truck in the garage. We're gonna need a place to store Mister King before we drop him off at the police station. Rachel and I will meet you at the apartment complex."

Cyndi and Nanci got into the *Lamborghini* and, after pressing a button on what looked like a garage door opener, drove through a passage that had been concealed by a large steel door. After pressing the remote's button a second time, the door lowered. Cyndi then shifted into second, third, and then forth gear, speeding through the tunnel leading to the street.

Wade and Norrin walked back up the ramp that led to Sam's study, through the house, and to the garage. It was a rare occurrence to be wearing costumes inside of the house. Under normal circumstances, Sam did not allow it. Once they had reached the garage, which housed 20 different vehicles ranging from a turquoise blue 1957 Ford Thunderbird to a delivery truck, Norrin and Wade removed their masks. If they were going to be driving around town in a delivery truck, they didn't need to draw attention to themselves by wearing masks. On one of the shelves, in the storage area of the truck, were six trench coats. They each grabbed one and put them on over their costumes. Wade drove as they departed the garage and continued down the path that led to the front gates.

Sam and Rachel had followed Norrin and Wade up into the house, then went their separate way. Sam walked out of the doors attached to the *cocina* and onto the rear veranda. Rachel followed, after locking the doors and closing them behind her. They stood on the veranda for a few seconds when Rachel turned to Sam. "It's still raining," she said with a scowl. Sam raised a telekinetic shield around them both and motioned to Rachel that she could safely leave the veranda. The two flew out from under the canopy and straight up into the night's sky.

CHAPTER VII

A Deadly Encounter

Sam was pacing the rooftop of Derek's apartment building, waiting for the other two groups to show up. Rachel was sitting with her legs folded.

"You keep pacing like that and you'll wear a hole in the roof," commented Rachel. "Worrying won't make them get here any quicker."

"It isn't that. Derek isn't even home right now," Sam informed her.

"And you know this because you were a peeping Sam and scanned his apartment, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. And you know the rules, no real names when we're in costume, Napalm."

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry. It's not like anyone can hear us anyway, on top of this roof with rain pounding down all around us."

"Not the point. If you don't make it a habit, you might slip up when it really counts."

"So, you were explaining why you were pacing," said Rachel, changing the subject so as not to encourage a debate.

"Lately I've been getting these strange feelings. It happens when I perform a large-area scan. I'll get these cold, primal, almost evil sensations that travel right through my skin and up my spine. I can't seem to get anything more than that."

“Can you tell who or where it’s coming from?”

“No. Which for me is really weird. I could be standing right here on top of this roof, and if you were somewhere in Russia, I’d be able to pinpoint your exact location, read your thoughts, and see through your eyes. But I keep getting these perceptions, which are clearly within my proximity, and yet, I have no clue as to who or what they are.”

“It’s people in general, Sam.” After calling him by name a second time, Rachel realized what she had done and quickly made reparations. “Sorry, Mantis. It’s the people all around you. They’re inherently evil.”

“You don’t believe that. If you did, you wouldn’t be studying so hard to become a doctor, whose primary responsibility is to save the lives of those ‘inherently evil’ people.”

“Have you been reading my mind, too?”

“I don’t need to read your mind to know that two and two equals four. By the way, everybody’s here.”

Rachel stood up and looked around. She could see the delivery truck that Norrin and Wade were riding in pull into and pass the entrance of the complex. The *Lamborghini* was parked in a space near the entrance.

“What about Mister King?” she asked.

“There aren’t any more cars pulling in right now and, since I’ve never scanned his mind before, I can’t locate him or tell if he’s near.”

Once Norrin and Wade had reached Derek King’s building, Wade backed the delivery truck into a space directly across from the building, and then checked in. Both he and Norrin realized that Sam no doubt knew that they had arrived before even turning into the apartment complex. Still, procedure was to check in, and since the reception of the microphone and earpiece they were wearing was limited to a mile, Norrin and Wade followed procedure once they had parked.

“We’re here, Mantis. You reading me?” asked Norrin.

“I got you. Toad?” Sam spoke then waited.

“*Aquí estoy, Señor Boss man,*” acknowledged Wade.

“We’re here, too,” Cyndi’s voice sounded over everyone’s earpiece.

“Is our friend Derek home?” asked Nanci.

“Not yet, Gorgon,” responded Sam. “I suggest everyone get comfortable, but stay alert. We might be here for awhile.”

It was nearly 11:30 P.M., when Derek pulled into a parking space in front of his apartment building. He was in a rental car as his was being repaired at a local auto body and paint shop.

“That’s him,” informed Norrin.

“Once he’s inside the building, Toad, you go around back and get on that balcony,” directed Sam. “Scorpion, you go in after Derek’s inside and the front door to the apartment building is closed. I repeat, after he’s inside with the front door shut. Mind Reader, Gorgon, keep an eye out for anyone coming in that front entrance, especially cops. Napalm and I will back up Toad and Scorpion should it become necessary.”

Derek sat motionless inside of the rental car after he had turned off the headlights and engine. He was staring straight ahead as if in a trance, watching the rain run down his windshield. The recollection of events, which had taken place the day before, kept playing over and over in his mind. The more it continued, the more specifics he was able to recall. The things he had seen were just not possible. Vampires, monsters, or the boogeyman, they didn’t exist. They weren’t real. And yet, the thing he had seen only one night prior, could have qualified as any one of those.

“What’s he doing?” asked Rachel.

“He’s just sitting there,” replied Wade. “At least I hope he’s just sitting there.” Wade looked at Norrin and smiled. Norrin returned his grin but crinkled nose.

At that point, Derek opened the car door, but continued sitting there while the rain pitter-pattered against the interior of the car. Finally, he stepped out and slammed the door behind him.

“Wait, wait,” Sam whispered into his microphone.

Norrin and Wade had slipped out of their trench coats and were putting their masks back on.

“He’s so uneasy,” announced Cyndi over her microphone.

“I know,” replied Sam. “Everybody, be ready for anything. This guy could snap at any moment.”

Derek walked up to his apartment building then opened the door and walked in.

Wade quickly exited the vehicle and took off running toward the rear of Derek’s building. Once he had reached the lower level apartments located below directly Derek’s, Wade leapt into the air and landed on his balcony’s railing without a sound. Quietly, he stepped down onto the balcony floor. Norrin walked briskly toward the door that Derek had entered and opened it. Once he did, he saw Derek standing there in the hallway. He had stopped momentarily to check his mail.

Derek slowly turned his head to the left and, even before he had raised his

eyes to see the face of the figure standing so close to him, he knew who it was. His hands began to tremble, causing the key ring hanging from his mailbox to shake noisily. His skin was turning from a rosy flesh tone to a sickly pale white. Finally, his eyes met Norrin's.

At that point, Norrin introduced himself. "Good evening. My name is Scorpion. I was making brief calls on my neighbors tonight regarding a better hope for our future."

Derek slowly took three steps backward and reached into the right hand pocket of his trench coat. Before leaving Paul's house, Mason had loaned him a gun just incase he found himself in a sticky situation. This was that sticky situation. Without warning, he removed his hand from his pocket revealing a rather large handgun. Gripping the gun tightly with both hands, Derek closed his eyes, slightly turned his head, and pulled the trigger twice.

Caught completely off guard, Norrin took two shots; one to his chest and the other to the stomach. He was propelled backward, falling through the apartment's front door. After clearing the entryway, he landed on his back on the concrete pavement.

Derek stared in amazement. He couldn't believe he had just dropped the guy that had jumped from a two-story building and actually kicked over his car. Quickly, he regained a portion of his composure and ran through the doorway, nearly stepping on Norrin.

The second they had heard shots echoing through their earpieces, Sam and Rachel descended from the rooftop. "Toad! Scorpion's down! Scorpion's down!" shouted Sam.

Instinct seemingly took over as Wade jumped onto the balcony's railing, then onto the roof, and finally, from the roof to the ground; crouching directly in front of Norrin.

Upon hearing Sam's shouting over her earpiece, Nanci's heart felt as though her heart had stopped beating. It felt as if someone had kicked her in the stomach and she could no longer breathe. At that same moment, Cyndi's eyes met Nanci's. She turned the key in the ignition and sped down the stretch of road to Derek's apartment building. Slamming her foot down on the break pedal, the car came to a screeching halt. The *Lamborghini* doors lifted open and Cyndi and Nanci jumped out, running toward Norrin.

"Scorpion! Scorpion!" yelled Sam frantically, cradling his head and holding his hand.

"Oh, God," Rachel cringed.

"Norrin! Norrin!" called Nanci, as she came running. Once in front of

Norrin, she fell to her knees next to him.

Sam was agitated that she had used his actual name twice, but knew better than to comment about it at that moment.

"The Kevlar body armor stopped the bullets," informed Sam, running his hand across Norrin's chest. "He'll be okay."

"How do you know?" voiced Nanci, in an assertive tone. "You're not a doctor! What if the impact broke or fractured his sternum or a rib, and it penetrated his heart? What if the fall fractured or chipped his skull and he has bone fragments logged in his brain? You don't know!" Tears were forming in her eyes.

"He looks okay, Nanci. His head isn't swollen or bleeding," informed Rachel, in her most consoling and soothing voice.

"And Rachel would know," added Cyndi, also attempting to reassure Nanci.

At that point, Norrin lunged forward, simultaneously activating his super human strength, extending his canine teeth and fingernails, and growling. When his super human strength was active, or what he usually referred to as his *adrenaline factor*, physical and chemical changes within enabled him to growl or even roar like a lion. His voice was also altered sounding much deeper and throatier.

As he growled and lunged, Sam quickly released him and Cyndi, Nanci, and Rachel jumped because they had been so startled.

"Where is he?" questioned Norrin, making his way to his knees and eventually standing up.

"Are you all right?" asked Nanci, placing both of her hands on his chest.

"I'm fine," he answered, in an irritated manner. Even with his mask on, everyone could see the anger in his face, not to mention the green glow of his eyes behind the mask's lenses. "Where is he?" repeated Norrin.

"He ran toward the woods," answered Wade, pointing in the direction of the dark and silent forest next to the apartment complex.

Once Sam had seen that Norrin was not seriously injured, he took to flight pursuing the shooter, while Norrin rose to his knees. The group had not even noticed until Norrin was on his feet for a few seconds.

"Where's Sam?" Wade asked, looking in all directions.

Cindy looked around and, after closing her eyes, she said, "He's headed toward the woods."

"We'd better follow him," suggested Wade.

"We're not following anyone!" insisted Nanci, in a forceful tone. "Norrin almost got killed and—"

“Calm down, Nanci,” directed Norrin, reverting to his normal voice. “I said I’m fine. But I’ll tell you what, I’m not gonna stand here while that maggot that just shot me gets away. I’m going after him. The rest of you can stay or come with. I don’t care which,” said Norrin, storming off in anger.

As Derek ran, he could feel his heart beating faster and faster. It felt as though it would explode. It was fairly cold out, but Derek was far too distracted to notice as he sped through bushes, brush, and trees; continually, being slapped in the face and struck against the legs and shoulders, ducking and weaving through the forest, while attempting to dodge the foliage. After only a few minutes he had to stop. His lungs were burning and he could barely breathe. His energy was sapped.

While slowing down, Derek looked over his shoulder, but surprisingly, there was nothing or no one behind him. He slowed even more, glanced straight forward, and then turned again to see if he was being followed. As far as he could see he was not. Before he could turn and face forward again, something impacted against his foot causing him to trip and fall. He was face down in a pile of decaying, shriveled, mud drenched leaves. As Derek painstakingly lifted the upper half of his body from the filth, he could see the front of his clothes covered in muddy leaves and feel his face and hair caked as well. He forced himself backward to a kneeling position and looked around to see what had tripped him up. While groggily scanning, Derek’s eyes came across the legs and body of a deer. It looked dead. As he raised his eyes he could not believe what he was seeing. His eyes were open so widely that they began to tear. A look of deathly horror passed across Derek’s face. It was even worse than the expression he’d had after seeing Norrin standing in the entrance of his apartment building, if that were even possible. The only sound he was able to utter came from his exhausted lungs, which were beginning to tense up. Finally, Derek’s eyes met those of the horrific figure standing before him. They would be the last thing he would ever see.

As Sam flew into the wooded area and around the trees blocking his path, he began experiencing the unnatural feeling he had discussed with Rachel only a short time ago. It grew stronger and stronger the deeper he traveled into the woods. At one point he even faltered in his flight, but collected himself and continued on. Without warning and all at once, Sam lost Derek’s signal. He could no longer maintain a telepathic lock on him. There was nothing to lock on to.

At that same moment, Cyndi grabbed her head in agony and slumped over. Right away, Wade and Rachel grabbed hold of her, preventing her fall.

Norrin quickly turned his attention to Cyndi. "Cyndi? What's wrong? Are you okay?" he asked, distracted from his anger.

She looked up removing her hands from her head. "It's Derek," she whispered solemnly. "He's dead."

Everyone's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Wade, stay with them," instructed Norrin, as if he thought he were Sam. Then he sped toward the woods, running as fast as his feet could carry him.

Wade turned to the women.

Nodding her head, Rachel said what everyone else was thinking. "Yeah, we'd better follow him." She and Nanci helped Cyndi until she had regained her balance. Once she had, the entire group followed Norrin into the woods.

Sam didn't understand how or what could have happened. The only conclusion he could gather was that Derek had either tripped and broken his neck, or ran into or fell on top of a broken branch or limb of a tree and impaled himself. Either way, Sam knew he had to find Derek.

He continued on to the last place he had felt Derek's thoughts. Only a few yards away, he landed on his feet and proceeded with caution. The dark feeling Sam had been experiencing was engulfing him the closer he got to Derek's last known location. He felt as though he were drowning in it. His head was splitting, resembling the way one might feel when experiencing an excruciating migraine. Still, he blocked out the pain and continued on. At this point, he was moving as stealthily as possible taking long strides. His upper body was poised, ready to use a martial arts attack or defense maneuver should the need arise.

As he approached the spot where Derek had last stood, Sam unexpectedly stopped in his tracks. Looking at the ground, he saw Derek's decapitated body laying there, the gun he had used to shoot Norrin still gripped tightly in his lifeless hand. Only a few feet from the corpse, Derek's head lay staring up at Sam with incredible fear still in its eyes.

Slowly, Sam reached into a pouch on his utility harness, drawing three of the *shuriken* he had packed. He could hear heavy panting and a stomach wrenching continuous crunching, that words could not justly describe. He placed each *shuriken* between the fingers of his right hand. Speedily, he turned and raised his right arm. He too could not believe the sight standing before him.

Sam drew back his arm to launch the razor-sharp metal projectiles but, little did he know, that what stood before him had taken notice of his presence, from

the moment his foot had touched the ground. Before Sam could launch the weapons, an enormous limb came crashing against his body. Instinctively, he had raised a telekinetic barrier around himself before being struck. It was the only thing that saved his life. But, it did not stop him from being smacked backward several feet and tossed up against a large tree.

Sam's state of awareness began to diminish after the blow, causing the barrier that he had erected to weaken and then fade. He knew if he wanted to stay alive he must remain conscious. His earpiece and microphone had been damaged when he had struck the tree, leaving him unable to call for help or even let the others know where he was.

Gradually, the figure started to make its way toward Sam. It was time to make a decision. Gain composure, fight, and possibly live. Or give into pain, fatigue, and weakness and most definitely die.



CHAPTER VIII

Uninhibited Rage

After dropping Derek off at a car-rental agency fairly close to his apartment complex, Paul decided to grab a bite to eat. It was late in the evening and most restaurants were either closed or would be closing soon. However, some fast food restaurants kept later hours, and since Paul's favorite was Roy Rogers, he headed for the closest one. After driving no more than five minutes, he pulled into Golden Ring Mall's parking lot, and made his way up the parking structure ramp closest to Montgomery Ward.

Paul continued up to the second level and found parking as close as he could to the mall's entrance. Due to the hour and inclement weather the lot was nearly barren. Paul turned the engine off, then reached into his ashtray and pulled out a roll of 50-dollar bills. He shoved it into his pocket, exited the car, walked into the mall, and into the restaurant. Once inside, he approached the counter and began to order.

"Gimme a Bacon Cheeseburger, a large fry, and a large Coke."

The young man behind the counter punched a few keys on the register and gave Paul his total, at which point Paul pulled out his roll of fifties and removed one from the roll. He then tossed it on the counter.

Picking it up, the young man politely asked, "Sir, do you by chance have

anything smaller? My drawer is really low on fives and ones.”

Paul ignored him, acting as though the young man had not just asked him a question. The young man politely waited, but Paul just stood there staring off in another direction. The young man began to feel uncomfortable with the silence and made up his mind to accept the payment. To change the 50-dollar bill he would have to go into the rear office and make change.

“I guess I’ll need to get some change from the back. Gimme just a minute and I’ll be right back,” he informed Paul.

He walked past the fryers and grills, then to the back office. Within seconds he reemerged with a young woman wearing a vest and a tie.

“Here ya go Tom. Here’s a hundred in tens, 40 in fives and ten in ones. Let me grab a few of those larger bills while I’m here,” she requested.

“Hey!” interrupted Paul. “You sure are taking yer sweet time. Hurry up! I’m hungry.”

The young woman, who happened to be the shift leader, looked up at him with an irritated expression.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she replied, trying to keep her composure. “We need to exchange some money because Tom doesn’t have enough change to break your 50.”

“I don’t care what you think you have to do, slut! You need to get my food, now!” asserted Paul, his voice getting louder and more hostile. “I should get a free meal just for having to put up with you two idiots.”

“You’d better back off, pal, or I’ll call security,” asserted the young man.

He was small in stature especially compared to Paul. Even still, he wasn’t about to be bullied or allow his shift leader to be degraded, just because the jerk in front of the counter viewed them as a couple of lowly fast food workers.

“Are you going to calm down, sir, or do I need to call security?” asked the young woman.

Rage filled Paul’s eyes. He had clearly overreacted to the situation from the start. The young man behind the register had shown courtesy to Paul from the moment he had approached the counter. Nonetheless, Paul, being the degenerate and emotional infant he was, chose to blow the situation completely out of proportion.

“You’d better get my food!” he ordered, an almost insane look in his eyes. “Or I’ll break your necks. And if you call security, I’ll break his neck and shove both of your faces on the grill. Then I’ll cut yer throats.”

At that point, the two employees were positively riddled with fear. The man standing before them had escalated from being belligerent and rude, to

threatening their lives. As they stared on in disbelief, they couldn't help but notice a wild look in his eyes, the gritting of his teeth, and the red flush color of his face.

"Hey, calm down," said the shift leader sheepishly. "It's all right," she added, gathering his order and placing it on a tray. "Here, here's your food and your money. This order's on the house," she offered, trying to force a smile.

"Tracey?" shouted the cashier.

"It's okay, Tom," she affirmed, still speaking in a calm tone, not taking her eyes off of Paul.

"That's right," interjected Paul. "About time I finally got some decent service. That's what happens when you go to a filthy hole and have to put up with a couple of minimum-wage-makin', white-trash losers."

Tom was angry but also very frightened. Tracey was just as frightened as Tom, if not more. As Paul walked toward a table, he stopped by the 'Fixin's Bar' picking up a few toppings for his burger. He then found a seat and plopped down.

Once Paul was seated and out of earshot, Tom started to whisper to Tracey. "Should we call security?"

"I don't know," Tracey whispered back.

"We shouldn't just let him get away with that. We should call security or maybe the cops."

"What if he says we're lying? There's no one else here to corroborate our story. They'll think we're a couple of kids overreacting or making it up."

"We'll tell the truth. They'll have to believe the truth."

"Who's gonna believe a couple of minimum-wage-earning teenagers? As long as he eats and leaves, that's all I care about. If we're lucky, we'll never see him again."

Paul quickly scarfed down his food. Once he had finished, he sat staring off into space letting his food digest. Tom and Tracey wanted to let him know that the restaurant would be closing soon, but both were far too afraid to look in his direction much less talk to him. After Paul felt that his food had settled, he stood up, looked back at Tom and Tracey, and pushed his tray piled with trash and condiments onto the floor. He had not finished drinking all of his soda, so when the cup hit the floor, the top fell off, and Coke and ice spilled all over the tiled floor. Tom and Tracey stood behind the counter wishing he would just leave, praying he would not walk toward them or speak to them.

Paul started to exit the restaurant when a security guard approached and blocked his path. He was an older man, probably in his mid-fifties and balding

on the top of his head. Lifting his hand in a gesture motioning Paul to stop, he began to speak. "Hey, you. What was that about?"

"What?" Paul remarked, attempting to appear menacing.

"I saw what you did," the security guard continued. "You pushed that tray onto the floor and made a mess for someone else to clean up. There's no reason for that. The waste basket is right there." He pointed toward the nearest trash bin.

Tom and Tracey, for the first time since Paul had verbally abused them, felt at ease. Now if the asinine fool wanted to cause trouble, he'd have security to deal with.

"You go over there and pick that mess up, mister, and put it where it belongs," insisted the guard.

Paul stood there fuming, trying to stare the man down.

"You don't scare me," said the guard, looking up into Paul's indignant face. "I did two tours in 'Nam. I ate, drank, slept, and crapped closer to the enemy than this. Charlie didn't scare me none, and neither do you."

After a few more seconds of staring, Paul walked over to the tray he had dropped on the floor, bent down, and started to pick everything up.

"That's better," said the security guard, standing with his arms folded.

Tom and Tracey could not hold back their smiles of relief. Finally, justice had come.

As Paul was picking up the last of the ketchup packets, he looked in their direction. Seeing the grins on their faces infuriated him even further. It was as though they were mocking him and laughing at him, at least in his mind. All the trash he had knocked to the floor was now on the tray. He stood up and walked as though he were heading to throw the trash away properly.

But, once he had reached the spot where the security guard stood, he took the tray and shoved it up against the guard's chest. The force was so great that it knocked him to the floor, causing him to whack his elbow against the tile. The front of his shirt and pants were thoroughly soiled with soda, ketchup, and mustard stains, as well as other residue that had dripped from Paul's burger.

Tom and Tracey gasped as the events came to completion. Paul looked back at them, then turned and began walking at a fast pace toward the exit leading to the parking structure. After he had left, Tom and Tracey ran from behind the counter to the security guard's aid.

"Sir, are you okay?" inquired Tracey, placing her hand on the man's back and arm to offer assistance.

"Do you need us to call an ambulance?" added Tom.

“No. No kids. Not for me anyway. I’m okay.” Gradually, the guard made his way to his feet. “Sorry you kids had to see that. I’m gonna call for some backup. You two can close now if ya like.”

“Should we call the police?” asked Tom eagerly.

“Don’t worry about that. Once we have him in custody, we’ll take care of that,” affirmed the security guard.

The guard pulled out his nightstick and took off running in the direction in which Paul had fled.

“I hope he’ll be okay,” said Tracey, clearly displaying her concern.

“He’ll be fine. He’s a tough old guy. I’m sure he’s radioing the other security guards right now. They’ll get that jerk,” affirmed Tom, trying to sound comforting yet confident at the same time.

Once things had somewhat calmed, the two began performing their nightly closing procedures. Tracey counted the cash and prepared tills for the morning, while putting together the day’s deposit. Tom closed the security gate and then cleaned the fryers, grills, and milkshake machine. After that, he restocked the cups, sandwich wrappers, and fry containers. Lastly, he mopped the floor. As he was mopping, he started to fantasize about fighting the man that had treated he and his workmate so roughly, in an effort to impress Tracey and win her heart. He had never mentioned it to her, but Tom had developed quite a fondness for Tracey.

He imagined Paul leaning over the counter and pushing Tracey back against the soda fountain. Rushing to her aid, Tom looked into her eyes and said, “Tracey? Tracey? Are you okay?”

Returning his gaze, looking through his eyes and into his soul, she said, “I’ll be all right. When you’re near me, Tom, I can’t help but feel safe and secure.”

Tom shot an intimidating glare toward Paul. He could see the nervousness in Paul’s face as he rose to his feet.

“No, Tom,” begged Tracey. “I couldn’t bear to see you hurt. Stay here. Stay with me.”

Turning his attention toward Tracey, Tom bravely declared, “I can’t allow that pig to manhandle you like that. To touch you is a privilege, and that piece of filth never earned that privilege.”

Standing erect, Tom placed both of his hands on the counter top, hurled his legs into the air, and over the counter, landing a perfect dismount. Then he assumed a *Tae Kwon Do* stance.

“You attacked the woman I love,” accused Tom. “Now, you’re gonna pay.”

At that point, Paul rushed toward Tom. Jumping into the air, Tom executed

a half twist, kicking Paul in the face and knocking him to the ground. Tom began jogging in place and shifting his head from side to side to loosen his neck muscles. As Paul looked at Tom, unable to believe someone so small could have actually knocked him down, he pounded his fist against the floor.

Jumping to his feet, Paul swung a punch aiming for Tom's face. Tom was too quick for him though. He ducked causing Paul to miss entirely. No wait! It would be more dramatic if Paul actually connected. Yeah, Paul's punch connected with Tom's face, causing him to slightly falter.

Slowly turning his head back toward Paul, Tom wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth and glared at the stain it left on his hand.

Paul then pulled a knife from his pocket, a switchblade. Tom noticed the mop extending from the rolling bucket of water. Walking over to it, he began to unscrew the handle from the metal base, as he had seen Eddie Murphy do in the movie *Coming to America*. Once it was free, he began twirling it around while staring at Paul. Tom's expression reflected both focus and intense confidence.

Again, Paul rushed Tom, lunging toward Tom's chest with his knife. Turning sideways, Tom avoided the attack. He swung the mop handle in an upward motion, striking Paul's wrist and forcing him to release the knife. Next, he shifted the pole's upper half and struck Paul in the face. Shifting the lower half, he struck Paul in the genitals. While Paul gripped his crotch in pain, Tom quickly crouched, spun, and with his weapon, knocked Paul off of his feet.

Tom stood there, pole outstretched at one end, tucked behind his back at the other. His opposite hand was outstretched. He stood ready in case Paul had any fight left in him. But, Paul didn't move. He was down for the count.

Tracey came running to Tom's side and, once there, she embraced him. "I was so afraid," she said, holding Tom tightly. "You told him you loved me. Is that true?"

"Of course it's true," he pledged. "I've loved you from the moment I first saw you."

The two began kissing passionately as Tom released the mop handle. He then lifted his hand from Tracey's back and placed it on her—"

"...Tom? Tom! Hello, Earth to Tom. *Ground control to Major Tom*. Are you in there?" asked Tracey, waiving her hand in front of Tom's face.

"What? Huh, oh sorry. I drifted off there for a second," he confessed.

"I could tell. Who were you dreaming about? Lisa Bonet, Marissa Tomei, Dana Delaney, Paula Abdul? Come on, I know it was one of them. All you boys dream about Paula Abdul," insisted Tracey.

"No. I was actually just thinkin' about work, that's all."

“Really? Hmm, I doubt that. Anyway, I’m done with the paperwork. Is your mom picking you up tonight?”

“Nah. I told her I’d catch the bus.”

“I can give you a ride,” she offered.

“I don’t want you to have to go out of your way for me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re on the way. Grab your backpack and let’s get outta here.”

Tom hurried and grabbed his backpack, which he had scribbled his favorite band’s names all over in paint marker, and his Columbia jacket. He was so excited. Even though his house was no more than a 12-minute drive from the mall, depending on the traffic lights, it was an opportunity to be alone with Tracey. That in itself made all of the day’s bad experiences bearable. Not only bearable, but what’s more, obsolete.

As the two walked through the mall toward the parking lot, Tom made small talk in an attempt to avoid uncomfortable silences.

“So, you’re a senior, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, thank God.”

“You gonna go to college?” he pried further.

“Maybe. What I really want to do is go to acting school.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I wanna be an actress. I’m gonna leave Maryland and never look back. I’m gonna live in Hollywood and be a big star like Molly Ringwald, or Jennifer Grey from *Dirty Dancing*. I love that movie, it’s the best.”

“Yeah, that’s a good movie. That’s cool, being an actress, I mean. You’ll be rich, and you’ll be able to hang out with all the big stars.”

“I know. I love theater, too, though. I’ve been debating on maybe going to New York and trying to get parts in Broadway shows. I’ve actually been involved in a local theater downtown for a while. The woman who owns it writes and directs plays. She’s the coolest person. I’ve had a few minor parts in plays there so far, but I just tried out for one of the main characters in this new play, Jennifer Morgan, and I think I might get it. I read the script and I really love the character. I think I could be a good Jennifer Morgan. Cyndi, she’s the owner, is directing this play herself. She said she’d call me tonight and let me know if I got the part or not. God, I hope there’s good news waiting for me when I get home.”

“There will be,” said Tom, attempting to reassure her.

“I hope so. So what about you? You go to EVT right?”

“Yeah, I’m a junior. My specialized training is in Architecture. I love to draw.”

“I know. I’ve seen the pictures all over your binder.”

Eastern Vocational Technical High School, affectionately known to most as EVT, was a school that offered not only the general curriculum that the majority of young men and women were required to learn but, in addition, vocational programs that taught its students a trade. Twenty different vocations were offered and trained at the school. Just to be considered for becoming an attendee, it was required to complete and submit an application.

“I’m looking forward to college,” admitted Tom. “You’re so lucky. You can start in six months if you want to. I still have a whole nother year.”

“Oh, yeah, lucky me,” she said sarcastically.

At that point the two had reached the door of the upper level parking structure nearest Montgomery Ward.

“Oh no! It’s raining. I don’t even have my coat, much less an umbrella,” complained Tracey.

Immediately, Tom dropped his backpack and all but ripped off his coat. “Here. You can use mine,” he said handing it to her.

“What about you? You’ll get drenched if I take your coat.”

“That’s okay. I’m a guy.”

Tracey began to smile. “And that means it’s okay for you to get rained on and that I’m just a girl that might wilt?”

“Well, ah—” Tom had gotten tongue tied and couldn’t find quite the right words to say.

“I’m just kiddin’. Thank you very much. You’re a perfect gentleman,” she replied, as she put on the jacket still smiling at him.

Tom smiled back as his heart started to pulsate faster. He may not have beaten up the guy that had threatened them earlier but, in a round about way, he was still able to play the hero.

Tom ran ahead of Tracey, almost tripping over himself to hold the door open for her. The rain was coming down quite hard, so they both squinted their eyes so as to see through it. Tracey was parked at the far end of the parking lot. The two started toward her car, making their way across the lot and doing their best to avoid puddles. At the halfway point, they noticed something on the ground. It was rather large and looked like a body. They had been moving quickly but had now reduced to a walk. Slowly, they approached the large lump lying face down on the asphalt.

“Oh, my God,” Tracey gasped. “It’s a security guard.” She could tell by the shield patch sown to the arm of his jacket.

Tom leaned down and turned the guard on to his back. “Jeez! It’s Bob!”

Bob was the security guard that less than an hour ago had intervened and stopped a brutal man from terrorizing him and Tracey. Now, Bob was lying on his back with a bludgeoned bloody nose, a deep gash in the back of his head gushing blood, and a neck unable to support the weight of his head. Tom reached for Bob's wrist but he could feel no pulse. Then he placed his index and middle finger on the side of Bob's neck, but still, he could feel no pulse.

Quickly removing his hands from the dead man, Bob's lifeless corpse hit the asphalt. "He's dead! Jesus, he's dead!" squealed Tom.

"Dead? Why? How?" Tracey frantically asked.

"I dunno! It must've been that guy! He killed 'im! He just killed 'im! Call 911!"

"How? The phones are on the inside! When we walked outside, the door automatically locked when it shut!"

Tom looked up at Tracey from the kneeling position he had assumed next to the dead security guard. His eyes began to widen. Before he could warn her, Tracey felt an incredibly tight squeezing around the center of her upper arms. The squeeze was so tight, that as the skin on her arms twisted, it felt as if it were burning.

"Ahhhhh!" she screamed, as she turned and looked up into Paul's deranged face. "Ahhh! Ahhhh!"

Tom felt himself gripped with fear. He couldn't move. Tracey began to kick and thrash about trying to free herself. Finally, she lifted her foot and ran the heel of her shoe down Paul's pant leg, causing the skin on his shin to peel.

It hurt, but not much. Before the two had come out of the mall, Paul had been sitting in his car snorting lines of cocaine. He felt the heel as it drug against his pants and skin but the pain was minute. He began squeezing Tracey's arms tighter and shaking her. Tom could hear her agonizing screams echoing in his ears and, even though it was raining, he could see terror on her face and the tears running down her cheeks.

That sight was enough to make Tom forget his own fear and act upon his anger. He rushed toward Paul and managed to slip his foot between Tracey's legs and kick Paul directly in the crotch. Instantly, Paul stopped shaking Tracey and released her. He clutched his crotch tightly. Even with the drugs coursing through his system, a kick to the testicles was a kick to the testicles.

Tom ran to Tracey, holding and trying to comfort her while assessing the situation. "Are you all right? Tracey? Tell me you're okay!" pleaded Tom.

She was crying much too hard to even utter a word. All she could share were her sobs. Before he could say anything further, Tracey gasped. As Tom turned he felt Paul's shoe against his face. He could barely focus at that point. Paul lifted

Tom up by his shirt and began punching him in the face and stomach until Tom was covered in his own blood, and unable to support his own weight. Finally, Paul held Tom's limp body in a semi-standing position. Using the full weight of his body and all of his strength, Paul stomped the top of Tom's shin forcing his leg to bend backwards. Tom screamed in agony as the bone tore through his flesh and his pants, leaving him unable to stand. He lay there bleeding, broken, and helpless.

Next Paul turned his attention back to Tracey. She tried to scurry backward, unable to muster the strength to stand. Still in tears and emotionally drained, Tracey began to call for help. "Help! Help! God please! Oh God, please help me! Somebody!" But, her pleas fell on deaf ears and no one came to her rescue.

Paul grabbed Tracey by her upper arm again, where he had previously squeezed her so tightly, and forced her to her feet. He smiled as he looked into her eyes. Then, just to humiliate her, he slapped her across the face, once with the palm of his hand and again with the back of it.

"Yer gonna love this," he said, grinning the sick and twisted grin of a mad man, just inches from Tracey's face.

After he had abused her and had his way with her, Paul threw Tracey's frail body to the ground, where she landed in a puddle of stale motor oil mixed with rainwater. Then he got into his car and drove away. She lay there gripping her stomach, tears in her eyes, bleeding with torn clothes, and feeling completely defiled. As she raised her head she could see Tom only a few feet away. He had witnessed the whole disgusting scene. Tears were running down his cheeks and his arm was outstretched toward her. But, with his useless leg and broken bones, there was nothing he could do.

Tracey could see the pain in Tom's face as his mouth hung open, though no sound was coming out. "Oh, Tom," she whispered, crawling to his side. She cradled his head in her lap and began stroking his hair. Tears streamed down the sides of her face as she looked out across the parking lot, blankly staring off into the distance.

CHAPTER IX

The Battle

Sam ran his hand across his body checking for broken ribs. It didn't feel as though any were broken. The impact from hitting the tree felt as if he had been hit by a semi, or perhaps it was a combination of the backhand he had received in addition to being tossed against the tree. He could feel his eyes closing and his mind wanting to shut down.

Three quarters of the way shut, Sam's eyes could barely see the monstrous frame moving toward him. He gathered himself together and forced his eyes fully open, focusing on clearing his mind and staying awake.

What stood mere feet in front of him was astonishing. It was at least eight feet tall, if not taller and covered in fur. Standing on two legs, it had the snout of a dog, wet and covered in blood, filled with jagged cutting teeth. Its arms were long and muscular with razor sharp bloodstained claws extending from fingers, which had been clutching the head and neck torn from the dead deer lying near Derek's headless body.

The thoughts running through Sam's mind must have been similar to the last thoughts Derek experienced shortly before his death. The creature looked down at Sam with what almost resembled a grin. Its cold grey eyes stared as though there was nothing behind them but an empty lifeless soul that fed on death and

enjoyed it. When it swiped at Sam it had moved so quickly, that had Sam blinked, he would have missed seeing the arm that had struck him with such great force.

Sam looked into the creature's eyes, watching carefully, waiting for it to make a move. Gradually, Sam was regaining his focus and strength. He was not at one-hundred percent but he was feeling better. The beast's grunts and heavy panting was unnerving. Sam could see the creature's breath with every puff from its mouth and nose. He was unable to discern if it was waiting for him to make the first move or simply toying with him, trying to confuse and further frighten him.

"What are you waiting for?" Sam grunted, bravely standing his ground, looking into the face of the horrible thing staring down at him. He again tried to reach into the beast's mind in an attempt to find out who or what it was, where it had come from, and if it was simply a mindless animal or an intelligent sentient being. The attempt caused a stabbing pain in Sam's mind. He grasped his head and instantly broke off all efforts.

The creature's grin, for lack of a better term, seemed to widen. A throaty growl made its way up from the beast's stomach and out of the corners of its jowls. Forcing the pain from his thoughts, Sam did his best to show he was not afraid or intimidated. "Come on, then. I'm waiting," he uttered, with a raspy voice.

At that moment, the beast lunged forward head first, mouth open, with saliva and blood dripping from its teeth and jowls. Sam again raised his telekinetic shield and tried dodging the attack. This time the shield was slightly nicked, but still, the force was enough to disturb Sam's balance. Leaping from his position, he stumbled and fell to the ground. Hurriedly, Sam made his way to his knees, reaching into the pouch on his belt concealing his smoke bombs. He dashed one against a large rock embedded in the mud directly in front of him and endeavored to fly away.

Before getting even a few feet, Sam felt a tugging at his ankle. Catching him completely off guard, Sam almost cried out. The creature moved quickly, but Sam hadn't realized it could move quite that fast. He had hoped the smoke might have disoriented the monster but it had not. Using its keen sense of smell, it had easily located Sam, although, momentarily, it had difficulty seeing him.

Sam looked at it through the smoke, which, due to the rain, was quickly dissipating. He could see the creature's thin, black, bony fingers grasping his ankle. Its piercing eyes were staring down Sam's leg and looking into his face. It began tugging him toward itself. Pulling a throwing knife from his harness, Sam flung it with all his might toward the creature's face. The beast let out a blood-curdling howl as the knife penetrated its skin directly below its right eye.

As the creature reached for its face with one hand, it slammed Sam to the ground with the other. Sam had taken a beating from the monstrous brute. His head was pounding. His arms, ribs, and legs felt weary. Breathing hurt so badly, as his lungs pressed against his bruised ribs, that it was hard to concentrate on anything else. Sam realized he had one of two options if he was to make it out of the situation alive. Either, fly away as fast as he could with the remaining strength that he could muster, or find a way to kill the bestial figure.

The monster pulled the blade from its face and tossed it to the ground. Blood squirted from the wound where it had resided. Sam lifted his upper body using his arms, feeling the stiffness and straining of his muscles. How much more did the creature have? Was it tiring at all? Did the bleeding cut beneath its eye even phase it? All these questions ran through Sam's thoughts as he plotted his next move, perhaps his last.

The beast began to snarl, pant, and display its teeth and gums; stretching the furry flesh around them back as far as it could. Its ears started to twitch independently from one another. Sam remained focused on the creature's eyes. He did not allow any of its movements nor his surroundings to distract him.

Sam glanced quickly toward the sky. Through the rain and tree branches he could see the clouds and moon. Should he go for it, fly away as fast as he could? There would be no shame in that. After all, to flee and live would be preferable to fighting and probably dying violently and painfully. Sam's pride continued to tug at him, though. He was Mantis, David's finest student, Scorpion's mentor and quite possibly the most powerful telepathic telekinetic on the planet. He had never run from a battle. Not once. Sam remembered as a boy hearing stories of Indian braves that had journeyed out into the wilderness, armed only with a knife, to slay a bear as a test of their manhood. This creature was about the size of a bear, maybe a bit smaller. But, Sam's head throbbed. His body ached. He had only two knives and three *shuriken* left. His thoughts briefly turned to his wife, Cyndi. If he fought and was killed, Cyndi would become a widow and all because of his foolish pride. No, it was time to run.

Sam again glanced upward toward the sky and then back at the creature. This time it had seen him do it. The creature leapt into the air and Sam instantly dropped to his back, extending his arms and lifting his hands palms flat. Sam raised the strongest barrier he could muster with the remainder of the strength he possessed. The beast stared down at him from its position. It had jumped and clung to a tree, hanging roughly 12 feet above the ground and blocking Sam's exit route. It had dug its claws into the tree bark to steady itself. It lowered its head slightly, staring intently at Sam and licking its teeth. Sam held firm, refusing

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to flinch. Suddenly, the beast released its grip and came plummeting downward toward him.

As the creature was falling, Norrin appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, charging the beast and tackling it against the earth. The two slid, entangled on the muddy ground, neither one letting go of the other. Fierce *berserker* movements came from both figures as they rolled around in the wet sludge. Norrin managed to wriggle free and spring to his feet. The creature turned and stood on all fours facing Norrin. The two stared at one another for several seconds, both breathing heavily, both in attack positions. The beast let out a growl and several hostile barks. Norrin reached deep within himself and returned the beast's growls followed by a roar that would have frightened even the most savage creature.



The beast was silent. It stared in amazement. Obviously, it had never seen a man do anything like that before. It turned to run and as it did, Norrin reached for it. He couldn't quite grasp the hair on the creature's back but, instead, wound up digging his nails across its back. It let out a yelp, stopping for only a second, giving Norrin time to grab the only thing he could, its tail. He gripped it tightly, and with a heave, he swung it into the thickest tree that he could see. The beast wildly slammed against the tree letting out an ear piercing squeal and yelp. Then it slumped to the ground.

Norrin then released its tail and grabbed it by the throat. Lifting it into the air with only one hand, he rammed its body against the same tree a second time.

"What are you?" growled Norrin, in that eerie voice he had so often used when his adrenaline factor was active.

The beast's head began to wobble as though it might lose consciousness. Then with one last effort, it slashed at Norrin with its claws. The front of his uniform had been torn to ribbons. As the creature looked at the flesh beneath, it noticed that Norrin's skin was unmarred. Not a cut, slash, or even a scratch was there. Norrin's expression grew even more indignant and more ferocious as he drew back his free arm, nails fully extended.

"No! Scorpion don't! Wait! Don't kill it," ordered Sam. He had somewhat recovered and managed to get to his feet.

Norrin turned toward Sam. His teeth were fully extended and his eyes glowing so intensely green through the mask's lenses, it looked as if they might burn through them. At that moment, the beast took its opportunity. It reached up and with all its might swung, knocking Norrin backward and causing him to come crashing to the ground.

It began to run away but, after retreating only a few yards, it was struck and knocked to the ground. Lifting its eyes upward, it caught sight of yet another costumed man. It was Wade. Much the same way Norrin had heard the creature's howl when Sam had pierced its flesh and followed the sounds to its location, so, too, Wade and the others did similarly; listening to the barks, growls, and roars they'd heard once inside the forest.

Wade stood over the creature. He was not attempting to look menacing, nor had he assumed an attack stance. He just stood there looking down on the beast. It could smell no fear whatsoever coming from Wade. It was as though Wade was so superior to the pathetic thing crawling around on the ground, that he would not allow himself to appear shaken or put himself on the defense, lowering himself to its level.

Again, it turned to run away. This time, four fist-sized fireballs struck it in the

chest, abdomen, shoulder, and thigh. The creature yelped in pain as the fur on its body singed and the fire scorched its skin. The creature was beginning to give in to exhaustion and weakness. It barely held its own weight up with its wobbling arms. It huffed and tried to put forth a brave show of intimidation, but it was in vain.

Sam was floating in front of it. Norrin stood poised to attack, looking like a rabid animal. Wade stood to one side, daring it to make a move and Rachel to the other side, with two bowling ball sized fireballs hovering on either side of her. Cyndi and Nanci were close but had taken refuge behind two trees. Neither one had the ability to confront a beast like that even with their individual gifts. The safest place for them was out of harm's way.

"Is this thing a—" Rachel stopped herself. "No, no. I'm gonna say it. Is this thing a frickin' werewolf? I mean it looks like a werewolf!"

"There's no such thing as a werewolf," responded Norrin, still speaking with his altered voice.

"Yeah, and there's no such thing as men who can pick things up with their minds, or men that can kick over cars, either. And of course, there's definitely no such thing as a woman that can create fire from thin air and control it by thought, is there?" countered Wade.

"There is no way werewolves exist," insisted Norrin.

"Sam, is that really a werewolf?" asked Cyndi, projecting her thoughts.

"I have no idea what it is as of yet. I can't get into its mind. Can yo—" Sam quickly ceased to finish his thought. "Hold on! Don't try. It gave me a splitting headache and disrupted my concentration when I tried. It could do worse to you."

"I can try," she offered.

"No! I'm serious. Do not try to enter that thing's mind. There's no telling what that might do to you," demanded Sam.

"Well, what do we do with it?" asked Wade. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I really don't look forward to standing here in the woods all night, in the rain, waiting 'til the sun comes up, hoping this thing reverts to human form."

"It killed Derek. It's a murderer," informed Sam.

"Then I say we kill it," asserted Norrin.

"We don't kill," admonished Sam.

"We don't kill people. This is not a *people*," argued Norrin.

"You kill me and you'll never be safe. No matter where you go, no matter where you hide, never," proclaimed the beast, in a voice that would have rivaled Norrin's while his adrenaline factor was active.

Everyone stood in disbelief. It talked. The beast had actually talked.

"Did that thing just talk?" asked Rachel rhetorically.

"I am no *thing*, woman," it declared, speaking a second time. "I am a prince. Your attack, your attack upon me could be considered an act of war." The creature was short of breath and seemed to be in some pain. "Leave now and you may live, at least through the night. Stay, and I swear, before the sun rises, you'll all be dead."

"You talk big for a wounded dog," Norrin taunted.

The creature looked into Norrin's eyes and again seemed to grin. It then closed its eyes and sniffed the wintry air. Lifting its head toward the sky, it barked three times. Caught off guard, Nanci jumped, still taking cover behind a tree.

Suddenly, the sounds of multiple barks were heard echoing throughout the woods and they were getting closer. The beast turned toward Sam, its eerie grin still reflected on its jowls.

"It's time to go," instructed Sam.

"What?" questioned Norrin.

"Now," Sam ordered.

"But—"

"Now!" he demanded a second time, raising his voice. "Napalm, fly out of here now. Scorpion, Toad, the two of you stay with Gorgon and get her to your vehicle immediately. I'll take Mind Reader with me and we'll meet you back at the lair. Everyone go. Go now!"

The group dispersed, and as they did, those that hadn't noticed yet saw Derek's head lying in the mud close to his body. Watching them flee, the creature leaned back against the tree it had been lying next to and let out a laugh. They could all hear the horrific sound, crawling through their flesh and up their spines, echoing in their ears as they fled.

Rachel had decided to fly to the delivery truck and get a ride back to Sam's house with Norrin and Wade. While she was in the air, she noticed two empty police cars parked in front of Derek's apartment building.

"Rachel to Cyndi," she spoke into her microphone.

"Mind Reader here, Napalm," replied Cyndi. She was sure to use her and Rachel's call signs because earlier, she had called Nanci and Rachel by name shortly after Norrin had been shot and while Sam was right next to her. He hadn't mentioned it yet, but she knew he would bring it up later.

"Sorry, yeah. Mind Reader, the cops are in front of Derek's building," said Rachel. "Let Sam know, and ask if he has any suggestions."

Sam had been listening by way of Cyndi's thoughts. "Are they outside?" Sam projected to Rachel.

“No, I don’t see them in their cars or standing outside. They must be inside one of the buildings questioning people,” she responded verbally.

“Are you on your way back to my house?”

“Negative. I was going to catch a ride with Wa—” she caught herself before finishing Wade’s name. “Toad and Scorpion.” She hated having to remember to use everyone’s “call sign” or “code name.”

“We’re almost there. While we’re landing Mind Reader and I will cloud the mind of anyone who might have noticed any of our vehicles or our group. Get inside the truck, and wait for the others. Scorpion, Toad, and Gorgon should be there soon. Once they arrive, advise them we’ll be taking the *Lamborghini*.”

“Will do.”

As Sam and Cyndi landed, Sam removed his telekinetic hold from around his wife. The two began reading various thoughts within their proximity and removing the memories of anyone that had noticed any in the group or their vehicles. They also clouded the minds of those who at that moment, were looking out of their windows. As far as any of the gawkers could tell, there was no delivery truck or *Lamborghini* in the parking lot, nor were there any colorful characters parading around in costumes. Those that might have seen or heard Norrin get shot, now described the victim as an older Asian man carrying a bag of groceries.

Soon Norrin, Nanci, and Wade had emerged from the forest. They were running at a fast pace, keeping an eye out for anyone or anything following them. As they cleared the trees, off in the distance, they could see two police cars. Immediately, they stopped running.

“It’s okay,” each of them heard in their thoughts. It was Sam. “No one can see you or the vehicles right now. Mind Reader and I are in the *Lamborghini* and ready to leave. Hurry to the delivery truck, and we’ll all get out of here.”

The three remaining stragglers hurried to their vehicle. When they arrived, they found Rachel sitting in the storage area wearing two coats.

“What? I’m cold,” she commented, clutching the coats tightly to her body and dripping from head to toe.

“I didn’t say anything,” answered Wade, grinning from ear to ear.

“I hate rain,” she announced, shivering and puffing against her bottom lip.

“Let’s move, let’s go! Now, Wade!” Norrin demanded, as he removed his mask.

“Hold your pinchers there, buddy. I’m goin’, I’m goin’,” retorted Wade, after removing his mask as well.

Nanci took a seat next to Rachel and also removed her mask. She reached for one of the four remaining trench coats kept in the rear of the vehicle and put it on backwards.

"That's pretty appropriate, you know," commented Rachel.

Nanci glanced in her direction and let out a slight laugh. She then whispered to Rachel, "Did we just see that? Did we just see a living, breathing, werewolf?"

"Talking!" added Rachel. "Don't leave out the talking!"

"Yeah," continued Nanci, still whispering. "I didn't know werewolves could talk."

"Talk? I didn't know they could live!" exclaimed Rachel.

"Yeah, I know. Do you think people feel like that when they see someone like us? Ya know, like when we use our powers. Do you think they feel about us the same way we feel about it, that thing?" questioned Nanci.

"I don't know." Rachel paused. "I don't care!" she continued. "That was a werewolf back there! A Lon Chaney, Jr., *The Howling*, Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, freakin' werewolf! In Baltimore! Werewolves live in Transylvania, or Romania, or Germany, or some other third-world European country like that!"

"Those aren't third-world countries, just to let you know," interrupted Wade.

"You shut up and drive!" commanded Rachel.

"What is it with you people today? So pushy. What am I, a chauffeur?" Wade's weak attempt to lighten Rachel's mood caused only Norrin to crack a tiny smile.

"This is why I don't do this anymore," resumed Rachel. She wasn't looking at anyone in particular. She was just speaking aloud. "Werewolves, guns, police, and, and werewolves! At least in an E.R. I know what I'm up against. Even if somebody comes in pounding at death's door, I still know what to do. There are no surprises! But I put this stupid costume on again after six months and, SURPRISE! Werewolves exist!"

"She tends to ramble on, doesn't she?" Norrin commented to Wade.

"You shut up, too! I didn't ask you anything," grunted Rachel toward Norrin.

"It'll be okay, Rach," comforted Nanci, while patting Rachel's leg.

"Yeah, sure it will. I'll tell ya what, I'm gonna sleep a lot less soundly knowing werewolves are out there waiting to rip my heart out." Finally, Rachel was starting to calm down and speak more rationally. "I can't believe it was my stupid idea to get together and do this. Well, as of right now, immediately, right this second, I'm retired. Napalm's retired. Don't come lookin' for her,

don't come askin' about her, don't come a callin'. Napalm doesn't live here anymore."

Norrin and Wade looked at each other with small grins but said nothing. They simply shook their heads. Nanci continued her attempts to comfort Rachel, putting her arm around her and patting her back.

Sam and Cyndi were headed back to their house by way of the Beltway. Cyndi was driving as Sam was still throbbing from the blows he had endured. His arms cradled his ribs as though they were a newborn infant. Cyndi could feel his pain, though he tried to hide from her the scope of his discomfort.

"Hang in there, tough guy. We'll get you fixed up once we're home," said Cyndi, in an attempt to console her husband.

"I'm fine," alleged Sam. "Just a little sore, that's all."

"Oh, now you're lying to me? I'm a telepath, too, you know. Maybe I'm not as powerful as the almighty Mantis, but I'm no inept beginner. Your ribs are killing you, you've got a burning sensation in your back and arms, and your right ankle feels sprained. Not to mention your splitting headache. Does that about cover it?"

"You're right. I'm sorry. I just didn't want to worry you."

"Worry me? Newsflash, Sam! Scary werewolves prowl the forests of Baltimore decapitating some white guy, news at eleven!"

"He was just a drug dealer, Cyndi."

"You don't know that! Not for sure! And even if he was, he was still a human being. 'We don't kill,' remember? That includes not standing idly by while others do."

As Cyndi chastised Sam, he felt a stabbing sting on his right side. He winced in pain gripping his side tenderly. Cyndi could feel his anguish and discontinued her lecture. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to preach to you. I just don't like it when I hear you talk so callously about another human being. I don't want this life to desensitize you to the pain and suffering of people. Even those you may feel deserve a little suffering."

"I know. Sometimes it's hard to be empathetic, seeing the utter lack of humanity people extend to one another day in and day out. But, I need to work on that. I lose my compassion and I might as well stop doing this."

"I wish you'd stop doing this either way," Cyndi thought to herself.

"I know you do," Sam replied aloud. "But, let's save that discussion for another time, okay?"

Cyndi looked at him and crinkled her nose. "Sorry. I forgot who I was sitting next to for a second there."

“I’m gonna rest my eyes,” Sam informed his wife. He was fast asleep, shortly thereafter.

Cyndi looked at her husband lying there so peacefully. She kissed her two fingers and placed them on Sam’s cheek. “Get some rest, Super Sam,” she whispered. “You’ve earned it.”

CHAPTER X

Reconciliation

“Ow! You’re not being very gentle you know,” criticized Sam.

“Too bad,” responded Rachel.

“And your bedside manner leaves much to be desired,” he added.

She again, poked and pressed against his ribs ensuring none were broken.

“Ow!” he cried out in pain. “You did that on purpose.”

“Yup!” she admitted.

“You’re upset about the—what happened in the woods earlier, aren’t you?” concluded Sam.

The group had arrived at Sam’s house 45 minutes after leaving the apartment complex on Rossville Boulevard. Sam and Cyndi had reached the estate first and the rest were following about ten minutes behind them.

Once they were inside of the underground fortress, Cyndi woke Sam up by lightly rubbing his arm and calling his name in a soft docile voice. She aided him out of the car and into one of the rear resting areas of the lair, where she helped him out of his costume and carefully assisted him into bed. She then covered him with a comforter and, after kissing his forehead, stood up and walked to the bathroom to get Sam a glass of water and some pain-relief medication.

While filling the glass with tap water, Cyndi heard Norrin, Nanci, Wade, and

Rachel enter the primary room of the lair, after descending the path of the secret passage. She could sense a high amount of anxiety coming from Rachel. Rachel had never experienced a situation quite like the one they had all shared in that night and it had left her on edge. On the other hand, Norrin and Wade were both thoroughly exhilarated, being physically the most powerful members of the team and rarely facing a challenge when it came to hand-to-hand confrontations. This night had given them something they had not felt in quite awhile, the pumping of their blood, the racing of their hearts, and the animalistic glory of battle. Even though they had no idea how many vicious beasts were headed in their direction when fleeing the forest, had Norrin and Wade been given the option, they would have chosen to stay and continue battling the monsters. Nanci, surprisingly, didn't seem very moved by the experience. Yes, she had jumped when startled by the barks of the creature in the forest, but that was because she had been caught off guard. The actual experience of being in that situation and witnessing the things that she had seen, did not have the same effect on her as it had on Rachel.

Once Cyndi had finished filling the glass and had gotten the pain medication for Sam, Cyndi approached Rachel and asked if she would look him over. Although an amateur, Rachel agreed to give Sam the once over.

Admittedly, Rachel had been the instigator of the night's beginnings. Still, a part of her blamed Sam for having lived through what was, quite possibly, the most terrifying experience of her life. She of course had put on a brave front while in the woods. Letting fear get the best of her could have cost her life. She kept that in the forefront of her mind earlier that evening, when putting on her costume that hadn't seen the light of day in over six months. She may have been a bit rusty but she was no novice.

Nonetheless, it was Sam who had organized this band of colorfully dressed up characters. It was Sam who had spent time, effort, and money furthering the reckless activities of these friends. And it was Sam who had appointed himself leader of the group, putting his own life as well as the lives of his colleagues in harm's way, time and time again.

Rachel, although a loyal friend, had her own opinions of Sam. Perhaps, a part of her still resented him for the dissolution of their romantic relationship and she was treating him more severely than he actually deserved. Be that as it may, Sam knew that both Norrin and Wade would follow him wherever he might lead them and for the sake of Cyndi and Nanci, she wished that he would put an end to their costumed escapades. For those reasons, she was not being particularly gentle in her examination of him.

“What gave you that idea?” responded Rachel, regarding Sam’s statement of her being upset about the happenings in the woods.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe the fact that you’re trying to put your fingers through my side, might have something to do with it,” accused Sam.

“You’ll live,” she snapped, as she stood up from her kneeling position next to the bed. She had turned to walk out of the room, when Sam called to her.

“Rachel?”

She stopped but did not turn toward him.

“You’re pretty upset, even for you. I could uncover the reasons as to why, with or without your consent, but I won’t,” confessed Sam. “Is it that you were completely caught off guard by what happened back there, or is it something else?” he questioned.

“You know, Sam, you may be an incredibly gifted telepath,” she turned toward him. “But, when it comes to common sense, you’re an idiot.”

“Don’t hold back, Rach, tell me how you really feel,” he commented, with a smirk on his face.

“Okay, I will. It’s time to grow up Sam! It’s time to act your age. You’re not a 13-year-old boy anymore! You’re a grown man with a wife, a business to run, and a life to live. Why do you insist on living out some juvenile, boyhood fantasy, instead of putting that energy into those more important things?” She paused, waiting for Sam to say something. “Well? That was a question. I’m waiting for an answer.”

Sam turned toward the wall for a few seconds, and then turned back looking directly into Rachel’s eyes. “I don’t know,” he answered.

“Not good enough! That’s a copout and you know it. I want a real answer!”

“What do you wanna hear, Rachel? What do you expect me to say?”

“The truth, Sam! I want the truth. You know all about the truth, right? You’re a telepath. You get the truth all the time, whether it’s given freely or you tactlessly steal it. So how about you, huh? Are you gonna tell the truth or hide behind a lie?”

“Fine! You want the truth? I’ll give it to you. I grew up in a house without a father. Sure, he was alive, which was more than Norrin had with his mother. But, still, we didn’t have that whole American dream, apple pie, fairy-tale relationship. My whole life I wanted my dad to be a dad, to do all the things that dads are supposed to do. I wanted him to come home from work and be a husband to my mom. I wanted him to take an interest in my personal life, my hopes, and my dreams. I wanted him to have taught me to ride a bike, or drive a car, or play ball at a neighborhood court. But, he didn’t. I don’t have all the

answers as to why. I considered reading his mind once or twice, but I was too afraid of what I might find. So I didn't."

Rachel's expression of anger had softened and had been exchanged for one more resembling empathy.

Sam continued. "I also grew up quite wealthy. So, I lived a privileged life while other kids were neglected, abused, pulling food out of trash cans just so they wouldn't have to go to sleep hungry, while I ate whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted it.

"I wanted to do something with my life when I grew up. I wanted it to count for something. Not be just another rich kid leeching off of society and profiting from the blood, sweat, and tears of others, while they made me richer breaking their own backs. Since I was born with extraordinary gifts, I figured, why not use those gifts to help regular people—the people that work from nine to five or in some cases six to six, the people who work their fingers to the bone, just to put a roof over their heads and food on the table for their families?

"I didn't want those families to be without a father then if I could help it, and I still don't. I don't want to see kids lose their fathers or mothers like Norrin and I did. I can't cure cancer, and I can't stop divorce. But, I can prevent the strong from victimizing the weak. I can stop a storekeeper from being shot because he won't give up the day's cash drawer to some drug-addled filth, whose only interest is his next fix. I can stop a mother from living a life of torment and heart-wrenching anguish because some nutcase decides he's going to kidnap, rape, and murder her only child. I can save a family from burning to death in a fire because their cheap, lowlife, self-centered landlord, who could care less whether they live or die, won't install smoke detectors in their dilapidated apartment building. All those things I can do! So I do them, and I'll continue to do them."

Sam's face had hardened. His eyebrows were furrowed and his nostrils flared. Rachel waited a few seconds and then spoke.

"Sam, I understand your wanting to help people, and I can appreciate your not wanting to have them suffer some of the same unfortunate circumstances both you and Norrin have. I really can! I want to help people, too. That's why I'm working hard to become a doctor. I have powers, gifts, and abilities just like you do. But, I've realized that if I put on a costume and go out with the intension of helping people, I could wind up doing more harm than good.

"I mean, first of all, it's not legal. Being a vigilante and taking the law into your own hands, without the proper authorization from the local government, is illegal, Sam. Then there's putting your life in danger again and again. You've been lucky so far. We all have. Norrin may be pretty tough and Wade

invulnerable, but you, me, Cyndi, or Nanci, all it'll take is one lucky shot. One time when we're so preoccupied, focusing on one thing and not paying attention to another, and that'll be it. It's over. We're done, finished, dead. Dead, Sam, and then, it'll be too late.

"You're rich. Monetarily, you have more than most people will ever even dream of having. Use your money for good. If you wanna help underprivileged people, build affordable housing where they can live, instead of living in the Projects. Open soup kitchens, where those who can't afford food can go and get a warm, decent meal. Donate money so that the city can hire more cops and firefighters. So that they can buy more police cars and fire engines, and build police stations and fire houses. Just doing those things alone will give people homes, food, protection, and hope. Hope, Sam. Not to mention create jobs and employ people that are sitting at home right now, thumbing through the Classifieds praying for a job."

Rachel's point of view had reached Sam's heart and his countenance had softened. "To some extent, I do that already, Rachel."

"Do it more fully! Focus on that, your publishing company, and for God's sake, your wife. Sam, you have a beautiful wife with an enormous heart, and she loves you. Lord only knows why, but she loves you. She wants to live her life with you and give you a baby—a baby, Sam! Isn't it about time you started filling this castle of yours? Do it for her. Give her peace of mind. Allow yourselves to have 'happily ever after.' It's right there. It's within your grasp. All you have to do is reach out your hand and take it."

Sam looked at Rachel and smiled. He could feel her words were true and her intentions honorable.

"Ya know, after we broke up, we never really talked about, you know, the reasons why. I mean, we did, but—"

"Hey, it ended. At the time we both may have had hard feelings, but I think now we can agree it was for the best. We're friends now, family really. You've got an awesome wife, and I'm happy for you. I really am."

"I know. Thank you. I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I am truly, truly sorry for any pain I may have caused you. I know I must've seemed pretty insensitive for a while, but that was just me trying to deal with the situation in my own way. I hope you'll forgive me."

Rachel's eyes began to well up with tears. She had waited years to hear those words, although she never believed that she actually would. Realizing her eyes were glazing over, Rachel regained her composure, forcing the lump in her throat down, and gave Sam a smile. She wasn't about to let him see her cry. She

wouldn't be able to live with herself if she did.

"I appreciate that," she confessed. "I don't hold any grudges, and I hope you don't either."

"Absolutely not. Not at all," he affirmed.

Rachel's emotions were on her sleeve at that moment and, after smoothing over old wounds between Sam and herself, she felt it best to quickly change the subject while there was peace. "So, you should probably keep a bandage around your mid-section for a few days and be sure to rub antiseptic ointment on all of those cuts. You'll be sore for a week or two but, fortunately, that should be it."

"Thanks, Doctor," expressed Sam, with gratitude.

"I'm not a doctor yet," she replied.

"You will be. The best in all of Baltimore."

"Maryland, the best in all of Maryland."

"My mistake. Maryland: of course, Maryland."

The others had been waiting in the foremost room of the lair. They had heard some shouting from both Sam and Rachel, but tried not to eavesdrop on the specifics of their conversation. Cyndi had considered listening in by way of Sam's thoughts but decided against it. She felt it best to give them their privacy and perhaps ask Sam about the specifics later, if the mood seemed favorable. Cyndi had again warmed some tea and poured a cup for all who were waiting.

"It got pretty quiet in there all of a sudden," mentioned Nanci, looking around at the other three waiting in anticipation, for an outcome to the argument they had overheard.

"I bet Rachel killed Sam," Wade jested. "In his weakened condition, I think she could take him."

Cyndi shot a look in his direction letting him know that she did not find his comment amusing.

Norrin spoke up. "I'll go check on them," he said, rising from his chair.

"No," admonished Cyndi. "Give them a moment. They both need to get some things off of their chests, and maybe they're finally doing it. If we start seeing fireballs and other things start to fly around the lair, then we'll interrupt."

Waves of excitement and exhilaration were still emitting from Norrin and Wade, though Norrin was beginning to tire. Using his superhuman strength for extended periods of time and expending large amounts of energy required him to get rest and replenish his stamina. Nanci still did not seem very moved one way or the other by what she had seen. Cyndi was growing more curious as to why. She, herself, had experienced a degree of fear while in the woods that still had not completely left her. The thought of that immensely large hideous beast,

with blood on its face and claws, and saliva dripping from its jowls left Cyndi unsettled. The fact that it had spoken left her dumbfounded. But, Nanci, quite possibly the most vulnerable of the group, did not seem to be very bothered by the whole experience. Cyndi was not going to mention anything at that moment, but she made a mental note to ask Nanci about her seemingly undemonstrative attitude at a later time.

Sam and Rachel had finally appeared from the rear of the lair as Norrin and Wade were starting on their second cups of tea. Sam was walking slowly, cradling his ribs with his right arm. Rachel stood next to him with her hand on his back, ready to assist with support should he need it.

Even though Sam was the only one requiring assistance to walk, Norrin asked, "Are you two gonna be okay?"

Sam looked at Rachel and she back at him.

"Yeah, we're gonna be fine," answered Sam.

"Uh-huh, we're good," added Rachel.

Everyone's look of anticipation faded to one of relief. Cyndi walked up to Sam and took Rachel's place at his side, after thanking her for assessing his condition. Then, she helped Sam to a chair and, after making sure he was comfortable, poured him a cup of tea.

Turning to Rachel, she asked, "Can I pour you a cup?"

Rachel nodded, indicating she would appreciate a cup. They shared a smile with one another and Cyndi felt much better, sensing the waves of calmness issuing forth from Rachel. As she passed Rachel her cup and saucer, Cyndi gently placed her hand on Rachel's shoulder. Rachel looked up at her and, still smiling, patted Cyndi's hand with her own.

"I was talking to Norrin earlier," said Sam, while sipping his tea. "I let him know I wanted to take us all away on a little vacation. We've all suffered a little stress lately, not only in our personal or business lives, but also, due to the efforts we've put forth trying to protect the people in our community. Nanci, Norrin mentioned you have some vacation time you're able to take at work. Is that right?"

"Yeah, about two weeks," she responded.

"Good," continued Sam. "Wade, you can take a little time off, right?"

"Abso-positively," Wade answered. "I could use a good vacation."

"Rachel, I know you've got a test on Monday and you've been working very hard to maintain your GPA in school, but do you think you can take some time away from both work and school, for a much-needed, much-deserved vacation?" asked Sam.

“When are you planning to leave?” she inquired.

“Well, since your test is Monday, how about Tuesday or Wednesday? Would that work for everyone?” he asked.

“I could do that,” responded Rachel. “Does that work for you guys?” she asked, turning to the others for their approval.

“Yeah. Sure. Sounds Good!” they all agreed.

“Great!” responded Sam excitedly. His sudden movement due to his enthusiasm had caused his side to pain. “Ooh,” he winced, as he reached for his side while exhaling.

“You all right?” questioned Norrin.

“I’ve been told ‘I’m going to live’ by the best doctor in all of Maryland,” he commented, while smiling at Rachel.

Rachel returned his smile and nodded her head deeply, in an exaggerated motion.

“So, where are we going?” asked Wade eagerly. “Ocean City, Orlando, Atlanta, Niagara Falls?”

“We could go to San Diego and visit Norrin’s family while we’re there,” suggested Nanci.

“Those are all good suggestions,” commended Sam. “But, I was thinking of something more along the lines of an international trip. How does Paris sound?”

Sam’s comment had caused everyone in the room to freeze. They all looked at him, some with shock, others with anticipation. Even Cyndi had not yet been to Paris. She and Sam had visited a few countries away from the North American continent, but not France, not yet. The idea of going to Paris with her husband and closest friends was just the getaway she needed.

“Are you serious?” Rachel blurted out. “You so better not be joking,” she commented, waiting for Sam’s response.

“I’m very serious,” he assured her.

“That sounds freakin’ rad!” exclaimed Norrin. He quickly turned to his wife for her reaction. She was still in a state of shock, staring at Sam with her mouth wide open.

“Did you just say Paris?” she asked, to confirm her ears had heard correctly.

Sam smiled at her and nodded his head, yes.

“I have to pack,” she barely managed to get out, while staring blankly. “No, I mean, I have to call, call Telani, I mean Miffani, I mean—” Looking at Norrin, she asked, “Are we going to Paris?”

“Well, Sam says we are,” he answered, placing his arms around his wife. “That is, if it’s okay with you.”

Nanci, finally comprehending that she was indeed going to Paris, squeezed her husband as tightly as she could. She then ran to Sam and embraced him.

"Ooh, ooh. Gently please, gently," he requested.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she apologized, loosening her grip. Then she kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"You're very welcome," he replied. "I especially want *you* to have a good time," he expressed to her.

Norrin had earlier mentioned Nanci being upset and even in tears, due to her frustrations with the lives of their alter egos. Sam had also witnessed her weeping, first hand, when Norrin had gotten shot. He had also felt her despair, grief, and hostility toward both he and Norrin during that moment. It was important to him to distract her thoughts from the discouragement and frustration she was experiencing, for which he felt partly responsible, and give her something pleasant to focus on.

"I have to call my job," Nanci continued. "I have to get time off. We need to go so that I can get ready."

"We've got two or three days, Nance," informed Norrin.

"That's all? We need to go now!" she insisted, grabbing Norrin's arm and yanking him toward the ramp leading to Sam's study.

"I guess we're leaving," commented Norrin. "Lemme grab our things from the back, and we'll go," he informed his wife.

After retrieving their civilian clothes from the sleeping quarters, Norrin handed Nanci her trench coat. They both put their coats on over their slightly damp costumes and slung their bags over their shoulders.

"You're not going to change?" asked Sam.

"Nah, we'll be fine," assured Norrin. "The majority of our outfits are covered by our coats, anyway."

"Then drive carefully. Don't speed or do anything to draw attention to yourselves. The last thing you need is a cop pulling you over and asking you to step out of the car, wearing only your jammies," Sam commented sarcastically.

"Uniform, it's a uniform," countered Norrin.

Nanci began tugging at his arm, signaling she wanted to go.

"So, I guess we're leaving," announced Norrin a second time. "Thanks for the tea, Cyndi, and thanks for this trip, Sam. We're both really grateful."

"You can thank me by having a good time," encouraged Sam. "And Norrin, don't pack the costume. Leave it at home."

Nanci's smile grew even wider, so that her rosy cheeks looked as though they might burst. Sam's words made her heart swell with elation.

“Really?” questioned Norrin.

“Mmm-hmm. Scorpion, Gorgon, Toad, Mantis, Mind Reader, and Napalm won’t be joining us on this trip. They’ll be staying home,” assured Sam.

“Napalm’s retired,” Rachael informed those who had not yet heard. “I told Norrin, Nanci, and Wade on the way here, and now I’m telling you two,” she commented, facing both Sam and Cyndi. “Tonight was her last night out. She went out at the top of her game and will no doubt be sorely missed, but that’s it. That’s all she wrote. Napalm has left the lair. Rachel, on the other hand, is going to be focusing on becoming a skilled surgeon and save lives in that way, with your permission of course, Mantis,” she notified, looking only at Sam.

He shrugged his shoulders and waived his hands, giving her an expression as if to say, “You don’t need my authorization or permission.”

“Good. Then that’s settled,” she continued. “Rachel,” she said, pointing to herself, “will always be there for all of you, any time you need her. She’ll always be your friend,” pledged Rachel.

“And Sam, Cyndi, Norrin, Nanci and Wade will always be there for you,” assured Cyndi.

“Well, maybe Sam, Cyndi, Norrin, and Nanci will, but Wade—” Wade stopped in mid-sentence, looking at the ceiling closing one eye. “Okay, I guess Wade will be there, too.”

“Oh, thank you, ever so much. I don’t think I’d have been able to go on without Wade,” remarked Rachel sarcastically, lifting the back of her hand to her forehead.

“Ya know, me neither. That’s why I’m there for you,” he countered, while pointing and winking at her, just so he could have the last word.

It was very late at night or early in the morning, depending on your point of view and, slowly but surely, all of their guests made their way out of Sam and Cyndi’s home and to their cars. Everyone was sluggishly tired but, even so, excited about the prospect of visiting Paris. They each waved goodbye before getting into their cars and driving away. Sam and Cyndi stood in the doorway, Sam in a silk bathrobe and Cyndi in a thigh length leather jacket, watching their friends until they could no longer see their cars driving toward the exit.

“Hey, Super Sam,” said Cyndi, looking at her husband with pride and admiration. “That was a pretty heroic thing you did there.”

“What?” asked Sam nonchalantly. “Battling that wolf creature even though it was twice my size and physically a juggernaut?” Sam knew that was not what Cyndi was referring to, but he had decided he’d play coy.

“No,” she answered, fully realizing Sam knew that that was not what she had

meant. "Making Nanci and Rachel feel better. I wanted to listen in on your conversation with Rach, when the two of you were in the back room of the lair, but I decided not to. I figured you two needed some privacy to work through a few things."

"Yeah, we did. Thanks for that."

"You're welcome. When the two of you came out, I could sense Rachel's disposition had improved greatly, and she even seemed, I don't know, *completo o satisfecho*, ya know, fulfilled."

"Well, we aired a few of our past grievances and apologized to one another for any unintentional injuries we may have inflicted upon one another."

"It helped her. It made her feel better."

"Me, too."

"I'm glad," Cyndi commented, nuzzling closer to Sam but being careful so as not to aggravate any of his wounds. "Nanci was *muy contento con* the idea of leaving the costumes at home as well."

"*Si, pero Norrin no esta tan loco para esa idea.*"

"*Si*, but, I think when he sees how happy she is and what a good time she'll have in Paris, he'll be glad he did," Cyndi assured him.

"I'm sure you're right," said Sam, pulling her closer and looking into her warm and beautiful eyes.

"*Te amo*, Sam."

"*Te amo*, Cyndi," he replied. Then tenderly, he kissed her forehead.

CHAPTER XI

“Don’t Shoot the Messenger”

Several weeks had passed since Mason had told Paul to put the word out on the street that they were looking for a badly dressed costumed character with a ridiculous haircut. A man roving about and terrorizing anyone that might be involved in activities considered less-than legal.

Fantastic stories were reported to Paul of costumed men appearing and disappearing from thin air. Other stories included costumed men who had busted down doors ranging from heavy woods to steel. One story even involved a woman who, supposedly, had the ability to fly and produce fire from the palms of her hands. Mason, himself, had been told of an account where a man wearing a costume had simply pointed to a man and caused him to float in mid-air.

The reports began to frustrate and even anger Mason. Either everyone he and Paul had spoken to had taken him for a fool, or they were all on drugs. The seemingly fabricated stories reminded Mason of Derek’s account regarding the night he and Paul had rescued him from the man with the high-top fade. Derek was not on Mason’s “favorite persons” list, and the fact that he had attempted to reach Derek by phone multiple times within the past several days and gotten only his answering machine, lessened his chances of being placed on that list any time in the near future.

Derek had been visibly shaken by what he had witnessed that night. Mason had figured him to be a spineless waste of skin since the first day he had met Derek. He was probably at home with every door in his apartment locked and barred, hiding in bed behind his covers instead of moving product, Mason thought to himself.

He grabbed the receiver of his phone and began dialing Derek's telephone number. This time the phone did not ring. Instead, Mason heard three separate distinct musical tones followed by, "The number you have reached is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please hang up and dial the number again." The message began to repeat itself a second time. Mason pushed and held down the button on the telephone, to disconnect the call. It was possible he had misdialed, especially considering how irritated he was at that moment.

He released the button and then dialed again. To his chagrin, the recorded message played once again. Mason's face was changing from its flesh tone, to a flushed pink. He slammed the receiver down in anger and proceeded to his front door. He grabbed his jacket from his coat rack and keys from a glass table near the door. As he reached for the doorknob to leave, suddenly, his doorbell rang.

Mason looked through the peephole of his door and, on the other side of it, found a man in a police uniform. Mason sighed heavily as his forehead bumped against the door. Reluctantly, he opened it.

"What do you want, George?" asked Mason. The expression on his face clearly indicated his feelings of inconvenience in being bothered.

"Hi, Mike. Can I come in?" replied the man, standing up against the door jam. His expression reflected considerable concern, and his skin seemed unusually pale.

"I was just on my way out, George. What do ya need?"

"You really wanna let me come inside, Mike. I've got some news for you and you're definitely gonna wanna be sittin' when you hear it."

Mason shook his head and, begrudgingly, motioned in an exaggerated manner for the policeman to enter.

Mason's home was immaculate. There were paintings hanging from the walls and sculptures and pottery in every room. Mason was an art lover, especially fond of custom pieces. He had traveled the world picking up a painting here, a statue or bust there. His collection had definitely set him back a few dollars but, to him, it was all worth it.

The latest in entertainment equipment could be found in his living room. These items included a 54-inch television, a dual videocassette player/recorder,

a satellite and cable connection for the television, as well as thousands of dollars in stereo equipment.

Mason directed the policeman to his living room and motioned for him to take a seat on an Italian leather sofa. Then, he sat down on a matching recliner.

"Something tells me, you didn't come to my house this early in the morning to give me good news," concluded Mason.

"I wish, Mike. God knows I do," expressed the man sitting across from him, worry etched all over his face.

"Am I gonna need a drink?"

"Yeah, yeah probably. You'd better pour me one, too."

Mason stood up and walked over to an elaborately decorated cart with gold and silver trim. He grabbed two crystal goblets and filled them half full with brandy.

"Here," said Mason, extending his arm toward George.

George took the goblet, swished around the alcohol inside a few times, and then took a drink. After taking a deep breath, he sat motionless for a second or two and repeated the action.

"Now that you're comfortable, you came over here for a specific reason," asserted Mason. "Wanna get to it?"

George nodded, while finishing his gulp from the cup. "Look, Mike, there's no easy way to tell you this, but—" George stopped in mid-sentence, seemingly disturbed with the information he was about to share.

Mason looked at him and raised his eyebrows as if to say, "Continue."

"Well, first of all, you know that guy you've had moving merchandise for you over in Towson? What's his name? Derek something or other?"

"King."

"Yeah, King. Derek King. Well, I'm looking around the precinct yesterday morning, pourin' my cup o' coffee, right? And I happen to see a file on one of the detective's desks with your boy Derek's picture paper clipped to the front. Nobody was around so, I, nonchalantly, picked up the file, just to see what it was about. I opened it, and I see this report marked 'homicide.'"

Mason's forehead raised and his expression shifted from attentiveness to curiosity.

"Yeah," the policeman continued. "I recognized the guy, so, I was kinda curious as to who he'd killed. I started thumbing through the file and realized he hadn't killed anyone. He was the one dead."

Mason's mouth dropped. "Dead? He's dead?"

"That's what the report said."

"He owes me 35 grand!"

"I don't know anything about that, but, you'll never guess *how* he was found."

"Don't tell me, some badly dressed nigger in a red costume wearing a high-top fade was standing over his dead body, holding a butcher knife."

"I don't know if the guy was a nigger or not, at least the report didn't say. But Derek's severed head was found five feet away from his body," informed George, taking another gulp from his goblet.

"Did you say severed head?" questioned Mason.

"Severed head. As in separated from the rest of him, as in Headless Horseman, as in 'There can be only one.'"

"How? Who did it?"

"Don't know. The body was found in the woods near the apartments on Rossville Boulevard, by the YMCA. You know where that is?"

"Yeah, I know where that is. He lives there. Wait. Sorry. Lived there."

"Uh-huh. Some tenants called 911, 'cause they said they'd heard shots. This was about two weeks back. Two patrol cars responded to the message from dispatch and went to check it out. When they got there, the tenants reported a guy fitting Derek's description, shooting some old Chinc and running into the forest. They never found the nip but, after searching the forest, they found Derek's head and body; covered in muddy leaves and lying in a pool of his own blood. There were pictures in the file. They weren't pretty."

"And you're telling me you and your brothers in blue have no clue who's responsible for this?"

"Hey, it's not even my case. I just came across the file purely by accident."

"Taxpayer's money going to waste."

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, the report said the head was torn from the body. It wasn't a clean cut like with a knife, a sword, or an ax. Those would leave a distinct mark on the flesh. And it wasn't a chainsaw, welding torch or anything like that. The coroner's report showed animal blood and saliva found in the wound. It seemed like it might be a bear attack but, one, all the bears are hibernating this time of year and, two, Baltimore isn't known for it's bear population."

Mason sat in his chair contemplating what may have happened. No matter what scenario he ran through his mind, his thoughts always returned to the costumed man.

"George, ya know the guy I was telling you about? The one with the red costume and high-top fade? I'd asked you a few weeks back to keep an eye and

ear out for anything you might find or hear regarding him. Do you think there's any possibility he's involved?"

"There weren't any reports of it. No eye witnesses saying anything about a red costume."

George lifted his empty glass, indicating he wanted a refill. Mason shot a look of irritation toward him rolling his eyes. Still, Mason got up and refilled the policeman's goblet half full. The alcohol had settled George's nerves and he had become relaxed and more open, not only answering all of Mason's questions, but also, freely offering confidential police information as well.

"What about his apartment, George? Did the report say anything about the contents of his apartment?" asked Mason.

"Yup. They found yer drugs, if that's what you mean," informed the slightly inebriated policeman.

Mason sucked his teeth and shook his head, as he pounded the arm of his chair with his fist.

"I know. It sucks." George continued, "They say the street value was about 45 grand. But, they didn't find it in his apartment. It was still in his car, along with some other personal stuff they mailed to his family. But, the drugs and the gun they fou—Oh! I forgot to mention. They found a gun clutched in his hand at the crime scene. It had two rounds fired off, which were probably inside the missing Chinc. But, at the scene itself, there were no shells or casings found. He hadn't fired at all while in the woods."

"Why did he run into the woods in the first place? Why didn't he get back into his car and drive away or go to his apartment?"

"Beats me. Maybe he was high."

"Did the autopsy report any drugs in his system?"

"Don't know. I didn't see the official autopsy report, just the police report."

"And this happened when, exactly?"

"You mean, when was he iced?"

"Yeah."

"It was about two weeks ago, on a Saturday night."

"Exactly two weeks?"

"I believe so. Why?"

"Because, that was the last day I saw him alive. It was late at night, maybe eight, maybe nine. I don't get it though. You say he shot some Chinc, right?"

"Yeah, that's what the report says eye witnesses saw."

"And a body was never found?"

"According to the report, not yet."

"Doesn't that seem odd to you? Someone, somewhere, should have made a

call to 911, letting them know they had Chinese food rotting on their front lawn.”

“You’d think.”

“Well, this day pretty much blows. Not only am I out 35 grand, but I need a new runner for the Towson area.”

“Yeah, your stash was confiscated. So was the gun he had in his hand.”

“That was mine, too!”

“Well, now it’s in the evidence locker down at my precinct.”

“I know that freak in the costume is somehow involved in this. I know it. He tried to kill Derek the night before he was found dead. He had to have followed us to Paul’s apartment and waited there until Paul took Derek to rent a car. Then, he probably followed Derek to his apartment building from the car rental agency and took him by surprise. Derek, that moron, must’ve pulled out the gun I let him borrow and started shooting indiscriminately, missing *Sambo* and hitting Charlie Chan. Somehow, by dumb luck no doubt, he managed to get past the dork in the costume and made a run for it, heading for, of all places, the woods.”

“That all sounds well and good but, unless your costumed character can change himself into a vicious bear and tear a man’s head clean off of his shoulders, it still doesn’t explain how Derek’s head got lopped off.”

Mason was beginning to wonder. “You still haven’t told me if you’d gotten any news about a guy parading around town wearing a costume. Have you?”

“I’ve heard a story or two. I’m not sayin’ I believe a word of ‘em, but I’ve heard a couple.”

“And?”

“Well, I’ll tell ya my favorite.” George’s face began to glow and he looked like a little boy getting ready to watch his favorite cartoon. “This rookie, total newbie, wet behind the ears, comes into the station with his partner after patrolling their beat. They’ve got two guys in cuffs with ‘em and they look pretty shook up.

“The rookie starts raving about a man who jumped out a window, no wait, jumped off a roof, it was a roof, onto this car they were chasing. His partner tells him to shut up but he keeps going.

“He says he and his partner are takin’ a break one night, when they hear a report come over their car radio of an alarm tripped at some jewelry store downtown. They’re only six blocks away so, they radio in that they’ll check it out. When they get there, they see two guys in ski masks run outta the store and jump into a car. The guys see the cops coming, so they take off, tires squealing, trying to make a getaway. The rookie’s partner’s driving, so, he hits the siren and flicks

on the flashing emergency lights.

"The two cars are speeding down the streets of Baltimore, taking corners at ridiculous speeds and barely missing parked cars, cars driving on the road right next to them, and even pedestrians. After about a three-mile chase, the rookie says he sees this guy jump off a building, I mean, literally, jump off a building and land on the hood of the car they're chasing. When he lands, he's facing the driver and passenger and, now, the front end of their car is crushed. The tires shoot off, like they're connected to a tube of toothpaste that just got squeezed in the middle.

"The guys in the car are lucky, though. They were smart enough to put on their seat belts, so they don't go flying through the windshield. But, they do however, get the wind knocked out of 'em when the seat belt yanks them back against their seats. Left some nice bruises, too.

"The car comes to a screeching halt as steel and fiberglass grind against the asphalt, creating sparks that go flying all over the street. The guy in the costume steps out of this gaping hole he's left in the hood of the car, and then, walks over to the driver's side door and tears it off.

"The rookie tells me, he and his partner pull up to the wreck and jump outta their car with their guns drawn. The Halloween character gives 'em a salute. Then, he leaps into the air landing on a four-story building. He looks back at the cops on the ground, turns, and runs away."

"Runs away?" Mason asks in disbelief. "Runs away where? He's on top of a roof!"

"I don't know. I didn't make the story up. I'm just tellin' you the way the story was told to me."

"Whatever. Go on."

"That's it, pretty much. That's the best I've heard yet. Like I said, I'm not sayin' I believe a word of it, but—" George shrugged his shoulders and nodded his head, indicating his story was finished.

"And this guy was wearing a red costume?" inquired Mason.

"That's the thing. The rookie said he was wearing a brown suit with white on his stomach."

"What do you mean a brown suit with white on his stomach? You mean, like a brown jacket and pants with a white vest?"

"No, no. I mean his costume. It's brown everywhere except for the stomach and chest area." George motioned, making circles around his mid-section. "It's white there. And he had a frog inside of a circle on his chest, too."

"Where do these people come up with this stuff? They all need freakin' hobbies!"

“Oh, God. I almost forgot. There’s somethin’ else, Mike.”

“What?”

“It’s bad. It’s actually the real reason I stopped by. I got sidetracked spouting off about that King guy, ’cause what happened last night reminded me of that file I’d seen with your friend, Derek, on the front.”

“He’s not my friend, and what do you mean ‘*what happened last night?*’ What happened last night?”

“I got a report over my patrol car’s radio while on my beat last night. Somebody called in that the guy responsible for raping that girl at Golden Ring Mall and beating her boyfriend nearly to death, was staked to the ground in front of his apartment building and needed immediate medical attention. When I got there, three patrol cars were already on the scene. One cop had called for an ambulance but nobody had moved him. They were all too afraid to.”

“What are you talking about?” Mason asked, unsure as to why George was explaining this to him. “What do you mean they were too afraid to move him?”

“Mike, it was Paul. They found him chained to four stakes sticking out of the ground. Both his arms and legs had chains wrapped around ’em. There was a freakin’ ninja star embedded deep in his shoulder and one in his hand. Something like a stiletto had been driven right through one of his knees. The leg that didn’t have the knife embedded in it was broken, and so was his collarbone. His right eye was swollen shut and his nose was broken. His jaw just hung there. He couldn’t have closed it even if he’d had the strength to. Whoever did this wasn’t tryin’ to kill ’im. They knew exactly what they were doing. Every injury inflicted was done so to cause extreme pain and suffering, not to kill. I think they were tryin’ to send a message.”

Mason could not believe what he was hearing. Though his drink had dulled his senses, he was still in shock. A picture of Paul’s broken body, completely defenseless and utterly defeated, continuously ran through his mind.

“Where is he now?” Mason managed to get out. He had a deranged look in his eye and his voice was almost at a whisper.

“He’s at the hospital, Mike.”

“What, hospital?”

“Franklin Square. He’s being guarded ’round the clock by uniforms. That girl he supposedly raped, ID-ed ’im. They say once he’s stable, they’ll take ’im to county where he’ll await trial.”

“Who did this?”

George could see rage on Mason’s face. It was a still rage, which was always the worst kind.

“Honestly, Mike, I don’t know. No one does. Before the ambulance got there, one of the cops said they barely heard him say something like, black costume.”

“Black costume?”

George nodded his head and repeated, “Black costume.”

Mason leapt to his feet, turned, and walked down a hallway leading to the bedrooms. George began to feel nervous. Mason had a deranged look in his eyes and thoughts started to pop into George’s mind such as, “Don’t shoot the messenger” or “I’m just the messenger, don’t take it out on me.”

George spoke up meekly. “What, what are you doin’, Mike?”

From one of the bedrooms, he could hear Mason’s voice. “I’m declaring war on anything in a costume. You might even wanna take that absurd outfit you’re wearing off, just to be safe,” advised Mason, regarding George’s police uniform.

Mason emerged from one of the bedrooms, wearing a long coat. George could see a gun tucked in the front of his pants.

“Get your butt up, George. You’re gonna get me into that hospital.”

“What? No. I mean, I can’t do that,” chuckled George, trying to make lite of what Mason had just said.

“You can and you will,” Mason replied calmly, putting his keys and wallet into his pockets.

“No, Mike. Really, I can’t.”

“George! George. You really don’t want to screw with me right now,” informed Mason, looking directly into George’s eyes.

“No, of course not. It’s just that I, I, I’m not scheduled to be at the hospital or anything. There’s a specific rotation schedule for guarding the prison— Paul, for guarding Paul. And I’m not on that list.”

“You’ll find a way. I have faith in you.”

“How?”

Mason’s eyes opened wider as he glared at George. “You’ll find, a way,” he said a second time.

“Okay, Okay. I’ll find a way,” agreed the policeman. “I’m not exactly sure how, but, I’ll find a way.”

“That’s the spirit, George. That’s exactly what I want to hear from you. That ‘can do’ attitude. Now let’s go. I need to see if Paul can give me any more information regarding this ‘black costumed’ character, before he dies.”

“I told you, his injuries weren’t fatal, Mike. He’s gonna live.”

Mason waived his hand twice, motioning George out the front door. He locked it from the inside and, as he was closing it, said, “That remains to be seen.”

CHAPTER XII

Paris “*La Ville Lumiere*”

It was a cool brisk morning in Paris. Sam and Cyndi were just waking up, although the local time was 11:20 A.M.

“*Buenos dias*, Mookie,” said Cyndi, her head against her pillow and her eyes adjusting to the thin beam of daylight, making its way through a gap between the curtains.

“Mmm, it’s morning already?” asked Sam.

“Mmm-hmm. *Comment-allez vous?*”

“*Tres bien*,” mumbled Sam, as he wiped his eyes, also waiting for them to adjust to the light. “What time is it?”

Cyndi turned and looked at the clock sitting on a night stand next to her side of the bed. “It’s 11.20.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but remember, there’s a six-hour time difference between Paris and Baltimore.”

“Oh, so it’s only 5:00.”

“Five twenty, to be exact.”

“I guess we should get up and get dressed. We’ll be here for ten days, so, we’d better get used to the time change.”

"I'm gonna take a shower first, okay?"

"It's all yours."

"Wade's about to call our room."

"Yeah, I know. Everyone else is still asleep. I'll have him call Norrin, Nanci, and Rachel, and tell them to meet us in our room in an hour."

"Okay," Cyndi hollered, from the bathroom. The phone rang and Sam lifted the receiver.

"Hello."

"Sam?"

"No, it's Cyndi. What do you want?"

"Ha-ha, you're so funny. Are you awake yet?"

"Nope, I'm still sleeping. Why do you ask?"

"You're full of jokes this morning, aren't you?"

"Yeah, we're both up. We actually just got out of bed. I totally spaced on the time difference."

"Me too. I've been up for about 45 minutes, but when I woke up and saw that it was 10:30, I couldn't believe it. I never sleep past eight and that's only on the weekends."

"Well, we're getting ready now. Why don't you call Norrin and Rachel's room and let them know we're meeting in my room in about an hour."

"Sure, stick me with waking them all up."

"You can handle it. You're a super hero remember? One hour, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. We'll see you in an hour."

Wade phoned Norrin and Nanci's room next. They were both still asleep but the sound of the phone's ring quickly put an end to that.

"Phone," Norrin mumbled, his eyes still closed.

"Mmm-hmm," answered Nanci, her eyes also closed.

"You gonna get it?" asked Norrin, his face smashed sideways against his pillow.

"Nope. You?"

"Ah, come on," Norrin began to whine. "You're right next to it."

Nanci lifted the ringing phone's receiver with a lock of her hair and placed it carefully against the side of Norrin's face. "Not anymore," she replied, snuggling her pillow and smiling, her eyes still shut.

Annoyed with his wife, Norrin answered curtly. "Hello."

"Wow! Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. What's wrong? Did Nanci make you sleep on the floor last night?"

"Ah, Wade. What time is it?"

"Time for ugly Negroes to get their butts outta bed."

"You mean you're not outta bed yet and you're calling to wake us up?" asked Norrin facetiously.

"Boy, everybody's got jokes today. I just got off the phone with Sam and he says we're all meeting at his room in about an hour. So, get up! Tell Nanci to get up!"

Norrin turned to Nanci, "Wade says, 'get up.'"

"Tell Wade, he can stick his head between his legs and kiss his own butt," she replied, pulling the covers over her shoulders.

"Nanci says, you can kiss your own butt," informed Norrin.

"She can kiss it for me, if she wants. I'll just unbutton my—"

Norrin cut Wade off before he could finish. "Don't make me come up there and kill you, Wade."

"I'm just kiddin'. Anyway, get dressed. Be at Sam's room in one hour. I hafta call Rachel and tell her, too. She's probably still asleep."

"Probably. Good luck."

"Tell me about it. I'm gonna need it."

Once he had hung up with Norrin, Wade called Rachel's room. An abrupt piercing continuous ringing woke Rachel from her deep sleep. The ringing continued noisily for five rings. At that point, Rachel lifted the phone's receiver and slammed it down onto its base.

It rang a second time. She again lifted the receiver and slammed it down.

A third time it began ringing. This time she lifted the receiver and placed it near to her face. "This better be a life-or-death matter, or it's gonna turn into one before this conversation ends," she grunted into the mouthpiece.

"And a blissful *bonjour* to you, too, *Mademoiselle* Rachel," Wade greeted her.

"What do you want, Wade? What time is it?"

"It's 11:30."

"A.M. or P.M.?"

"A.M., of course. Don't you see that sun peeking through the edges of your curtains?"

"No," she answered. She had not opened her eyes as of yet, and her head was hidden under the covers.

"Well, get up! We're all meeting in Sam and Cyndi's room in one hour."

"Don't yell. I'm on vacation, and I refuse to commit to any specific schedule while I am."

"Aw, come on. Sam's probably gonna take us all to breakfast. I am so hungry."

"You're always hungry, and if it's 11:30, it's too late for breakfast. If you're so hungry why don't you go to the cafeteria and get a *croissant* or something?"

“Are you gonna get up or do I have to come and get you up?”

“I’d like to see that.”

“All right. Here I co—”

“No, no. I’m up. I’m up.” Rachel had finally opened her eyes and forced herself into a sitting position.

“Good. Get ready and be at Sam’s room within an hour.”

“Fine,” she replied, hanging up the phone and slowly standing to make her way to the shower.

Even though she was half asleep, Rachel took notice of how elegant the bathroom was. All of the fixtures, from the handle to flush the toilet to the towel racks and faucet handles, were made of brass. Even the toilet paper spindle was brass. The dual sink counter top appeared to be marble, as did the base surrounding the oval-shaped tub. Rachel thought to herself, she’d be sure to soak in that tub before she left. But for now, she staggered into the shower for a quick refresher.

After about an hour, Wade exited his room, key in hand. An attractive young woman wearing a housekeeping uniform was right outside his door, her cart nearby.

“Oh excuse me,” said Wade, making his way past the woman.

“Oh, *monsieur*. I am housekeeping. I clean your room?” requested the woman, using broken English.

“Yes. I mean, *oui. S’il vous plait*,” answered Wade, trying to impress the woman with his minimal knowledge of the French language.

She smiled, nodded and proceeded into Wade’s room as he headed to the elevator, on his way to Sam and Cyndi’s room. He took the elevator down one floor and, after exiting, turned left and walked down the hallway leading to his friends’ room.

When he arrived, the door was cracked slightly open. He knocked on it and waited for an answer.

“Come in,” invited Sam.

Wade entered the room and found everyone was already there waiting for him. “What’s up, Negroes!” he greeted, his arms opened wide and a smile plastered across his face.

Sam and Norrin looked at Wade, smiles on their faces. Cyndi, Nanci, and Rachel shared various expressions of confusion.

“And non-Negroes!” Wade commented, this time addressing the women.

They all smiled. Cyndi and Nanci chuckled, while Rachel rolled her eyes.

“We’re the non-Negroes,” observed Cyndi, looking at the other two girls and pointing to herself, Nanci, and Rachel.

“Really?” asked Nanci sarcastically. “Are you sure? I was hoping I was in the Negro group.”

Everybody laughed, as Nanci was the palest person in the room.

“So, what’s the plan, Sam, the man? I’m hungry,” informed Wade, looking to Sam as if it was his responsibility to solve the problem.

“Why don’t we head down to the front desk and ask the concierge what nearby restaurants he recommends and go from there?” suggested Sam.

At that moment there was a knock at the door. Sam smiled looking at Cyndi.

“No,” she replied.

“No, what?” asked Wade.

Sam’s smile widened as he opened the door from his seated position across the room. Everyone raised their eyebrows giving Sam a look as if to say, sure, give away your secret.

At the door, stood a woman in a housekeeping uniform. She seemed a bit startled, not seeing anyone standing next to the door as it opened.

“*Bonjour*,” greeted Sam.

“Oh, *bonjour, monsieur*,” she replied, peering around the corner. “*Si cela vous derange pas, est-ce que je peux nettoyer votre chamre maintenant?*”

“*Oui, entrez s’il vous plait. Nous allions juste partir*,” explained Sam.

The woman waited for all to leave before proceeding into the room, cleaning supplies in hand.

The six piled into the elevator and descended to the lobby. Once there, Cyndi approached the check in counter and using flawless French, asked the gentleman tending it if he could recommend any restaurants in the area.

“When did you two learn French?” inquired Nanci.

“They didn’t” replied Norrin. “They stole it.”

“Borrowed,” corrected Sam. “When we arrived at the airport last night, Cyndi and I linked into the minds of two different people grabbing hold of their thought patterns. That way, while we’re here, we’ll be able to assist when translation is needed.”

“Doesn’t he make stealing sound so pretty?” commented Rachel.

“We’re not stealing. We’re borrowing their thought patterns so that we can translate the language. They’re not even aware we’re doing it,” said Sam, in his own defense.

“Stealing with the owner ignorant of ever losing anything. How crafty.” Rachel goaded further.

Sam flared his nostrils and refused to continue the conversation. The others laughed, waiting for Cyndi to return.

“What’s so funny?” she asked, after returning from the front counter.

“I was explaining to our ‘so called’ friends, that we’d be able to assist them in translating French while we’re here. They, then, proceeded to reduce us to common thieves,” explained Sam.

“You told them about the airport?” questioned Cyndi.

“Uh-huh,” replied Sam.

“Don’t worry, Cyndi. We don’t blame you,” interrupted Rachel. “We all know Sam used his insidious mind manipulation to make you act against your will.”

“Yeah, he did!” agreed Cyndi.

Sam quickly turned to her, raising his eyebrows, surprise in his eyes.

“I’m just kidding,” admitted Cyndi, tweaking Sam’s nose. “We figured it’d be easier this way, instead of fumbling through a French/English Dictionary during the entire trip.”

Everyone began nodding their heads. “See, that makes perfect sense,” acknowledged Wade. “Why didn’t you just say that,” he continued, staring at Sam.

“What do you mean? I did say that!” responded Sam.

Everyone loved seeing Sam when his blood was boiling and his frustrations displayed for all to see. They all started laughing at him, including Cyndi, as she stroked the back of his head.

“Keep it up,” said Sam, chewing the inside of his cheek. “I’m gonna conveniently leave you all behind when it’s time to go home. You can all find your own way back to Baltimore.”

The group was staying at the *Hotel de Buci* on *Rue de Buci*, in the Latin Quarter. The desk attendant had informed Cyndi that nearby was a restaurant on *Boulevard Saint-Germain* called the *Brasserie Lipp*, which he highly recommended. He had handed Cyndi a map of the area and circled her current location as well as the location of the restaurant. He also mentioned a few famous sites that she and her party might visit during their stay, and marked those on the map as well.

It was winter, and the Parisian weather reminded the group of tourists of Baltimore’s weather. It wasn’t quite as cold and there was no snow, but the wind blew a continuous breeze and common sense warranted bundling up. All were wearing thick warm coats and gloves, and all but Norrin and Wade had woolen scarves.

They walked along the road taking notice of the beautiful French

architecture. Tall, white buildings with elegant and intricate carvings graced the old city. Experience and wisdom emanated from it. Paris had stood as a proud and dignified city for hundreds of years, at a time when the land that would one day become the United States of America, was home to various tribes of people who lived off the land and respected and treasured it.

Sam, who loved to read, felt exhilarated walking through the streets of Paris. He recalled reading about some of the events that had taken place there. For instance, the first that came to mind was a 17-year-old maiden named Jeanne from the village of Domremy, who in 1429 had launched an attack to reclaim the city from English rule. His thoughts also turned to a man small in stature yet a giant in military command, named Bonaparte. He imagined what a renaissance Paris may have looked like in 1785, when Napoleon, after attending military academy, earned his commission as lieutenant, or what the mood may have been among the citizens when he was crowned First Consul at age 30, in 1799. Sam wondered what thoughts may have been running through the mind of Alexander Dumas, not readily recognized as a black author, when he penned *The Three Musketeers* or *The Count of Monte Cristo*, during 1844 and 1845. The charm of Paris and its intoxicating beauty had enticed Sam. But, not just Sam, the others were under its spell as well.

Cyndi, Nanci, and Rachel looked forward to visiting some of the boutiques to see the latest in Parisian fashion, and the antique shops, to see some of the older furnishings and other household items. Norrin couldn't wait to get to *The Louvre* and see the Mona Lisa, face to face. Wade was in love with the city's architecture and walked the streets with a silly smile on his face, admiring all of it.

In what seemed like only a few minutes, they had reached the *Brasserie Lipp*, to experience their first taste of authentic Parisian food. After placing their orders, they discussed their plans for the remainder of their stay.

"I was thinking," Sam began, "No doubt we all want to visit a few of the more popular sites as a group. So, we should arrange certain days that we'll spend together as a group and a few days where we'll separate to either see or revisit certain places we, individually, have a specific interest in."

Everyone agreed that the idea was a good one.

"Why not spend the next few days together seeing things like the Eiffel Tower, *L' Arc de Triomphe*, *Notre Dame*—"

"The *Louvre*," Norrin interrupted.

"The *Louvre*," Sam continued, "And any other things we can agree on seeing."

“The *Moulin Rouge*,” Wade blurted out.

Norrin looked at Wade smiling and nodding his head, when he felt a sharp jab at his side. He turned, to find Nanci with a sour expression on her face.

“That’s a terrible idea, Wade,” Norrin quickly changed his opinion. “I can’t believe you’d even suggest such a thing.”

Wade shook his head and gestured as if he were cracking a whip, while mimicking the sound it makes when it snaps.

“I don’t want to offend anyone, but I was hoping that Norrin and I might spend one or two days alone while we’re here,” requested Nanci.

“Absolutely. I was going to suggest that myself,” admitted Sam. “Cyndi and I are definitely planning on a day or two alone, and you and Norrin should do the same. Surely, Wade and Rachel can keep themselves entertained for a couple of days.”

“I think we can manage,” Rachael assured them.

“Hey, I don’t need y’all to have a good time. If anybody needs me, I’ll be spending two consecutive days at the *Moulin Rouge*,” informed Wade.

“I think we should also do a girls’ and boys’ day out,” suggested Cyndi. “We can split up for a day, girls with girls and boys with boys. That way we girls can do and see the things we want, and you boys can do the same. Oh, and by the way, I really don’t care if that offends anyone,” she jokingly commented.

The group was in agreement that those were all good ideas, and once they had confirmed their plans for that day, their food arrived. Everyone expressed that the food was delicious, though somewhat different from a typical American meal. Both, Norrin and Wade, were dissatisfied with the portion sizes, but kept quiet so as not to offend any of the locals or embarrass anyone in their party.

Once they had finished, the waiter approached and asked if everything had been satisfactory. Sam answered him, assuring everyone had enjoyed their meal. He handed the waiter his credit card and, once the bill had been taken care of, they all thanked the waiter and hostess and proceeded to leave.

They made their way to *Quai Voltaire* and followed the *Seine* toward the Eiffel Tower. There were tour boats traveling along the river, as were a few barges. Several barges were docked along either side of the bank.

“People actually live in some of those barges,” informed Sam.

“That seems like it would be nice,” commented Rachel. “Living on a boat in the heart of the most romantic city on earth, while gently being rocked to sleep night after night by the rippling waves.”

Cyndi’s eyes widened as she smiled, nodding in agreement toward Rachel.

“Just actually being here and walking the streets is romantic. I have this

euphoric feeling all over,” admitted Nanci. Norrin smiled, extending his hand for her to take hold of. She grasped it tightly, sharing a smile with her husband that spoke volumes regarding her elation at that very moment.

Upon reaching the massive tower, Norrin looked up and began experiencing vertigo. When his adrenaline factor was active, he didn’t seem to be affected by heights, one way or the other. But, when he wasn’t using his gifts and abilities and was just being a regular human being, he thoroughly did not enjoy being in, near, or looking at tall buildings, structures, or natural formations.

“You’re on crack if you think I’m going up there,” he stated.

“Oh, come on, you wuss,” taunted Wade. “You’ve traveled all the way to Paris and are standing in front of the Eiffel Tower. Are you gonna tell me that you’re not going to the top and look out over the entire city?”

“That’s exactly what I’m tellin’ you,” affirmed Norrin.

“Ah, come on,” pressured Wade.

“Nope,” responded Norrin, refusing to budge.

“Well, we’re all going up,” notified Sam. “You can stay here and wait for us if you’d like, but, we’re not going to rush on your account.”

Sam gave Norrin a look of a mentor disappointed in his student. Norrin didn’t care. He returned Sam’s facial expression with one of his own, letting Sam know with the utmost clarity, he did not care.

They all started toward the ticket counter, when Norrin felt a body nudging against his side. He looked down to see his wife prodding him, motioning toward the others.

“I am not going up there,” he insisted.

“Please,” she begged, in a whining voice.

“There is absolutely no way you are getting me up in that thing.”

Three quarters of the way to the top of the Eiffel Tower, Norrin cringed, squinting his eyes so as not to get a clear view of the ground.

“Open your eyes, Norrin,” teased Wade. “The view is amazing.”

“Be nice, Wade,” said Nanci, coming to her husband’s rescue. “This is hard for him. Don’t be discouraging.”

“This is amazing,” Rachel concurred. “I just want to fly out there and hover freely over the city. It looks so peaceful from up here.”

“It looked peaceful enough down there,” interjected Norrin.

“True. But, it’s even better up here,” she insisted.

“I’ll take your word for it,” informed Norrin, still squinting his eyes.

“It really is breathtaking,” Cyndi chimed in. “You should really try to open your eyes and enjoy this, Norrin.”

"I'm enjoying it just fine like this, thank you," he commented.

As the elevator came to a halt at the top of the tower, the car jostled slightly. Norrin gripped the handrail tightly and said, "Oh, God," closing his eyes tighter.

"He's not going to help you. You should've never come up here in the first place. Now, you're gonna plummet to your death," bantered Wade.

"Wade, you big jerk, leave him alone," contested Nanci, kicking him in the leg.

The others tried not to laugh where Norrin could see, so as not to hurt his feelings. They couldn't help but chuckle a little though, covering their mouths, trying to conceal their amusement.

"That's right, laugh it up, fuzz balls," commented Norrin, as he gripped the handrail making his way toward the opened door.

"Listen here, you stuck-up, half-witted, scruffy-lookin' Nerf herder. Step out of the elevator and take a look at *La Ville Lumiere*, from this perspective. It's magnificent," admonished Sam.

"*La Ville Lumiere*?" inquired Wade.

"The City of Lights," said Cyndi, moving closer to her husband.

"But it's daytime," informed Wade.

"Your grasp of the obvious is astounding, Wade," commented Sam. "Now, shut up and enjoy the view."

The rest of the day was spent getting acquainted with Paris. They visited various quaint shops, picking up souvenirs and post cards for family and friends back home. Sam had picked up a post card for each of his parents, as well as a few small items for his mother. Norrin was sure to purchase a few post cards and gifts he would send to his father, stepmother, and sisters back in San Diego. Cyndi, Nanci, and Rachel bought a few knickknacks for themselves, their parents, and their sisters. Wade hadn't purchased any gifts, but he was sure to buy a few postcards to mail to his parents, brother, and sisters.

On the second day they visited the *Louvre*, home of some of the most famous paintings and sculptures in the world. Norrin especially enjoyed his time spent there. Although he had not pursued it as his profession, Sam, too, enjoyed the art that the museum offered, being an artist himself. Eventually they made their way to the Mona Lisa, Leonardo Da Vinci's crowning achievement. The painting itself was simplistic, just a woman seated with her hands folded, sharing her smile with anyone who might need some encouragement or comfort.

Norrin stared at it for several seconds in disbelief. He was actually standing within just a few feet of one of Master Da Vinci's works. He wanted to reach out

his hand and touch the painting but he knew he dare not. Not simply because of the alarms that were no doubt connected to it, but, also, an inner feeling that he, an artist not fit to clean Da Vinci's paint brushes, had not earned the right to place his hand on the masterpiece.



Nanci came closer, placing her hand on Norrin's back. "It is beautiful, isn't it?" she mentioned.

"Mmm-hmm," answered Norrin. "You know, some people believe Da Vinci painted this as a self portrait in women's clothing," informed Norrin.

"I've read that," said Sam.

"I don't believe that, though," continued Norrin. "I choose to believe that this was Da Vinci's one true love that he had somehow lost, either to another

man or his own insecurities. But, he never forgot her and never stopped loving her. He felt that she was so important, so perfect, and so wonderful that he wanted her to live forever, and for people generations to come to love her as much as he did. So, he immortalized her in the only way that he could. Through his art.”

“Wow,” commented Cyndi. “That’s almost poetic.”

“What an in-depth interpretation of such a simplistic painting,” added Sam.

They all stopped and marveled, staring at the painting pondering Norrin’s words, seemingly viewing it in this new light for the first time.

Little did they know, the painting was not the only thing in the room being studied. They, too, were being carefully watched.

CHAPTER XIII

Under Surveillance

“What’s your location?”

“*Champs Elysees*. The females are currently inside of a boutique.”

“And the males?”

“Not within our proximity. I believe Black and White have them under surveillance.”

“Stay with the females. I’ll contact you if we require an incident initiated.”

“Understood.”

“Grey, out.”

Cyndi held up a blouse, draping it across her chest and mid-section. “What do you think?” she asked, looking at Rachel and Nanci.

Nanci crinkled her nose and Rachel shook her head.

“What do you mean?” Cyndi questioned. “This is the latest in French design,” she stated, holding up the orange blouse covered in frills and displaying a pleated design, from the abdomen area to the bottom of the blouse.

“Yeah, and I’m sure the Pepto-Bismol pink toilet paper in the *Louvre* restrooms is also the latest in French design. But, you won’t catch it in my bathroom,” commented Rachel.

Nanci laughed and Cyndi made a funny face, sticking out her tongue. She then hung the blouse back on the rack. Rachel had three items that she was carrying and wanted to try on. She asked Cyndi to notify one of the boutique employees so that they could direct her to a fitting room.

Cyndi assisted in finding someone to show Rachel to the fitting rooms and, after she had disappeared into one, Cyndi approached Nanci. Nanci was eyeing a pair of blue jeans with a rose pattern design near the cuffs on the outer portion of each pant leg.

“So, are you having a good time so far?” Cyndi asked.

“Are you kidding? This rules!” Nanci replied. “Honestly, even though Norrin and I have never really talked about it, I never dreamed I’d actually go to a European country, much less France, the romance capitol of the world. I mean, it’s like something you hear about or see on TV, but, you don’t really feel like it’s an actual place or that you’ll ever really be able to go there. But, it is and I’m here. Thanks so much for this opportunity, Cyndi. I really needed this.”

“Don’t thank me. You’ve earned it. Between putting up with our two husbands and all of their testosterone driven antics, we’ve earned this trip. I told Sam that today we were putting all of our purchases on his Visa Gold.”

“Aw, no. Thanks for the offer, but, that’s okay. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Right? Oh, no! That wasn’t an offer, that’s what we’re gonna do. With all the mental strain and aggravation those boys put us through, especially their leader, Little Chief Runny Nose, the least he can do is buy us a few things.”

“It’s not just Sam. Norrin’s just as guilty.”

“Yes, he is. But Sam knows Norrin and Wade would follow him into Purgatory, if he asked them to. Their ‘honor,’” said Cyndi, making quotes with her fingers, “would allow them to do no less. I think Sam takes advantage of that from time to time. Wade, being mister invulnerable, with no wife or family to worry about, doesn’t flinch when it comes to running off toward danger. But, Norrin, he really should consider how what he does effects you and your feelings, before dressing up in that costume of his and charging off toward deadly situations, time and time again.”

“True. And Sam should do the same for you. Especially, since he’s not as durable, physically, as Norrin or Wade.”

“Are you saying my husband’s a wimp?” asked Cyndi, with a look of offense in her eyes.

“No! Not at all! I didn’t mean—”

“I’m just kidding.” Cyndi smiled, and began to chuckle. “Yes, you’re right. He should.” Cyndi paused briefly, and then said, “Since we’re on the subject, I

noticed you didn't seem very bothered by the incident in the woods with the wolf creature."

Nanci shrugged one of her shoulders and reflected an expression showing it hadn't really fazed her at all.

"Aw, come on," Cyndi continued. "No offense, but, after you dogging my husband, I feel comfortable in saying that you're probably the most vulnerable of the group. I mean, when it comes to powers, you and I have the least in physical defenses. Me, I at least can take control of an attacker's mind and force them to leave me alone. But, you, even though that hair of yours is easily stronger than most people's hands and arms, that's about it when it comes to your defensive capabilities. Outside of your martial-arts training, that is. And somehow, I don't think all the martial arts training in the world could've beaten that thing."

Nanci smiled and continued looking at the clothes.

"Are you telling me you weren't the least bit afraid?" questioned Cyndi.

"Well, of course I was a little afraid," admitted Nanci, "But, think about it. Look at who I'm married to. I mean, have you ever honestly seen anything as scary as Norrin when his eyes are glowing green, his fangs are overlapping his lips, and his finger and toenails are extended like knives protruding from his fingers and toes? Or how about when his nostrils are flared, his brow furrowed, and drool is seeping out of the corners of his mouth as he lets out a terrifying roar? I've seen him pick up a mini-van and smash it into the ground. After seeing things like that, it takes something pretty spectacular to unnerve me."

"Yeah, I remember before we were all married, there was that child serial killer who'd gotten to about a dozen kids before we stopped him. I think Norrin would have killed that guy if Sam hadn't been there holding him back, telekinetically, until Norrin calmed down. I remember, Norrin had this crazed look in his eyes and fought so hard to break free of Sam's hold. You know, it took Sam three days to recover fully from that experience?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Sam later told me that he struggled to keep hold of Norrin and almost lost his grip a couple of times. He said it was lucky Wade showed up to help subdue Norrin. Otherwise, that serial killer guy would've probably wound up a bloody spot on the wall. Does it ever scare you? Norrin, I mean. When he gets that way"

Cindy actually wanted to conclude her sentence by saying, "...when he gets that way? Acting like a mindless wild beast," but, she didn't want to offend Nanci by degrading her husband. "I'm sorry," Cyndi continued. "If it's too personal, you don't have to answer. I didn't mean to pry."

Nanci had looked away. Her expression seemed one of embarrassment as she tucked her hair behind her right ear. Cyndi wasn't sure if it was embarrassment toward her question or with her husband's wild animalistic side; and she wasn't going to invade Nanci's private thoughts by reading her mind and extracting the information.

Nanci forced a smile and said, "No, it's not too personal. When we were younger and I saw Norrin change for the first time, it totally freaked me out. I mean, I had never seen anything like that before in my life. Later, when I found out that he had feelings for me and we were alone talking, he shared something very personal with me that I'll never forget. He told me about a time when he was 14 and had had feelings for Rachel's older sister."

"Yeah, I remember Sam telling me about that."

"Well, one day, she saw Norrin when he was in full Scorpion mode. She knew he had special gifts just like her younger sister, but she'd never actually seen him change. She was out with Norrin, Sam, and Rachel, when Norrin noticed this small scrawny kid being attacked by six larger older boys, some distance away. The kid was short, skinny, wore glasses, and a pocket protector. Basically, he looked like the poster boy for nerds.

"The older boys had knocked him down and thrown all his school work all over the ground. They started kicking the boy and stomping on and tearing his school work with their feet. When he realized what was going on, Norrin took off in their direction. He recognized the larger boys as juniors and seniors from his high school. When he reached the boys, he demanded they stop. They said stuff like, 'What are you gonna do?' and 'You'd better get out of here or you're next.'

"Norrin activated his adrenaline factor, popped his teeth and fingernails and started to growl. He grabbed one of the boys by his shirt and, with one hand, threw him into another. He turned to the other four and roared. They all took off running as fast as they could.

"By that time, the others had caught up to Norrin and when he turned toward them, Rachel's sister saw him, in that way, for the first time. Completely startled, she jumped backward. Norrin said she looked at him as if he was the most disgusting thing she had ever seen. He had forgotten to revert to his natural human form and when he realized he had startled her, he called her name and reached toward her. He said she recoiled, drawing her hand away from him, as she stood there with fear etched in her face.

"Norrin told me that that was one of the most painful experiences of his childhood. Someone he deeply cared for and wanted to be close to saw him as

a monster, as something hideous and frightening. Before we were married, he admitted his biggest fear was loving someone and having them see him as nothing more than a hideous monster, something too frightening and terrifying for anyone to really love. I realized at that moment, I could never show that I feared him in that way. I definitely couldn't tell him that the first few times I watched him change, it totally freaked me out.

"After awhile, I got used to it. Sometimes, now, I even laugh. I think it's funny because he's really this sweet, tender-hearted guy, who turns all feral and pretends to be mister tough guy."

"I don't think he's pretending," commented Cyndi. "He's pretty tough."

"He's only tough when he's mad. Outside of that, he just puts on a good show. But, to answer your question, that's why the wolfman guy didn't bother me. One, I've seen something much more powerful and frightening, and, two, I knew if it even looked at me wrong, Norrin would've torn it in two."

"Yeah, he probably would have."

"He probably would have what?" asked Rachel, returning from the fitting room with the three items she had tried on.

"We were just discussing Sam and Norrin's alter egos," informed Cyndi.

"Well, you can stop that right now," insisted Rachel. "This vacation is a retreat and escape from that life. No shoptalk on vacation. Got me?"

"Yes, ma'am, Sergeant Rachel, sir!" responded Cyndi sarcastically, giving her a salute.

"I really like these," said Rachel, showing her friends the two blouses and skirt she had tried on.

"Then let's get them. Today's shopping spree is on Sam," announced Cyndi.

"Really?" asked Rachel excitedly.

"You betcha," she answered. "Sam said we should charge 'til our hearts are content."

"I don't know," said Nanci, feeling reluctant about spending Sam's money.

"Well, I know!" responded Rachel, not giving it a second thought. She marched toward the cashier counter, plopping her items down on the counter.

"Come on," encouraged Cyndi, smiling at Nanci. "Grab those jeans you've been eyeing, and let's get on with our day."

Nanci returned Cyndi's smile and grabbed the jeans, following her to the cashier counter.

"The men, where are they?"

"They're currently outside of *Notre Dame* Cathedral. They're standing near a

hedge feeding doves and pigeons from the palms of their hands.”

“How charming.”

“They are now entering the cathedral.”

“Stay with them. His highness wants to know their whereabouts at all times.”

“Understood.”

“Grey, out.”

Sam, Norrin, and Wade entered the old dark cathedral, marveling as they lifted their heads to see an intricately detailed ceiling. Beams of curved concrete emanated from either side of the structure. They were congruently grouped together forming various patterns. The ceiling stretched high above their heads and sheltered the old, dimly lit, gothic building from the inclement weather outside. It had just begun to rain shortly after the three had entered the building.

“A sob burst from the depths of his chest and he cried out, ‘Oh! Everything I loved!’” Sam uttered solemnly, as he took his first few steps inside the cathedral.

“What is that?” asked Norrin.

“You really should read more,” encouraged Sam. “It’s a quote from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.”

“I saw the old silent film,” said Norrin. “It’s sad how that jerk stabbed and killed the Hunchback at the end of the movie. I’m glad old Quas tossed him over the side of the cathedral. And Esmeralda, she went off with that soldier in the end and didn’t give poor old Quas a second look. I guess he was just an ugly monster to her.”

“That’s not the way it happened in the book,” informed Sam. “You should read it. It’s really good.”

“You know Norrin can’t read,” remarked Wade, while smiling and patting Norrin on his back. Norrin looked up at Wade and sneered, eyeing him up and down from head to toe.

They made their way to a statue of Joan of Arc standing against the right wall of the cathedral, if entering from the front entrance.

“She was an amazing warrior,” stated Sam.

“How old was she when she died?” asked Wade.

“The so-called religious leaders of her time, who I like to think of as hypocritical, scumbag, misleading, deceivers, had her burned at the stake when she was only 19,” explained Sam.

“That sucks,” commented Norrin, with disgust in his voice.

“Yeah, it does,” continued Sam. “I’ve read about her life, accomplishments,

battles, and finally her trial. After learning about her, I truly believe she was born with gifts and abilities, above and beyond that of the average human.”

“You mean, like us?” inquired Norrin.

“Exactly like us,” answered Sam. “Or should I say, more like me. She used to have these visions, which were even brought up during her sham of a trial. She believed they were visions or knowledge sent by God. It’s not surprising, because during that time the church basically ruled the citizens. There was no separation between church and state. So, naturally, with her upbringing and the church poisoning the minds of all of the people; the only explanation she could come up with for the strange abilities which she possessed was that God must’ve been empowering her. I believe the truth rang closer to her being a telepath with post-cognitive abilities.

“A good example of that is when she met the *Dauphin*, Charles the seventh, who would become King of France. As a test, she was told to pick him out of a crowded room full of men. She’d never seen or met Charles before. Obviously, there were no cameras back then, so she hadn’t seen a picture of him, and as France was dealing with an oppressive English occupation at the time, the *Dauphin* hadn’t had time to have multiple portraits painted of himself and distributed throughout France.

“Joan looked around a bit and was able to pick him out. He wasn’t dressed in royal robes, and as a matter of fact, they’d placed a decoy on the throne to mislead her into thinking he was the *Dauphin*. But, she wasn’t fooled. She picked him out of the crowd with no problem. Now, how could anyone but a telepath do that? She may have strategically planned her attacks by reading the minds of her enemies, finding their weakest points and what they feared most, to either force a retreat or to gain a victory in battle.

“Then, the man she was responsible for crowning betrayed her and took away the majority of her army. Not long after that, the English, they captured her, tried her, and burned her at the stake; accusing her of heresy and the practice of witchcraft.”

Norrin and Wade could see the anger in Sam’s eyes.

“That was over five hundred years ago, Sam,” Wade stated, not understanding why Sam seemed so bothered by some obscure event that had taken place so long ago.

“People haven’t changed,” insisted Sam. “Not really. The government of her time exploited her gifts, used her to further its own prominence, and when it felt it no longer had any use for her, they threw her away like a piece of garbage.” Sam turned from the statue and looked at Wade. “Do you honestly think that if the

government that we live under knew about us and others like us, they would act any differently than the government of Joan's time? They'd use us to further their own agendas and, once they'd used us to the point that we no longer were an asset to them or had no more to give, they'd try to dispose of us just like they did Joan."

Sam's facial expression showed he was obviously incensed.

"Someone's feeling dismal today," interjected Wade. "You and Cyndi have another argument?"

"No," Sam answered. "It just upsets me to see governments who are supposed to protect their citizens exploit and use and abuse them, especially, those who fight hard to better the lives of the common people, while the politicians sit back and ignore them."

"Feeling a little unappreciated?" questioned Norrin. "You're the one who always told us when we were kids not to look for appreciation and gratitude. 'Our reward comes from knowing we fight for what's right and defend those unable to defend themselves,' I believe were your exact words," he reminded Sam.

"Yeah, you're right," admitted Sam. "I guess some of the things that Cyndi and I have been discussing as of late have been weighing on my mind. You know, they really want us to put the vigilante life behind us," stated Sam, looking at Norrin.

"I know. It's just that it's a part of who we are. A big part. Honestly, if it wasn't for Nanci bringing it up all the time, I don't know that I'd ever consider quitting," said Norrin.

"I am so glad that's not anything I have to worry about," Wade interrupted. "I do what I want to do, go where I want to go, and say what I want to say. The day you boys said, 'I do,' was the day you basically gave up those freedoms. You don't get to do, think, or say what you want anymore. You have to ask yourselves every time you take a crap, how will this affect my wife? Me, I'm not prepared to relinquish all of those freedoms. Not yet, anyway."

Both Sam and Norrin acknowledged Wade's comment, slightly chuckling and grinning. But, they knew to a degree, his words rang true. Neither one gave a clichéd response like, "Yeah, don't get married" or "You're right. Stay single." Sam and Norrin loved their wives deeply and, overall, were very happy with their marriages. But, this one issue, this one obstacle was the difference between having a really good marriage and having nearly a perfect one.

Norrin did not understand his wife's thinking when it came to this issue. She knew that being Scorpion was a part of his life before he had even known her.

It continued being part of his life while they were dating and during their engagement. Why she thought he would no longer have it as a part of his life once they were married was beyond him.

After the three had finished touring the cathedral, they stepped outside and noticed a soft serve ice cream stand across the street. Although it was still raining, Sam asked, "You guys want some ice cream? I could go for some ice cream."

Norrin and Wade both agreed to join Sam for an ice cream cone. They began eating the vanilla ice cream, after they each had received their cones. Their eyes widened as they looked at one another, after taking their first bite. They each had eaten vanilla ice cream before and had tried different variations on the flavor from various ice cream makers. But, this, this was without a doubt, the very best vanilla ice cream they had ever eaten. The bad weather did not lessen their enjoyment of this experience in the least. They each devoured the ice cream and the cone; thoroughly satisfied by the time they had finished.

They had wiped their mouths with the thin paper napkin they were given by the ice cream vendor, when Norrin and Wade heard a voice inside their minds.

"The both of you keep wiping your faces and don't make any sudden moves. Just act as if everything is normal," instructed Sam. "I've noticed two guys who've seemed to show up every place we've been today. I just saw them again."

"Where are they?" Norrin projected his thought to Sam.

"They're a few doors down, outside of one of the souvenir shops," answered Sam. He had linked all three of their minds so that they could share their thoughts, without verbally communicating.

"Are you sure they're tailing us?" inquired Wade.

"It could be a coincidence that they've shown up everywhere we have today but, there's one thing I find peculiar. I can't read their thoughts. Their minds are blank to me," Sam informed them.

"Really?" asked Norrin.

"Yeah, and that makes me nervous," admitted Sam.

"Who are they?" asked Wade.

"Look toward the cathedral. Then, slowly, turn toward the souvenir shop four doors down, so that it appears that you're simply taking in the scenery. They're the guys in the thick, gray, woolen trench coats. One of them is black, the other white," Sam informed them.

Norrin and Wade threw their napkins into a bin marked, *REBUTS* and looked toward *Notre Dame*. Norrin began speaking aloud as he slowly turned. "Even in this rain, Paris is a beautiful city."

“It sure is,” commented Wade, also nonchalantly turning from the cathedral toward the souvenir shop four doors down.

When their eyes finally reached their target, there was no one there fitting the description Sam had given.

“They’re not there,” projected Sam, looking through Norrin’s eyes as he had turned his back to the souvenir shop. “Okay, either I am way off base or those two realized they’d been seen.”

“What do you wanna do?” Wade said aloud.

“Well, I don’t know about you two but, after being here a week, I’m starting to feel a little rusty regarding my tracking skills,” said Sam.

“You specifically said, ‘leave the costume home,’” reminded Norrin.

“Yes, I did,” projected Sam. “But, no one knows who we are in Paris. If we have to use our abilities, we’ll be as discreet as possible. Even if anyone does see us, I can always remove those memories from their minds if need be.”

“Then we’re gonna do a little tracking?” inquired Wade.

Sam smiled and lifted his eyebrows twice. A huge grin spread across Norrin’s face and the three men were off to try and locate their would-be spies.

CHAPTER XIV

The Hunters or the Hunted?

Sam had advised Norrin and Wade that if they all were indeed being followed, and their onlookers had been tailing them from place to place, they would probably turn up again.

They agreed to leave the surrounding area of *Notre Dame* and head toward the *Bateaux Mouches*, to take a boat ride along the *Seine*. Perhaps, the two men Sam believed were following them would appear again, perhaps not. Sam felt that if they stayed in public areas, the chances of an incident being initiated by the two men, if they were indeed following them, would be minimal. Thus far they had attempted to be covert and non-confrontational, just watching Sam, Norrin, and Wade.

The three descended the stairs leading to the lower cobble stone walkway along the riverbank. Sam had informed them he would be keeping the mental line of communication open, in case it became necessary to communicate without speaking.

As they walked toward the dock to purchase their tickets and board the boat, Norrin took point, Sam was in the center, and Wade kept an eye out from the rear. Wade sent a mental message to Sam and Norrin, asking, "Either of you see anything yet?"

“Not me,” replied Norrin. “Sam?”

“Uh-ah,” Sam answered. “But keep alert. I’m betting that whoever this is won’t try anything out in the open, but I have been wrong before.”

“Maybe, like you said earlier, it was just a coincidence these guys were in the same places we’ve been today. Maybe they’re just tourists and are taking in the sights, like us,” suggested Norrin.

“Possibly, but they weren’t just at the same tourist attractions we visited today. They were also at the same café where we had lunch,” informed Sam.

“Really? I don’t remember seeing two guys together there fitting the description you gave,” projected Wade.

“They sat at separate tables. One was close to the entrance, the other toward the restrooms.” Sam shared his memory with both Wade and Norrin so that they could get vivid pictures of the two men tailing them.

“Oh, you’re right,” said Norrin.

“Yeah, I see,” Wade, too, acknowledged.

Sam purchased tickets for each of them and, then, they boarded the boat. They took seats toward the rear of the boat, as the majority of the passengers had seated themselves toward the front and center.

It seemed as though the boat was ready to depart, when two final passengers presented their tickets to the individual stationed at the docking ramp. It was the two men that Sam believed had been following them.

After entering the tour boat, the men seated themselves in two separate rows near the center of the boat.

“Is that supposed to throw us off?” questioned Wade, projecting his thoughts to his friends. “Because, if it is, it’s not working.”

“I still can’t penetrate their minds,” admitted Sam. “I don’t understand why. I can get into the minds of everybody else on this boat, but not those two.”

“Something’s wrong,” projected Norrin. “There’s no way this is a coincidence. They’ve been following us all day and you can’t read their thoughts. I smell a trap.” Norrin paused. “The girls!” he projected, widening his eyes and grabbing his chair.

“They’re fine,” informed Sam. “I reached out to Cyndi a few seconds ago and she, Nanci, and Rachel are all fine.”

“Then you think it’s just us they’re after?” inquired Wade.

“I don’t know what they’re after,” responded Sam. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

“Let ’em come,” asserted Norrin. “All this sneaking around and spying on us is pissing me off. If they want trouble, they came to the right place.”

“You promised to use your mind before your muscle, recently, remember?” reminded Sam.

“I remember,” projected Norrin. “I will politely and tactfully ask them why they’re following us. When they give me an answer I don’t like, then I’ll smack ‘em down.”

“That sounds fair,” responded Wade, with a smile on his face.

Sam decided he would toy with the would-be spies a bit, so, he began telekinetically flicking the two spies on their ears. At first, they pretended not to notice and acted as though it had not bothered them but, when Sam started flicking harder, they both turned and looked directly at him.

“That got their attention,” said Sam. There was no question now. Not only had the two men been following them but, it seemed as though they also were aware that the three men possessed various gifts and abilities.

Both Norrin and Wade saw the two men turn and stare at Sam. After a few seconds had passed, Norrin returned their stares with one of his own, jerking his body forward in a quick motion as an act of aggression. The two men simply smiled and turned around in their seats facing forward again.

“Oh, no!” Norrin projected loudly. “Did those two just blow me off? Oh, it’s on now!”

“Norrin, stay in your seat,” admonished Sam. “We’re on a boat full of innocent passengers. You make a move on those guys and they might hurt one of them.”

“He’s right, Norrin,” agreed Wade. “Now’s not the time.”

The tour continued and after a period of time, the two spies stood up and walked to the rear of the boat, passing Sam, Norrin, and Wade. They stood, looking out the back window, with their backs to Sam, Norrin, and Wade.

“Okay, they’re away from the passengers. Let’s confront them now,” urged Norrin.

“I’ll approach them. You two stay on guard. Be ready for anything,” instructed Sam. He stood up and walked about eight paces toward the back of the boat. Norrin and Wade also stood up and faced the rear of the boat.

Standing only a few feet away from the men that had been following them, Sam asked, in a monotone voice, “Why are you following us?”

There was a silence. The men did not react or even acknowledge Sam was standing behind them. They simply stood with their backs to him, staring out the rear window.

“I asked you a question,” he reiterated, this time adding an authoritative tone to his voice.

The Caucasian man slowly turned and began to speak with a German accent. "I'm sorry. Are you talking to us?" he asked.

"You know I am," Sam sternly answered. "Why are you following us?" he asked again, this time slightly raising his voice.

"You must be mistaken," commented the black man, in what sounded like an African accent. He turned and looked at Sam. "We're simply tourists taking in the beauty Paris has to offer."

Sam stared at the two men as he started to chew the inside of his cheek. There was a silence, after which Sam said, "If that is true, I strongly suggest you spend the remainder of your stay as far away from my friends and I as possible. We'd hate to think you had any intentions of ill will toward us."

The black man smiled a crooked smile, saying nothing further while staring into Sam's eyes.

"Oh, I've had enough of this!" insisted Norrin, as he walked aggressively toward the rear observation area of the boat, to take his place at Sam's side. His nostrils flared and his brow was furrowed.

The man with the German accent casually lifted his hand indicating Norrin should stop, and then pointed toward the front of the boat.

As Sam, Norrin, and Wade turned toward the front, they could see everyone had turned toward them in their seats, brandishing gruesome smiles on their faces. The eerie smiles graced the faces of men, women, and children as well as old ones. They all shared the same deranged expression of amusement, as their eyes twinkled reflecting the lights inside of the boat.

Norrin's eyes moved, looking back between the men in the rear of the boat and the passengers in the front. Even the tour conductor was staring at them with a look of insanity on his face.

Sam projected to Norrin and Wade, "Take defensive positions!"

"Yes, Norrin and Wade. I suggest you follow Sam's instruction," the three friends heard echo in their minds. "Your situation seems precarious."

"That wasn't you, was it?" Wade directed his question aloud, toward Sam.

Sam, with his eyes open widely, shook his head, no.

At that moment, Norrin activated his adrenaline factor and extended his teeth and fingernails. His eyes glowed a luminous green.

"I don't understand," Sam spoke aloud, as he turned toward the seated passengers. "Not 20 minutes ago, I sensed thought patterns emanating from all of these passengers. Now, I can't reach any of their minds. They're closed to me."

“A mystery. Isn’t it?” commented the man with the African accent, wearing a smirk on his face.

Although the rain had let up, the sky was growing dark, which prompted Wade to comment, “It’s getting dark out and I really don’t want to stay here, considering the situation and our present company.”

Sam looked into the eyes of the two strangers standing in front of him. He lifted his left hand and closed his fist tightly. The sudden sound of glass shattering was heard by all aboard the boat, as a gaping hole burst forth from the boat’s glass ceiling. Shards of glass fell inside of the boat and onto the floor; while some of it rocketed into the air outside of the boat. The two spies and other passengers ducked their heads and tried to find cover. Sam protected himself with a telekinetic shield while Norrin and Wade ignored the falling glass, knowing their durable skins would not be penetrated.

Wade reacted to Sam’s lead and leapt into the air, jumping through the hole in the roof and landing on the riverbank. Norrin was in no hurry to leave, so Sam, telekinetically, lifted him into the air and through the hole, following close behind. Together, they joined Wade on the riverbank.

“We don’t want this, Norrin. Not yet. We’re unprepared and quite possibly dealing with a superior opponent,” advised Sam.

“Superior to you, maybe,” replied Norrin, in his altered voice.

Sam turned to him, “Whoever that was not only has the ability to block me from entering his mind, but can also forge mental imprints onto the minds of others. This causes any telepath that attempts to read the minds and thoughts of one individual to believe he’s penetrated that individual’s mind, when in actuality, he’s reached the mind of someone else entirely. Don’t take him lightly, Norrin. That would be a huge mistake on your part.”

“Why?” questioned Wade. “Why us? Why now? We’re on vacation! We didn’t do anything to anyone! We weren’t bothering anyone!” Wade was beginning to agree with Norrin’s line of thought. Maybe they should confront this enemy and show them who the superior individuals were. To inflict a pummeling so severe that, whoever this was, would never consider bothering them again.

“I understand your feelings, Wade,” acknowledge Sam, although Wade had not verbalized anything more than a few questions. “Believe me, I’m just as pissed off as the two of you. But, before we go charging off to battle, we had better be frickin’ sure we know who and what we’re up against. And as of right now, we don’t have a clue.”

Sam broke the mental connection between him and his friends. Then verbally, he advised that they should make their way back to the hotel. As they

walked away, Sam wiped the memories from the few onlookers that had noticed their escape from the boat.

When they had gotten back to the hotel, Sam sensed the women were in their individual hotel rooms. He sent a mental message requesting Nanci and Rachel meet he, Norrin, and Wade in his hotel room as soon as possible. He made it very clear that the request was urgent.

The two grabbed their room keys and headed toward the elevator. Rachel had pushed the button sending for the elevator before Nanci, so, it appeared at her floor first. As the elevator descended to Nanci's floor, she found Rachel waiting for her inside when the door opened.

"What's going on?" inquired Nanci.

"Don't ask me. I was just laying on my bed resting after a hard day's shopping. Then, the next thing I know, 'I need you to come to my room as soon as possible,' rings through my head," Rachel said, mimicking Sam's voice.

"He sounded pretty serious," Nanci noted.

"Attila the Sam is always serious," replied Rachel.

Nanci smiled, but, for some unknown reason, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was indeed seriously wrong. Once the two women had reached Sam and Cyndi's room, Rachel knocked on the door. Before she had finished her third knock, the door swung open. Sam, Cyndi, Norrin, and Wade were all seated with grave expressions on their faces.

"Boy, don't you all look glum," commented Rachel, with a smile on her face, trying to make light of the serious mood. "Come on, we didn't charge that much today," she continued. The others had not changed their expressions, causing Rachel to feel uncomfortable. She quickly exchanged her jovial expression for one more serious. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Sam had shared his earlier experience with Cyndi, telepathically, and explained that he'd kept it hidden so as not to worry her, when contacting her from the tour boat. She wasn't pleased with his explanation, nor his keeping the information from her.

"Cyndi? What's wrong?" asked Nanci.

"Tell them," said Cyndi, her words sounding more like an order than a request, as she stared at her husband with a cross expression.

"You two should sit down," admonished Sam. Nanci and Rachel both sat down, Nanci next to Norrin and Rachel close to Cyndi. Sam continued, "A few hours ago, Norrin, Wade, and I were walking around the city, when I got this feeling that we were being watched. It wasn't a telepathic perception, just intuition. I noticed two men, one black and the other white, that had

coincidentally happened to show up everywhere we'd visited during the day. When we were on *Champs' Elysees*, they were there. As we walked through the park in front of the *Louvre*, they were there. When we ate lunch at a small café near *Notre Dame*, they were there, seated at separate tables.

"After the three of us had toured the inside of the cathedral, I noticed they were still following us. I attempted to read their thoughts to determine what their intentions were, but, I was unable to do so."

Nanci and Rachel's expressions reflected confusion, disbelief and perhaps even a degree of fear.

"I still am not sure why I couldn't," Sam continued. "At that point, I informed Norrin and Wade of what I'd noticed, telepathically. Mysteriously, when they turned to see the two followers, they had vanished. Later, I shared a mental image of what the two looked like. We tried to find them, with the intention of determining if they truly had been following us, and wound up on a tour boat traveling along the *Seine*.

"The men had followed us onto the boat just as it was departing the dock. Several minutes into the cruise, we approached them. When I asked them if they were following us, they at first denied it. Then, Norrin stood up, and that must have startled them. The white man pointed toward the front of the boat and, when we turned to see what he was pointing to, everyone on the boat was turned and staring at us. The crew and passengers alike were staring with horrific grins on their faces. Men, women, children, and even elderly people looking at us with expressions of insanity."

"It felt like they were looking through us," added Wade. "Like they knew something we didn't. Like we were about to be attacked, and they were going to watch like a blood-thirsty mob."

Nanci and Rachel were speechless. Chills ran up their spines. They had traveled several thousand miles and, still, it was as if they could not escape the abnormal and bizarre. It seemed as though danger were a living tangible thing, which stalked and hunted them down, no matter where they may try to hide.

Rachel spoke up. "The people on the boat, didn't you get one of your Sammy Sense, tingling, we're-in-trouble vibes the minute you were in their proximity?"

"No," Sam answered. "Whoever it was blocking me from reading the minds of the two guys following us, also had, how can I say this? You know how a person might have the ability to disguise their voice, in some cases, even mimic exactly the voice of another person?"

Norrin, Nanci, Wade, and Rachel nodded their heads, indicating they understood.

Sam continued. "Well, this person can do something similar with thought patterns. He takes the thought pattern of one person and, temporarily, overlays that pattern on the mind of another. In essence, making a telepath believe he or she is reading one individual's thoughts, when in reality, they're reading the thoughts of someone else entirely. Of course, this would only work on strangers because, if a telepath got a fake signature from someone they knew, they'd recognize it instantly."

Norrin, Nanci, Wade, and Rachel did not follow Sam's explanation entirely but, he could sense they had gotten the gist of it.

Cyndi, however, completely understood. She was nowhere near powerful enough to pull off something like that. Her mental powers were basically limited to reading minds, projecting and receiving thoughts, and controlling the thoughts and actions of others, for brief periods of time. She wasn't the most powerful telepath on the planet and she didn't pretend to be.

This situation frightened her, though. Not only because the individual Sam had described seemed, mentally, more capable than anyone they had ever encountered before, but, for the first time, she actually sensed self doubt in Sam.

Sam was one of the most confident, gifted, almost arrogant individuals she had ever known; especially, when it came to his belief in his own capabilities. He, of course, did not parade it around like a badge for all to see. It was a silent arrogance. When it came to personal achievements, based solely on his own actions, he had the utmost confidence in himself. But, not his time.

He was not cowering in fear, nor was he considering turning tail and running away. However, he actually was wondering if he had indeed met his match. He knew David, his mentor, was also a very talented telepath and telekinetic, but Sam believed he had surpassed David's abilities some time ago.

"I guess the vacation's over," expressed Nanci, her heart beating rapidly.

If Cyndi had wanted to see Nanci concerned or afraid, regarding her well being, this was her chance. Nanci was no telepath, but she could see Sam, Norrin, and Wade had been visibly shaken by their experience; and Sam's voice, while relaying their experience, didn't have its usual tone of confidence. He sounded disturbed and unsure of himself.

"No!" Sam insisted. "We're not going to let them direct our actions or dictate our moves. We have three days left, and we're going to enjoy them."

Everyone looked at Sam, giving him various expressions reflecting he had just made a stupid comment.

“Okay,” he corrected himself. “We’re going to enjoy them as much as we can under the circumstances, while being careful and cautious. Wade, Rachel, I’m not trying to play matchmaker, but I feel it’s best that none of us be alone at any time for the remainder of our stay. I think it would be best if you two either shared a room, or Rach, you can stay with either Cyndi or Nanci.” Turning to Wade, he said, “Wade, you can stay with either me or Norrin, if you don’t feel comfortable about sharing a room with Rachel or she with you. Either way I don’t care, but we need to make a decision tonight.”

Rachel looked at Wade, flaring one nostril and displaying a sneer. “Can you keep your hands to yourself?” she asked.

Wade smiled and said, “I believe the real question is, ‘Can *you* keep *your* hands to *yourself*?’”

“You wish, Toad boy,” she commented.

Finally, they agreed to stay in Wade’s room for the remaining three nights.

The next day proved to be uneventful, thankfully. The entire group stayed together as they walked the streets of Paris, stopping occasionally to purchase nick-knacks and souvenirs. They ate all their meals together and if one person visited the restroom, someone else always accompanied them.

As they ate their dinner that evening, all at the table sat in silence. Each one pondered upon their individual thoughts, although in a round about way, they were all thinking the same thing.

“I’m not doing this.” Cyndi spoke up, shaking her head. “I’m not going to live my life like a prisoner! I am so sick of this! It’s like we’re not allowed to have normal lives, even when we make every effort to do so.”

“It’s not Sam’s—”

Cyndi quickly cut Norrin off from completing his thought, reading it before the words escaped from his mouth. “I know it’s not Sam’s fault, Norrin. I wasn’t placing blame. Simply expressing how I felt,” she said, somewhat curtly.

They all sat picking at their plates when their waitress approached the table. “*Monsieur*, I was told to deliver this to you,” said the woman, speaking perfect English with a French accent.

She handed Sam an attractive, purple, foil envelope. Sam thanked the woman and dismissed her. He looked to his friends at their various positions around the table and, then, back at the envelope.

Carefully, Sam opened it; running his finger along the flap that was loosely affixed to the lower half of the envelope. As he lifted the flap, he found a beautifully engraved invitation with gold trim and lettering. A painted picture of

a woman with her arm and hand extended wearing a thin, basic dress, covered the majority of the invitation's left side. It read:

*You are cordially invited to attend
a most special dinner held in your honour.
Your host, Mr. Dominic Mazella, graciously waits
in anticipation of your arrival.*

*Sincere and Warmest Regards,
Mr. Grey*

Date: Thursday March 9, 1989

Time: 7:00 P.M.

*Location: La Tour d'Argent Restaurant
15-17 Quai de la Tournelle, Paris*

CHAPTER XV

An Invitation to Dinner

The previous day's events surrounding Sam, Norrin, and Wade's experiences were perplexing. None of them knew who was responsible for having them followed, or who the individual was that had been able to not only interrupt Sam's mental link but, also, prevent him from recognizing the false thought patterns imprinted over the minds of the passengers on the tour boat.

One thing was for certain. Whoever this Dominic Mazella was, somehow, he was involved. Also, this Mr. Grey, whose name appeared at the bottom of the invitation, he too, must be involved. The questions were, how were they involved and to what extent were they directly responsible for the disruption in the lives of these six friends?

As a whole, the group had decided that they would accept the dinner invitation, in the hopes that all their questions would finally have answers. Who had orchestrated this elaborate scheme? Why had they singled out Sam, Norrin, and Wade and had them followed? How did they know that they would be in Paris? And most importantly, who was the telepath powerful enough to deceive Sam and invade the link he had created between himself and his two friends? Whoever was responsible, had gone to an awful lot of trouble to get their attention and flaunt, their supposed, superiority.

La Tour d'Argent was the most elite restaurant in all of Paris. In most cases, reservations were required weeks if not months in advance. The restaurant wasn't far from the *Hotel de Buci*, so, everyone agreed to walk. They did, however, decide that they would play along with this ruse and dress properly for the occasion.

Sam had brought along one of his tuxedos, in expectation of taking his wife out to a private romantic dinner before leaving Paris. Cyndi had packed a beautiful evening gown and matching shawl, in anticipation of that same evening. At least their preparations would not be in vain on their last night in Paris.

Norrin and Nanci had each brought along a formal set of clothing as well. Norrin had changed into a pleated pair of slacks, a mustard-colored dress shirt, a tie, and a vest. Nanci had braided her hair into a long continuous braid flowing down her back and was wearing a blue, shoulder-less, Renaissance-style dress.

Wade and Rachel, who were now sharing a room, had also finished dressing. Wade was wearing an oversized tuxedo shirt, a bow tie, and a pair of slacks with suspenders that matched his tie. Rachel had slipped into a thin, spaghetti strap, bright red dress.

Everyone met in the hotel lobby at about 6:30, so that they could all walk together. Although the mood was a somber one, the girls took the time to compliment one another on their outfits. At that point, Sam took Norrin and Wade aside and began instructing them. "I don't know what's going to happen tonight but, if we're attacked, your primary responsibility is the safety of the girls. For the most part, Rachel can take care of herself. Nonetheless, watch her back. If things get ugly, get the girls out of the restaurant and to safety. Wade, you stay with them and protect them at all costs. Norrin, you get back inside as soon as you're able and back me up."

Norrin and Wade clearly understood their roles and both nodded in agreement. Sam didn't like having the women accompany them to this meeting but he realized that, if their safety was his principal concern, then, the safest place for them to be was in the company of Norrin, Wade, and himself.

They exited the hotel to find a man dressed in a top hat and tails waiting for them. An authentic 1800s-style carriage was parked only a few feet away from the hotel's entrance. Two magnificent, white mares stood proudly at the head of the carriage to pull it. The man in the top hat bowed slightly and, with his right hand, motioned toward the carriage.

Sam attempted to read his thoughts but there were no thoughts available to him. "Okay," he said. "We're going to play this game, are we? Very well. Ladies,

gentleman, I believe our carriage awaits.”

Cyndi spoke up. “Are you getting anything from him?” she directed her question to her husband. “I’m not getting anything.”

“Nor am I,” replied Sam, staring toward the oddly dressed stranger. “I believe that’s all part of our *compere*’s plan.”

The carriage driver, still bowing, raised his head and smiled, staring directly into Sam’s eyes.

“So, do we humor him for now or continue walking?” asked Wade.

“We’ll humor him for now,” commented Sam, staring directly back into the carriage man’s eyes.

The driver opened the carriage door and lowered the retractable stairs, so that his passengers could enter. Sam took Cyndi’s hand assisting her into the carriage. After they were inside, Norrin and Wade followed suit, assisting Nanci and Rachel.

For winter, the temperature outside was surprisingly comfortable. Even still, the six passengers had worn their warm coats and brought along umbrellas they’d purchased while in Paris, in case there was a change in the weather.

The coachman never spoke once. Not before leaving the hotel, not during the ride, nor did he speak once they had arrived at the restaurant. He simply opened the carriage door, after lowering the stairs, bowed, and waited for them all to exit the carriage.

Sam was the last to step out of the carriage and, after stepping off of the last step, he stopped and turned to the driver. The man’s head was still bowed.

“You have any idea what we’re about to walk in to?” questioned Sam, pointing his thumb toward the restaurant. Sam expected nothing from the man and that is exactly what he received. The driver finally stood erect and shared nothing more than his smile with Sam.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” said Sam, as he pulled five hundred francs from his wallet. He folded the money and placed it in the coachman’s outer jacket pocket, near his lapel. “Thanks for your troubles,” he commented, turning toward his wife and friends and motioning them to move toward the restaurant’s front entrance.

A man dressed in a very professional-looking waiter’s uniform was stationed at the restaurant’s entrance. He opened the door and bent slightly at the waist, motioning with his free hand for the guests to enter.

Norrin was the first to enter followed by Nanci, Sam, Cyndi, Rachel, and Wade. Once all six were inside, a thunderous applause greeted them from the entire compliment of the restaurant’s employees. The six friends stood in a state

of confusion, not understanding what was happening. Norrin and Wade had even turned to look behind and around them, to see who all the people were clapping for.

A mature-looking man wearing a very expensive suit, stepped forward and introduced himself. "Greetings," he extended, as he bowed his head. Looking at the guests with glazed-over blue eyes, he said, "I am Mr. Grey, a close personal associate of your host, Mr. Dominic Mazella. If you'll accompany me, I'll show you to your table."

Cyndi looked around and noticed there were no patrons in the restaurant. Outside of the staff and Mr. Grey, they were the only ones there. "Sam," she projected to her husband, "We're the only ones here."

"Yes, I know," he responded aloud. "Mr. Grey, is it? It seems we're the only guests at the restaurant this evening. Is all of this just for us?" Sam asked.

"Mr. Mazella is a very gracious host when it comes to his guests. He wanted to impress upon you all how valuable he believes your friendship is, and his deepest hopes that you will share a mutually prosperous and beneficial relationship, now, and in the days to come," responded the man calling himself Grey.

"Ooh, a cryptic response. You should be able to translate that, Sam. Those are your specialty," commented Rachel, as she eyed Mr. Grey, wearing a stern expression on her face.

"Not cryptic, *madame*," corrected Grey. "Truthful. Tonight, we're here to share the truth with one another. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Very well, then, Mr. Grey. If you please, show us to Mr. Mazella's table," requested Sam.

Mr. Grey nodded and led them up four flights of stairs to an intimate dining suite. As they entered the quaint room, a gentleman wearing a three piece suit with his back to a window overlooking the Seine and *Notre Dame* Cathedral, began clapping his hands. He appeared to be in his late forties or perhaps early fifties. His salt and pepper colored hair was combed back, flat against his head and he was clean-shaven. He wore a smile on his face and his dark eyes radiated a certain wisdom and experience, as if he possessed a very old soul. "My honored guests. My friends," he said, "Please, be seated."

The man was sitting at the head of a rectangular, wooden table. On either side of him, there were three place settings that had been arranged for his guests. Reluctantly, they each approached the table and took a seat; Sam, Cyndi, and Norrin on one side, Wade, Nanci, and Rachel on the other.

"Please, please. You all look so tense, so cautious," said the man at the head

of the table. "There is no need for that tonight. I am Dominic Mazella, your host, and as long as you are my guests, you have nothing to fear. No harm will come to you. So, please relax. Mr. Grey, see to it that we're brought two bottles of wine. Something special, for this momentous occasion."

At Mazella's command, Grey disappeared from the room.

"Mr. Mazella," Rachel spoke up. "This is all very impressive. The horse and carriage ride here, the welcome when we entered the restaurant, and this elaborate dining area of yours. But, if you think you're fooling anyone, even for a second, you're sadly mistaken. You had some of us followed. You invaded their minds or you had someone else do it for you, it doesn't seem as though you actually do anything yourself around here. And then, you orchestrate this elaborate display to either impress or frighten us. I haven't figured out which as of yet. My question is, why? What's your purpose? What's your angle? What do you want?"

Mazella looked at Sam. "She's a feisty one, isn't she?" he commented.

"Yes. She is," responded Sam. "But, I believe she just accurately expressed the minds of all of your so-called guests seated at this table. Before we came up the stairs, Mr. Grey said that tonight was a night to share the truth. Do you have any truths you'd like to share with us, Mr. Mazella?"

"All in good time, Samuel. All in good time," replied Mazella.

Mr. Grey had returned with two waiters, each holding a bottle of wine and each with a towel draped across their right arm. "Mr. Mazella," Grey began speaking. "For the pleasure of you and your honoured guests, an 1858 *Chateau-Citran*."

"Delightful," replied Mazella, gesturing for the waiters to take the bottles to either side of the table and present them to his guests.

The waiters immediately responded to Mazella's cue and took the wine bottles to both sides of the table, displaying them for the six to see. The waiters removed the corks and on one side of the table, presented a cork to Sam that he may take in the aroma. On the other side, a cork was presented one to Rachel.

"I realize only Cynthia and Nanci are of legal age in the United States but, here in France, you're all old enough to partake," stated the host.

"So, you know our names and our ages. What else do you know about us, Mr. Mazella?" inquired Cyndi.

Mazella nodded his head and the two waiters each took a side of the table, filling the crystal wine glasses in front of each of Mazella's guests. Then, after the others had been served, Mazella's glass was filled. Lifting the glass, Mazella motioned his arm forward toward the others seated at his table. None of his

guests moved. They simply sat with unyielding expressions, staring at him. He shrugged his shoulders and then took a sip from his glass. After swishing the alcohol around in his mouth to savor the taste, he swallowed; and in reply to Cyndi's question answered, "Everything. I know everything about you."

One could almost hear the silent gasp of the women seated at the table. Wade's eyes opened wider and Rachel sat with her indignant expression focused on Mazella.

"How?" questioned Sam. "How do you know so much about us?" he asked, feeling confused and frustrated. A slight hint of anger was noticeable in his tone.

"When you entered that doorway," Mazella pointed toward the only entrance to the room with a serious expression on his face, "I introduced myself as Dominic Mazella. As do the six of you, I also have a second identity, known only to a small few. Well, actually," he smiled, "a small few compared to the world's entire population. But, in actuality, about 60 thousand individuals give or take a few hundred, recognize me as their King. The King of Wolves," revealed Mazella, as the smile faded from his face.

Everyone seated around the table that had just heard the news felt as though their hearts had stopped beating. A chill ran up Rachel's spine as she recalled hearing the wolf creature from the woods speak and even laugh.

Anger filled Norrin's eyes. He had remained silent up until now but, he too, recalled the incident that had taken place in the woods. His wrestling with the beast, its taunting of him and his friends, and, finally, their retreat at Sam's order, when they had heard more wolf creatures en route.

"Is this your attempt at revenge, old man?" questioned Norrin. "Is all this supposed to scare us? Because, so far, all you've accomplished is to piss me off."

The two waiters standing in the room dropped their towels and looked at Norrin as if he had just committed a grievous sin. Mazella held up his hand motioning for the two to keep their places.

"Our friend, Scorpion, here, is known for his quick temper. We will forgive him this once," stated Mazella, his eyes fixed intently on Norrin, his hand still in the air.

"Is Norrin correct, Mr. Mazella?" questioned Sam. "The werewolf we encountered said he was a prince. Would that make him your son? Is your plan to exact revenge on those responsible for his humiliation?"

"Werewolf? Ha! I love that term. To think it's the twentieth century and people still believe in werewolves," said Mazella, a smile stretching across his face from ear to ear. "Werewolves were the tales that gypsy parents told to their children, hundreds of years ago, to make them behave. I would think that the

man intelligent enough to deduce the truth about Joan of Arc, would have come to a better conclusion than werewolves.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “You’re like us! You were born with those abilities,” he announced, kicking himself for not coming to that conclusion sooner.

“Give that man a cigar!” congratulated Mazella, smiling at Sam. “Not one of those crappy American jobs either. He deserves an authentic, hand-rolled Cuban, straight out of Havana.”

At that moment, four men in chefs’ uniforms entered the room, each with a platter in hand. Each platter displayed a roasted duck. They had all been prepared differently with various spices, herbs, and basting sauces. One was stuffed and another skinned.

“Ah, dinner,” Mazella commented enthusiastically, as the chefs placed the platters on the table. A professional carver entered the room scraping his carving knife against a thin cylindrical sharpening stone. Then, he placed the sharpening stone on the table, removed a damp cloth from his apron and wiped the carving knife. Carefully and with precision, he began carving each duck.

After the ducks had been prepared to serve, the four chefs returned to the table and began distributing the food. Each person was given a drumstick, a wing and several slices of meat from the breast. A large salad was brought to the table, after the four platters had been removed, and placed in the center.

Mazella lifted his knife and fork and began to dig in. “Please,” he encouraged. “Enjoy. This is my favorite meal when I come to Paris.”

The six guests sat at the table touching neither their food nor wine.

“No?” commented Mazella. “Not hungry? But, you’ve hardly eaten anything all day.”

“Did you have us followed again?” questioned Wade.

“Followed?” said Mazella, between shoveling forkfuls of food into his mouth. “My dear boy, I’ve had you under surveillance since the moment you stepped foot on French soil. I only allowed you to find out when I was ready for you to know. The places you’ve visited, the restaurants where you’ve eaten, even your hotel rooms have all been under surveillance 24 a day. Which by the way, you three ladies, you’re all magnificent,” he stated, while chewing his food with a smile on his face.

“You’ve been video taping our rooms these past nine days?” asked Rachel, as she felt her stomach clench. “And, you’ve had us followed everywhere we’ve gone?”

Mazella nodded with a smile still etched in his face.

“You sick—”

“Ah-ah-ah. Mr. Scorpion already used your group’s one free outburst to be insolent,” commented Mazella, still smiling and pointing to Norrin with his fork. “Any more acts of willful disrespect on your part could prove to be quite costly,” he warned Rachel.

“Disrespect?” Sam interrupted. “You invited us here for a reason, Mazella. I assume it was for more than to brag and divulge you’re a twisted voyeur. What is it you want?” asked Sam, disgusted that the privacy of himself, his wife, and his friends had been thoroughly violated.

Mazella lifted a cloth napkin and wiped his mouth. Then, he began speaking. “I, much like you, am a businessman,” he commented, looking toward Sam. “I don’t let anything stand in the way of business. But,” he lifted his finger, “but, I’d much rather conduct my business under pleasant conditions than deal with complications. I prosper, and I like to share my good fortune with my friends.”

“That all sounds very noble. But, something tells me your business,” Sam lifted his hands gesturing quotes with his fingers, “is not on the up and up.”

“Well, if by on the up and up you mean legal, I guess that depends on which country you’re in at the time,” stated Mazella. “Samuel, you spoke about the truth a few minutes ago, and I’m going to share some of those truths with you now. I was born in Milan over six hundred years ago.”

There was a silence at the table.

Mazella continued. “I realized at the age of 15 that I could transform my body into what I called at that time, a man-dog. I didn’t understand how it had happened and, at first, I thought I was dreaming. I felt so alive, so strong, so energized. I allowed the beast within me to take over, spending more time in my man-dog form than my human form. A part of me wondered if I had been cursed or transformed by some wicked spirit. Then, one day, an old woman from my village approached me. She was frail looking, hunched over slightly, and covered in wrinkles from head to toe. No one in the village knew how old she was and few actually associated with her. Occasionally, some traded goods with her for favors. That’s all people would say: she provided favors. As the woman walked closer toward me, she dropped her outer garment, standing in front of me, stark naked. It wasn’t pretty. She began transforming right in front of me, in the same manner in which I had done several times myself. I couldn’t believe it. For the first time in a long time, I felt I had someone I could relate to.

“Later, she explained that the favors she’d provided our village was that of protector. If anyone came to the village looking to loot or pillage, or take women or girls for their own pleasures, or to kill the men, she would destroy them. I mean she’d wipe them out entirely, gutting them and tearing the flesh from their

weak and feeble bodies, as an example to any who might follow. Some knew exactly what she was and some simply accepted that it was within her power to protect.

“She taught me about the abilities I possessed, the added strength, speed, agility, and heightened senses. She also told me about others like me in neighboring villages, distant lands and even spread across the vast seas in other foreign kingdoms. She explained that the name our kind had taken was Wolves. As Wolves, we took what we wanted to take, traveled where we wanted to travel, and killed whom we wanted to kill. The most important rule to live one’s life by as a Wolf, she explained, was to always be strong. There was no room in the pack for the weak or lame. The stronger a Wolf became, the more they were respected and could be given positions of privilege by the King. No matter who you were or where you lived, as a Wolf, you pledged your loyalties and allegiance to the King of Wolves, she explained.

“As I grew older and came to know the King, I grew to despise him. He was a weak and foolish imbecile of a Wolf, focused more on his own indulgences and pleasures than on being a strong leader and setting an example for his pack. So, close to my ninetieth birthday, I called him out and confronted him. You see, among the Wolves, kingship isn’t passed from father to son. It’s an earned position. Only the strongest can attain to it. So, publicly, I challenged the King’s competency and leadership. His only response would be to defend his throne. We both transformed into our Wolf forms and fought for what seemed like hours, biting, clawing and tearing at one another’s flesh, covered in blood until only one was left standing.” Mazella lifted his hands touching his chest with the tips of his fingers.

“I’ve been the King for well over five hundred years,” he continued. “While I am King, my entire family is considered royalty, including my youngest son whom, I’m told, you all recently met. The average lifespan for a Wolf, if he isn’t killed or doesn’t contract some fatal illness, is one thousand years. So, God willing, I’ll be around for close to another four hundred years.”

“What do you know of God?” challenged Cyndi.

“In all honesty,” admitted Mazella, “not much, I must confess. What I do know, however, is that the six of you have another 50 or 60 years left in you at best. In the line of work you’ve chosen to take on, I’d bet not even that long. But, for however many years you do have left, I’d like us to be friends. I want to make sure your remaining years are happy and prosperous, and I ask only one thing in return.”

“I knew I heard a, *but*, coming somewhere in this speech,” muttered Rachel.

"I wouldn't refer to it as a *but*, as much as a friend doing a favor for another friend," explained Mazella. "You're all very gifted and intelligent young men and women. Sooner or later, you'd probably discover that as a businessman, I'm responsible for one of the most lucrative cartels along the eastern seaboard of the United States. I know the popular slogan in that country of yours right now is, 'Just say no!' That Nancy Reagan really needs a different hobby. But, in my line of work, I encourage people to just say yes."

"You're a mob boss. You're a drug-dealing, mutant-freak of a mob boss," declared Norrin, a sour expression on his face.

"That's two Mr. Scorpion," noted Mazella, staring at Norrin holding up two fingers. "I offer you all a deal," he turned, again looking back at all seated at the table. "I know how important your city is to you. You all seem to have gone to great lengths in watching over it. So, I'll not only leave you alone but, but, I also won't import any shipments directly into your harbors. In return, all I ask is that you stay out of our way. You don't disrupt my business, you don't detain or harass anyone in my employ, and you don't destroy any of my product."

"Gee, is that all?" asked Rachel sarcastically.

"Yes. That's it," he replied. "In return, I no longer have you followed. I no longer have your homes, places of business, and areas of recreation under surveillance. I no longer have your family members tracked, and I completely and absolutely, leave you alone. I'll even offer any one of you positions on my payroll if you'd like."

"He knows where we live," Cyndi projected mentally, to her husband.

"Yeah, I do," said Mazella aloud.

Sam turned to him. "So, you're the telepath."

"Me? No," admitted Mazella. "Mr. Grey, however, who is in my employ, is an exceptional telepath accomplishing things most telepaths are unable to do. I believe you've recently experienced some of his handiwork."

Grey stepped forward. He'd been standing in the room the entire time, not speaking or serving. Simply standing near the entrance and taking everything in.

"He's been using a little trick, I believe you're all familiar with," confessed Mazella. "He linked our two minds together and has been keeping track of any telepathic conversations that might be taking place, since the moment you walked into the restaurant. I admit, it was an unfair advantage but, in a position like mine, it's necessary to always try and have the upper hand."

Sam looked over his shoulder at Mr. Grey. "You're the one responsible for ruining my vacation."

Grey smiled. "Guilty as charged," he replied.

“So, it doesn’t appear that you’re hungry,” commented Mazella, as none other than himself had touched their food. He gestured for the two that had opened the wine bottles to remove the plates. After the plates had been removed, Mazella took another drink from his wine glass then wiped his mouth with his napkin. “About my offer, what do you say?” he asked.

“Do you really need to ask, Mr. Mazella?” questioned Sam, looking the Wolf King directly in his eyes.

“Come now. Be reasonable,” encouraged Mazella. “I have agents all over the globe. Do you really want to have to sleep with one eye open for the remainder of your lives? And your families, what about them? Make a deal and you ensure their safety. I’ll even assign personal security to them if you’d like.” Mazella turned to Norrin. “Surely you, Norrin, would hate to see anything happen to those two beautiful sisters of yours. How old are they now? Seven and ten, I believe. And your father, hasn’t the poor man lost enough already?”

That was the final taunt. Norrin activated his adrenaline factor, stood up, and walked to the head of the table where Mazella was sitting. He grabbed hold of the table’s edge and with minimal effort, flipped it backward causing it to land on its top. He placed his face only inches from Mazella’s and said, “If I even think you’ve attempted to harm my family, you’re dead. And my father,” Norrin chuckled, “I’d really like to see you try and harm my father. You’ll be dead before your old tired head hits the pavement.”

“Well, I tried to be a gracious host,” stated Mazella. “I wined and dined you. Tried to make you feel important and special. I even offered you my friendship. But, clearly, that’s not enough for you. I see an example must be made.” Mazella nodded and the two waiters standing at the doorway tore through their clothes, changing in appearance as their body structure transformed, and fur began growing and covering the majority of their bodies. In the end, two very large, very powerful Wolves stood blocking the exit.

Rachel was the first to react. Instinctively, she tilted her head to the right and expelled a blast of fire across the floor. It burst out like a stream of fire shot from a flamethrower. Only a wall of fire separated the two transformed Wolves from her and her friends.

The others who had been sitting around the table jumped to their feet, all but Mazella. The room was getting hot, fast. Quickly, they all flung off their coats, taking defensive postures. They all knew that quick thinking and working together was the only way of getting out of the restaurant alive.

Before he could react further, Norrin felt his body being controlled by an outside force. He fought to regain control trying to overcome mental

suggestions, but, he could not. His hand lifted to a striking position, his fingers spread evenly curled at the tips, and his nails fully extended. He began moving toward Nanci. At first she didn't understand why, but then, realizing he was moving to attack and seemed to be struggling, perhaps under someone else's control, she screamed out.

"Sam!" screeched Nanci.

Sam quickly turned to see Norrin towering over his wife in a completely offensive stance. Nanci was down on her knees, back against the wall, staring up at him with terror in her eyes. With Norrin's arm raised and claws extended, all it would take would be one quick clean swipe and Nanci would be dead, with Norrin as the instrument of her execution. Almost instinctively, Sam grabbed hold of Norrin, telekinetically, and held him in place using all of his mental strength.

"Wade!" Sam hollered. "I can't hold him much longer!"

Wade moved quickly. He stood between Norrin and Nanci, grabbing hold of Norrin's wrists tightly. "I've got him!" informed Wade, raising his voice.

Sam turned immediately to Grey. He stared into Grey's eyes with a scowl on his face as his lips thinned and his mouth began to frown.

Neither Sam nor Grey moved. They stood there as flames began to consume more and more of the room, simply staring at one another or so it seemed. The intense battle taking place between the two, as they attacked one another's minds may not have outwardly appeared as much but, the struggle was so brutal and so destructive, that only a telepath could truly have understood the carnage.

To the two waiters that had transformed themselves into their Wolf forms, Sam seemed distracted, vulnerable and an easy target. They both leapt into the air and through the wall of fire, lunging toward Sam. Halfway through the flaming wall, they stopped in mid-air. Their fur began to singe and their flesh began to burn and melt. They both yelped and cried out, trying to free themselves, but they could not. Finally, they were launched through the ceiling, one floor and then another. Eventually soaring high up into the night's sky and, eventually, falling downward, plummeting into the waters of the *Seine*.

Sam smiled as a stream of blood ran out of one of his nostrils and across his thinned lips. At that moment, Grey cried out, grabbing hold of his head and screaming out in pain. Sam, then, grabbed hold of the lapel's of Grey suit and using only his physical strength, threw Grey through the fifth story window and watched as he fell into the *Seine*.

Mazella looked at Sam in disbelief. "I don't believe it," he said. "You had so

much trouble with the first Wolf you encountered, yet while mentally battling Grey, you easily defeated two.”

Sam wiped his nose with the back of his hand, as the last few drops of blood dripped onto his white shirt. “The first time, I was holding back,” he informed Mazella. “This time, I wasn’t.”

The floor began to creak as the fire continued consuming the room and weakening the buildings walls.

“We need to get out of here, now!” demanded Wade, forcefully. “This floor won’t hold for long!”

Sam attempted to link all of their minds to coordinate their escape. But, after depleting his stamina and energies to defeat Grey, he had nothing left. He slumped over and fell to the floor.

“Sam!” Wade called out.

Norrin turned to see Sam collapse to the ground. He turned to Wade and said, “Wade! Get Cyndi and Nanci out of her now! Rachel! Get out! Now!”

“What about you two?” yelled Nanci, with tears in her eyes, over the roar of the flames and crackling of the burning wood.

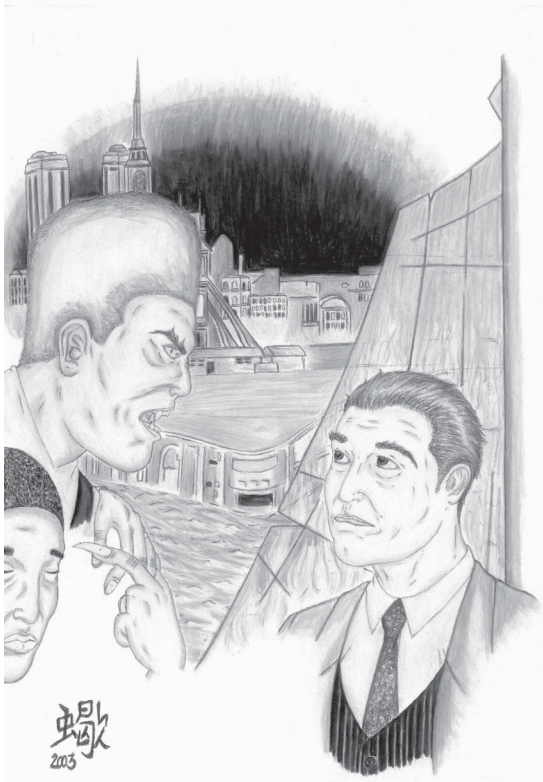
“Don’t worry about us!” he responded, to his wife. “Just go! Wade, go!”

Wade wrapped an arm around Cyndi and, then, Nanci. In turn, they each draped one of their arms around the back of his neck. With a slight crouch and then a leap, Wade jumped through the hole left by the Wolves that Sam had launched through the roof. He easily cleared the building and, as he fell toward the earth, he instructed both women to wrap their legs around his mid-section. As he landed, his knees bent, carefully stopping his forward motion. The two girls climbed off of Wade and they all turned toward the burning restaurant.

Rachel shot up into the sky like a rocket through the same hole Wade, Cyndi, and Nanci had escaped through. She then joined the others, landing right next to them as they all stared waiting in anticipation of Norrin and Sam’s exit.

Norrin lifted Sam, draping Sam’s left arm behind the back of his neck. He held Sam’s middle and ring fingers, using leverage to support Sam’s weight. He walked toward the window that Sam had thrown Grey through, stopping in front of the still seated Mazella. “You picked the wrong people to screw with, old man,” warned Norrin, his glowing eyes fixed intently on Mazella’s face, as beads of sweat poured down his forehead. “You and I, we’re gonna meet again. And before you die, you’ll watch as all your little wolf pups bow before me, their new King.”

At that, Norrin protected Sam’s body, covering it with his own, and jumped through the shattered window and into the *Seine*.



Mazella finally stood up, as flames enveloped the room behind him, and walked next to the window. He looked out to see Norrin floating on his back paddling toward the shore with one arm. Sam was also floating on his back next to Norrin, held above the water by Norrin's other arm.

"So it begins," Mazella whispered, watching as Norrin and Sam finally reached the riverbank, their friends assisting in fishing them out of the water.

Sam was beginning to return to consciousness as his wife and friends hovered close tending to his needs. Norrin lifted his eyes back toward the burning building, listening to the sirens fast approaching in the background. On top of the building stood the silhouette of a Wolf staring down upon them. It lifted its head toward the sky and howled. Norrin wanted to go after it but, he knew at that moment, his place was with his wife and his friends. He watched as the Wolf disappeared into the horizon of the burning

building's roof and, inevitably, jumped off of it.

As he watched the Wolf escape, Norrin had no doubt in his mind that it was Mazella that was fleeing, and no doubt that one day their paths would cross again.

CHAPTER XVI

Stolen Confessions

Once back at the *Hotel de Buci*, the six victorious friends convened in Sam and Cyndi's room, far too vibrant for sleep. The night's experience had gotten their blood pumping and adrenaline flowing. All were eager to talk about what had just happened and to find out exactly what had transpired between Sam and Grey.

Sam was recovering from the confrontation, but it had definitely taken its toll on both his mental and physical well being. On the way back to the hotel, the group stopped at a small street market and purchased some food to snack on as well as several bottles of wine. Some they would enjoy back at the hotel, some they would take home to the states for a later time.

After all had entered his hotel room, Sam instructed Norrin and Wade to remove all of the spying devices that had been placed inside. A very small video camera had been hidden inside an air vent. Under the night stand closest to Cyndi's side of the bed, there was a microphone for taping their conversations. Also, behind the chest of drawers was another microphone.

Norrin grabbed the camera after removing the metal vent covering and Wade collected the two microphones. Then, they both gave the devices to Rachel, who, happily, incinerated them.

“How did you know where they were?” asked Wade.

“I got a lot of information from our friend, Mr. Grey, before I threw him out of the window,” explained Sam.

“Cool,” responded Norrin. “And by the way, nice touch on that tossing him through the window, thing. I was very proud of you at that moment,” jested Norrin, clutching his chest and wiping the imaginary tear from his eye.

Sam smiled. “Well, under normal circumstances, I might not advocate such displays of violence but, in this instance, I felt it was warranted.”

“Me too!” agreed Norrin. The others had slight smiles stretched across their faces.

“So get down to it, fearless leader,” insisted Rachel. “What juicy tidbits did you score from your scuffle with Mr. Black and Blue?”

Sam chuckled, then, began to divulge the specifics of what he had managed to obtain from Grey. “While Grey and I were doing our best to destroy one another’s minds, I was able to get the upper hand and not only shut him down but, also, tear quite a bit of useful information from him, including, how our rooms had been bugged and where they had hidden the devices.”

“Shut him down?” questioned Nanci.

“Shut him down,” responded Sam. “He is no longer able to use his telepathic abilities. I turned them off.”

Everyone’s eyes widened, impressed that Sam had not only possessed the ability to defeat his enemy but, also, to permanently restrict him from any further use of his extraordinary powers.

Sam continued sharing his information. “Remember the first day when we met in this room to go out sight seeing together? Well, the maid that had entered the room as we were leaving was actually a Wolf. She and another woman set the recording devices in ours rooms.”

Wade interrupted, “I bet the other one was the woman that came to my room, right as I was heading down toward your room. I assumed she was just there to clean the room.”

“Of course you did,” continued Sam. “Why wouldn’t you? The whole ruse was set in motion to appear as innocent as possible, so as not to rouse our suspicion.”

“It’s disgusting that they were taping us and listening to our conversations,” Rachel chimed in. “And you guys,” she commented, looking toward Sam, Cyndi, Norrin, and Nanci. “I don’t want to go into all the gory details but, no doubt, you four were engaging in things that married people do. Now some sick perv little werewolf is getting his jollies watching the unedited footage.”

“Ooh, that’s so gross,” said Nanci, while crossing her arms and rubbing her shoulders.

“Yes. It’s perverse,” agreed Cyndi. “I should be able to make love to my husband without some foul-smelling pig getting off while watching.”

“They’re wolves, Cyndi, not pigs,” commented Wade, trying to add a little humor.

“Do you see me laughing, Wade,” asked Cyndi, with a cold stare on her face and irritation in her voice.

Wade splashed a dopey expression across his face and said, “Sorry. Just tryin’ to lighten the mood.”

Cyndi rolled her eyes, then turned her attention back toward her husband.

“It is rather unsettling that this was done to us,” agreed Sam. “But, it’s done and there’s nothing we can do now except prevent them from spying further. Each of your rooms are bugged in the exact same manner as this one. Unless you want to continue providing a show for Mr. Mazella and his little wolf pack, I suggest you destroy the devices once you’ve returned to your rooms.”

Everyone nodded. Once back in their rooms, they would remove and destroy all of the recording devices.

“What else did you find out?” inquired Rachel.

“A lot, actually,” responded Sam, looking at Rachel. “Remember when we were on the roof of Derek King’s apartment building and I told you about the weird feeling I’d been experiencing?”

Rachel nodded.

“Well, that happened when I telepathically performed wide-area scans. I got that feeling because it was the only sense I could get from scanning a fully transformed Wolf. Once they’ve changed into their altered form, if I passively scan an area and happen upon one, that’s the impression I’ll sense from them. When we were in the woods, however, and I aggressively tried to reach the Wolf’s mind, it caused me both mental and physical pain. For some reason, telepaths are unable to reach the mind of a fully transformed Wolf. If a telepath scans a Wolf while in human form, he or she will get nothing. It’s like trying to read a book with no print on the pages.”

“I don’t understand,” interrupted Nanci. “Mazella said that Grey had created a mental link with him before we’d even entered the restaurant. If a telepath can’t get into the mind of a Wolf, whether in human or altered form, how did Grey do it?”

“I wondered that myself,” admitted Sam. “I tried requesting Mr. Grey voluntarily divulge the answer to my question but, when he would not, I took the

answer from him. Basically, Grey was a very advanced telepath. He'd known Mazella for over 20 years. Throughout that time, he worked, year after year, to reach into Mazella's mind. Through great painstaking effort, eventually, he was able to do so. According to what he knew, few telepaths had ever been able to reach the mind of a Wolf. As long as the Wolves remained in human form, Grey could reach into their minds and mentally communicate with them."

"That's why you couldn't read those guys who were following us," stated Norrin.

"Exactly," replied Sam.

"And the passengers on the tour boat?" questioned Wade.

"They were also Wolves," said Sam. "Grey had grabbed several of the thought patterns of average passers by walking around Paris, and overlaid them on the passengers of the boat while watching from a safe distance. I didn't know any of those people. I'd never met any of them before. So, with a quick passive scan, I assumed the minds I had sensed were those of the others on the boat."

"This Grey sounds powerful. Maybe, even more powerful than you," commented Nanci. "How were you able to beat him?"

"Well, don't get carried away, Nanci," said Sam, in an attempt to defend his pride. "I wouldn't exactly say he was more powerful than me."

"Oh, please!" Norrin blurted out, with a smile on his face. "You were nervous about this guy before you even knew who he was. Admit it. We all saw it in your face."

"I was a little nervous," admitted Sam, begrudgingly. "But, still, I overcame any self doubt I may have been feeling and showed our friend, Mr. Grey, that there was more to me than meets the eye."

"Robots in disguise," Wade blurted out, imitating a mechanical robotic sounding voice, as he jokingly assumed an attack stance. This time, everyone laughed.

"Anyway, in answer to your question, Nanci," Sam continued, "think of it as a martial arts match. Although the two fighters may have different strength and skill levels, just because one knows a certain move or combination of techniques his or her opponent doesn't, does not necessarily mean the first individual is a better fighter or more powerful. In actuality, if number two has perfected the skills he does know, and is possibly a bit stronger than his opponent, he most likely will win. In my case, Mr. Grey may have had a few more tricks up his sleeve but, in the end, I was the stronger telepath."

"You go, Mantis," congratulated Rachel, smiling at Sam, feeling a bit of pride in his accomplishment.

Sam smiled. "Mazella does have a bit of information on each one of us. Once we're back in the states, we should probably contact our families and warn them to be watchful. They shouldn't stop living their lives, but they should attempt to be prepared in case their lives become endangered. Honestly, I think Mazella will leave us alone, at least for a while. He got a small taste tonight of what we're all capable of, and I don't think he's in a major hurry to jump into a war with us."

Norrin remained silent. Deep down he knew he had already declared war on Mazella, verbally and to his face. He struggled with whether or not he would share his final comments he had delivered to Mazella with his friends. After a few seconds had passed, he decided, for now, he would keep them to himself. Perhaps later, once back in the States, he would share them then.

"I found out a few more things from Mr. Grey, regarding Mazella," Sam continued sharing. "You know that little story he shared with us regarding his overthrowing the previous Wolf King? Well, the guy was his father. Mazella was the illegitimate son of the then-married King and some peasant girl. At the time, illegitimate children were looked down upon, and the idea of the King of Wolves involved in an adulterous relationship with a peasant girl, would've proved to be scandalous. So, the young girl left Rome and carried her child to term in a small village near Milan. There she delivered him and watched him grow to manhood. She's still alive, although Mazella doesn't keep in close contact with her. When he was a child, she didn't tell him about his heritage, being a Wolf I mean. So, when the old woman from his village came to him and made clear what he actually was, he began to think of her as his mother. She, however, is dead now.

"Mazella's father never acknowledged his existence or accepted him as his son. Nonetheless, he had a deep desire to know his father. I can understand that, I guess. But, eventually, the more Mazella found out about his father, the more he detested the man. The King of that time squandered what little money he had and extorted money from his own people when he felt the need. And as far as how many illegitimate children he had, he'd lost count. He had a mistress in every village, city, and territory across Europe and parts of Asia. That's why, when he was old enough and strong enough, Mazella killed him and took his throne."

"It's the old, daddy-doesn't-love-me-so-I-killed-him complex," commented Rachel.

"Pretty much," replied Sam. "Mazella didn't know Grey had that information, though. There were several bits and pieces of information Grey had extracted from Mazella's mind without his knowledge or permission."

"That sounds vaguely familiar," said Rachel, looking toward the ceiling with

one eye closed while scratching her chin. "I can't quite put my finger on it, but, I've heard of someone somewhere doing something similar before."

Sam rolled his eyes and continued speaking. "Some things Grey discovered were just personal unimportant bits of information like, Mazella's disappointment with some of his children, specifically his youngest son. Past political figures he'd had dealings with, were among some of the pieces of extracted info. For instance, you know he actually knew Joan of Arc?" Sam turned to Norrin and Wade. "Remember that theory I ran by you two at *Notre Dame*? Well, I was right. Mazella tried to explain to Joan on two separate occasions that she had been born with certain gifts and abilities and that she should use them to her own advantage, instead of building a throne for Charles the seventh. But, Joan refused to believe Mazella's explanation, insisting that God had endowed her with his Holy Spirit, and that she must devote her life to doing His will. The poor girl died in ignorance."

"That sucks," commented Rachel.

"Yeah, I know," Sam concurred. "But, on a more positive note, I got some juicy details we may be able to use to our advantage, or at least find incredibly interesting. In the late 1800s, Mazella lived in London. He was married at the time but, I guess, had chosen to follow in his father's footsteps. He, too, had a mistress. Several over the years, in fact. But, this one, she was special. He actually had fallen deeply in love with her for some unknown reason. Perhaps it was more lust than love, wanting to possess something he could truly never have. She was a prostitute named Mary Jane Kelly. For those of you not up on your British history, Mary Kelly was the last known victim killed by Jack the Ripper.

"According to the information Grey had appropriated, our King of Wolves was very much in love with this woman. He had even promised her he'd have his wife at the time murdered, so that he and Mary could be married. But, Mary was so wrapped up in her life as a prostitute and in love with the idea of living from moment to moment, seeking out new experiences, and satisfying her lustful desires that she refused to commit to Mazella. Sure, she gave lip service, expressing her love and pledging her loyalty but, behind the scenes, she was drinking herself ragged and fulfilling the desires of any man, woman, or beast willing to pay the 50 pence she charged.

"When Mazella discovered this, catching her in the bed of some drunken sailor, he was furious. Mary looked up at him from under her satisfied customer, laughing and squealing with pleasure. Mazella, completely distraught, left immediately, but returned later in wait for the man to leave the room. After Mary's customer had exited the room and descended the stairs to the street below, Mazella unexpectedly pounced on him while in his Wolf form. He tore

out the man's throat and ripped apart his stomach, removing the man's intestines with his piercing fangs and powerful jowls. After that, he walked up the stairs leading to the room where Mary Kelly was still dressing. Reverted to his human form, he kicked open the door completely startling Mary. He pointed at her, blood dripping from his hand and mouth, and told her that she had no idea what she had given up. Then he swore he'd kill her, but, not before she'd seen him destroy everything that meant anything to her.

"In exacting his revenge, Mazella lashed out at Mary in the only way he knew would cause her pain. He killed her closest friends, deliberately and brutally. Lastly, after he'd destroyed everything that Mary cared about, viciously, he killed her too."

"So you're saying Dominic Mazella is Jack the Ripper?" questioned Wade.

"One and the same," informed Sam.

"And this helps us how, exactly?" Wade inquired further.

"It's knowledge, Wade," said Sam. "Knowledge of your enemy is power against them. Even old or minute knowledge."

"It's definitely interesting if nothing else," added Rachel. "There is no statute of limitation on murder, you know."

"So what are you suggesting, Rach?" asked Norrin. "That we chain up old Dominic, take him to Scotland Yard and declare we've captured Jack the Ripper? Oh, and by the way, he's a werewolf. Well, not actually a werewolf the way you understand, but a man born over six hundred years ago with the ability to transform into a wolf-like being?"

"They'd strap backward jackets on us, lock us up, and throw away all the keys," said Wade.

"I'm not saying we should perform a citizen's arrest or anything, guys. I just thought you'd all like having a little dirt on Mazella considering he has so much information on each of us," stated Sam.

Everyone reflected expressions that Sam's reasoning made sense and nodded in accord.

"Got anything else?" asked Rachel.

"Uh-huh." Sam continued. "You know how in all the old horror movies, from Lon Chaney's Wolfman to Curse of the Werewolf, everyone always uses silver weapons to kill the werewolf? Well, those ideas are based in reality."

"Reality?" questioned Cyndi, with her arms folded. "You're talking about humans that turn into walking, talking, wolf creatures, and you have the audacity to use the word, reality, in the same sentence?"

"Well, whatever you want to call it, silver does hurt them," Sam continued.

“Under normal circumstances, if not killed immediately from a wound, even what may seem to be a mortal wound, they’ll heal at a substantially fast rate. But, silver, silver slows their healing process and causes some type of allergic reaction, which retards their normal recuperative abilities. If a mortal wound is inflicted on them with a silver weapon, they usually will die.”

“Good to know,” interjected Norrin.

“I didn’t give you that information so that you could go out and hunt and kill Wolves, Norrin,” counseled Sam. “Remember, they’re still human. They have gifts and abilities just like you and I.”

“Hey, did I say anything about hunting and killing?” asked Norrin. “But, if I should happen to be carrying a silver bladed sword and some unfortunate Wolf accidentally runs into it once or twice, impaling himself, well, accidents happen. Or say, I’m carrying around a silver-tipped staff, minding my own business, and some unobservant Wolf comes around a corner, not watching where he’s going, and smashes his head against it a few dozen times. Hey, ‘time and unforeseen occurrence befall us all.’”

“You just make sure you don’t go out of your way to give ‘time and unforeseen occurrence’ too much of a helping hand,” instructed Sam.

Norrin held up his hands and shrugged his shoulders, while sharing a closed mouth grin, which stretched across his face.

“Once we’re back in Baltimore, I have a friend who I’ll have check our homes for recording devices and set up security systems for each of us,” offered Sam. “I’ll also do the same for any of your family members you may be concerned about, and cover the cost entirely. Even if it means flying my friend cross country to do the job,” promised Sam, turning to Norrin.

Norrin nodded. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

They were all beginning to tire at that point. Their adrenaline rushes had worn off and, now, sleep was needed. As Norrin, Nanci, Wade, and Rachel made their way to the door, after collecting all of their belongings and items purchased from the street market, Sam reminded them to debug their rooms. They all nodded in agreement and bade Sam and Cyndi goodnight.

Tomorrow, they would be heading for home. Even though the last few days of their stay in Paris had proved to be unsettling, the first six days of the vacation had been most enjoyable and their final night had ended on a positive note. They had confronted their adversary, defeated him, and had gotten answers to all of their questions, having suffered minimal damage. Yes, it was a good end to a maddening two days. Tonight, they would experience a restful sleep. Feeling safe and at peace in the comfort of their beds.

CHAPTER XVII

Silent Mourning

Upon arriving home, Sam, telekinetically, moved the suitcases from the front veranda to the upstairs *dormitorio principal*. He was now rested from his skirmish with Mr. Grey and wanted to exercise his mental abilities. After all of the suitcases were upstairs, Cyndi began unpacking them.

While unpacking, Cyndi looked over at her husband several times. There was an obvious concern in her eyes and in her heart. Sam could sense her distress as she hung the clothes in the closet and put them away in their drawers.

"I'm fine," he assured her, with compassion in his tone. "I'm almost back to one-hundred percent."

"I know," said Cyndi, continuing with her work.

Sam walked up behind her and removed the hanger from her hand and embraced her tightly. "Cyn, I'm okay. We're okay."

"Sam," Cyndi spoke up, after closing her eyes, "I was really scared this time. When you and Grey were fighting, I wanted to help you. I wanted so badly to join your mental battle and fight alongside you. But, I sensed how strong he was. I could feel it as he struck out at you, again and again; trying to tear away at your sanity, remove your memories and experiences, and to shut down your mental processes completely, leaving you a mindless vegetable. I was terrified."

“Cyndi, it’s good that you didn’t join in. You could have been seriously injured,” noted Sam, as he turned her around and looked directly into her eyes. “You may have even been killed.”

“And you couldn’t have been?” she questioned.

“Yes. I could’ve been. But, I’ve trained long and hard during the past seven years to perfect my abilities. I know what I’m capable of, and if I’d have felt that I was completely out of my league, I never would have fought Grey on that level. I would have relied more so on my telekinesis and martial arts.”

“This was supposed to be a getaway from that life.”

“Yes. It was. But, I think we need to realize and accept one certain fact about our lives. Even if we stop doing what we do, even if we put away the costumes and lock them up in a trunk and toss it into the sea, we still will be different. Our powers, our abilities, they make us different from all of the average, normal, run-of-the-mill humans we coexist with every day. No matter how much we may want to or how much effort we try to put into it, we will never be exactly like them. We’ll never live their lives or be one of them, Cyndi. And those who know or find out who we are and what we’re capable of, they may force us into situations that we not only don’t want, but, didn’t go looking for. Just like Mazella did.

“If that happens, the only thing we can do is continue on with our lives and try to have as much happiness as we possibly can, despite those barriers. And should an obstacle stand in our way along the road, we face it and, if necessary, remove it from our path. Then, we continue down the road. But, Cyndi, if you live in fear, and plan, and conduct every step of your life around hiding and running from those fears and obstacles, and you try to deny who and what you are, then they win. They win, Cyndi. They don’t suffer. They don’t endure the sleepless nights hiding from shadows beneath their covers. They don’t walk around irritable, angry, or dispirited. You do. And when you do, it makes them happy. It makes them overjoyed, because they know they’ve beaten you. They’ve conquered you. They’ve broken you. Don’t let them break you, Cyndi. Don’t let them win.”

Sam’s words had reached Cyndi’s heart. She finally understood, more fully, why Sam had chosen to live his life the way he had and why Norrin and Wade had adopted many of his philosophies. Regarding the vacation to Paris, everyone had gone with the intension of having a good time, of sharing the experience with their closest friends, and to escape the rampant chaos of their everyday lives. No one had planned on encountering Dominic Mazella or gone with hopeful anticipation of having their lives thrown into utter anarchy. But,

when the unforeseen did occur, they faced and conquered it. And, then, they continued on with their lives.

Cyndi looked up at Sam, her arms wrapped tightly around him. "You're right," she said, smiling proudly at her husband. "I guess since I developed these abilities, I wanted to feel normal. I went out of my way to be even more normal than everyone else. I surrounded myself with as many things that reminded me of the so-called normal people. I didn't regret the fact that I possessed special gifts, but, I overcompensated for that aspect of my life by immersing myself in as much normalcy as possible. You're right, though. There's no way to ensure or guarantee that your life won't be touched by some unexpected event or occurrence. The only thing you can do, if or when it happens, is accept it, fight through it, and keep on going once it's over."

Sam smiled at his wife with admiration, love, and respect because she had opened her heart and mind and come to that conclusion.

"That, of course, doesn't mean that I condone or promote actively seeking out these types of situations, or eagerly and actively pursuing them," added Cyndi. "But, when one falls into your lap without provocation, the best thing you can do is overcome it and move on."

"That's my girl," replied Sam. "Now, I'm gonna run over to the office for a bit to make sure they didn't burn the place down while I was away. I also want to see if we have any potential novels we're considering publishing. Are you gonna be okay?"

"Yes," replied Cyndi. "I'll be fine. I need to touch bases with Nicole to see how things are going with production for the new show. Opening night is less than two months away, and she's been overseeing things while we were away."

"Okay. Well, if you need me, call me on my car phone or at the office. I shouldn't be there too late." Of course, Cyndi could contact Sam at the speed of thought at anytime she wished, but Sam wanted to work in conjunction with Cyndi's desire for a degree of normalcy. "Once I'm home, we can spend a quiet, uneventful evening together listening to music in front of the fireplace."

"Hopefully not too uneventful," replied Cyndi, with a flirtatious grin on her face.

Sam lifted his eyebrows twice, returned her smile, and then headed downstairs toward the parking garage.

After she had finished unpacking, Cyndi changed into a pair of sweats and walked downstairs to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of mint-sweetened iced tea. Once she had filled her glass, she grabbed a remote, which activated a centralized stereo system. It was connected to multiple ceiling speakers

positioned throughout the house. Cyndi pushed the button marked POWER and, to her pleasant surprise, Silent Morning by Noel was playing at the time. Cyndi increased the volume and began dancing around. Silent Morning was one of her favorite songs. The way in which she moved would have reduced the most powerful of men into a blithering idiot. Cyndi's Latino blood had endowed her with an impeccable dancing ability and an unmatched rhythm.

As the song faded and finally ended, Cyndi grabbed the receiver from the phone in the *comedor* and dialed Nicole's home phone number.

Nicole was Cyndi's assistant and had been left in charge of pre-production for Cyndi's newest play, *Twilight's Edge*. Both *Paradox Tears* and *Mourning Vesper*, Cyndi's two previous plays, had done well and were given rave reviews by not only *The Baltimore Sun* but, also, several local events periodicals. Cyndi had put a lot of herself into writing her most recent script and hoped this production might do even better than their predecessors.

Unable to reach Nicole at home, Cyndi phoned her theater in downtown Baltimore.

"Hello," said a voice on the other end.

"Hi. This is Cyndi. Is Nicole there by chance?"

"Hi Cyndi. This is Doug. Yeah, she's here. Hold on a sec, and I'll go get her."

"Thanks Doug," replied Cyndi.

Doug was one of the stage hands involved with building sets and creating props. Cyndi had hired him because, although a diligent and meticulous worker, Doug had been out of work for some time. He was married to one of the women Cyndi often used in making and gathering costumes. So, when Cyndi found out he had been without work for a while, she offered him a job and paid him handsomely.

Within less than a minute, Nicole had come to the phone. "Hey, slave driver," greeted Nicole.

"Oh yeah, that's me. Mrs. Slave driver," remarked Cyndi.

The two laughed.

"I just got in this morning and I wanted to see how things were coming along," said Cyndi.

"Well, for the most part, things are good," replied Nicole. "At least things surrounding the production. The sets are under construction, costumes are being made or purchased, and the actors are learning their lines pretty quickly."

"Good," said Cyndi, relieved that everything was moving along as planned. "But, you said things were good surrounding the production. Is there a problem outside of the production? Are you doing all right?"

"Me? Oh yeah. I'm fine. I've been a little busy while you were living it up in

Paris, but, I was able to keep things under control.”

Cyndi thought to herself, *Living it up? If you only knew.*

“Actually, Cyndi, there was something that happened to Tracey. You know the high school student you’d chosen to play Jennifer Morgan?”

“Yeah,” acknowledged Cyndi. “I called and spoke to her mother the Saturday before I left for Paris. I had asked her to let Tracey know that she’d gotten the part. Her mother was ecstatic. She said Tracey had been anxious about it all week.”

“I know. Tracey was so hoping she’d get the part. But, we had to go with your second choice. Tracey won’t be playing the part of Jennifer Morgan in this production. She may never play any part ever again,” Nicole informed her.

“Why? What do you mean? What happened, Nicole?”

Nicole began to explain to Cyndi what had happened to Tracey. She detailed the experience the way it had been explained to her by Tracey’s father. How a man had come into Tracey’s work and belittled her and her fellow employee. How he had threatened them both and assaulted and killed a mall security guard. Finally, she described how the same man who had threatened the two adolescents, unexpectedly, snuck up behind them on their way to Tracey’s car and, then, beat Tracey’s co-worker nearly to death. After that, beat Tracey into submission and raped her, leaving them both in the second-story parking structure of Golden Ring Mall. Sadly, Nicole added, it was the same Saturday that Cyndi had informed Tracey’s mother that Tracey had gotten the part of Jennifer Morgan.

Cyndi’s eyes began to tear as she felt the pain in her chest and the knot in her stomach. “Oh, my God,” she whispered, in one breath.

“Yeah. I know. The cast and crew were caught completely off guard by the news. I even shut down early that day because nobody was able or even wanted to keep working. They all just wanted to go home to be with their families and thank God they were okay. We all visited her while she was in the hospital. Everyone chipped in and, after she was released, we sent flowers to her house. I found out about it the day you left for Paris. Her father called the theater and told me. I decided I’d wait to tell you after you got back. I didn’t want to ruin your vacation.”

“Thanks Nicole,” said Cyndi appreciatively, wiping the tears rolling down her cheeks. “And thanks for rallying everyone to let Tracey know how much we all care about her.”

“No problem. We do all care about her. I’m just, I don’t know. An experience like that for a girl so young and in the prime of her life, I’m just afraid

she may never recover. I mean, thank God she didn't get pregnant! Then, she'd have to make the decision of whether to keep the baby and raise it, give it up for adoption, or maybe she'd even have considered an abortion. Decisions like that are something a 17-year-old girl should never have to face."

"I know. I know. Listen, Nicole, I um, I was going to come down there today but, ah, now instead, I think I'll go and visit Tracey and her family, and let them all know that we're still thinking about her."

"Okay. Okay, yeah. That's good. I have things under control here. I'm sure her parents would welcome a visit and hopefully it may lift Tracey's spirits. Tell her we all miss and love her, and that our thoughts and prayers are with her."

"I will. Thanks again, Nicole."

"Don't mention it. I'll talk to you soon."

"Okay, bye."

"Bye."

The news touched Cyndi deeply. In all her life, she had never had anything so terrible happen to any of her relatives or friends. She had never lost anyone in death, she had never known anyone to be mugged or assaulted, and, most certainly, she had never known anyone who had been raped.

Cyndi ran upstairs to her *dormitorio* and changed into a knit sweater and a pair of jeans. She didn't want to appear overly formal nor did she want to look sloppy. Once dressed, she grabbed her key ring and purse and headed toward the parking garage.

As she sat down in her silver Mercedes, she removed the address book from her purse. She kept the names, addresses, and phone numbers of everyone affiliated with the theater in the book, so that no matter where she was, she would always have access to them. Cyndi found Tracey's name right away and verified her address. Tracey lived in Essex, so Cyndi quickly rolled out of the garage and began the 45 minute drive toward her destination.

While on the beltway, Cyndi began recalling the events that had taken place the Saturday before she'd left for Paris. It was the day she and her friends had begun the day shopping at The Galleria downtown. It was the day she and all her friends and husband had enjoyed lunch at David's restaurant, The Silver Dolphin. And afterward, she had, unintentionally, wound up projecting hurtful thoughts to Sam, due to her frustrations regarding his repeated dangerous activities. It was also the day the entire group had reunited to capture an alleged drug dealer named Derek King but, instead, found his decapitated body, which had wound up that way due to, of all things, a man capable of transforming into an immensely large humanoid wolf.

All around, it was an unyielding day whose only positive aspect was that it hadn't taken the lives of any of its victims. Even Tracey, although severely traumatized, was still alive.

Before reaching Tracey's home, Cyndi stopped at a florist in the Rosedale area and picked up a bouquet of tulips, Tracey's favorite flower, and a card. After writing a brief but encouraging note inside of the card, Cyndi continued on to Tracey's house.

Tracey's family lived in a two-story townhouse. It was in a nice neighborhood where, during summer months, the laughter of children often filled the streets and the feeling of family unity was a prominent factor in lives of those in the community. But, when Cyndi approached Tracey's front door, she couldn't help but notice the feelings of despair, grief, and hopelessness emanating from within the home. Cyndi took a deep breath, let it out and, then, rung the doorbell.

A woman opened the door greeting Cyndi with an almost forced pleasant expression, trying to hide her sorrow behind a counterfeit smile.

Cyndi spoke up right away, extending a kindly expression on her face. "Hi. Mrs. Spinnerman, I'm Cyndi. I'm the owner of the theater that Tracey's performed at from time to time. We spoke briefly on the phone a few weeks back."

Mrs. Spinnerman recognized Cyndi's voice and remembered speaking to her once or twice when visiting the downtown theater, while watching her daughter perform. "Yes, Cyndi. I remember you." She glanced downward, noticing the flowers in Cyndi's hand and, then, looked back toward Cyndi's face.

"I wanted to drop by to see how Tracey was doing," said Cyndi, forcing herself to widen her smile so as to appear as good-natured as possible. "I've been out of town for a few weeks and just got back this morning. When I called my assistant, Nicole, she told me what had happened to Tracey."

Mrs. Spinnerman moved her eyes away from Cyndi's face and looked down at the ground as her lips tightened. Between the embarrassment and the grief in her heart she was experiencing, Mrs. Spinnerman was at wit's end.

"Mrs. Spinnerman, I am so very sorry about what happened to Tracey. I just wanted to stop by to tell her how much all of us from the theater really care about her, and that we all love and miss her very much," assured Cyndi. Her expression was one that clearly reflected heartfelt and earnest concern.

Mrs. Spinnerman smiled, after seeing the empathy in Cyndi's eyes, and said, "Thank you, sweetie. Come in. Come on in."

Once Cyndi had entered, Mrs. Spinnerman closed the door behind her and

locked it. Cyndi noticed all the shades had been drawn and the curtains were still closed although it was mid-afternoon. "Tracey really hasn't felt like company," explained Mrs. Spinnerman. "But, I think she'll make an exception for you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Spinnerman," said Cyndi, as she followed the woman up a flight of stairs and to a room where the door was closed.

Mrs. Spinnerman knocked on the closed door and began to speak. "Trace, it's Mom. There's a visitor to see you."

"I don't want to see anyone, Mom," replied the fragile voice from behind the door.

Mrs. Spinnerman sighed, looking toward Cyndi, then forced a smile. "Trace, you might wanna reconsider. It's Cyndi. The woman who owns the theater where you perform."

The door cracked open ever so slightly as Tracey peered through the opening to see who was standing in the hallway. Slowly, she opened the door to see her mom and Cyndi, who was holding a bouquet of flowers. Tracey could see the fake smile her mom had recently grown accustomed to wearing. Cyndi, too, was smiling in an attempt to appear as non-threatening as possible and, hopefully, to lift Tracey's spirits.

"Hi, Tracey," said Cyndi, in a gentle soothing tone.

"Hi," Tracey mumbled, looking at Cyndi, and then shifting her attention toward the floor.

"Can I come in?" asked Cyndi.

"Um, okay. I guess," Tracey answered, still averting her eyes toward the carpeted floor.

Cyndi turned to Mrs. Spinnerman and asked, "Is it all right if I spend some time alone with Tracey, Mrs. Spinnerman?"

A look of concern came over Tracey's mother.

Cyndi noticed it immediately and said, "I'll make sure Tracey doesn't exert herself or wind up overly excited. I promise."

Mrs. Spinnerman smiled, nodded, and walked back down the flight of stairs.

After Cyndi had entered the room, she closed the door behind her. She then handed Tracey the flowers and card she had brought for her. Tracey smelled the flowers, then looked up at Cyndi and said, "Thank you."

There was emptiness in Tracey's eyes and an indescribable pain, which Cyndi could feel emanating from Tracey's heart. She had bruises that had partially healed on her face. There were also multiple bruise marks on her upper arms that were revealed by her short sleeve shirt. She had stitches over her left eye and on her lower lip. Both were still slightly swollen.

There was a chair near the window in Tracey's room, so, Cyndi asked if it would be all right if she sat down. Tracey nodded and, after Cyndi was seated, Tracey sat down on her bed, setting her flowers down beside her.

"I just got back into town today," informed Cyndi. "I've been away for two weeks." Cyndi specifically did not tell Tracey she had been in Paris, so as not to upset Tracey. No doubt, the idea of Cyndi gallivanting around Paris, while Tracey was there in Baltimore recovering from assault and rape, would have done little to make her feel better. "I called the theater and spoke to Nicole earlier. She let me know what had happened while I was away."

Tracey sat silently, not making eye contact with Cyndi.

"How are you doing?" asked Cyndi, feeling regret after asking what she felt was an incredibly stupid question. Besides, Cyndi knew how Tracey felt. Exactly, how she felt.

"I'm okay, I guess," responded Tracey, stroking the fur of the stuffed teddy bear lying near her pillow.

"It looks like you're healing up pretty well," said Cyndi, grasping for anything encouraging to say.

Tracey didn't respond to Cyndi's comment at first. For a few seconds, she simply sat staring blankly at the wall, continuing to pet the toy bear. Finally, she said, "I'm sorry I ruined the play."

"What? What do you mean?" responded Cyndi. "You didn't ruin the play."

"I was supposed to play Jennifer Morgan and because I, I, because of what happened, now I'm not. I'm sorry. I let you down. I let everyone down." Tears were forming in Tracey's eyes as she reached for the stuffed animal and clutched it tightly to her chest.

"Tracey, listen to me," said Cyndi, in a calm yet firm voice. "You in no way, shape, or form let anyone down. Everybody completely understands why you've chosen to take some time away. Under the circumstances, it's expected. It's normal. If you hadn't requested the time off, I would have insisted upon it. You haven't done anything wrong."

Cyndi stood up and walked over to the bed. She sat down on the edge of the bed right in front of Tracey. As she reached for Tracey's hand, instinctively, Tracey flinched backward. Cyndi understood Tracey's hesitation in being touched and did not take it personally. Nonetheless, Cyndi carefully took Tracey's hand and began rubbing it. Tracey lifted her head, finally making eye contact with Cyndi. Tears were nearly dripping from Tracey's eyes, so Cyndi gently removed the teddy bear from Tracey's grasp and moved in closer, embracing her tightly, in a display of comfort and affection.

Although she wasn't making any sound, Cyndi could feel Tracey's body quiver as she broke down into tears. "That's right. You get it out," consoled Cyndi. "You get it all out. It's okay," she said, while patting and rubbing Tracey's back.

After a short time, Tracey pulled back away from Cyndi, sobbing and wiping her nose. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be crying all over you. That sweater is probably worth more than my whole family," she said, wiping her eyes.

Cyndi immediately spoke up, grabbing hold of Tracey's hand and, again, rubbing it tenderly. "Tracey, I'm your friend. I will always be your friend. And the very most important and essential part of being a friend is to stand by your friends when they're sad, or upset, or hurting and in pain. And you stay by their side, night and day if necessary, supporting them in whatever way they need you to until they're better again. Even if it means sacrificing a sweater," said Cyndi with a smile, hoping to add just a bit of humor.

Tracey couldn't help but crack a smile.

"I'm here for you," continued Cyndi. "I will stand by your side as long as you need me to be there. And I'll stay there until you're better."

"They called me a whore," said Tracey, in a quiet whisper.

"Who?" Cyndi's expression immediately changed from caring and sympathetic to anger and disgust. "Who called you those things?"

"The kids at school. I went back for a day after, after everything happened. But, some people had already heard about what happened to me and some of the boys said that I wanted it. That I liked it."

"Kids are often cruel, and teenage boys are often moronic imbeciles. They say stupid things like that because they're simple-minded, asinine fools, unable to articulate an intelligent thought. Those things they called you in no way describe who or what you are. It wasn't your fault, and you didn't ask for it."

"I don't know if I'll ever want to act again. I don't know if I'll ever want anything again. I don't know if anyone will ever want me again."

"Of course they will," assured Cyndi. "Your family loves you. Your friends love you. All of us down at the theater love you. Before I came, Nicole specifically asked me to tell you that everyone at the theater wanted you to know how much they all love and miss you. And one day, a man will meet you and fall so deeply in love with you that nothing will be able to change that."

"But if he finds out what happened to me, he won't—"

"When he finds out what happened to you, he'll feel so sad that you had to endure such an unspeakable act, that he'll spend the rest of his life loving you, and trying to make your life as perfect as he possibly can, in the hope that, one

day, that experience will gradually fade from your memory.”

Tracey’s chin began to quiver as tears rolled down her cheeks. Cyndi, at that point, sent a mental suggestion to Tracey that she was beginning to tire. Tracey’s eyes had grown heavy as she looked up at Cyndi and said, “I feel a little sleepy.”

“That’s okay. You should get some rest. It’ll help your body heal quicker. I’ll visit you again, soon, if that’s okay, to see how you’re feeling.”

Tracey nodded, her eyes barely able to stay open. Cyndi assisted Tracey as she lay down and her head hit her pillow. Within seconds, Tracey was fast asleep, quite possibly the most restful sleep she’d had in weeks. Cyndi covered Tracey with her comforter and knelt by Tracey’s bed, right beside her.

Cyndi, then, brushed away the hair from Tracey’s face and placed the palm of her hand on Tracey’s forehead. Carefully, Cyndi began reviewing the day’s events Tracey had experienced the day she was assaulted.

She watched from Tracey’s perspective as a tall, muscularly built man with blonde hair began belittling Tracey and her co-worker. How he talked down to them and humiliated them by calling them names and, eventually, even threatening their lives. She watched as the man snatched his tray of food from the counter after Tracey had gathered his order. She felt the sinking feeling of Tracey’s heart and the knot in her stomach as she watched the man eat his food and, then, push his tray onto the floor while sneering at her.

She watched as the man picked up the trash that he had pushed onto the floor and, then, slam the same tray against the chest of a security guard that had insisted the man pick up his mess.

She experienced the same surprising fear that Tracey had felt as Tom told her the security guard, slumped over on the asphalt near a puddle of mucky rainwater, was dead. And the surprise, as she felt incredibly strong hands squeeze her arms until they hurt, while lifting her in the air and twisting the flesh on her arms until they burned.

She experienced the relief as she fell to the ground, free of the horrible man’s grip as Tom came to her rescue. She felt her ears ring as the sound of Tom’s shrilling scream penetrated her eardrums. She watched as the bone, which had torn through his skin, ripped Tom’s pants, after their attacker had stomped Tom’s knee causing his leg to bend entirely backward.

She felt her heart beat faster as she suffered a smack across her face, and, then, another. She winced as she saw the assailant’s face so close to her own, as he insisted she was going to enjoy what he was about to do to her. Terror engulfed Cyndi, as she experienced Tracey kicking and screaming as her pants were torn off. She cried out for help again and again. Why wasn’t anyone

coming? Why didn't anyone help? Then, she felt a punch to the face, and another. Followed by a punch to the stomach, knocking the wind out of her and, then, another and another. She felt Tracey's violation, as with no more strength to defend herself, the attacker forced himself on her. And when he was finished, he stood up and kicked her in her side.

Cyndi watched as the man drove away in his car and the rain spattered against Tracey's face. She turned toward Tom, beaten and broken, as he reached for her, wanting to help but unable to move.

Tears were streaming down Cyndi's face and her nose was running. She didn't realize it until she broke her link with Tracey. Although she was no longer reliving the experience, Cyndi's chest hurt and she had to make a conscious effort to get her breathing under control.

Cyndi's eyes were red and swollen from her tears. She wiped them from her cheeks with the back of her hand and wiped her nose with the side of her index finger. She placed her hand back on Tracey's forehead, and again closing her eyes, she began to remove certain thoughts and feelings. She didn't remove the entire experience from Tracey's mind, too many people were already aware of what had taken place. But, she took away the lingering anguish, which ate at Tracey's soul and ripped away her spirit. She removed feelings of degradation and any lack of self worth and self respect. She strengthened Tracey's fortitude, so that she could again stand tall and walk with self pride.

Then, completely fatigued, Cyndi removed her hand from Tracey's forehead and sat in silence for several minutes. After that, she stood up, gathered what few things were hers, tenderly kissed Tracey's forehead and exited the room, closing the door behind her. Cyndi then walked down stairs.

Mrs. Spinnerman was folding clothes and watching television. Cyndi spoke out as she reached the bottom stair. "Mrs. Spinnerman, Tracey was very tired and fell asleep. I shut the door to her room after I said goodbye. She seems to feel a bit better. I think you'll notice an improvement in her frame of mind when she wakes up."

"I hope so," said Mrs. Spinnerman. "Maybe she needed to reconnect with something she loved, in order to work toward getting back to her old self. I hoped someone would be able to reach her."

"Well, I think I was able to reach her. Who knows, before we know it, she may be auditioning for the lead role in her next play," said Cyndi, with a smile on her face.

"That would be a miracle," said Mrs. Spinnerman, hope ringing in her voice. Mrs. Spinnerman walked Cyndi to the door and thanked her again for

coming over. As Cyndi exited, she smiled again, trying to encourage Mrs. Spinnerman, then waived goodbye. Once the door had closed behind her, Cyndi's smile faded to a scowl.

As she walked to her car, she projected a thought, immediately reaching its intended recipient several miles away.

“Norrin. This is Cyndi. Respond at once if you’re receiving this message.”

CHAPTER XVIII

“Vengeance is Mine”

After arriving at BWI Airport in Baltimore, Norrin and Nanci moved their luggage from the baggage pick-up to the airport’s lower level front entrance. Sam had arranged for four limousines to pick him and his friends up and drive them to their homes. Sam and Cyndi had gotten into one and had already headed toward their part of town. Wade and Rachel each had their individual limousines, which chauffeured them to their respective homes in two separate towns of the greater Baltimore area.

Norrin and Nanci were the last to leave the airport. As Norrin placed the final piece of luggage into the trunk of the vehicle, he noticed the distant expression on his wife’s face. It was a look of concern seemingly coupled with grief.

The driver had opened the rear door waiting for both of his passengers to enter. Norrin walked up next to Nanci and placed the palm of his hand on her back. “We’re all set,” he said, looking into her eyes wearing a halfhearted grin. Nanci forced a smile as she looked up toward her husband. Norrin hated to see that. Before they had left for Paris, he had seen that forced smile many a time. He had come to easily recognize the difference between Nanci’s true happiness and contentment with one of her smiles, and a façade or pretense of well being

with a fake or forced smile. While in Paris, before their encounter with Dominic Mazella, Norrin had seen his wife smile and even laugh heartily, reflecting her high spirits. But, now, back in Maryland, Nanci's joy seemed to have all but left her.

Once they were both inside of the vehicle, the driver closed the door behind them. He then took his station in the driver's seat and pulled away from the curbside heading toward Carney.

Nanci took Norrin's hand and held it tightly as she looked out the window, seemingly scanning for danger.

"Hey, what's wrong?" asked Norrin.

A look of frustration spread across Nanci's face. She began to whisper, "How do we know this driver isn't a Wolf?"

Norrin smiled, looked his wife directly in the eye, and whispered, "We don't."

Nanci's expression changed from frustration to irritation. "I'm serious," she continued whispering. "What if he raises the glass plate that separates his section from ours and fills our compartment with poison gas or something?"

Norrin flashed an expression reflecting he felt Nanci was being absurd. "You've seen one too many 007 movies. Even if that were, by some stretch of the imagination, to happen, it's going to take a few seconds for enough gas to fill our compartment to even begin to effect us. I can have my adrenaline factor up and active within a fraction of a second. If I see, smell, or hear gas filling our compartment, I can kick the door off its hinges, assuming our maniacal driver has locked the car door from his remote switch in the front of the car, grab you, and jump out of here saving both of our lives. At that point, we're only out a set of luggage and a few clothes."

"It's just that I'm worried about these Wolves and Dominic Mazella. They know who we are, where we live, who our relatives are. I mean, I've never had anyone threaten my family to get to me. If anything were to happen to my mom and dad or either of my sisters because of me, I swear, I don't know what I'd do."

"Nance, nothing is gonna happen to your parents or your sisters. I'm not playing with these Wolves or Mazella." Norrin's expression had also become sterner. "If they come close to my family or your family and attempt to harm them, I have no issue whatsoever in killing them. I know Sam won't agree with me, but, it's one thing if someone attacks us personally while in costume. It's an entirely different matter if they invade our homes, our lives, and the lives of our families. My dad won't hesitate in killing one of them if they attack him or anyone in his home, and neither will I."

“Your dad has abilities that enable him to protect himself, his wife, and your sisters. But my parents and my sisters are just ordinary human beings. They don’t have any special powers. They don’t have super strength, extraordinary agility, or invulnerability. They wouldn’t stand a chance against one Wolf, much less a pack of them.”

“And that’s exactly why Sam said we should warn our families about those dangers. That way they can prepare themselves. They should keep a gun, maybe a few guns in their homes, and they should be easily accessible. They should be loaded with silver bullets, and there should be a box or a few clips of extra bullets around for emergencies. Your parents and sisters don’t have small children in their homes, so, that shouldn’t be a problem. Sam said he’d pay for security systems in everyone’s home, and the guy he’s using is an electronics specialist. He has the ability to sense and locate any electrical activity. He can tell how much voltage is present, or AMPs, or whatever units of measurement electricians use, with pinpoint accuracy. He uses the latest in technology when setting up security devices, so, believe me, your parents and sisters are in good hands.”

“In their homes. But, what about when they leave their homes?”

“Nanci, there is no guarantee when anyone leaves their home. They could get hit by a car, or suffer a heart attack, or aneurysm, get shot by a stray bullet meant for someone else, or have a house fall on their head. Like Sam said, they can’t stop living their lives, but they can make sure they’re prepared should any dangers come their way.”

“Like Sam said. Like Sam said,” mimicked Nanci, in a mocking tone. “I don’t care *what Sam said*. I’m sick of *what Sam said*. It’s his fault we’re in this situation to begin with.”

“You know what? I’ve had about enough of you ragging on Sam,” stated Norrin, with a stern unyielding look in his eyes.

Nanci’s eyes widened as she looked intently at her husband expressing an offended stare.

“That’s right,” Norrin continued. “Sam is my best friend. Sam is my brother. Sam is my mentor. He helped me to understand and perfect my powers at a time when I thought of myself as some reject or freak. Sam has spent his time, effort, and money trying to make not just mine, but all of our lives a little better, so, that we have a bit of normalcy in our lives. And Sam saved your life not two days ago, when I stood over you poised to tear your head off your shoulders.”

That last sentence caused Nanci to burst into tears.

“I’m sorry, Nance,” continued Norrin. “But, you needed to hear that, so that, hopefully, you might see things from a correct perspective. Sam’s our

closest, most reliable friend.” Norrin reached toward Nanci to console her, but she tugged away from him.

“I thought I was your best friend,” she said, staring him down and sobbing.

“You know what I mean,” said Norrin. “I’ve known Sam since I was seven years old. Outside of family, he was the only person I allowed myself to get close to as child after my mother died. He proved to be like a brother to me, more than a brother. When I was happy or excited, he shared my enthusiasm. When I was angry, so was he. When I cried, he felt my pain and consoled me. I will never see Sam as an obstacle or an enemy and, as my wife, you shouldn’t try to make me feel that way.”

Norrin turned from his wife with a scowl on his face, looking out his window. Within seconds, he felt a hand placed over top of his own. He turned back toward his wife, still with a stern expression, as he watched the tears roll down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Norrin’s expression softened. “Nance—”

Nanci gently placed her hand over Norrin’s lips and began talking. “Since we’ve been married, I’ve wanted us to have a normal life. A life like other married couples have, like my parents. I was brought up in a home where dad goes to work, mom takes care of the family, and everyone contributes to making the home a happy place. Even though I’ve had these abilities for years now, I’ve never completely accepted them. I know that when I met you, Sam, Wade, Cyndi and Rachel, I was willing to run around the streets of Baltimore playing super hero. As a teenager, it gave me a rush or a high. But, now, as a married woman, I realize I no longer want any part of that life. I want to be a wife and—” Nanci hesitated for a moment and, then, looking directly into Norrin’s eyes, said, “and a mother.”

Norrin’s eyes widened. “Are you—”

“No. I’m not pregnant. But, I wanna be,” she confessed. “I want us to have a normal life, Norrin. I want us to be happy and raise children and grow old together. Is that so wrong?”

Norrin shook his head. Although his mouth was slightly open, he hadn’t uttered a word.

“A part of me has felt the biggest obstacle in the way of that dream was Sam,” continued Nanci. “That’s why, either verbally or inwardly, I’ve blamed him. But, I think I’ve finally realized it’s not Sam that’s standing in the way of my happiness. It’s not Sam at all. It’s you.”

Norrin’s body moved backward slightly as his eyebrows lifted.

It was hard for Nanci to continue, in fear that her next words could either make or break her marriage. But, within herself, within her convictions, she mustered up the strength and continued. "You want this life. It's become such a part of you that you can't let it go."

Norrin interrupted. "Are you blaming me for what happened with Mazella?"

"No. What happened with Mazella isn't anyone's fault. Not really. He sought us out. We didn't go looking for him. But, when you do go looking for trouble, when you purposely and willingly go out seeking confrontations, things like this are inevitable to happen. We all purposely and willfully went out seeking to bring Derek King to justice; performing a service, which is not our job, responsibility, or even our right. And, what was the outcome? Derek King is dead. Dead, Norrin. You were shot, and only, because you were wearing protective clothing, are you still alive. Sam was nearly killed because, instead of defending himself with full force, he held back. And, now, now, we are faced with an entirely new enemy who knows our identities, who knows where we live, who knows our families, and who, not in the least, has a pornographic videotape of the both of us and Sam and Cyndi. Also, two cop cars wound up at the scene of your shooting in front of Derek King's apartment building. Who knows, maybe being there at that time kept those cops from stopping some poor child from being assaulted, or some woman from being raped, or possibly even some upstanding citizen from being murdered. Why? Because they were there, instead of patrolling their normal beat. Sure, it's just speculation, but it's possible.

"Don't you see, Norrin? All this could have been avoided if you and Sam would have just left things alone. If it bothers you that you stumble upon a drug dealer, report it to the local authorities. Don't take matters into your own hands. You're not gods. You can't simply do whatever you want, just because you're more powerful than everyone else. It's morally and ethically wrong."

Norrin was speechless. Nanci was making valid arguments and supporting those points with facts. She wasn't simply spouting out anger due to her frustrations and heightened emotions. Norrin respected logical thought supported by factual and evident information above all else, so, at that point, he was forced to stop and actually ponder Nanci's words.

Would Derek King still be alive if they had reported his alleged activities and given a description of him and the area they had seen him conducting business, to the local law enforcement? Certainly, Norrin would have never been shot that night if he and his friends had never gone out actively pursuing Derek King. Sam would have never come across the Wolf in the woods. As a matter of fact, they may have all lived the rest of their lives never even knowing Wolves existed,

which, no doubt, would have greatly pleased Rachel. And although it may not have bothered the men nearly as much as the women, they would never have had to endure the humiliation of having their rooms monitored, and their most intimate activities recorded.

"So, what do we do now?" asked Norrin, waiting for his wife's response.

"You tell me. What do you think we should do?" she responded.

"You really think we should put the costumes away permanently, don't you?" questioned Norrin, already knowing what Nanci's answer would be.

"Me? Yes I do. But, you already know what I think," retorted Nanci. "What I want to know is what you think?"

Norrin sat in silence for several seconds, with a look of contemplation that somewhat resemble constipation. Finally, he spoke up. "If I'm walking down a street and I see someone being held at gunpoint, or two or three really big guys are beating the crap out of someone, obviously unable to defend themselves, I'm not turning a blind eye."

"I'm not saying you should. As a matter of fact, I'd think less of you if you did. But, don't go out actively searching for that person being held at gunpoint, making it your top priority for being out. And, don't go looking for that guy being attacked by three or four guys. That's the cop's job. Let 'em do it. If you stumble upon some illegal activity, find a payphone and dial 911. It's a free call. If it's absolutely necessary for you to involve yourself in some goings on and there is no other way to stop something than to intervene, and I mean life or death here, then, stop, detain, and make a citizen's arrest, if need be. I believe those are still legal."

"Ya know you really are a very intelligent person. Despite what Wade says about you," said Norrin comically.

"Ha-ha. So, do you agree?"

"Can we give it a trial run? Say, two weeks?"

"Say, six months."

"Six months? One month."

"Four."

"Two."

"Two?"

"Yeah, two."

"Okay, I can live with two."

"Ha. I would have gone as high as three."

"I would have settled for one," replied Nanci, raising her eyebrows.

After they had finally reached home, Norrin carried the suitcases two by two

into the house and up the stairs, to his and Nanci's bedroom. Together, they unpacked the suitcases with smiles on their faces. This time, Nanci's smile wasn't a false mask covering her true feelings. It was actually heartfelt. Norrin, too, expressed honest feelings in his smile. He was still coming down from the high that he had felt from Nanci defending her position so very logically. He also was interested in her comment regarding becoming a mother. Norrin had always wanted children and the prospect of having them with Nanci, whom he loved so very much, was more than he could have ever hoped for.

Nanci worked part-time at Macy's department store at the White Marsh Mall. She enjoyed working with her fellow employees and dealing with the public. Mostly, it was the fact that the people, whom she dealt with on a day-to-day basis, were normal everyday people. They were mothers shopping with and for their children. They were young women and teens looking for the latest fashions to impress their friends, co-workers, and schoolmates. They were men shopping for a new outfit to wear on that date they had just made with some girl they had finally worked up the courage to ask out.

No one there was looking to save the world or running from someone pursuing them except, perhaps, an energetic toddler running its mother ragged. Work was where Nanci was able to envelope herself in the activities of regular run of the mill people. It was her escape from the bizarre uncanny activities, which surrounded the rest of her life.

Once they had finished unpacking, Nanci said, "I wanna go to the mall."

"White Marsh?" asked Norrin.

"Yeah. I need to find out what my schedule is for work next week, so, I'm gonna stop in at Macy's and just walk around a bit. Maybe, do a little window shopping."

"Okay. You want me to come along?"

"Nah. That's okay. I could use some me time."

"Are we okay?"

"Yeah. We're fine. Especially, after our talk in the limo. I just haven't spent any time with just myself lately. I could use some time for just vegging, not focusing, and just kinda wandering aimlessly."

"Okay. Well, I should be here for most of the day but, if you call and I'm out, I'll probably be out grabbing a quick bite to eat."

"Okay."

Nanci grabbed her purse and key chain, and headed out the door and toward White Marsh Mall.

Norrin spent the next few hours parked on his living room floor in front of

the television. Being in France for ten days, he hadn't been able to watch television and understand what he was watching for several days. He also had missed two of his favorite television shows, *Beauty and the Beast* and *21 Jump Street*.

It was Saturday and the middle of the afternoon, so, nothing special was on television. Norrin and Nanci didn't have cable television, so, he was reduced to finding what he could on the standard local channels. Suddenly, he remembered what came on television every Saturday afternoon on channel 54. Kung-Fu movies. Badly dubbed, sound effects at every move, choreographed, Kung-Fu movies. They were the best. Norrin quickly changed the channel to 54.

Norrin was reclining on the floor with a childlike smile pasted across his face and was halfway into the movie when—

"Norrin. This is Cyndi. Respond at once if you're receiving this message."

There was an abruptness to her projection. It was aggressive and obtrusive.

"Cyndi?" Norrin spoke aloud.

"Yes. This is Cyndi, Norrin," she responded curtly.

"What's wrong? Are you all right?" projected Norrin.

"No! I am not all right! I am definitely not all right!"

"Cyndi, what is it?"

"I need you to do something for me."

"What?"

"Get your costume and meet me at Parkville Senior High School. I'll be in the parking lot toward the rear of the building."

"My costume? Parkville High? Why? Cyndi, what's going on?"

"Do it, Norrin! Just do it. I'll explain when you get there."

"Cyndi?—Cyndi?"

Cyndi had disconnected the line of communication. Norrin's calls to her went unheard or at least unacknowledged. Whatever the situation, it was serious enough for Cyndi to have contacted Norrin personally. Not only had she insisted he meet her, but, also, she had told him to bring his costume. Why? And why was it Cyndi contacting Norrin and not Sam? Cyndi hated the vigilante life, why would she encourage Norrin to bring his costume? Wait. It was Cyndi who had contacted Norrin telepathically, not Sam. Where was Sam?

Norrin began to worry, running upstairs and grabbing the hanger with his costume on it and shoving it and his mask into his gym bag. He rushed back down the stairs, opening the secret passage that led to the hallway leading to the underground cavern where his *Porsche* waited. Once he had reached the car, huffing and puffing, he jumped into the driver's seat and exited the cavern, speeding toward Parkville Senior High School. It was only a few miles away but Norrin hurried nonetheless.

Norrin waited about five minutes once he had reached the high school before Cyndi showed up. She pulled up next to the *Porsche* and lowered her tinted automatic window. She was wearing a scowl on her face and there was rage in her eyes. Norrin's window was already down and, once Cyndi's window was completely down, he spoke up. "Cyndi, what's going on? I'm totally freaked here. Is Sam okay?"

"I assume Sam's fine," she responded, in a cold callous voice.

"Then what?" insisted Norrin, relieved that his friend was in no imminent danger.

"The night we encountered the Wolf—"

"It's a Wolf?"

"No. Let me finish. The night we encountered the Wolf in the forest a friend of mine was viciously humiliated, beaten, and raped."

Norrin's look of concern was exchanged for one of shock and disgust.

Cyndi continued. "I just found out about it earlier this morning. I've just come from the 17-year-old girl's home after visiting her."

"Seventeen?"

"Seventeen. She was distraught, brutalized, and without spirit. I saw the man who did it through Tracey's memories. I relived her experience. The man was one of the men that you had seen the night you first met Derek King. He was the tall, blonde, muscular one."

"How do you—"

"Know what he looked like? Sam shared with me the experience he had retrieved from his mental link with you. I recognized him immediately."

"I have no clue where to find him, Cyndi. I don't even know his name."

"But, I do. I relived my friend's experience allowing me to acquire remnant mental imprints from her attacker. He lives in the apartments across the street."

"Does Sam know? Have you told him about this?"

"No. I haven't. And I don't intend to, at least not yet. Not until I've finished what I came here to do."

"And what is it you intend to do? If I let you kill him, Sam will kill me."

"I have no intension of killing him. I want him to live. I want to make sure he lives a long, long time."

Cyndi opened her trunk and removed a costume from her gym bag. Both she and Sam kept an extra suit in their primary cars for emergencies.

"Suit up," instructed Cyndi.

Reluctantly, Norrin complied with Cyndi's instructions. In the deserted parking lot, they both shed their civilian clothes and replaced them with their individual costumes.

Once fully dressed, Cyndi told Norrin to leave his car at the school, as they'd be driving across the street in hers. Once inside the car, Cyndi drove out of the parking lot, across Puttyhill Avenue, and into Tracey's attacker's apartment complex. She parked her car directly in front of the building where the attacker lived.

Cyndi turned to Norrin. "You're backup. That's your roll. Don't get involved and don't get in my way. Only if I'm defeated do you interfere. Understand?"

"Cyndi, I'm no telepath, but you're obviously not yourself. Maybe you should give yourself some time. Let me and Sam handle this one."

"Norrin, you have two choices. Either you assist me or you walk back to your car. Pick one. I don't care which, but I'm not taking suggestions or putting this to a vote. Now are you with me or not?"

Norrin paused for a moment, realizing that both Sam and Nanci would kill him if they could see what he was about to do. "Okay. I'm in."

Paul had just finished dressing to go out for the evening when he heard a knock at his door.

"When I tell you to, kick it open," whispered Cyndi.

Norrin prepared himself by activating his adrenaline factor.

"Who is it?" Paul called out, as he finished tying his shoes. There was no answer.

"Wait," admonished Cyndi. "Wait."

Paul made his way to the door and placed his eye over the peephole.

"Now," Cyndi quickly instructed.

At that, Norrin kicked the door near the spot where the doorknob and deadbolt were positioned. The door broke through the jam swinging open, smacking Paul in his face and knocking him to the floor.

He looked up from his position, lying on the ground back against the floor, with blood streaming from the cut on his forehead and a dazed look in his eyes. Two costumed figures entered the apartment, one wearing red the other wearing black.

“Good evening, Paul,” said the figure in black. The voice was a feminine one. “That is your name, isn’t it?”

Paul looked up at her with a confused expression.

“How do I know who you are? You’re wondering that, right?” said Cyndi, tapping her temple with her index finger. “My name is Mind Reader. I read people’s minds. Most recently, I read the mind of a little girl you chose to violate. I think it’s time you paid for the sins you’ve committed, Paul.”

Paul started to scurry backward slowly and, as he did, Cyndi followed closer and closer. Paul looked passed Cyndi at the figure standing with his arms folded leaning against the wall. Paul recognized the outfit from the night he and Mason had rescued Derek King. The man in red smiled eerily, staring down at Paul with a perverse pleasure, as if waiting for justice to be disseminated.

Cyndi reached into a slit in the flowing skirt portion of her costume. As she removed her hand from the fold, she produced a quarterstaff. She began to twirl it and as she did, Paul scrambled to his feet.

Cyndi, looked at the man standing before her through the lenses of her mask and said, “When you wake up in the hospital, ask yourself, if this was all worth it?”

At that same moment, roughly 20 or so miles away, a blank expression came over Sam’s face, while discussing with his assistant the progress of a new book his company was planning on publishing.

“...and he said he was just finishing up chapter 35,” said Sam’s assistant, Curtis. “He should be—”

“Oh no,” Sam muttered, staring forward not actually looking at anything in particular.

“Oh no?” responded Curtis. “What’s wrong with that? That’s great progress. Sam, Sam?”

CHAPTER XIX

Unyielding Justice

“What in the world did the two of you think you were doing?” questioned Sam, as he paced Norrin and Nanci’s living room floor, staring angrily at both Cyndi and Norrin.

Nanci was sitting on her couch at the opposite end of Norrin, with Cyndi seated between the two of them. Nanci’s arms were folded and although she hadn’t yet joined Sam in his chastising of Norrin and Cyndi, the irritation in her eyes and the furl of her brow spoke volumes.

“What are we now? Some vengeful mob? Common street thugs?” asked Sam, as his nostrils flared, and his wife and friend felt his piercing gaze.

Nanci, staring directly forward at the wall opposite the couch and shaking her head, finally, spoke up. In an unsettling calm tone at almost a whispers volume, she said, “You made a promise. You made a promise and didn’t even wait a full 24 hours before breaking it.”

“Nanci, I—”

“Shut up, Norrin. Just shut up. I don’t want your excuses,” replied Nanci, cutting off her husband before he could plead his case to her, or begin to explain what had happened.

“Nanci, it’s not Norrin’s fault,” expressed Cyndi, adding her voice to Norrin’s defense.

“No, surprisingly, it’s not,” interrupted Sam. “Although, he is an adult capable of making up his own mind, it seems that he was coerced.”

“I was not coerced. I went because it was the right thing to do,” commented Norrin, returning Cyndi’s favor, so as not to let the full blame be placed on her shoulders.

Nanci turned toward Cyndi and began speaking. “Obviously, I wasn’t there when all this transpired, nor am I a telepath. So, why don’t you fill me in on exactly what this is all about?”

Cyndi looked up from her seated position toward Sam, who, with an annoyed expression, scoffed and motioned his hand toward Nanci. Cyndi, then, turned back toward Nanci and began to explain.

“After Sam and I had gotten home from the airport and unpacked, he left for a while to go check on things at the office. I decided I’d call my theater to see how things were there. I spoke with my assistant, Nicole, who informed me that one of our cast members had been beaten and raped.”

Nanci’s expression softened instantly.

“Yeah,” continued Cyndi. “And she’s barely 17.”

Cyndi and Nanci were both 21, coincidentally, born on the same day. Seventeen was only four years behind them but, with the experiences they had lived through, the things they had seen, and the growing they had done in those four years, 17 seemed like an entire lifetime ago.

“Oh, my God,” said Nanci, in one breath. “Is she—”

“Alive?” interrupted Cyndi, completing Nanci’s thought. “Yes. She is. I visited her earlier today at home. When I got there, she was so introverted, so empty, so lost in her grief, that it was a miracle that she hadn’t shut down completely. When I started talking to her, do you know what she did? She apologized for ruining my play. Apologized. To me. For ruining my play. This poor innocent girl with her whole life ahead of her, who had just lived through the unthinkable, was apologizing to me.”

No longer did Nanci’s face reflect agitation. Nor did her heart feel indignant toward Norrin or Cyndi. “Is she going to be okay?” asked Nanci meekly.

“Yes. I believe she will, eventually” responded Cyndi. “I assisted her in her recovery.”

Sam’s eyes turned toward Cyndi with a disturbed stare.

“Don’t look at me like that!” asserted Cyndi. “One, you weren’t there. You didn’t feel the desperation in her soul that I felt. And, two, you’re not a woman. You couldn’t possibly understand what it feels like to have someone overpower you and humiliate you, just to break your spirit and, then, then, violate your body, with you left unable to regain your dignity. Then, after all of that, having

to live the rest of your life with that unbearably heavy weight around your neck.”

“I can sympathize with her pain, Cyndi. But, entering someone’s mind and altering their thoughts and memories without their knowledge and or consent is somewhat unethical,” counseled Sam.

“And you’ve never entered someone’s mind without their knowledge and or consent?” questioned Cyndi, in an accusatory manner.

“I can answer that from personal experience,” Norrin spoke up. “He most definitely has.”

“The reason I’m upset has nothing to do with you removing painful memories from your friend, Tracey,” informed Sam. “I’m upset because you vindictively attacked her assailant, crippled him, and left him to die.”

“He deserved worse,” commented Cyndi, under her breath.

“Now who’s showing an utter lack of compassion for their fellow man, even though she feels he may deserve a little suffering?” questioned Sam.

Cyndi looked down toward the floor, feeling a degree of guilt due to Sam deflecting her own words back at her.

“What happened?” asked Nanci, fervently. “What did the two of you do?”

Cyndi lifted her eyes, looking up at Nanci’s face with shame reflected on her own.

As they were pulling up to the visitor’s parking at the Franklin Square Hospital, George reviewed his plan for getting Mason into Paul’s room.

“There’s only one guard in front of his door,” explained George. “I’ll approach him and make up some story about me needing some information to complete my report. The door should be slightly open. If not, his back will definitely be toward it while I’m talking to him. It’ll be up to you to sneak in. I can’t guarantee how much time I can give you. And if you’re discovered—”

Mason interrupted. “If I’m discovered, you’ll play the ignorant buffoon, which won’t be far from the truth, and deny everything.”

“Look, Mike, I shouldn’t even be doing this! If I’m caught, I’ll lose my badge and most likely have charges brought against me.”

“Well, that would be a sad situation, George. But, since I’m paying you more than you’re worth, and since I’m already in a rather disconcerted mood, my suggestion to you is to focus more on making the next several minutes a success, and less on what your pathetic brothers in blue might do to you, if you’re caught. Believe me, if this goes down badly, I’ll do worse.”

A lump formed in George’s throat as Mason uttered those words. Yes, if discovered, George would be stripped of his badge, lose his job, and quite probably spend some time behind bars. Convicts treat ex-cops pretty badly in

the pen. But, even if all those things were to happen, at least he wouldn't be bound and slowly tortured, or heinously murdered, or suffer the prospect of one or both of those things happening to his friends and or family members. If George were to double cross Mason, not only were those things a probability, but, surefire reality.

Once inside the hospital, Mason and George took the elevator to the fourth floor. When the door opened, the two men exited the elevator and walked off in separate directions. George took the most direct route to Paul's room, while Mason took the long way around, heading in the opposite direction. The corridor would eventually lead back to where Paul's room was located. As Mason was walking, he noticed a supplies closet with items the doctors and nurses used on a daily basis. Inside, he also noticed several pairs of scrubs, which after nonchalantly entering the room, Mason put on over his clothes.

At that point, Mason exited the supplies closet and continued toward Paul's room. He proceeded down the hallway and at its end turned right. About 30 feet away stood two policemen. One was the officer guarding Paul's room. The other was George, trying to distract him.

Mason slowed his pace and lowered his head, so as not to be overly visible. Once within earshot, Mason heard George say something about needing more information on the condition of the man in the room. The guard sounded willing to help but had stated he needed to go to the restroom. He asked George if he would be willing to stand guard for a while, while he relieved himself and grabbed a cup of coffee from the cafeteria. George willingly accepted. At that, the guard was off.

Mason quickened his pace and before entering the room, made brief eye contact with George. Once inside, Mason saw Paul lying in a hospital bed. Paul was hooked up to multiple machines with various tubes coming in and going out of his body. They were monitoring his vitals, nourishing him, and assisting him in breathing and staying alive. Paul had casts that had been placed on various parts of his body setting his broken bones. Both of Paul's eyes were discolored and one was swollen shut. The heart monitor sounded a continuous beep, letting anyone who might enter the room know that, although utterly pulverized, the man was still alive. Still, all who might have the misfortune of seeing Paul in that disturbing condition would no doubt agree; it would have been better for him if he had not survived.

Mason moved closer, standing at the foot of Paul's bed. He lifted the chart that hung from the footboard detailing all of Paul's injuries. Mason began reading. There were deep lacerations due to metal projectiles in the right shoulder, right hand and left knee. The right lung had collapsed. The left clavicle

was broken, as was the jawbone, and cartilage around the nose. There was a fracture in the skull, left wrist, and tibia. The chart also indicated multiple cuts and bruises all over Paul's body.

Mason dropped the chart and shook his head. He stepped closer toward the headboard. Leaning over, Mason whispered, "Paul. Paul? Can you hear me? It's Mike."

Paul moved ever so slightly, opening his one relatively good eye. It was bloodshot and there was a heart stopping fear in it as it looked around the room. Finally, it was able to focus on Mason.

"Mike," Paul whispered out of the corner of his mouth, unable to fully move his mouth as his jaw had been wired shut.

"Yeah, Paul. It's Mike. What happened to you? Who did this?" whispered Mason.

"Black costume," Paul mumbled, barely coherent.

"Black costume?"

Paul closed his eye and was barely able to nod his head.

"Someone wearing a black costume did this to you? Like the guy in the red costume we've been asking about?"

Paul's eye opened and Mason could barely make out Paul's fearful expression through his swollen face.

"The guy in the red costume, was he there, Paul?"

Paul did not move. He didn't nod his head or mumble an answer. He just laid there with fear plastered across his distorted face.

"Paul, I need to know. The man in the red costume that we saw the night we rescued Derek, was he there, Paul?"

Paul nodded quickly, although his nod more resembled a convulsion.

As he exhaled, Mason's head dropped in discouragement. "They know where you live, Paul. The cops, they brought you here. They've searched your apartment and car. Once you recover, they're gonna have all kinds of questions regarding what happened to you; all the contraband they've found in your apartment, the girl who's accusing you of raping her and beating the crap outta her and her boyfriend. All this is gonna lead back to me. I can't have that, Paul. You're not strong enough or smart enough not to let them crack you. I'm sorry, Paul."

Paul closed his eye and as he did, a tear ran down his cheek.

Mason looked down at a chair that was in the corner near the bed's headboard. Mason lifted a medium sized cushion from the chair. He turned back toward Paul and looked down at him. "It sucks it had to end like this, Paul, but, if you weren't such a moron and used your head for something other than

a means of getting drugs into your system, this could all have been avoided.”

At that, Mason removed a gun from the front of his pants, covered the gun’s barrel with the cushion, placed the cushion directly on top of Paul’s forehead, and pulled the trigger, twice.

Afterwards, Mason quickly made his way to the door. He found George seated in a chair where the other policeman had been sitting while guarding the room. The original officer still had not returned.

“The staff will no doubt be here soon when they see Paul’s heart monitor flat lined,” said Mason.

“What?” asked George, with a look of shock on his face and a sinking feeling in his heart. “What did you do?”

“What I had to,” replied Mason. “I’ll find my own way away from here. I suggest you think fast and come up with a really good reason how someone slipped past you and got to him.” With that said, Mason moved speedily down the hallway in the opposite direction of the nurse’s station, and toward the door leading to the stairwell.

As Cyndi walked toward Paul, quarterstaff in hand, Paul initially began taking steps backward. Then, something must have triggered his thought processes, realizing Cyndi, although appearing menacing in her black costume, was considerably smaller than he was. Paul stopped moving backward and his nervous expression changed to one of hostility.

Norrin stood near the door with his arms folded, blocking Paul’s only means of escape. As Paul’s apartment was on the third floor, fleeing by way of the balcony was not an option, unless Paul was willing to risk injury.

Looking at the lenses of Cyndi’s mask, seeing his own reflection not to mention the look of enmity on the visible portion of Cyndi’s face, Paul attacked. With a quick thrust of her arm and a snap of her wrist, Cyndi smacked Paul across his face with her quarterstaff, almost faster than the eye could see.

Paul’s head snapped backward as blood ran from his nose and the left corner of his mouth. Paul stumbled slightly but did not fall. In his efforts to gain composure, Cyndi continued her assault. A jab to his abdomen was followed by a kick to his groin and, then, another.

Doubled over in pain and on his knees with one hand on the ground, Cyndi moved closer to kick Paul in his face. But, she allowed herself to get too close without attacking. Paul grunted as he grabbed Cyndi’s ankle, squeezing it like a vice. Cyndi had been so unfocused with rage that Paul was able to take advantage of the situation, grab hold of Cyndi, and flip her backwards onto the floor. Cyndi came crashing to the ground, landing on her back.

Paul scrambled to his feet, wiping the blood from his nose and mouth. He shuffled toward an end table to get to his gun. As he reached for it, Paul screamed, as he felt a burning stabbing sensation in his hand. He immediately recoiled, cradling the wounded hand with the uninjured one.

“Ah-ah-ah,” said Norrin, having just flung a *shuriken*, sinking it completely through Paul’s hand. “This is gonna be a fair fight. Or as fair as it can be between a second degree black belt and a slightly used white boy.”

“You stay out of this!” ordered Cyndi, as she got to her feet. “You’re here for backup. So stand there and don’t move unless I’m face down on the ground and not moving,” she demanded, looking toward Norrin.

Norrin lifted his hands in a manner indicating he’d keep hands off, and, then, folded his arms and leaned back against the wall.

Paul looked at Norrin enraged at what Norrin had done to him, then turned back toward Cyndi. His heart was beating like a train speeding down a track. Sweat was dripping from his forehead and his breaths were deep and gusty.

“What’s wrong, Paul?” asked Cyndi. “Not used to dealing with an opponent who fights back?”

Paul reached for an ashtray and flung it toward Cyndi’s head. She ducked, spun, and released a shuriken, which embedded itself deeply into Paul’s shoulder.

“Ahhh!” Paul shrieked in pain.

“Paul. Shhh. You’ll upset the neighbors,” remarked Norrin, holding his index finger to his lips.

Paul screamed frantically as he charged Cyndi. He threw a punch in her direction with the hand which still had the *shuriken* deeply embedded in it. At that, Cyndi shifted her stance, avoiding Paul’s right handed strike. Paul also moved quickly and, though he missed connecting with his punch, he was able to grab hold of Cyndi’s neck with his left hand.

Norrin moved from his reclining position against the wall and prepared to come to Cyndi’s aid. But, it was not necessary. Cyndi grabbed hold of Paul’s wrist with one hand and with the other, she pulled a knife from her utility belt and shoved it as deeply as he could through the flesh surrounding Paul’s knee. He let out a scream, loosening his grip around Cyndi’s neck. Quickly, she grabbed hold of Paul’s left wrist, removing his hand from her neck, twisting it and snapping it backward.

Cyndi, then, dropped to one knee and in one flowing motion, swept her staff across one of Paul’s shins. The strike greatly weakened the leg. Just as smoothly as she had delivered the first blow, Cyndi brought her staff backward, smacking it against Paul’s calve. Once again, she brought the weapon forward against the

same point on the shin she had first struck. This time, the weakened bone cracked and Paul fell to his knees. Cyndi, still in a kneeling position in front of Paul, gripped her staff with both hands and, after raising it, brought it crashing down with all her might against Paul's collarbone.

Paul was finished. He fell over onto his side and lay motionless, barely conscious.

Cyndi grabbed Paul by the shirt, running purely on adrenaline, and lifted him to eye level. "What's wrong, scum? No more fight in you?" she taunted. She smacked Paul across the face. "Huh? Answer me!" She smacked him again with the back of her hand, and, again, with the palm of her hand. "You like attacking defenseless children? Huh?" screamed Cyndi in an insane rage, as Paul's eyes rolled back into his head, his head wobbling from side to side. "I'm no child! I'm not defenseless! *Eres un sucio, demente, asqueroso, molestador de ninos! Quiero matarte!*"



Cyndi's slaps became punches, striking Paul's pulverized face over and over again, until her glove was saturated with his blood.

Suddenly, "Mind Reader? Mind Reader! Cyndi! Cyndi!" yelled Norrin, as he grabbed hold of Cyndi's wrist preventing her from striking further. "Enough! Enough! He's down! It's over. He's down."

Cyndi looked up at Norrin; she was gritting her teeth tight as she panted heavily, the air escaping through the corners of her mouth.

"You've won. It's over," insisted Norrin.

Cyndi released her adversary's shirt and watched as he slumped over onto the floor. While releasing her grip, Cyndi noticed her glove covered in blood. Although unseen, due to the lenses of her mask, she closed her eyes tightly and let her head drop. "Do you have any *manriki* chains?" she asked.

"Yeah, two. Why?" Norrin asked.

"Pick him up and follow me," directed Cyndi. "I'm going to send a message to his friends and anyone that might get the stupid idea to follow in his footsteps."

Norrin heaved Paul's beaten body over his shoulder and followed Cyndi out of the apartment, down the steps, and out the entrance to the building. He could feel Paul's broken body shift and wriggle unnaturally due to the damage inflicted.

"Drop him," said Cyndi.

Norrin removed Paul from his shoulder and carefully lowered him to the ground. Cyndi pulled four stakes from the ground from the foliage surrounding the apartment building and planted them in the ground, one near each of Paul's limbs.

"Give me your chains," said Cyndi, stretching out her arm, palm open, toward Norrin, while still looking down at Paul.

He handed her both of his *manriki* chains. She took Norrin's chains and pulled two from a pouch in her own utility belt. She then wrapped one around each of Paul's wrists and both of his ankles. Finally, Cyndi wrapped the other end of each chain around the wooden stake closest to the bound limb. Paul was on display like a slaughtered animal.

"This is what happens to filth that attack defenseless children," said Cyndi, sneering down at Paul.

"What have you done?" said a voice from behind Cyndi.

As she and Norrin turned, they saw Sam descending from the sky wearing civilian clothing.

"Cyndi? What have you done?" repeated Sam, as his feet planted firmly on

the ground. He ran past her and dropped next to Paul. Immediately, Sam checked for a pulse. He looked up at Cyndi and Norrin and said, "It's faint, but he's alive."

Sam had noticed Cyndi's car parked in the parking lot, so, he said to Norrin, "How'd you get here?"

"My car is parked across the street at Parkville High," answered Norrin.

"Then walk to it and go home. Cyndi and I will be joining you there shortly," Sam directed.

"But—"

"Do it, Norrin! Don't argue. Do it now," ordered Sam.

Norrin sighed heavily but followed Sam's instructions heading toward his car.

Once Norrin was on his way, Sam turned his attention back to Cyndi. "Are you insane?"

"Sam, you don't understand," said Cyndi.

"No. No, I don't understand. I don't understand how a woman with so much love and compassion in her heart and soul could do something so savage."

"Sam—"

"Not now, Cyndi. Now, we have to call an ambulance so that this man can get the medical attention he needs. After that, we go to Norrin's house. You both have a lot of explaining to do."

Cyndi had finally finished explaining to Nanci what had happened. Nanci sat motionless and expressionless.

"I understand how upset and heart broken you must have felt to hear about your friend's terrible ordeal, Cyndi," commented Nanci. "But, don't you think you went a bit far? I mean, you ran off half-cocked. You excluded your husband from your decision and involved mine? You know how I feel about this life, Cyndi. I was under the impression you felt the same way. This, this just isn't like you."

"With all due respect, Nanci, you couldn't possibly understand," stated Cyndi. "And, I wouldn't want you to. I didn't just hear about what happened to Tracey. I didn't simply feel her pain or sense her grief-stricken emotions. I relived her entire experience. I saw it through her eyes. I felt everything she felt. I suffered the beating, the fear, and the degradation. You couldn't possibly imagine what that poor girl lived through. She's a child. She never should have had to endure that," said Cyndi, as tears formed in her eyes. "She deserved vengeance. She deserved justice. And, I, gave it to her."

Nanci nodded and grabbed hold of Cyndi's hand. She understood, from a

woman's point of view, why Cyndi had done what she had done. Nanci had never seen Cyndi react so intensely or so violently but, under similar circumstances, Nanci felt she might have reacted in the same manner.

Sam sat in a large recliner. His head hung low and was supported by one of his hands. "I never meant for us to become this. I never saw us as an angry uncontrollable mob, executing its own brand of justice. Yes, we use force when necessary, but, never excessively. Never beyond what's required to take control of a situation and never viciously. This was vicious, Cyndi. If you had continued, you would have murdered him."

"I was careful," interrupted Cyndi, speaking out in her own defense. "I made sure—"

"Careful! Careful? The man's pulse was nearly non-existent! How is that careful?" asked Sam.

Cyndi didn't answer.

"Maybe you and Nanci are right," said Sam. "Maybe it's time to put the costumes away permanently. If this is the direction we're moving toward, if this is what we're becoming, it's better to stop now, before we become corrupted by our own weaknesses."

"Sam, times are changing," Norrin spoke up. "They require we change with them. Our enemies become more powerful, and more vicious, and more deadly. They're not going to play fair, or fight with honor, or feel sympathy or regret because they've acted too ruthlessly. They're not going to *hold back* or pull their punches. And, the more we play by the rules and treat them with kid gloves, the weaker we're gonna appear. And believe me you, Sam, they'll take advantage of it. Every common street thug will prance around Baltimore doing whatever they like because they'll know they'll be able to get away with it."

"So, in essence, we become them to defeat them. Is that what you're saying?" questioned Sam.

"We do what it takes to protect those who need our protection. If that means we get tougher, then so be it. We do it to make Baltimore as safe as we possibly can for the decent people," countered Norrin.

"By any means necessary?" Sam further questioned.

This time, Norrin didn't respond. He knew where Sam was going in his line of questioning.

"No, Norrin. That's not who we are, and that's not what I've spent the last seven years trying to instill in you," said Sam firmly. "Listen, we've all just returned from a somewhat-taxing trip, and now, we're facing this. We need a few days to recover, cool down, and rest from everything; a few days to get our heads

straight. Cyndi and I are going home. Maybe, at the end of next week when we've all had time to recoup, we can resume this conversation with more levelheaded thinking. For now, let's let it lie, okay?"

Everyone nodded. In all honesty, no one wanted to discuss it any further, anyway. Once Sam and Cyndi had left and the door had closed behind them, Nanci embraced Norrin tightly.

"You're one of the most compassionate, empathetic, kindhearted men I've ever known. Never lose that, Norrin. It's who you really are. Never lose that, okay?"

Norrin kissed Nanci on the top of her head and assured her he would always try to retain his empathetic side. As long as Nanci was there to be the calm to his storm, Norrin's aggressions would continue to be tempered by his compassion.

CHAPTER XX

The More Things Change...

June of 1989 was an especially enjoyable month. All six of Baltimore's heroic protectors had in one way or another prospered or had some set of events work out in their favor.

Both Cyndi and Rachel had completed all of their college finals and scored no less than a 95 percent on any one of them. In the fall Cyndi would begin her senior year in college and from there decide whether or not to go to graduate school, or work toward specializing in a specific field. Most likely, she would pursue a field in the arts and continue promoting her own theater, eventually perhaps branching out toward New York.

Cyndi's production of *Twilight's Edge* had gone off without a hitch. Opening night the theater debuted the production to a packed house. Tracey Spinnerman had even been able to resume her role as Jennifer Morgan. All the critic's revues agreed that Tracey's performance was spectacular and that the part must have been written especially for her.

By this time, another event had blessed the lives of Sam and Cyndi. Cyndi was now pregnant. She was about two months into her pregnancy and her stomach had ever so slightly begun to bulge. Sam had filled her closet with the latest in maternity fashion upon hearing the news so that as the months

progressed, Cyndi would always have plenty of clothes that fit her.

It was a joyous time at their *hacienda*. They had started preparations on the nursery but, since they had opted to keep the baby's sex a surprise, the colors and decor were both neutral. Secretly, Sam hoped for a son. Not only to carry on his name but, also, to have the type of relationship with his child that he had missed out on with his own father. Cyndi, however, hoped for a girl on whom she'd shower her affections, dress in beautiful outfits, and share secrets which are special between mothers and daughters.

In the end, it truly didn't matter whether or not the child was male or female. The most important thing was a hoped for healthy child, and that their child receive the very best that Sam and Cyndi had to offer.

Rachel had interviewed for and accepted a part time job at John Hopkins Hospital. She of course wouldn't be seeing patients in the capacity of a doctor, but she would be working in the environment in which she had planned on spending the rest of her life. Also, in working at the hospital, she could build her connections and references, so that when it came time for her to take her place as a doctor, she might have a foot in the door at John Hopkins. For now, Rachel would start out admitting patients and serving in a "go for" capacity. That didn't bother her, though. She was simply elated to be working in a medical facility.

Wade, an independent contractor, during May and June had been offered so much work, that he was forced to hire an additional 20 men and women to work for him on a full-time basis. In the past, Wade would seek out work, bidding on various jobs in hopes to be the lowest bidder and attain work. Now, he was receiving such a continuous flow of calls that he was forced to turn work down or refer it to another contractor. Both Wade's business and bank account were growing at a substantial rate.

Norrin and Nanci were also moving forward with their careers. Norrin had recently completed a painting that had been purchased by and would be hanging in the Walter's Art Gallery, in their Modern-Day Artists exhibit. Nanci had increased her working hours and had achieved the goal of highest sales in her store during the month. Because she had earned the highest commissions, Nanci was given an award and two tickets in the balcony seats to the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.

Now was a time when the six friends were focusing on their personal lives and careers. Now was the time when four of them focused on strengthening their familial bonds. Now was a time where Mantis, Mind Reader, Scorpion, Gorgon, Toad, and Napalm had faded from existence.

Shortly after Cyndi's encounter with Paul, Sam had organized a meeting at

his house. He had even invited Rachel, although she had made it abundantly clear that she had no intention of ever putting on her costume again. In fact, she had given it back to Sam as a sort of closure, as it was he that had initially provided it for her. Instead of meeting in his underground lair, this time, Sam gathered everyone into the *sala*. He had told Norrin, Nanci, and Wade that there would be no need to bring their costumes, just themselves.

Usually when Sam had a meeting at his home, Cyndi would prepare tea and serve some sort of refreshment or snack. This time, however, Sam had opened up his full bar. He knew the discussion would be complicated if not taxing on everyone's nerves, and something stronger than tea might make the evening pass more smoothly.

After everyone had arrived and gotten comfortable, Sam began mixing drinks. As he did, he opened the discussion. "I invited everyone here tonight to discuss continuing the vigilante activities we've pursued over the years." Sam turned to Rachel, "As we're all well aware, Rachel has hung up her cape and tights permanently," said Sam jokingly. "But, out of respect, and the fact that she is an essential part of this extended family, I asked her to be here."

Rachel smiled and winked at Sam. A gesture showing she appreciated the fact that no matter what decisions she had made, she was still considered a close friend and part of the group.

Sam continued, "Recent events have forced me to rethink our respective roles as the unofficial protectors of Baltimore. It's no secret that Cyndi and Nanci have wanted to put that life behind them and focus on building on the foundation laid for each of their families. I don't say this to point fingers or place blame. I say it so that we all understand where each of us stands on this topic. Rachel also believes she can best serve her community in a civilian role as a doctor. Norrin, and correct me if I'm wrong, enjoys his role as Scorpion, bringing order to those who would act in a lawless manner. This brings a certain satisfaction to him."

Norrin interrupted, "For those who believe they're untouchable, or those who would victimize the weak to fatten their own pockets and grow in prominence, yeah. I do enjoy making it clear, that there is always someone more powerful than they are who can stop them."

Sam turned to Wade. "Wade, I'm not exactly sure where you stand on this issue. I've always assumed that since you've always stood with us, that this is something you feel is a part of your life. But, I don't want to put words in your mouth."

Wade shrugged his shoulders and briefly displayed an expression reflecting

he hadn't so intricately dissected his reasons for continuing as Toad. "Honestly, I've done what I've done because I can. I agreed with you," he said, looking toward Sam. "Since we have these abilities, why not put them to good use? It seemed a righteous course to help those who needed our help; stopping criminals from causing harm or pain to others. If you're asking me if I want to stop, I'd have to say, probably not. Whether the rest of you do or not is up to you. I may not be as proactive as I have in the past, but I still plan on stopping a mugging or assault if I should come across one. I'm not going to cross the street and walk down the other side of the road."

"And no one's saying you should," affirmed Cyndi for all to hear. "If, if you happen across an incident like that, there is nothing wrong in helping the victim. I'd advocate that even if we didn't have these powers."

Sam interrupted her, "But, you feel comfortable in continuing on as Toad whether the rest of us follow that path or not, is what you're saying, right?" commented Sam, looking toward Wade. "Perhaps not as actively as before but continuing nonetheless?"

"Yeah," answered Wade, in a nonchalant manner.

"Me, I've always felt that what I did," said Sam, motioning his hand toward his chest, "was important not only to the community but, also, myself. I've enjoyed being Mantis these past seven years. But, now, I'm a husband and hopefully, one day, a father. It's been brought to my attention that continuing as Mantis could hamper my availability and effectiveness in both of those roles. That's something I'm just not willing to have happen. Cyndi and I want to start adding to our family soon. Therefore, as of now, I will no longer be continuing on as Mantis."

At the completion of that statement, each face in the room reflected its own expression. Norrin's was disbelief. Wade simply nodded. Wade had had a feeling from the day Sam had taken his wedding vows that this day would eventually come. Although, at the time, he wasn't sure when it would come, now it seemed it finally had. Rachel too nodded. She was pleased that Sam had finally woken up and decided to put his efforts toward the more important things; being a husband to Cyndi and, hopefully, one day a father to his child. Nanci was somewhat surprised and her expression definitely reflected that. She would never have thought that Sam would give up being Mantis, much less announce it in such a public manner, in an almost symbolic example for Norrin to follow. Cyndi looked up at her husband with satisfaction and admiration. Instantly, a smile came to her lips. She tried not to allow its broadness to stretch across her face, in an attempt to somewhat conceal her complete and total elation. Even so,

with the twinkle in her eyes and the waves of happiness emanating from her soul, one would not have had to have been an empath to know how Cyndi was feeling at that moment.

“This may come as a shock to some of you,” Sam continued speaking. “To some, it may seem long overdue. Either way, this is the decision I’ve made. As for the rest of you, I can’t tell you what to do. Wade, if you choose to continue on as Toad, I’m sure you’ll continue doing a fantastic job. Norrin and Nanci, if you two continue as Scorpion and Gorgon, I’m sure you’ll also do well. My only advice would be to use your minds before using your muscle. Also, try never to let your emotions be your driving force.”

Nanci turned toward Norrin and in a way a child might look to its parent for an answer to its plea, she waited for him to say something. Norrin knew what she wanted. He knew that to simply follow suit with Sam would bring the same inner peace to Nanci that it had brought to Cyndi. He also remembered that he had recently promised Nanci that he would put Scorpion away for a period of time, and had broken that promise within only a matter of hours.

“Nanci and I recently made an agreement that we would give Scorpion and Gorgon a rest for awhile. Regrettably, I broke that promise almost right after making it,” admitted Norrin.

“That was my fault,” interrupted Cyndi, looking apologetically toward Nanci with a sincere request for forgiveness.

“No. No, it was mine,” stated Norrin, accepting full responsibility for his actions. “I acted on impulse without thinking or coming up with any alternatives. Had I taken some time and thought things through as I’ve often been admonished,” said Norrin, looking toward Sam, “maybe, I may have come up with a better solution,” he said, as his head dropped. Then lifting it and turning to Nanci, he continued, “But if Nance will accept my apology and is willing to give it another try, I’d be willing to shed the costumes and see if it’s something I’d be able to live without permanently.”

Nanci’s smile stretched from one cheek to the other. She wasn’t going to try to conceal her feelings or put on an act that she was only mildly pleased, as Cyndi had. “I accept, and yes,” she said.

“Looks like I’m on my own then,” said Wade, stretching his arms widely while still seated. “That’s okay. The rest of you won’t be in my way anymore when I’m out takin’ care of business,” he said with a smirk.

Wade’s comments were obviously sarcastic and inaccurate but, it was his attempt at adding humor to an almost solemn event that seemed to dawn the end of an era.

Oddly enough, as May approached and passed on into June, Wade hadn't worn his Toad costume once. Sam, Cyndi, Norrin, and Nanci too had all committed to their promises and stayed away from their vigilante activities. With all of their careers flourishing and their personal lives seemingly improving day by day, both Sam and Norrin doubted they would ever wear their costumes again. From time to time, they would catch a glimpse of the local broadcast news or see some article in the daily Baltimore Sun newspaper that would trouble them but, in sticking to their promises, they would dismiss it; leaving it to the local authorities to attend to or solve.

In June, Norrin had turned 20. Wade's birthday had been in May and Rachel's would be coming soon in July. They each look forward to their birthdays in the following year when they would finally be 21 and no longer have to use fake IDs to enter bars, clubs, or purchase alcohol from grocery and liquor stores. Sam would be 21 in a little over two months and both Cyndi and Nanci would be turning 22 that same month.

Toward the end of June, all six friends had gotten together to celebrate Rachel's new job. They had decided to have dinner at the Cathay Village Inn restaurant on York Road in Towson. It was arguably the best Chinese restaurant in Baltimore although not overly expensive.

Dinner conversation was enjoyable. The topics ranged from the goings on in each of their careers to news regarding their various family members. Laughter broke out several times during the course of the evening as all enjoyed their food and generous portions of plum wine. There was contentment and serenity emanating from their table that evening; a calm that none had recognized or realized in what seemed like an eternity.

In each of their individual worlds all was sublime. There were no flaws, no arguments, no hard feelings, no resentments, no bitterness, and no anxieties. For quite possibly the first time in all of their lives, everything was perfect.

After dinner, everyone walked together out into the parking lot. They were all still huddled together talking and laughing. Although it was mid-evening, the sun still shined low in the sky.

"Thanks everyone," said Rachel. "I had a great time. Great food, great friends, who could ask for anything more?"

"Our pleasure," said Cyndi, as she hugged Rachel tightly and kissed her cheek. Then Cyndi pulled a rectangular gift-wrapped box from her handbag and handed it Rachel. "This is a little early, we all know, but, we wanted to give it to you anyway. It's from everybody."

Rachel took the gift and eagerly began unwrapping it with childlike

anticipation. Once all the wrapping paper was removed, Rachel opened the box. Inside was a stethoscope with shiny chrome binaurals and a circular engraving around the chrome chest piece, which read, "*To Rachel, One of the Best Friends and Best Doctors in all of Maryland.*"

Tears welled in Rachel's eyes as she clutched the gift tightly. She then looked toward each of her friends and said a heartfelt, "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Each took their turn giving Rachel a warm hug and kiss on the cheek. After that, each said their goodbyes to one another and got into their cars. The cars pulled, individually, toward the driveway to exit the restaurant's parking lot with Wade in the lead, followed by Rachel, Sam, and finally Norrin. Before he could pull away, a car came barreling down the road passing Wade, with a police cruiser in close pursuit flashing its lights and blaring its siren. The two cars sped down York Road at incredible speeds putting not only their own lives in danger but, also, the lives of the innocent bystanders around them.

Wade looked over his shoulder back at the others in the cars behind him. Rachel shook her head, not in disgust or annoyance as one might think, but, rather, to let Wade know she would not be following him. Wade looked to Sam who simply shrugged his shoulders. Wade then looked to Norrin, whose two-month verbal agreement with Nanci had recently expired.

Norrin looked at Nanci and she could see in his eyes his desire to join Wade.

"Go," she said, nodding in Wade's direction.

"I don't have to go. I'm sure the cop—"

"Go! Now. Before I change my mind," said Nanci, forcefully.

Norrin leaned over and kissed Nanci who intensely returned his kiss. Norrin then opened the driver's side door and ran to Wade's car getting in on the passenger side.

Sam and Cyndi had both turned to see what Nanci's expression would be. Nanci had gotten out of her passenger seat and was walking around to the driver's side. She shrugged her shoulders holding up her hands, palms open, and said, "Oh well, it was a good two months."

"You want to go with them don't you? And before you answer, remember, I'm a telepath," said Cyndi, waiting for her husband's response.

"I want to be a husband to you and a father to our child," responded Sam. "That's what I want. I'm not going with them."

"I think you should."

"No you don't," said Sam, his eyes squinting with a look of displeasure on his face.

“Yes. I do. You haven’t been Mantis for over two months now and I’m so very grateful for that. But, now, I think you may need to be Mantis, even if only this one last time, to be sure you’re really willing to give him up.”

“That’s crazy.”

“No, it’s not. If you’re going to give this up, it’s gotta be because it’s your own choice, your own *will*. Not some sporadic decision you’ve made because you’re angry with me or Norrin. Last time that’s what it was. A hasty decision based solely on emotion. You’ve had time to recoup from that and can now make a choice based on clear thinking. Make sure you can give this up, Sam, because I won’t offer this to you again. Next time you tell me Mantis is retired, I’ll insist you swear on your love for me, on your love for our baby, that it will be permanent.”

Sam could see by Cyndi’s tone and expression the seriousness of her offer. He nodded and looked forward. Wade and Norrin had already pulled away. Rachel was looking back at Sam waiting to see what choice he would make.

Sam’s car door swung open and as he got out he removed his sport coat, tossing it in the back seat of his car. Cyndi, Nanci, and Rachel watched as Sam’s feet left the ground and he took to flight following Wade, Norrin, and the car chase. Tears filled the eyes of all three women left behind, each with their own reasons for their tears. Rachel’s tears were for Cyndi and Nanci. Cyndi’s tears were for her unborn child. Nanci’s tears were for a belief that, perhaps, Norrin’s love for a conjured-up character named Scorpion outweighed his love for her.

Within seconds, Sam had caught up to Wade’s car. He was flying high above the street keeping tabs on both Wade’s progress as well as the car chase less than a mile ahead of them.

“Wade. Norrin,” projected Sam. “I’m above the two of you. I can see the cop chasing what looks like a brown Taurus.”

Wade turned to Norrin with a smile stretched across his face. Norrin returned Wade’s smile.

“How close are we?” asked Wade aloud.

“Close,” responded Sam. “I’d say less than half a mile.”

“I’m gonna speed up and try to catch up to them. Can you keep up?” taunted Wade.

“Nigga, please,” whispered Sam, as he increased his speed passing Wade, the police car and the car it was pursuing.

“He doesn’t like to be challenged,” said Norrin, while staring at Wade, still smiling like a child who had discovered hidden presents before their surprise party.

Wade's eyes widened. He then said to Norrin, "Take the wheel."

"What?"

"I said, take the wheel," repeated Wade, opening his car door and crouching in the door jam, while holding the rim of the door in one hand and the roof of the car with his other.

Norrin scooted into the driver's seat and once Wade could see Norrin had full control of the vehicle, he made his way to the roof.

"All this time cooped up as a civilian has turned Wade into a daredevil," said Norrin aloud.

"I can see that," projected Sam. "How reckless." At that Sam began a spinning freefall, well over one hundred feet above the street toward the fleeing car. The closer he got to the car, Sam could make out what looked like two young children, in the front seat. As he got even closer he perceived them to be about 13, no more than 14.

It seemed to the driver and passenger as if Sam would crash face first into the windshield but, at the last second, Sam maneuvered a U-turn in midair and sped back toward the sky.

"There are two children in the car speeding away from that cop car," informed Sam, still projecting his thoughts to his friends. "They look like they're 12. If something doesn't happen soon, this could get very messy."

"Hey, fearless leader. Why don't you use that telekinesis of yours to pick the car off of the street and hold it in midair?" suggested Wade.

"I could do that but, as fast as they're going right now, if I were unable to get a tight hold of them or if I should slip, I'd do more harm than good. Even more people could wind up dead," responded Sam. "Don't simply act, Wade. Think, then react."

"He hasn't worn his Mantis jammies in almost three months, and, still, he lectures with such precision as if he'd never given them up," commented Wade, surfing atop his own car, while Norrin sped closer and closer toward the police cruiser.

The fleeing car began slowing as it turned a corner and inevitably came to a halt parking next to a curb.

"What's going on?" Norrin questioned aloud.

"I took control of the driver's mind and made him slow down and pull the car over," projected Sam. "Think, then react."

"Why you unethica—"

"Shut up, Norrin," said Sam, cutting Norrin off before he could chastise him about the ethical and moral aspects of being a telepath. "The police car is pulling

over behind the children. Everything should be all right now.”

“Cool. Land, and we’ll pick you up on the other side of the street, away from the cops,” suggested Norrin.

Before turning the corner, Wade jumped from the roof of his car onto the sidewalk. Making the policemen any more edgy than they, no doubt, already were, didn’t seem a wise course. Norrin turned the corner and drove past the police cruiser trying to appear as inconspicuous as possible. As he passed the vehicle he saw two officers inside exit the car with their weapons drawn. He continued driving for a distance before making a U-turn, and driving back along the opposite side of the road to retrieve Sam and Wade.

Suddenly, a piercing sound echoed. BANG! BANG! Norrin hit the car’s brakes turning his head to the left. He watched as the rear driver’s side door of the pursued car flung open; and a small boy fled the car, running as fast as his feet could carry him from the scene.

Sam ran up to the passenger side window of Wade’s car, which Norrin promptly rolled down. “He’s dead. They killed the driver. I felt him die. He was just a boy. I don’t even think he was armed.”

The next thing they saw was the boy who had fled the car run directly in front of them and into an alley adjacent to where Norrin had stopped. The two policemen soon followed, their guns still drawn.

Norrin looked at Sam with anger in his eyes. “Move,” he said. Sam quickly stepped back and allowed Norrin room to park the vehicle. As Norrin exited, Wade approached at a quick pace. “Was that gun fire I heard?” he asked.

“They killed a boy. The driver. He couldn’t have been more than 13,” said Sam.

“He wasn’t even armed,” added Norrin, his nostrils flared and his teeth tightly grit.

“I’m not one-hundred percent sure about that, Norrin,” admitted Sam. “And even if he wasn’t, that doesn’t mean the policemen didn’t think he was, or mistake something he may have had in his hand as a weapon. I wasn’t reading their minds.”

“He didn’t deserve to die. He was just a child,” insisted Norrin, barely moving his lips as he spoke. “Use of deadly force is only authorized if a cop or civilian’s life is in danger. There was no life or death situation here.”

“The cops went after the other kid who escaped,” Sam informed Wade. “It’s a possibility they may kill him. As they passed, I sensed a high degree of anger and frustration coming from them. They weren’t simply planning to apprehend him.”

“Why?” asked Wade. “Why such aggression toward a boy?”

“Let’s go find out,” said Norrin, heading toward the alley the boy had run into.

“I’ll take the bird’s eye view,” said Sam, ascending toward the sky.

“I’ll take the roofs,” said Wade, before leaping atop the building he had been standing next to.

Norrin began running down the alleyway, but neither the boy nor policemen were in sight. Soon the alley came to a path stretching in two opposite directions. Norrin stopped, wondering which way to go.

“Left,” Norrin heard in his head.

Without hesitation, Norrin took the path leading left.

The chase emptied out into a street perpendicular to the alley, across the street through heavy traffic and into another alley.

The fleeing child’s heart was beating like mad as he gasped for air. The alley he had run down had come to a dead end. He looked around: right, left, up, and down. There was a fire escape. Who knew where it led? It didn’t matter. At least it was away from here and out of this corner, thought the boy.

He jumped to reach the retractable metal ladder but was too short to reach it. He tried again, but kept missing. Before he could try a third time, he heard a bullet ricochet off of the brick wall behind him. He was cornered. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. No means of escape.

“You’re cornered, boy. There’s nowhere to run, now,” announced one of the policemen.

“Give up and you’ll get out of here in one piece,” stated another.

The boy lifted both hands in the air, his palms clearly revealing they were empty. Sweat rolled down his forehead and cheeks as he panted heavily, shaking, his eyes wide with fear.

As the two policemen moved closer, their guns aimed directly at the unarmed child, one said, “Where is it?”

The boy didn’t speak or make any sudden movements. He simply stood trembling.

“Where is it, boy? Where is it?” the policeman shouted.

Still, the boy, too gripped with fear to utter a sound, much less a word, did not answer. He had just seen his friend gunned down in cold blood by the two policemen standing in front of him, and, now, their weapons were trained on him.

“Tell us now! Where is it?” they continued to ask.

This time, because they were frustrated by the boy’s silence, one of the

policemen kicked him in his stomach. Immediately, the child dropped to the ground, clutching his stomach and gasping for air.

"Last chance, punk. Where's the notebook?"

"Screw it. Shoot the little Nigger, George, and be done with it. Even if we don't recover the notebook, no one'll ever be able to trace it back to us if it's ever found. They'll never be able to prove anything," said one officer to the other.

"Prove anything? Our names are in that book, you moron, along with every other cop in Baltimore that's on Mason's payroll. It tells who patrols where, who they do and do not let move merchandise in and around their beat, and what particular flavor of merchandise that cop might like best. Oh, and of course there's a matter of the dead cop back at his girlfriend's apartment, the dead kid in the car a few blocks away, and this little gutter trash right here. We can make up a story to cover our butts and walk away Scot free, but not if that notebook's out there circulating around somewhere."

"Fine. The book can only be in one of three places. It's either back at the apartment, back with the kid we shot in the car, or with this piece o' crap right here. We waste him and then we'll collect the notebook."

"Unless that slut hid it somewhere, or mailed it to the cops, or the news stations, or the papers. Why'd Vinnie ever get involved with that twaker in the first place?"

"Why does anybody get involved with anybody? Fine, I'll waste this kid and we'll play it by ear."

As the policeman started to squeeze the trigger, it seemed as though it was stuck. He pulled it tighter applying more pressure but, still, the gun would not fire.

The boy was still on the ground and had curled up in a ball with his eyes tightly shut, waiting for death. He expected the end to come quickly and he hoped it would not be terribly painful.

Finally, the policeman gripped the gun with both hands and with all his might he pulled backward on the trigger, but it did not budge. He couldn't understand why the gun was not firing. The safety was off and the gun had been recently cleaned. As the man stared at his gun pondering why it would not fire, he noticed the sky was darkening to a sick grayish color at an alarming rate. His partner also noticed. The two men looked at each other and around at their surroundings as fog filled the alley. But wait. They were no longer in the alley. Instead, they were standing in some grassy field. What was going on? This was impossible. Soon they could no longer see one another and began walking about calling out to one another. As the fog gradually began to clear, each man noticed strangely shaped

figures off in the distance heading toward them. As they turned looking in all directions, they noticed the figures had formed a circle and were closing in.

"Hello. Is somebody there?" called out one of the men. But, there was no answer.

The two policemen started to run but, in which direction was safety? Where was the path to sanctuary? The fog thinned as sounds filled the air. Bestial sounds, growling and snarling. In their efforts to escape running blindly, each man came to an abrupt halt and was knocked backward to the ground. Their guns flew up into the air away from their grasp. As they lifted their eyes, a hideous creature stood before them. It huffed and foamed at the mouth. Its arms were enormous and strong. Its claws were blood stained, as were its jagged teeth. It was covered in fur, with long tall twitching ears, and a pointed snout. Its soulless empty eyes gazed upon them as though they were prey as it let out a blood-curdling howl.

Wade, standing on the rooftop looking down on the two policemen, turned to Sam and asked, "How long are you gonna screw with these two idiots?"

"Until I'm satisfied that they've been thoroughly terrorized," replied Sam, chewing the inside of his cheek. "They killed a child and attempted to kill another. I'm going to know why."

The two policemen flailed about on the ground, crying out and swatting at the air every few seconds until, "Let 'em go, Sam," Norrin projected his thought to his mentor, while standing only feet away from the traumatized officers.

"Norrin, I—"

"Let 'em go. They're gonna talk or they're gonna die," said Norrin.

"You will not kill them, Norrin. Period. I'm letting them go now, but do not kill them," ordered Sam.

As the men were thrashing about on the ground, the veil over their eyes was lifted and they were able to recognize their surroundings. They were again back in the alley. Looking up from their cowering positions, the two men saw Norrin standing over them. Although Sam had discontinued his telepathic nightmare, he made sure to cloud the men's minds as to Norrin's true identity. To them, Norrin appearance reflected that of Scorpion.

"What? Who are you? What just happened?" asked one of the men.

Norrin grabbed hold of the man's shirt and hoisted him into the air with one hand, after activating his adrenaline factor. In his altered voice, he began speaking, "I'm your judge, jury, and if need be your executioner, Officer."

The other man still on the ground looking up in terror, attempted to scramble away on all fours. Norrin noticed his movements and quickly

demobilized the man, stomping the man's ankle with all his might. As the bones in the ankle shattered and the surrounding skin squished and tore, the policeman let out a spine-chilling scream.

"Shut up," said Norrin, in an uncaring monotone voice. He turned his attention back to the man he was holding in the air, "I just trashed your friend's foot. He'll probably never be able to walk quite the same again, if he's ever able to walk again. Do you know how many bones there are in a human foot?"

The man shook his head staring toward Norrin, his eyes filled with fear.

"Me neither," replied Norrin, smiling eerily at the man. "But, I know there's a lot. Unless you give me an incredibly good reason as to why you just killed a defenseless, unarmed child and attempted to kill another, I'm gonna cut open your feet with my claws." At that Norrin showed the man his free hand and allowed him to watch as Norrin's fingernails grew. "Then, we can count how many bones are in the human foot. After that, we'll get rid of those pesky kneecaps. You won't be needing them."

The man began to stammer and stutter, "Wha, I, we didn't! You've got the wrong guys!"

"Wrong answer," said Norrin. With his free hand, Norrin grabbed hold of the policeman's upper arm and, with an effortless tug, he dislodged the man's shoulder tearing muscle and ligaments. The policeman screamed out in pain, groggy and near passing out as he saw his arm hanging lifeless at his side.

"Wanna go for two?" Norrin asked. It was clear that the man was about to pass out. "No, no," said Norrin, smacking the man's face. "Stay awake. I want you conscious when I cut out your kneecaps."

"Enough," said Sam, descending from the rooftop. He too, appeared to be in costume. "Didn't we talk about acting like common street thugs a few months back?" asked Sam, looking displeased by Norrin's aggressiveness.

"I was interrogating. There's a difference," replied Norrin.

"We don't interrogate that way, Scorpion," insisted Sam, clearly upset by Norrin's response. "Now let him go."

Staring Sam directly in the eye still holding the policeman high above the ground, Norrin opened his hand. With a loud thud, the man fell to the ground. By that time, Wade had hopped down from the roof and joined his friends.

"Let's see," Wade began, "You've crippled one cop, seriously injured another. Both actions being felonies, I believe. What's next? Assassinate a prominent political figure?"

"Nah," responded Norrin. "Wouldn't want to infringe on the CIA or FBI's territory. Besides, these two are filth. If it wasn't for the Cub Scout leader here

they'd be blood spots on the ground by now."

"Then lucky for us there's always a Cub Scout around when you need one," retorted Sam, while squinting his eyes with a hint of annoyance in his tone.

At that Sam lifted the two men off of the ground telekinetically and held them suspended in midair. He began reading their minds and obtaining the needed information as to why these two had viciously gunned down one unarmed child and attempted to do the same to yet another.

Once he had all he wanted, Sam lowered them gently to the ground. He used his telekinesis to remove the handcuffs from their belts and handcuffed the two men together so, that each was attached to both pairs of cuffs. Sam then turned his attention to the boy sitting on the ground, no longer cowering in fear.

"You're not hurt, are you?" asked Sam, in a gentle tone.

The boy, sitting on the ground with his hands clenched and arms wrapped around his knees, shook his head, no. He looked at Sam as if he were the second coming.

"I saw one of the policemen kick you in your stomach. Are you able to breathe okay?" Sam questioned further.

"Uh-huh," the boy muttered, still staring with wonderment at Sam. "Are you God?" asked the boy.

"No," answered Norrin, reverting to his normal voice. "He just thinks he is."

Wade chuckled.

"No. I'm not God. My name is Mantis," said Sam, introducing himself to the boy. "What's yours?"

"Shawn."

"Shawn, I know what happened. I know why these men did the horrible things they did and why they were chasing you. I know you have the notebook they were after."

Norrin and Wade looked at one another somewhat confused. What notebook was Sam referring to?

"Shawn, may I please have the notebook?" asked Sam. "It's very important that that book gets to the right people. People who can use it to stop people like these two who attacked you from harming anyone else." Sam's hand was extended toward the boy.

The boy reached into his shirt and pulled out a small spiral notebook. He held his hand out toward Sam. Seeing the boy was offering it to him freely, Sam telekinetically brought the book to his hand. "Thank you, Shawn," said Sam, as he began thumbing through the notebook.

The boy's mouth hung open as he continued staring at Sam.

Still looking at the book's contents, Sam began to speak. "Shawn, are you familiar with Baltimore's transit system?"

The boy nodded.

Sam lifted his head from the book making direct eye contact with Shawn. "Good. I want you to take the bus home, and once you're there, tell no one what happened. Do you understand?"

The boy nodded again.

Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out five dollars in ones. "This will more than cover your fare."

The boy took the money and thanked Sam.

"You're welcome, now go quickly," admonished Sam.

Once the boy was gone Sam turned to Norrin and Wade. "We'll leave these two here and call 911 in an hour or two for someone to come pick them up."

"Do you think it's wise to just let the boy go like that and trust him to keep secret what he saw here?" asked Norrin.

"As he makes his way home, this entire situation will become clouded in his mind, like a dream he can't seem to fully remember," informed Sam. "By the time he's there, he will have forgotten the entire happenings."

"And these two?" asked Wade, looking at the cuffed policemen on the ground.

"All they'll remember is the woman they killed at her apartment and the child in the car. But, Shawn's face will always be a cloudy memory," stated Sam.

"Woman at her apartment?" asked Norrin.

"I'll explain in a moment. I don't want to stay here any longer." At that, Sam lifted he and his friends back atop the building he and Wade had been looking down from, not long before. Once there, Sam began explaining to Norrin and Wade what he had taken from the two policemen's minds as well as the boy, Shawn.

"It seems the two policemen in the alley and a third named Vincent Domingez were at the apartment of Vincent's girlfriend, Melissa. Melissa was a junkie who wanted to get clean and get help for the sake of her son. Her son is the dead boy the policemen shot in the car. It seems Melissa had made a deal with the District Attorney's office to reveal the names of several of the police officers on the take, as well as the territories in which they knowingly allowed drug trafficking to go on." Sam held up the notebook he had been given. "This has the names of those police officers, their beats, and even the names of those officers that have drug problems of their own. I don't know if this Melissa compiled the list herself or if she appropriated it from her boyfriend, but it cost

her her life. It seems that the three corrupt policemen had gotten word, probably through someone in the DA's office that's on the take, that Officer Domingez's girlfriend was about to exchange evidence that would bring down a good portion of Baltimore's not-so-finest, for a spot in the witness protection program. When the three men arrived at her house to find the evidence and silence her, she and Vincent went into the bedroom. I can only imagine he tried to talk her out of turning over what she had, perhaps even threatening her. The other two officers were waiting for the two of them or, at the very least, their partner to come out of the room.

"Meanwhile, Melissa's son and his friend, Shawn, were watching television. Suddenly, there was a yell or scream and seconds later, the woman appeared from the bedroom with blood dripping from her hands. One of the policemen rushed into the bedroom to find Officer Domingez with a pair of scissors lodged deep in his belly. The other policeman, waiting to find out what had happened, grabbed Melissa. She was clearly frantic with tears rolling down her cheeks. But before the man could grab her, she threw a notepad toward her son and screamed, 'Go, baby, go!' Her son missed it but Shawn caught it. The policeman in the bedroom yelled out, 'She killed Vinnie. He's dead.' Again the woman screamed, 'Go! Go! Go!' The boys ran out the front door and, on his way out, Melissa's son grabbed her car keys. The man holding Melissa shoved her into the bedroom and got a good look at the dead policeman, himself. He saw his partner with a pair of scissors sticking out of his stomach and instinctively reacted. He put a bullet in Melissa's head. After only a few seconds, the two men realized that the two boys had escaped and that if they didn't catch them, it could mean the end, not only for them but several of their comrades as well. As the two ran out of the apartment, they saw a brown Ford Taurus being poorly driven and screeching away. They pursued the car for several miles, eventually passing the Cathay Village Inn on York Road, and you both know the rest. The boy in the car was the woman's son, and he was not armed. They killed him in cold blood. All Melissa wanted was to get clean and make a better life for her child. She paid for that dream with her life and the life of her son."

Norrin and Wade had no words.

"I now understand the expression, 'everything comes full circle.' So many events come back to your first encounter with Derek King, Norrin," said Sam.

"What? What does Derek King have to do with this? He's dead," responded Norrin.

"These two policemen, Derek King, and even the man Cyndi beat within an inch of his life all work for a single man," informed Sam. "I saw Derek's face and

that man Paul's face as I probed one of the officer's thoughts. I saw interactions between them and I saw their boss. The man they all fear. Michael Mason is his name. He was the third man you saw the night you first met Derek King, Norrin. He is the plague of this city. The list I have in this notebook reveals several of the names of those who work for him. We have to stop this. We have to stop him."

"Sounds like a plan," said Norrin eagerly.

"You two forgetting something?" asked Wade.

Sam and Norrin looked at Wade for a moment not sure where his line of thought was going.

"Cyndi. Nanci. Aren't you two supposed to be focusing on your wives and families and quitting the crime busting business?" reminded Wade.

Sam and Norrin looked at one another as their hearts sunk. Their wives. All the excitement, all the intensity had caused them to forget about their wives.

Sam spoke up, "Cyndi and I are starting our family with one child on the way and who knows how many more in the future. I do want to focus on my wife and my child and our life. But, in all honesty, I cannot do that knowing full well a disease like this Michael Mason is out defiling my city, my home. I want to be able to know my wife and children are relatively safe when they leave my home. As long as Mason's out there dirtying our neighborhoods, I could never be at ease. I could never feel Cyndi and our children are safe."

"I agree," said Norrin promptly.

"Of course you do," retorted Sam.

"No, really I do. If this guy is as bad as you say, I may be safe, you may be safe, Wade and Rachel may be safe, but what about Nanci and Cyndi? They don't have invulnerability. They don't have fire expulsion. They can't move things with a thought to protect themselves. Sure they're definitely more trained than the average person, and Cyndi may be able to use her telepathy offensively, but they're not us. And like you said, what about our children? You have one on the way. Nanci and I would like to have a couple ourselves. I'll tell you this, and I say it with all seriousness, if we walk away from this and this Michael Mason does anything to hurt one of my children," said Norrin, motioning his hand to his chest, "I will kill him. I will kill him, Sam. I will rip out his intestines and show them to him. And you, and all of your telekinesis will not be able to stop me," affirmed Norrin, pointing his index finger toward Sam.

"Well, then, I guess we should finish this. Capture Mason and make sure he's put away for life, both to avoid his death and you spending the rest of your life rotting away in some dark cell for premeditated murder," countered Sam.

“You dress it up any way you’d like and call it what you will, but he’s going down,” insisted Norrin. “He’s going down for spreading poison to this city’s children. He’s going down for Melissa and her son. He’s going down for what happened to Tracey Spinnerman. He’s going down for buying off those people who are supposedly sworn to uphold the law and protect the citizens.”

“So what you’re saying is he’s going down?” said Wade. “Well, if he winds up in prison that’s a definite possibility.”

Bringing the mood back to a serious one, Sam again began speaking. “Before we commit to this though, Norrin, I need you to promise me something. When this is done, when it’s all over, that’s it. We’re done. Wade can do what he wants, but you and me, Scorpion and Mantis, they no longer exist. Nanci and Cyndi need their husbands, and my son or daughter needs their father. We do this, and then we call it quits. I started this seven years ago and by God I’m going to finish it. And it’s not because we’re doing anything wrong or because we can’t handle it. But we, you and I, swore oaths before God, our wives, and our guests that we’d love our wives and give them our very best. Thus far, we’ve both been somewhat negligent and left wanting in that.”

Norrin’s head dropped for a moment and as he lifted his head, his expression reflected one of remorse and regret. “I know. I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“I know you didn’t, and neither did I,” continued Sam. “But, we’ve done it, and, now, it’s our responsibility to fix it. Cyndi and Nanci deserve better, Norrin. They deserve our complete attention, our loyalty, our minds and bodies, the total package. Not simply token time or our attentions divided between them and our next mission. We have to live up to our promise, fully.”

Norrin nodded with a conviction on his face to take the necessary steps to make the needed changes.

“Mantis and Scorpion also deserve to go out with honor. We owe them at least that much,” stated Sam. “Let’s finish this and give them the exit they deserve. Let them fade out with dignity, honor, and respect at the top of their game. Then we’ll just be Norrin and Sam. Believe it or not, those are dignified names as well.”

Norrin smiled.

“Swear, Norrin. Swear on your honor. No. Swear on your love for me, on your love for Nanci. We do this and it’s over,” pleaded Sam.

Norrin looked at the gravel below his feet on the rooftop. Then he looked at Wade and finally Sam. He nodded, “I swear. Once this is over, no more alter egos.”

Sam and Norrin then both turned to Wade.

“Hey, where Mantis and Scorpion go, Toad goes too,” said Wade uncompromisingly. “I’ll stand with the two of you one last time and, then, Toad will pass on into oblivion with his brothers.”

“Not oblivion, Wade,” said Sam, placing his arms around both of his friends, “Elysium, where all legendary heroes go once they’ve earned their eternal reward.”

CHAPTER XXI

No Loose Ends

“Thanks again for the stethoscope. I really love it,” said Rachel, forcing a smile and feeling like a heel for trying to say something that might break the tension in the room.

She had been sitting silently worrying that if she spoke, she would either say something to make Cyndi and Nanci more uncomfortable than they already were, or make them feel worse than they already did.

“I’m glad you like it,” said Cyndi, forcing a smile of her own and sipping from her teacup.

Nanci hadn’t said anything. In fact, she seemed almost distracted, staring off into space at nothing in particular with a completely blank expression.

“Nanci? Nanci.” Cyndi called out trying to get Nanci’s attention.

Still, Nanci didn’t respond. Obviously, she was very deep in thought. Whether it was concern for her husband, vexation at his decision to chase after another adventure, or a combination of the two, it was undeterminable by her facial expression.

Suddenly, a thin burst of flame shot past Nanci and then dissipated. Only Nanci’s eyes moved as she shot a cross look toward Rachel.

“Sorry,” apologized Rachel. “You were so deep in thought that you didn’t hear Cyndi calling you.”

Nanci turned toward Cyndi with an apologetic glance.

"It's okay," said Cyndi. "I'm worried, too."

It wasn't that Cyndi was worried about her husband's safety per se; she of course was, to some degree. But, more so, she was worried what may result from him immersing himself in vigilante activities once again. Cyndi hadn't violated Nanci's privacy by reading her thoughts but, with the intense emotions Nanci was broadcasting, she might as well have been standing on her chair with a sign in her hands screaming, "My husband loves his little super hero costume more than he does me."

"It'll be okay," consoled Cyndi, trying to convince herself as well. "In the end, things will work out. I'm sure of it."

"Really?" responded Nanci. "I wish I could be as sure as you are. I don't think Norrin will ever give up being Scorpion. Even if it costs him our marriage."

Neither Cyndi nor Rachel had ever heard Nanci mention ending she and Norrin's marriage before. Sure, she was frustrated with Norrin's continual time spent as Scorpion, but divorce? That seemed extreme.

"It won't come to that, Nanci," interjected Cyndi. "Norrin's not going to lose you over this. He loves you far too much."

"Yeah, he loves me so much that as soon as the opportunity presented itself once his obligation had ended, he ran off as fast as he could to join Sam and Wade on another adventure."

"In all fairness, Nanci, you did tell him to go," reminded Cyndi.

"Eavesdropping on our conversation, Cyndi?"

"No. I happened to be turned looking in your direction when you told him to go, after he specifically said to you that he didn't have to go," answered Cyndi.

"So you're taking his side?"

"No. No. I'm not taking anyone's side. I'm simply explaining the details of what took place. Anyway, to infer I'm choosing a side sets you and Norrin as enemies or opponents, and I don't believe that's how you really feel, is it? I don't sense that in your heart."

Cyndi's words caused Nanci to stop and take a good look at herself. Cyndi was right. Nanci didn't want to portray Norrin as her enemy. She just wanted him to be her husband and focus on that.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to attack you," said Nanci remorsefully.

Cyndi simply smiled at Nanci, letting her know there were no hard feelings, and again sipped from her teacup.

"I think if Norrin and I are going to continue being married, I'll just have to resolve myself to the fact that he'll always be Scorpion. Honestly, he may be more Scorpion than he's ever been Norrin," said Nanci somberly.

"Either way, he's the man you fell in love with and married. He's the man that loves you indescribably," reassured Cyndi, "We may never be rid of our husbands' alter egos, and if that's the case, we have to ask ourselves; is it better to have Sam and Mantis or Norrin and Scorpion or none of them at all? Me, given that option, I choose Sam and Mantis every time as opposed to nothing at all."

"And that warms my heart," said Sam, entering the *sala* followed by Norrin and Wade. "But, that's not something you'll have to worry about very much longer." Sam walked over to the chair that Cyndi had been sitting on and motioned for her to stand up. Once she did, he kissed her, took her hand, and, after sitting down in Cyndi's chair, Sam sat her down onto his lap.

"I'm no telepath," said Wade, with a smirk on his face, "but I can sense that chair is in great pain."

Briefly, Sam chewed the inside of his cheek while staring at Wade and then began speaking. "Something just happened that needs to be addressed."

"If you're all going to have costume talk, I'm gonna go," said Rachel, standing and grabbing her purse.

"Wait Rach," said Sam. "Yes, we're going to have costume talk but not like you think. Up until today, we've put our vigilante activities behind us for more than two months. Norrin, Wade, and I talked and we're prepared to do it again, permanently. But, there's one more thing we have to do before that can happen."

Rachel sat back down and let her purse fall to the floor, waiting for Sam to explain further.

"We've found a common thread in so many things that have plagued our lives over the last several months, as well as the people we try to protect," continued Sam.

"Please don't say Dominic Mazella. Please don't say Dominic Mazella," uttered Rachel, at a whispers volume.

"No. Not Mazella," Sam assured her. "His name is Mason. Michael Mason. From what I was able to procure from a couple of Baltimore's not so finest, this Mason is responsible for the majority of the illegal narcotics trade in the greater Baltimore area. All the little dealers get their product from him. They all pay him a percentage and some pay protection money. He has his hands in prostitution, illegal gambling rings, weapons sales, corrupt politicians, and just about every

other illegal activity imaginable. His hands are very dirty. Filthy.”

Sam turned to Cyndi, “His right hand man is Paul, the man that you beat senseless. Actually, I should say was his right hand man. Mason shot him the day after he was taken to the hospital. He’s pretty much dead.”

“I can’t say I feel any remorse for him,” stated Cyndi. “But why would Mason kill his own man?”

“Paul was in police custody. He was completely traumatized and heavily medicated. Mason couldn’t take the chance of Paul giving up his entire or even part of his operation. So, he did the only thing that made sense to him. He eliminated the loose end,” explained Sam.

“And all this has to do with putting an end to your vigilante activities how?” questioned Rachel. “It sounds more like a debriefing than a, ‘We’re closing up shop for good’ talk.”

“Well, it is, sort of,” admitted Sam.

“That’s what I thought,” said Rachel, standing again and grabbing her purse. “I’m not interested in any more of your missions, Sam. Quite honestly, I don’t think your wives are very interested either. I mean, Cyndi’s pregnant, for God’s sake. Are you really so clueless as to hurl your pregnant wife into harm’s way?”

“No, Rachel. I’m not quite that clueless,” retorted Sam, in a very abrupt manner. “Cyndi will of course, not be involved as anything more than an information gatherer, a strategist, or a behind-the-scenes person, if you will. Norrin, Wade, and I will take care of all the hands-on portions. But, where I was going with this before I was nominated for the Bumbling Idiot Award,” said Sam, looking directly at Rachel, “is that this will positively be our final mission.”

“Yeah, that’s believable,” Nanci commented sarcastically, while rolling her eyes. In the past she might have held her tongue, too worried about offending someone. But, this time she didn’t care. She was going to say what she felt and she didn’t care who liked it.

“Truthfully, Nance,” Norrin spoke up. “Before we got here, we all swore that this would be it. This would be our last mission. We’d be able to tie up all the weirdness that’s affected our lives and the lives of those closest to us. Once that’s done, we can all focus one-hundred percent on our families and our personal lives.”

“Until the next mission, quest, or supposed horrific threat to Baltimore,” added Nanci.

“No, Nance. This is it. We finish this, and it’s done. We destroy the costumes, we seal up all the secret caverns, including their entrances and exits, we put all this behind us, and focus on building strong foundations for our

families. 'That's what you want, isn't it?' asked Norrin.

"Yeah. It is. It's just that it's so hard to believe you. This is so much a part of who you are, so ingrained in you. It's just really hard to believe you'd give it up," said Nanci.

"Nance," Sam interrupted. He rarely called her that. Usually, only Norrin called her that. But Sam wanted Nanci to hear the sincerity in his words, "Trust us. Give us the benefit of the doubt. Norrin just swore to me on his love for you, that once this is over, he's finished. This is his last mission. No more. We destroy Mason's network, we bring him down, and in the end, turn he and all of his affiliates over to the authorities. Then it's done. Just a few months, that's all we ask."

Nanci looked at Norrin. She wanted to believe Sam and Norrin. For the last two months they had both kept their word and lived civilian lives free of vigilante activities. But, putting that life behind them entirely? Nanci wasn't naive or gullible enough to accept the pledge of her husband or his mentor blindly. There was doubt lingering in the back of her mind. Nonetheless, the honest and genuine look in Norrin's eyes, almost begging Nanci to believe him, softened her heart.

"Okay. Okay. One last mission, right?" Nanci directed her question to both Norrin and Sam.

"That's it," said Sam, nodding his head with his hands lifted palms open.

"Yes. I promise," reaffirmed Norrin.

"Fine. I'll take you both at your word," said Nanci, finally giving in. "But, I do this with you. Cyndi may need to sit this one out, but I don't. I'm involved one-hundred percent. Maybe that way we'll get this done a little faster. I'll be highly motivated to put this behind us as quickly as possible."

"It may get a little dangerous, Nanci," informed Sam. "From what I gathered about this Mason, he's fairly persistent, quite deadly, and, by enlarge, feared by those who know him. It's unlikely he'll simply lie down and accept us trying to—"

"I'm very persistent, too, Sam" interrupted Nanci. "I'm no untested rookie. I doubt Mr. Mason can throw anything my way that I haven't seen or experienced before. I want to be a part of this, Sam. You want me to trust you. Trust works both ways. I want to help."

Sam turned to Norrin with a look of concern on his face. Norrin raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders. Nanci hadn't shown any enthusiasm whatsoever in being involved in a mission since before she had married Norrin. She most definitely had never all but insisted she be an active part of one before.

That attitude left Sam uneasy. If Nanci were to be more preoccupied with hurrying this mission than carefully focusing clearly on what was at hand, she might not only endanger the mission but, also, herself and her friends.

"You're committed to this?" Sam asked Nanci.

"Yes," she answered.

"And you're not going to be so overly preoccupied with ending this that you lose focus or act sloppily?" Sam's tone and expression now reflected that of leader and authoritative figure, as opposed to friend and consoler.

"No, Sam. I'm not a rookie and I'm not some impetuous child. I'm older than you are, remember?" she responded sternly.

"Yes, I know. I also know you're a frustrated wife craving the full attention of her husband. That's normal and understandable. But, I need to know you'll be giving this your full, unwavering, and undivided attention should you get involved. I can't have you as a liability, Nanci," said Sam.

"You'll have my full attention. I promise."

"Very well then. Norrin, are you okay with this?" asked Sam.

"Scorpion and Gorgon on one final mission together and going off to Elysium after it's over? Sounds kinda romantic to me. What more could I ask for?" commented Norrin, looking admiringly at his wife.

"Elysium?" questioned Rachel. "Where in the world did that come from?"

"Never mind," said Sam, defusing the question. "Tomorrow, 10:00 A.M., we meet in the lair and begin discussing ways to tear down Mason's organization."

"Yeah, I won't be there," Rachel said aloud.

"I didn't expect you would," retorted Sam. "For the rest of you who will, bring your ideas and your costumes. Just in case."

At that, everyone said their goodbyes and headed off each to their respective home.

The following day, at John Hopkins Hospital a visitor entered the room of Officer George Seward.

"Why is it that I'm continuously forced to visit my associates in the hospital?" asked Mason.

George turned toward the entrance of his room. He felt a surge of pain in his shoulder. His sudden movement due to Mason's unexpected arrival immediately aggravated the injury. "Mike. What're you doing here?"

"I heard through the grapevine you had an accident."

"If you can call it that."

"Was it an on purpose?"

"That, more than an accident."

"Look, you were supposed to eliminate that girlfriend of Officer Dominguez's, and get the supposed evidence she had on your brothers in blue on my payroll."

"Yeah. That was the plan."

"So why do I get the feeling you have bad news?"

"Mike, man, it wasn't my fault. I mean, how did I know she'd been contacted by the DA's office? How'd I know she'd sell us out for a house in the country and a place in the witness protection program for her and her kid?"

"George, if you're looking for sympathy or a shoulder to cry on, you'd better go out in the hall and find yourself a candy stripper. I don't give a crap about your personal problems. I'm interested in this proof. Where is it?"

"—?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't hear your answer."

"Mike I don't—"

"You don't have it, right? How typical. Don't tell me. You got cold feet and couldn't pull the trigger."

"No. That's not it at all. She's dead. I shot her in the head. I killed her kid, too."

"You killed her kid? Nice work! Maybe I've been underestimating you."

"Problem is, I took care of her at her place. She had her kid and a friend of his at her apartment. The kid's only 11 or 12, but when he saw his mom come out of her bedroom with blood on her hands and screaming for him to run, the kid and his friend took off out the door. He drove off in his mom's car trying to make a getaway."

"Lemme understand this. The woman comes out of her bedroom with blood on her hands screaming for the kid to leave, and he takes off in her car."

"Yeah."

"Whose blood's on her hands?"

"Vinnie's."

"Vinnie's?"

"Yeah. She killed 'im. After she does, she comes out of the bedroom, tosses her kid a notebook, and tells him to run. The kid freaks and runs out the front door with his friend right behind 'im, and takes his mom's car."

"Resourceful kid. Then what?"

"Then me and my partner chased the little piss ant for what seemed like five or six miles before he decides to pull the car over. I guess he figured he had a better chance to make a getaway on foot. After he pulls over, I pull up right

behind 'im. Me and my partner get out of the patrol car with our guns pulled, our service revolvers not the untraceable I killed his mom with. The driver's-side window's down, so, I walked over to that side of the car. The kid looks at me with tears in his eyes. I knew I had no choice, so, I pulled the trigger. No loose ends, right?"

"Exactly."

"I had no choice! If he talked, it'd be over for me! I took the gun I used to shoot his mom and I put it in his hand; that way when it comes time for the investigation, the gun used to kill his mom is in his hands. While I'm doing this, his friend darts out the back door and takes off running."

"Why didn't you shoot him, too?"

"I was gonna. I was gonna use the gun in the dead kid's hand while he was holding it, that way his hand would have residue from the gun on it. Again, thinkin' ahead to the investigation."

"Where was your useless partner?"

"I don't know. Maybe he got cold feet or froze. I can't say. But the kid, he took off."

"So, he got away? He's probably got Officer Dominguez's girlfriend's proof."

"Yeah. I think he did. But Mike, he didn't get away. We got 'im. I mean, we had 'im." George paused briefly. "You're not gonna like this."

"What?"

"Well..."

"What?"

"It seems your costume characters are back."

"Tell me you're kidding."

"I wish I were. I didn't go into all the details on the report I filed, but I experienced the strangest thing I've ever seen in my life, Mike. I had the little snot. We cornered him in this alley, right? I had my gun pulled, the same gun I used to kill his friend, and for some reason, it won't fire. I'm pullin' the trigger with all my might using both hands and, still, it won't fire."

"Was the safety off?"

"Yeah the safety was off! I told you, I had just shot the other kid! What do you think? I put the safety back on?"

"Hey, whenever I can underestimate a cop, I usually do."

"Funny. Anyway, then while I'm pulling the trigger trying to get the gun to fire, the sky goes dark."

Mason started to chuckle.

“What’s funny?” asked George.

“I was just thinking how funny it would’ve been if while you were trying to pull the trigger on this gun with all your might, you turned the gun and looked down the barrel like they do on those Bugs Bunny cartoons. And when you pulled the trigger while looking down the barrel, the gun finally fired. That would have been classic,” said Mason, trying to finish his explanation through his laughter.

“Yeah, Mike. That’d been real funny. Me lying there dead.”

Mason shrugged his shoulders while titling his head and lifting the left corner of his mouth. “Okay. Okay. The sky went dark. What do you mean? The sun went down, rain clouds overhead, what?”

“No. I mean the sky darkened. Not gradually. Instantaneously. Out of nowhere, this thick fog surrounds us. It’s all over the alley. Only I’m not in the alley anymore. I’m in the middle of this field. It’s like these rolling hills or something. All of a sudden, I hear these growls, like a bunch of wild dogs are near, but I can’t see where they are. It’s much too dark and foggy.”

“Did you get knocked out or something? Was this a dream?”

“Maybe it was, but, I tell you what, I wasn’t asleep. As I’m trying to find my partner through the fog, calling out to him and reaching out forward to try and touch something, anything, I bump into something. I looked up and, Mike, I know this sounds crazy but, I swear to God—”

“I don’t believe in God. You can swear to me though if you’d like.”

“Fine. I swear to you then. Mike, Mike, it was a werewolf.”

“A what?”

“A werewolf. And I’m not talking about a Lon Chaney Jr. Wolfman, werewolf. I’m talking that TV series or *The Howling*, werewolf. It was all teeth and drool and claws and fur. And Mike, I’m not lying, it was like eight or nine feet tall.”

“—?”

“Don’t look at me like that, man! I’m tellin’ you the God’s honest truth!”

“Again, I don’t believe in God. Nonetheless, I can accept that there may be some delusional, comic-book-reading, D & D-playing losers that, if you were to put a live naked woman in front of them would have no clue where to begin, running around Baltimore in their PJs, or underwear, or whatever, thinking they’re super heroes. But werewolves, George? Come on, I gotta draw the line somewhere.”

“My word, Mike. I give you my solemn word that I saw werewolves. Not just one. It was like an entire herd.”

“Pack.”

“Yeah. Exactly. And, then, all of a sudden, it all vanished. The werewolves, the fog, the darkness, it just vanished. Then, out of nowhere, this black guy with one of those tall hairdos, is standing in front of me in this red costume. He lifts me in the air with one hand and stomps my partner’s foot to jelly. It was disgusting. His foot didn’t even look like a foot anymore. He screamed, Mike. He screamed like I’ve never heard a man scream before in my life.”

“Again this man in the red costume, I need to find him and kill him. He needs to die.”

“Yeah, well, after what I saw, you’d better get yourself an army because after your super hero pulled my arm outta whack and smashed my partner’s foot to paste, he was joined by two of his pals. They were all wearing costumes. They were all a little different, though. The guy with the tall hair had a red outfit. The other two’s masks covered their entire head. You couldn’t see their hair. One was in green and the other wore a tan color.”

“Three total, huh?”

“Uh-huh.”

“The one in green pointed at us, and the next thing we knew, we were floating in the air and spinning. I felt really light-headed while I spun. I’m not sure if it was because of the shock of my arm dangling or what.”

“First werewolves and now you’re floating in mid-air? What’s next? A man in blue tights and a big red cape? I didn’t think you did drugs, George.”

“I don’t! I swear Mike! You’ve gotta believe me,” said George, as tears were nearly welling in his eyes. “After being held in mid-air with the feeling my brains had just been sucked out of a straw through my nose, the guy in green lowered us down. Then, magically, or something, our handcuffs flew from our belts and cuffed me and my partner together, by themselves.”

“And he of course will corroborate this.”

“I doubt it. He passed out after he got his foot smashed.”

“Convenient.”

“Mike, I’m not makin’ this up. I swear. Don’t ya think if I was gonna make something up it’d be better than this?”

“Doubtfully. Nevertheless, you’re here. Your partner’s here. You’re both clearly incapacitated, and the mysterious, costumed man is back in our lives. But, now, there’s not just one, there’s three.”

“That’s what I’m sayin’.”

“Fine. How long do you think it’ll be before you’re back on your feet and able to work?”

“I don’t know. Three, four weeks, maybe.”

“That long?”

“Yeah, man! I’m injured here! Damaged tendons and cartilage.”

Mason shook his head and began walking out of the room. Before reaching the door, he stopped. “Nah, too long,” he said, turning and firing three times. The gun had a silencer, so, the noise was nearly non-existent. “Thanks for nothing, George,” said Mason, as he exited the room.

There was no heart monitor monitoring the officer’s vitals, as his injuries were not life threatening. But, if there had been, the sound would have gone from a continuous rhythmic beep to a constant low-pitched hum.

CHAPTER XXII

The End Justifies the Means

“Oh, my God! Oh, my God!” shrieked Amber.

Amber was one of Michael Mason’s primary distributors of cocaine and heroine among Baltimore’s more elite and upper crust. She supplied drugs to the doctors, lawyers, politicians, and wealthy businessmen and women that Mason didn’t take care of personally.

Amber was running toward her parked car, fumbling for her keys and trying not to trip in her two-hundred-dollar high heels. It was dark and the parking lot at Double Rock Park was not especially well lit at night.

Fumbling nervously, Amber dropped her keys on the ground as she stood next to her car. “Come on, come on!” she nervously blurted out, while reaching for the keys. Suddenly, she stopped. Panic had seemingly overtaken her, as she heard a voice cry out from the darkness. No doubt, it was the man she had arranged to meet and had been talking to not five minutes previous. The man she had met to whom she would sell her product. But, not this night.

“Oh, God, come on!” she yelled, as she bent over to pick up her keys. Reaching for the key ring, Amber watched as two feet gently descended onto the blacktop no more than a foot in front of her. They were green feet. Even in the darkness that much was obvious. Amber turned her head, lifting her eyes slowly,

following the feet to the shins, then the knees, and the thighs. They, too, were green, as was the abdomen, chest, shoulders, neck, and head. Where a nose and mouth should have appeared a dark shadow kept them veiled. Only two large what one could only have assumed were eyes were visible. There was no pupil or iris. Simply two glazed over empty looking lenses.

“A little late to be out in this dimly lit park with no one else around, wouldn’t you agree?” asked the costumed man. “Or perhaps you prefer the cover of night to conduct your type of business.”

The woman, frozen with terror, didn’t respond. Sure, she had heard Mike mention something about costumed characters a while back, but she had dismissed it as either too much to drink or a night of partying a bit too hard. Now, even though her eyes were seeing it, though her mind didn’t want to believe it, one of Mike’s costumed characters had just landed right next to her. He hadn’t landed with a thud or an abrupt thump. He had lowered himself, by sheer force of will, gingerly onto the ground as if he had been levitating in mid-air.

Amber began to think of her next move. A gun, there was a gun in her purse. If she could just—

“You touch that gun and I may forget you’re a woman,” said the man in green.

Suddenly, there was a growl from the darkness several feet in front of her. Amber’s attention quickly turned in that direction. She couldn’t see anything, but the growl was close and getting closer. From the darkness, a figure appeared. It’s two most dominate features were tall hair and brightly green glowing lenses, which were its eyes. As it walked closer, Amber scuffled backward, unable to remove her eyes from the unsettling figure.

At that, her purse flew from her side into the hands of the man in green. “Let’s keep this away from you so that temptation doesn’t get the best of you, and so that you don’t do anything that might get you injured,” said the man.

A third figure appeared, small in stature, quite curvaceous, and also in costume. “Get up,” she said, walking up to the woman and taking a fist full of red hair near the nape of the woman’s neck.

“Take it easy, Nanci,” Sam projected his thoughts.

“Just trying to make it look convincing,” she responded to his thought.

Amber gasped, as she slowly stood erect. She was at least three if not four inches taller than Nanci. Nonetheless, she was still very much afraid. If for no other reason than that the outcome of this situation could result in any one of a few different, yet all unpleasant, endings. Would she simply be beaten and left,

disfigured, or permanently disabled? Perhaps she may even be killed.

“Don’t worry,” said Sam aloud. “We have no intension of doing any of those things to you. Your fate will lie with the local authorities. That being said, we cannot allow you to deal your poison to the people of this city or any other, even if they feel they want it. For now, you will remain here until the police arrive. When they take you into custody you will make a full confession, only, after they’ve read you your rights. If you try to leave this location before the police arrive, you will forget how to drive, how to walk, where you live, even why you want to leave. Once you’re in police custody and you’ve made a full confession, your will shall be your own again. If you’re released from police custody or get off on some technicality, and we ever catch you distributing drugs anywhere again, I promise, you won’t get off so easily.”

Amber’s eyes moved from Sam, to Norrin, and finally Nanci.

“That’s right,” said Nanci. “And, just so you don’t forget this little warning, here’s a sample of what you’ll get if we ever have to come hunt you down.” Making a tight fist with the hand that was not grasping Amber’s hair, Nanci punched her in the stomach. Immediately, Amber doubled over, clutching her stomach and gasping for air. At that, Nanci released the woman’s hair and flung her head forward.

“Gorgon! That was unnecessary!” scolded Sam.

“Not from where I stand,” she replied. “Didn’t want our pretty young thing to think we were making empty threats.”

“We’re leaving,” said Sam, using his displeased tone which Norrin and Nanci recognized all too well.

The three vacated the scene and as sure as Sam has planted his orders in Amber’s subconscious, each one she followed just so. She waited in the parking lot until the police arrived. Then, once her rights had been read, she made a full confession. The police officers were astonished at her forthright omission. Just as she had divulged, drugs were found in her car and her unconscious customer was found lying in the reclined driver’s seat of his own car. There were several hundred dollar bills in his possession in which to purchase Amber’s product. Once cuffed and in the back of the police cruiser, Amber’s will was once again her own.

Sam flew home and Norrin and Nanci drove back to the secret cavern where the *Porsche* was stored. There was no question in either of their minds that Sam was considerably unhappy with Nanci’s aggressions toward Mason’s drug peddler, Amber. In fact, Nanci had been acting more aggressively over the last two months than anyone had ever seen her act before.

During their commute home, Sam had a brief dialogue with Norrin, telepathically. Sam expressed concern regarding Nanci's quickness in volunteering to assist in bringing Mason's activities to an end. Her almost reckless behavior in tracking down and subduing several of Mason's affiliates and, finally, her deliberate inexorable assault toward Amber worried Sam.

Norrin knew Nanci's behavior had become more volatile toward the criminal underworld. He was well aware that Sam disapproved of what he considered excessive force, especially once an opponent had been subdued. Norrin didn't always agree with Sam's ideals and philosophies, and an animalistic part of him would have almost admired Nanci for her behavior, if not encouraged it, save one truth. It was completely and totally contrary to Nanci's nature.

Norrin knew his wife in the intimate way any husband gets to know his wife. He knew her mannerisms, likes, dislikes, what touched her heart and soul, what made her smile and laugh, and what made her sad and cry. Aggressive battery was not part of Nanci's persona, nor was merciless unsympathetic callousness. Norrin wondered whether his wife's yearning for a so-called normal life had clouded her good judgment, and was causing her to display an overenthusiastic approach to waylaying their enemies.

It had been three months since Sam had first discovered the name Michael Mason, and three months since he and his friends had agreed to one final mission before retiring their alter egos. During that time they had investigated Mason's organization thoroughly. They had gathered several names of those in Mason's employ both primary and mediocre distributors. Sam had obtained a list of those in political offices or in law enforcement that were in bed with Mason or on his payroll. He had not acted on it fully yet but plans were in the works to do so.

The members of Mason's organization who had been removed from the equation had all suffered beatings. Some were minor, others more severe. One constant remained with each incursion. Those that received the worst injuries were all victims of Nanci's rage, both men and women. It was as though Nanci looked at each and every opponent as an obstacle; a barrier between living the life that she had and having the life that she wanted. When fighting an individual, Nanci seemed to heap upon them all of the blame and hatred she felt for her husband being taken away from her night after night. Requiring penance for all of her sleepless nights spent worrying about him, when he would put on that God forsaken costume and venture forth in search of them and their kind, and penance for each tear she shed because of it.

By looking at Nanci, one would not imagine her to be a very proficient fighter, much less a first-rate one. Nanci was small in stature, slightly over five feet tall and had a very gentle old-world beauty about her. She most definitely did not have the hardened stare of a soldier. Even still, she had trained for years with Sam, Norrin, Wade, Cyndi, and Rachel learning various hand-to-hand combat techniques. Her living hair was several times in strength than that of the strongest man. If she were to wrap her lengthy locks around an individual's torso, wrists or even neck, it would be as though the largest of boa constrictors or pythons were crushing in upon them. When it came to a physical confrontation with Nanci, what you saw was most definitely not what you got.

Attempting to try and hide his true concern, Norrin chuckled and said, "Sam's a little worried about you. He thinks your use of excessive force is becoming more the norm instead of being used only as a necessity or last resort. Me, I'm all for excessive force, but, as long as I've known you, you haven't been. What gives?"

"Sam's always wanted me to support this life after you and I got married. Well, now, I'm being supportive," responded Nanci.

Norrin turned his head toward her, smiled, and raised an eyebrow.

"What?" questioned Nanci, looking right back at him with a nonchalant expression.

"I didn't say anything. But, since you asked, are you sure that your convictions to put this life behind us isn't affecting your more-than-usually-aggressive tendencies? I mean, Amber back there, she wasn't much of a threat. We had things completely under control. Yet, you chose to give her a sock, and a fairly good sock, I might add, right in the gut."

"Yeah, well, she's a drug dealer. A lowlife scum. She deserved far worse. She's lucky I let her off with just a punch. I could've done far worse."

"You mean like that guy who's arm you snapped backwards last month?"

"He had a gun, Norrin. He may have shot you, me, or even Sam. Then where would we be? I'll tell you where'd we be. The cemetery, that's where. Burying someone. I'm not going to let that happen so close to finishing all of this. I'm about to get my husband back and start our family the way it should've been from the day we said our 'I do's.' I'm here to get this done and get it done as quickly as possible. While doing it, I intend to ensure everyone's safety; mine, yours, even Sam's. If that calls for what Sam considers excessive force, then so be it. It's a small price to pay."

"Again, I agree. Completely. But, that sounds like me. It sounds like

something I'd say. I've never known you to be the kill-'em-all-and-let-God-sort-'em-out kinda girl."

"I just wanna finish this. Get it over with and move on with our lives. And I want everyone to make it out unscathed."

"Being unscathed doesn't mean only physically. It also can mean mentally and emotionally. You sure you're okay? Maybe you should let me, Sam, and Wade finish this up alone."

"No! Absolutely not! We started this together. We're gonna finish it together."

"Okay. Okay," said Norrin, patting Nanci's hand with his own. "Just be careful, okay?" he said, expressing a degree of concern in his inflection for the first time since the conversation had begun. "Don't get so wrapped up in bringing this to a speedy end that you lose a part of yourself along the way. It may be a part you might never get back."

Nanci looked at Norrin and smiled. "Now who's worrying about who losing a piece of themselves?"

"We've come full circle, huh?" said Norrin, smiling back at Nanci.

"I can't think of anyone I'd rather have come full circle with," she replied, as she ran her index finger across Norrin's cheek.

Norrin's mind was at ease, at least for now. He realized Nanci's concern was only for the safety of him and their friends. Sure, she may have been a bit overzealous within the past few months when it came to apprehending criminals, but, deep down, that was a side of Nanci Norrin had always secretly desired to see surface. When they were younger, before their engagement, Nanci was slightly more approving when it came to physical confrontation. But, after they were married, it seemed she no longer had a taste for combat. When placed in a situation where she was forced to fight, she would defend herself and attack her opponents quite skillfully, but she was never overly flashy or needlessly brutal. She did just enough to gain the upper hand and that was all.

Though Sam had either directly or inadvertently tried to place doubt in Norrin's mind regarding his wife's current mental and emotional state, Norrin chose to trust his wife's reassurance; instead of believing in what he felt were the paranoid suspicions of his friend and mentor.

Upon reaching his house, Sam scanned the area making sure there was no one within sight that might see him land. Once he was sure everything was clear, he descended, landing toward the rear of his house near the veranda. He removed his mask and telekinetically unlocked the French doors, then opened

them. Walking into the house, Sam's emotions were getting the best of him, emanating both anxiety and frustration.

"Ew," said Cyndi, approaching from the *comedor*. "I felt that the minute your feet touched the veranda. Rough night?"

Sam was chewing the inner lining of his cheek, so Cyndi knew he was upset about something. She hadn't probed too deeply into Sam's feelings further than what he was projecting. Primarily, because she'd rather Sam share his feelings willingly, as opposed to her reaching out for the information she wanted and trying to discern it from his thoughts. And, two, she was making an earnest effort not to use her abilities too often as there was no telling what effect it might have on her unborn child. Getting mental impressions from individuals who may be projecting their thoughts was one thing. Making a conscious effort to remove information from someone not volunteering it was something quite different. Although there was no scientific conclusive evidence that using her abilities would negatively affect her child, Cyndi wasn't going to take any chances. With all of the repercussions she and her friend's abilities had impinged on her personal life, she wasn't going to tempt fate by over using her gifts and possibly causing temporary or permanent psychological and or emotional damage to her baby.

"Nanci is continuing her Norrinish behavior," Sam responded. "We had our objective under control and subdued. But, that wasn't good enough for Nanci. She had to make her point. So, she punched the girl as hard as she could. The girl fell to her knees and was left gasping for air for several minutes. Nanci had to have hit her right in the breadbasket. I just—" Sam stopped there. "I'm sorry," he said. "The last thing you need right now is me ranting and raving about our mission." Sam's abrupt end to his venting was due to the realization that adding unnecessary stress to Cyndi, would do nothing for the well-being of the baby she was carrying.

"I'm sorry you had a rough night," said Cyndi, as she walked up close to her husband and gave him three tender pecks on the lips.

"I'm sorry it's taken us this long in trying to put all of this behind us," admitted Sam, gingerly rubbing Cyndi's tummy. "I know this is not easy for you, and I'm trying to end it as quickly as possible, but it seems for every one person we take down from Mason's organization, two more seem to spring up. I didn't think cutting the head from the beast was the best course of action to take but, now, I'm beginning to have second thoughts."

"Going after Mason directly would cause his subordinates to each go in their separate directions. And that would leave them with no leadership, no guidance.

It would be like having several wounded animals scurrying about, and, as you're well aware; few things are as dangerous as a wounded animal. You'd be left with a bunch of little Michael Masons all clamoring for his vacant position. No, you have to destroy the organization entirely. Not just wound the largest portion of it. That'd just give it the opportunity to retreat and heal."

"You're right."

"I think it's best to continue as you've been doing. Attack his primary distributors and extortionists, and once they're out of the picture, or at least the majority of them, then, cut off the head."

"Don't tempt me," said Sam, as he raised his eyebrows and began removing the remainder of his costume.

Cyndi smiled. "So, is Nanci being overly vicious?" she asked, sharing an ever so slight smirk.

"Yes," Sam quickly responded. "Must be taking lessons from her husband."

Cyndi chuckled. "She's just frustrated, and she's venting those frustrations in the most accessible manner she has. She figures if she beats up a little harder on the bad guys, no big deal. They deserve it anyway."

Sam looked at Cyndi disapprovingly.

"Hey," defended Cyndi, "I didn't say that's how I felt. I said these are Nanci's feelings. She just wants this to be over. We all do. She figured that throwing herself into this last mission and becoming an intricate part of it would make it end quicker. Unfortunately, that hasn't been the case."

"Her recklessness could get someone seriously hurt or worse."

"So, keep an eye on her like you've been doing, and don't let things get out of hand. Nanci could be a great asset to this mission if you'd just allow her to be. Don't underestimate her just because she's a woman."

"I never—"

"I know, consciously, you'd never judge someone by their gender. But, on a subconscious level, I think you still see her and me as the weaker sex, even though we possess abilities and training most men don't. Rachel, as powerful as she is, I've noticed you watching her back more than once."

"I watch everyone's back."

"Really? Tell me the last time you watched Wade's back?"

"Wade's back doesn't require much watching."

"Norrin?"

"I look out for Norrin now and again."

"Yeah, to make sure he's not eating anyone," said Cyndi, with a smirk.

Sam couldn't help but crack a smile on that comment himself.

“But really, think about it. Utilize Nanci’s strengths. That way she’ll feel needed and useful. That’s all she’s looking for. Do that, and I’ll bet she calms down considerably and your casualty list should decrease as well,” encouraged Cyndi.

Sam’s smile widened even further. “Okay. I’ll think about what I can do to focus her talents and help her to feel more needed.”

“Good,” said Cyndi. Then, she raised her heels upward to reach Sam’s lips and gave him another kiss.

“Now that you mention it,” said Sam, while nodding his head, “I think I know just what strengths of Nanci’s to play on. She’s young and beautiful. The majority of individuals we have to bring down before going after Mason directly are male; males that could be played and easily distracted by Nanci’s beauty. Males that might reveal pertinent information to her in order to make themselves sound important, in an attempt to win her affections.”

“Interesting idea.”

“I do as much as I can on a telepathic level but even I can’t get everything. Perhaps, what I miss or don’t become privileged to, she might be told or even overhear. She could serve as an undercover operative.”

“I could see that working. It might even help to move things along faster. Kill two birds with one stone?”

“Yeah. I’d just have to convince Norrin. He’s very protective of her.”

“Of course he is. He’s her husband. Even so, if I know Nanci, as long as she agrees with your suggestion, she’ll convince Norrin herself. You won’t have to even get involved. Maybe you should approach her first, before even mentioning it to Norrin. Let her talk to him about it if she’s in agreement.”

“I’ll do that. I—”

Sam was cut short in mid-sentence by the news broadcaster’s voice coming from the television in the background. He immediately noticed the word “Vigilantes,” plastered across the screen. He walked closer toward the television, grabbed the remote, and increased the volume.

“...the governor is also working closely with the mayor regarding the situation,” said the newscaster. The video feed was now displaying a clip recorded earlier presenting the governor of Maryland. “Vigilantism is an unacceptable and illegal menace. Some may feel that these individuals are picking up the slack for the local authorities or maybe even catching things the police force may have missed. That is simply incorrect thinking. They cause more problems than do good, by violating an individual’s constitutional rights, forcing or coercing confessions that are useless in court, and, in the end, wind

up contributing more to an alleged criminal's release than their capture. Most recently, some individuals in law enforcement have even been injured, either purposely or unintentionally, due to these vigilantes' activities. Now, they've crossed over the line so far that they've become criminals themselves. The only true way to meet the safety needs of the community is to put faith in your local police force, work within the confines of the law, and, most definitely, do not take the law into your own hands. Both the local and state authorities will be working closely together to see that a swift end is brought to these vigilantes' activities, as quickly as possible."

One of the reporters standing near the governor yelled out, "Mr. Governor, are you planning on bringing criminal charges against these individuals once you have them in custody?"

With a very somber stern expression, the governor replied, "Absolutely."

CHAPTER XXIII

Accountability

“Norrin,” projected Sam. “Are you at home yet?”

“Yes, I am, Sam,” responded Norrin. “Any particular reason you felt the need to contact me like this instead of picking up the phone and dialing my number?”

“Is your TV on?”

“No. Nanci and I were about to turn in.”

“We’ve got a problem.”

“When don’t we?”

“No. I mean real problems. Problems as in, ‘the authorities are looking for us’ problems.”

“Big deal.”

“The governor made a public statement that was just broadcast on Channel 13 news. He plans on bringing charges against the vigilantes who have been causing more harm than good. I’m paraphrasing.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

“Is there something you want me to do?”

“First, tell Nanci. Tell her now. That way she can freak out with you and get

it all out of her system, hopefully calming down by the time she sees me. I'll contact Wade and give a courtesy call to Rach, just to let her know. After that, I need to schedule an appointment."

"An appointment? At this hour? With who?"

"The governor of course."

"At 11:30 P.M.? You're gonna schedule an appointment with the governor? He may not take your call."

"I have no intention of calling him on the phone."

"Ah. You're going to invade his mind. That should make him much more open and agreeable to meeting with you."

"Meeting with us."

"Us who?"

"Us. Me, you, and Wade."

"Great, a meeting with the governor. That should prove to be interesting. I guess you'll expect me to wear a tie and be on my best behavior."

"No tie, but good behavior is always appreciated."

"I'll see what I can do." Norrin's attention became briefly divided. "I'm talking to Sam," he said aloud. "Yeah, telepathically. No, he's not complaining about you. Hold on, I have something to tell you." Norrin returned to Sam. "Sam, I'm going to tell Nanci about the governor. Give me a call tomorrow with our plans. Use the telephone."

"Will do," responded Sam, almost apologetically. At that, the mental link was severed.

It was dark in the governor's mansion when Sam arrived. He lowered himself slowly so that no sound was made as he landed on the roof. Being trained to notice things that were supposed to be hidden, Sam instantly picked out several security cameras strategically placed around the grounds. He was also aware of four security agents keeping watch over the mansion and its occupants.

Unnoticed, Sam began to move from mind to mind, scanning for the governor. After about four attempts, he was able to locate him.

"Mr. Governor, could you wake up please? There's something I need to discuss with you," projected Sam.

"Huh, wha," mumbled the governor incoherently. He was not quite awake and the small part of him that was, was willing to pass off the unwelcome interruption as a dream.

"Mr. Governor. Please, I need you awake. It's quite imperative that we speak," Sam continued.

This time the governor was fully awake and sat straight up in bed. "Who's there?" he called out.

"I'm sorry to wake you at this hour, sir. But, I felt it important that you and I speak."

"Who are you?" said the governor aloud.

"My name is Mantis. There's no need for you to speak aloud. Simply think what you'd like to say and I'll be able to hear you."

"Where are you?" thought the governor.

"I'm close. Don't worry. I have no intention whatsoever of harming you or anyone in your household."

"I'm not hearing you with my ears."

"No, you're hearing me in your mind. I have the ability to communicate with others by thought."

"That's not possible."

"With all due respect sir, I am doing it, aren't I?"

"I guess you are," thought the governor. He stood up, grabbed his robe, and left the room so as not to further disturb his sleeping wife. "This is going to seem ridiculous when I wake up," grumbled the governor.

"I assure you, Mr. Governor, you are quite awake."

"You still there? What do you want?"

"I was watching television earlier and happened upon an excerpt on the news. It seems you were publicly denouncing my friends and me."

"Are you the vigilante causing all the trouble lately?" questioned the governor.

"No, not lately, about seven years now to be exact. I am one of a few individuals who have spent the better part of our lives trying to make Baltimore a safer place for the decent people."

"Safer? Does safer include assaulting police officers?"

"Only when those police officers blatantly disregard the laws they've sworn to uphold, sir."

"And who decides that, you?"

"Any fool familiar with basic laws such as murder, assault, and the selling of illegal narcotics can observe a so-called police officer, premeditatedly breaking those laws."

"And you're saying you've witnessed this?"

"I have. It's why I'm here. I saw that little speech you made for the news media and figured you and I had better schedule a meeting between our two parties before things get ugly."

"You and your associates?" questioned the governor, as he made his way to the kitchen for a glass of milk.

"Absolutely. I have two other individuals who will be joining me. I will permit you to bring as many as five security guards or associates with you to this meeting."

"You will permit? Last time I checked, I was governor of Maryland. I wasn't aware I needed permission to conduct my activities; especially permission from some vigilante."

"Mr. Governor, I've already explained that I have the ability to communicate with others by thought. I can also read thoughts. If my colleagues and I show up to a meeting place you and I agree upon, and I sense more than five individuals with you, we will leave. And sir, I can sense mental impressions and thought patterns from miles away. I won't need to wait until I've reached said destination."

"Why five? Why not six or four?"

"I believe five is sufficient to provide you with a sense of security."

"A false sense of security, you mean."

"Mr. Governor, I respect you, and I believe overall you're a good man. I felt that way when you were the mayor of Baltimore and I still do. That's why I'm going to be very honest with you right now and tell you that, even if you were to show up with one hundred men, if I and my colleagues meant you harm, neither you nor your men would, by any means, escape that harm."

"I see. Well, then, I'll one up you. I'll not only meet with you and your friends but I'll do it alone. No security. No armed guards. Just me. Since I am the one who seems to be the most vulnerable here, though, I'll have to insist upon choosing the place of meeting."

"That doesn't seem unreasonable. Where would you like us to meet?"

The governor was quiet momentarily. "Since I'm assuming your house is out of the question, why not mine?"

"Your home?"

"My office, actually. Since you obviously know the way, why not call your friends and tell them we're meeting at the governor's place. I'll even spring for dinner."

"Mr. Governor, I promise, you have nothing to fear."

"I'm not—"

"I can sense your fear. You're trying to mask it by making light of this situation. I assure you, there is nothing to fear from me or my friends."

"Fine."

“Sir, I give you my oath. If any harm comes your way while you and I are meeting, I will defend you with my life. The only way anyone or anything will get to you will be by first killing me.”

The governor was momentarily silent. “Okay, I’m a bit more convinced.”

“Good.”

“I have several things on my plate tomorrow, so, it would be best if we met in the evening.”

“I prefer it. How’s 9:00 P.M.?”

“Let’s say 10:00 P.M.”

“10:00 P.M. will be fine. So as not to startle you, sir, please look out the window to your left.”

The governor turned his head and looked out the window. Sam was floating in mid-air roughly 25 feet from the mansion. The governor’s eyes grew wider as disbelief spread across his face.

Sam continued, “You have nothing to fear, sir. I simply wanted you to see me now, so that you’re not caught off guard tomorrow. Both my associates and I will be dressed in this manner. Please, do not be alarmed.” At that, Sam flew away. Had the governor blinked, he would have missed Sam’s speedy ascension.

The next day came and the hours seemed to drag for the governor. It was the anticipation of again speaking to the man, if he was a man, who had visited him the night previous. Anticipation of that meeting made the day’s other activities seem minor. The governor attended various meetings, one with Annapolis’ Department Head of Sanitation, a brief meeting with the city’s building commission, a luncheon with several children at an elementary school in Baltimore County called Fullerton, and even a discussion with Baltimore’s mayor on addressing the vigilante problem.

The governor did not offer the mayor any information regarding the brief meeting he’d had the night previous. He did, however, advise the mayor he wanted to discuss at length the vigilante issue the following day. The mayor was somewhat perplexed as to why they couldn’t discuss it further that day, but acquiesced to the governor’s request. The governor assured the mayor that he was looking into some things that would prove to be instrumental in their addressing the issue, but would not have specifics until the following day.

The governor was a bit more reserved with his condemnation of vigilantism, although the mayor did not seem to pick up on it. The governor had made up his mind to put aside any preconceived ideas as to combating these individuals. After all, there were at least three of them, and the one that had shown up at his

mansion could not only communicate without words but, also, read people's thoughts and even fly. There was no telling what the other two could do. To outright challenge these individuals or try and overpower them might prove to be not only unwise but, also, very dangerous.

After the governor had concluded his activities for the day, he made his way home. He enjoyed an evening meal with his wife, watched some television, did a little reading, and watched the clock waiting for 10:00 P.M. to come. As that time approached, the governor informed his wife that he needed to prepare for a few items on his agenda for the following day, and that, since he would be up late, she should turn in without him. He kissed her goodnight and headed in the direction of his office about five minutes before ten.

A part of him still felt uneasy. This could be a very carefully laid trap to kidnap him in exchange for a ransom or even kill him. The pleasantries of the previous night may have all been a *roués* to lull him into a false sense of assurance.

The governor's heart began beating faster as he took each step, another and another. He could feel his throat stiffening and his neck muscles tightening. As he walked through the door to his office, the governor turned slightly to flick on the light switch and close the door behind him. Once he had done that, he turned toward his desk. Seated in three chairs were three men with their backs toward him, each dressed in a strange costume.

"Jeez!" said the governor clutching his chest. "You could've at least let me know you were here."

The three men turn slightly in the governor's direction. "My apologies, Governor," said the voice from the man dressed in green. "We didn't want to alarm your staff so we waited patiently for you to arrive in the dark. It's not the easiest thing sneaking into the governor's mansion unnoticed."

"I believe you called yourself Mantis," said the governor, trying to regain his composure.

"Yes sir. I am Mantis. The gentleman to my left is Toad."

"Governor," greeted Wade.

"And to my right, Scorpion," continued Sam.

The governor's eyes moved to Norrin. Norrin gave the governor nothing more than a nod. He was nearly wearing a scowl on the exposed portion of his face, which didn't sit well with the governor.

"Your friend doesn't seem to like me," said the governor, pointing his thumb at Norrin.

"Don't feel bad, sir. He doesn't like anyone," commented Wade, with a smirk on his face.

"I like that one," commented the governor, again using his thumb to point at Wade. "At least he's got a sense of humor."

"Forgive my colleague, Mr. Governor. We're still working on his manners," said Sam. "I realize this is your office but, please, have a seat," Sam motioned toward the chair behind the governor's desk.

"I see we're talking using our mouths this evening and listening with our ears," said the governor, as he made his way to his seat. "You called this meeting, young man. What's on your mind?"

"First, let me apologize for any uncomfortable feelings I may have caused last night. I most certainly did not mean to startle or upset you in any way," stated Sam. "I simply needed your attention, and now that I have it, I will not communicate with you telepathically or read your thoughts again without your permission."

"I guess I'll have to take your word for that," commented the governor. "Now, back to the reason we're here. I'm assuming it has to do with my press conference the other day."

"Yes, sir, it does," Sam admitted openly. "I saw the speech you made on the news last night and was a bit concerned. From what I recall of that speech, you referred to us as an unacceptable illegal menace, criminals, and that your intentions were to bring charges against us." Sam paused, waiting for the governor's response.

"I was speaking of vigilantism in general. I wasn't referring to you specific—"

Sam cut the governor off before he was able to finish. "Indeed you were, sir. Please don't insult us by patronizing us."

"I thought you weren't going to read my mind."

"I don't have to read an individual's mind to know when they're not telling the truth. Every living being on the planet transmits feelings and emotions. When a person lies, those feelings and emotions involuntarily project a change. I can pick up those changes without reading your mind."

"So it seems I have no choice but to tell the truth entirely."

"It would seem that way, sir."

The governor bluntly and abruptly asked, "Do you have a God-complex, son?"

Norrin chuckled. He couldn't help but react as he was caught off guard by the governor's question.

"So, he can laugh," said the governor, looking toward Norrin. "I asked you a question, son. You seem to be the leader of this outfit. Do you and your friends

consider yourselves above the law? Does the law not apply to you because you three are more powerful than the average man or woman?"

"Who polices the police?" questioned Norrin in a raspy voice, reclining slovenly in his seat and looking directly at the governor. "When those placed in positions of disseminating justice act in an unjust manner, who do they answer to? When those who have sworn to uphold, protect, and defend turn their backs on that oath, and instead oppress, extort, and terrorize, who do the good people turn to then?"

There was a brief silence. Behind Wade's mask, he was squinting his eyes, and his lips were visibly tucked into one another. Behind Sam's mask his eyes were rolling and his nostrils flaring. Here we go, he thought to himself.

Before the governor could begin a response to Norrin's question, he answered it himself. "Us. That's who," he said, pointing his thumb at his chest. "Us. The ones who can't be frightened, or threatened, or bribed, or bought—"

"Scorpion!" Sam quickly interrupted, before Norrin could say anything further to offend the governor.

"I can't be bought, young man," said the governor, staring directly into the lenses of Norrin's mask, using the stern voice that the citizens of Baltimore and Maryland had come to know so well.

"Our apologies, sir," said Sam, quickly making reparations for his friend's poor choice of words. "Scorpion can seem very abrupt when he feels passionately about something. In this case, referring to the policemen you'd mentioned in your press conference that had been injured."

"I recall that," said the governor, with an annoyed inflection in his tone. "It sounds like, what's your name again? Scorpion?" he said looking at Norrin. "It sounds like Scorpion here has decided if things don't go his way, he's gonna do whatever he wants, and should an officer of the law get in his way, well, they're expendable. Right, Scorpion?"

The governor was not backing down. In fact, he had stood up from his reclining position and had taken a more aggressive posture with both hands on his desk. Norrin let out a huff of air and turned his face from the governor.

Not backing down, the governor continued, "It's exactly that line of thinking that's gonna cause you boys a whole heap of trouble. We've all been pretending to be civil to one another so far, but I'm willing to play this hand as far as you boys wanna go. Sure, your pal here can read minds and fly. Quite frankly, I haven't figured out how that's possible, yet. Who knows what the two of you can do?" he said looking at Norrin and Wade.

“Well, I can—”

“I don’t care! I don’t care what you’ve got tucked away in your little bag of tricks,” said the governor, cutting Wade off. “If I have to stop you, I will. The local police forces, the state troopers, the National Guard, I’ll do whatever it takes. A call to the president for some army, air force, marines, or a few Navy Seals, maybe. What’ll it be boys? You dealt this hand. You brought your chips to the grown-ups’ table. Now, let’s see if you’re big enough to stay and play a few hands.”

Norrin had heard enough. This governor reminded him of Dominic Mazella, a lot of talk, a lot of empty threats. But, when it came to playing King of the Mountain, Norrin had yet to lose a game, and he wasn’t about to be tossed down by some pencil-pushing politician.

Norrin watched as the governor stood with a glare in his eyes, staring down on him. Staring back at the governor, Norrin leaned forward in his chair. The lenses of his mask slowly began to glow an intensely bright shade of green. Norrin smiled as he could see the governor visibly taken a back at the sight.

“Scorpion,” Sam called to Norrin. But, Norrin ignored him.

Norrin separated his lips, as his grin grew larger exposing his teeth. The governor watched as Norrin’s canine teeth protruded further and further from his gums, until they almost overlapped his lips. Norrin reached down deep into his gut and let out a few muffled snarls. They were slightly less than a growl but more than enough to do the job for that in which they were intended. By this time it was clear that the governor was unnerved. His skin tone had whitened a few shades and his attack posture had almost turned to a recoil.

“Scared, Governor?” questioned Norrin, in the altered voice that was his when his adrenaline factor was active.

Sam stood up. “Stand down, Scorpion! Now! I’ll only ask once.”

Still seated in his chair, Norrin turned to Sam. He sat back and deactivated his adrenaline factor, attempting to appear less threatening.

“He’s a big dumb animal, isn’t he, sir?” Wade addressed the governor, grasping at whatever he could to try and lighten the mood.

“Mr. Governor, sir, we are not here to exchange threats with one another, nor take part in a pissing contest,” said Sam abruptly. “My soul purpose in arranging this meeting was to hopefully come to an understanding with one another, show you that we are clearly no threat, nor in opposition to you in any way, and to tell you about ourselves and why we do what we do.”

“Well, so far you’ve done a piss poor job,” replied the governor, attempting to breathe regularly again and trying to disguise a slight tremble. “Especially your

friend here. Didn't anyone ever teach him tact?"

"We've tried, sir," blurted out Wade. "Believe me, we've tried."

"Let me bottom line it for you, Bill," said Norrin, addressing the governor in a less than formal manner. "We're the good guys. We pick up the slack where you and your bureaucrats drop the ball. When an old woman living from month to month on her social security check is accosted by some piece of filth, that someone on your precious police force misses, we're there. When some pusher offers a seven-year-old their first taste of smack for free, in an attempt to build a life-long customer, we're there. When some disease tries to make an unsuspecting juvenile help him find Sparky because he's lost, when in actuality, he just likes having sex with little boys or little girls, we're there."

The governor's countenance softened slightly and he seemed more receptive to Norrin's words.

"And we don't get paid for it," Norrin continued. "We don't get praise, or glory, or fame. Most people don't even know we exist. The few that have heard about us or seen us usually dismiss the idea as someone drunk, high, or making up stories. I'll tell ya what we do get, though. We get hassled by mayors and governors that sit in the comforts of their pretty mansions, while we go out, night after night, putting our lives on the line. We get treated like crap by cops whose backs we watch and whose slack we pick up. Then, when we're forced to defend ourselves or others from lawless cops, we're labeled 'criminal' and 'menace.' We're not the ones killing unarmed children! That's your precious cops. That's what they do."

The governor turned to Sam. "What does he mean?"

"Sir, if you'll permit me, I'll share an experience with you," offered Sam. "I understand that this is the exception to the rule, but I believe if you see for yourself, you'll better understand why Scorpion feels so outraged by something that we witnessed not many months ago."

"How will you do that?" asked the governor.

"I can play the experience in your mind," informed Sam. "It's similar to watching a movie or video tape, only with the experience, it feels as though you are in the video or movie."

Feeling reluctant about having this man he barely knew playing around in his head, the governor asked. "Can it harm me at all?"

"No. Absolutely not," said Sam convincingly. "It will give you a clearer perspective on the events that took place. It may cause you some brief emotional discomfort, but it will in no way cause any permanent neurological damage."

Although something in the back of his mind shied away from going forth

with the experiment, the man hadn't become mayor and then governor by shrinking back when opportunity presented itself. Yes, this was something fantastic and entirely different than anything he had experienced before, but the governor felt curiosity gnawing at his very soul to agree to the process. So, he did.

At first, it seemed like a dream or some sort of semi-conscious state. Then as the haze diminished, it was as if the governor was there, seeing the scene unfold just as it had taken place not so very long ago. Of course, Sam was sure to keep he and his friends in full costume throughout the entire course of the replay. Anytime they spoke their real names or sent them in a telepathic transmission, Sam was sure to substitute Mantis, Scorpion, or Toad for the governor.

The governor was flying above the skies of Towson. He freefell as both he and Sam sped toward a car with two boys inside, then spiraled back toward the sky. He landed and watched as a police cruiser pulled up behind the two boys after their car had been parked. He walked up close next to the two policemen after they had exited their vehicle with guns drawn. Slowly, they made their way to the parked car in front of them.

"Hey, it's just a couple of kids," said the governor. But, the two policemen showed no indication that they had even acknowledged the governor's presence. "It's okay. You both can lower your weapons." Again, the governor's attempt to get the two men's attention fell on deaf ears.

The two officers at that point were standing on either side of the parked car pointing their guns at the children.

"Stop!" insisted the governor, raising his voice. He reached for the policeman closest to the driver's side door, but, his hand passed right through the man's upper arm.

BANG! BANG! Echoed through the governor's ears, as he watched the policeman gun down the unarmed child. The boy's lifeless body slumped over in the driver's seat. The governor stood helpless as the policeman placed another gun he pulled from his belt in the dead boy's hand.

Another child darted from the back of the car and the two policemen chased after him. Sam discontinued the vision at that point.

The governor stood opened mouthed in his office staring at Sam. "No. No, that didn't happen. It couldn't have happened. Not to a boy. You made that up," he said at a low-pitched volume.

"Governor, I think we both know that I didn't make that up," commented Sam. "My friends and I have seen things not quite that extreme, but along those same lines all our lives. This was without a doubt the worst display of abusing

one's power and position we'd ever seen. That's why we do what we do. To protect people like that dead boy. We may have failed him, but there've been hundreds, including his friend you saw dart out the back of the vehicle, that we haven't. We each have powers and abilities that the majority of mankind will never know. We've made the conscious choice to use those powers and abilities to help our fellow man. And not just the rich, or the well-to-do, or those we feel deserve it because of their status, or the size of their bank accounts. The majority of the time, we haven't had to work in opposition to those in uniform wearing badges. Unfortunately, at times it has been necessary. But, again, only in those instances where they were clearly misusing their power and authority. I know you are not so credulous as to dismiss the idea of dirty cops. They may be few and far between but, much like us, they do exist."

"Young man, I imagine I was familiar with 'dirty cops' long before you were even born," stated the governor.

"Then you can understand why at times the need has arisen to be somewhat aggressive with certain individuals, even though they may have been wearing a badge," said Sam.

"I cannot condone assaulting anyone wearing the uniform, even a dirty cop. You may not respect the man or woman, but you have to respect their position," insisted the governor. "If they break the law, then they have to be dealt with by the law, through the proper channels."

"Those who soil that uniform disgrace all who wear it honorably, sir," said Sam firmly, "And all those who would support and respect those who wear it," he continued. "But, I'm not here to debate how to deal with crooked cops or cops on the take. I'm here to try and work out an arrangement with you. I don't want you to consider us your enemies or in opposition to the law. We're neither. I want you to consider us your allies."

"If you want to uphold the law and protect innocent people, there are already in place various means in which you can do this," said the governor. "Join the force or the military."

"Hah!" Norrin blurted out, with a riled expression while fidgeting in his chair.

"I can safely say, neither I nor my companions have any desire to do either, sir," countered Sam. "In all honesty, very recently, due to mitigating circumstances, we've decided that the time has come to curtail our activities. We have other pursuits on which we intend on focusing our energies. But, before that happens, we have agreed to address one final issue. It's the real menacing criminal plaguing not only Baltimore, but, no doubt, other parts of Maryland.

It's a drug dealer named Michael Mason. He's responsible for the majority of the drug trade in Baltimore, and I'm sure various other parts of the state. He has his hands in illegal weapons sales, illegal gambling rings, prostitution, pedophilia, and a long list of other things I'm not aware of, I'm sure."

"You? The mind reader? Not aware of something?" questioned the governor.

"Even I am not omniscient, sir," admitted Sam.

"Well, just to let you know, I am aware of your Michael Mason. The FBI has had an oriental gentleman infiltrating his organization for the better part of a year now," informed the governor. "He's been posing as a distributor for the oriental community while building his case against this Mason character."

"Mason's a killer, sir," Sam interrupted. "He was indirectly responsible for the death of that boy I showed you. He also killed his own right-hand man a few months back because he'd become a loose end. Your FBI agent could be in considerable danger if Mason even suspects he may be anything other than what he says he is."

"He's a trained FBI field agent," responded the governor. "I expect he knows how to do his job."

"I'm not doubting that, sir. It's just that it seems Mason lulls those associated with him into a false sense of security," informed Sam. "Then, when they're at their most vulnerable or he no longer has a use for them, he turns on them like a fierce animal. I'd warn your FBI agent to be very careful."

"Listen, young man, it seems you're a good fellow. I like you. I really do. And your friends, well, I could even get used to the ill-mannered one. But, can you understand the position I'd be in working openly with vigilantes?" asked the governor.

"I would never want to place you in an uncomfortable position, Mr. Governor, but, a man of your ability and experience no doubt has ways of keeping things under wraps. If we were to say, assist in this one particular issue regarding Mr. Mason, I'm sure our involvement could be kept on a need-to-know basis," encouraged Sam.

"Well, the mayor of Baltimore would absolutely have to know. Otherwise, he'll be out there trying to hunt you down. A few in my office would need to know. The Police Commish—" The governor stopped himself in mid-sentence. "Say, you're not planting subliminal ideas in my head, making me more receptive to doing this are you?" he asked, addressing Sam.

"No sir. I am not," responded Sam.

"I can't believe I'm even considering this. I used to read about you guys in

comic books when I was a kid. The things you do are unreal. This can't be real," said the governor.

"It's quite real, sir. I assure you," said Sam. "Let us work with you as your allies. We trust you, Mr. Governor. We respect you. We wouldn't be here if we didn't. Once this is wrapped up, we'll retire and the vigilante issue in Baltimore will fade and disappear from everyone's memory. You have our word on that."

"It's late, boys. I need to get to bed. I have a lot of phone calls to make tomorrow and a few meetings to organize," said the governor.

Sam smiled.

"You fellows let yourselves in, I suppose you don't need me to walk you to the door," commented the governor.

"I believe we know the way out, sir," responded Sam.

Sam, Norrin, and Wade stood up and walked toward the window perpendicular to the governor's desk.

"How can I contact you?" asked the governor. "Once I've made all the phone calls and arrangements I need to make, I'll need to contact you."

Norrin and Wade had already exited through the window. "Every man, woman, and child on the planet can project their thoughts," informed Sam. "Think of you and me standing in a crowded room and you trying to get my attention. Call my name. Use your mind to call my name as though you were yelling it across a crowded room. I'll hear you and respond."

With that, Sam flew through the opened window, and he and his companions disappeared into the blackness of the night.

CHAPTER XXIV

Jessica

The following day Norrin, Nanci, and Wade all congregated at Sam's house. Both Sam and Cyndi were waiting for them in the underground lair. Cyndi had prepared a brunch for her guests and also brought down a pot of fresh coffee and some freshly squeezed orange juice.

After everyone had eaten to satisfaction, Cyndi cleared the dishes and the remainder of the left over food with Nanci's help. Once that was done, Cyndi and Nanci returned for the summary of Sam, Norrin, and Wade's meeting with the governor.

"Things got a bit tense once or twice," informed Sam. "Norrin growled at the governor—"

"I didn't growl," interrupted Norrin.

"Fine. Norrin snarled at the governor," said Sam. "That better?" he asked, looking toward Norrin.

"Much," responded Norrin.

"He insinuated the governor could be bought," continued Sam, still looking at Norrin.

"That, I did," admitted Norrin, unable to contain a smirk.

"Now, now. In all fairness, even you got a bit stern with our dear governor,"

said Wade, addressing his comment to Sam.

"I did. But, only at the points where it was called for," retorted Sam.

"And of course, you're the expert as to when it's called for," interjected Norrin.

"Of course," said Sam, with a smile draped across his face. Norrin simply rolled his eyes and ignored the comment.

Sam continued reviewing the meeting with the governor for Cyndi and Nanci's benefit, going over key points such as the telepathic review he had shared of the incident where two policemen had gunned down an unarmed boy. In the end, Sam let Cyndi and Nanci know that the governor was favorable to the idea of them working in conjunction with the authorities to dismantle Michael Mason's syndicate. Sam also informed them that the governor and various other branches of law enforcement, including the FBI, were aware of Mason's activities, and had already taken steps toward bringing him to justice.

Lastly, Sam let the girls know that he had informed the governor that this would be the final mission that he and his colleagues would involve themselves in and, after this, they would retire. That brought smiles to the girl's faces.

"So now there's no way we can back out of our promise," said Sam. "If we tried, I think the governor would find a way to send the entire U.S. military after us."

Norrin quickly added, "Be a shame, too. Do away with all those soldiers. Then who'd protect the country?"

Everyone looked at Norrin and smiled. Some shook their heads as well.

"Nanci," said Sam. "Cyndi and I were talking recently and we came up with an idea. I was going to discuss it with you in private first but, since we're all here and on the topic anyway, why not bring it up now?"

Nanci looked at Sam intently, waiting to hear what he had to say.

"How would you feel about going undercover?" asked Sam.

"Undercover?" she responded.

"Yes. Undercover. I was thinking, we've been going about trying to dismantle Mason's organization from the outside in," stated Sam. "What if we were to try tearing it apart from the inside out? Divide and conquer."

"Now wait a minute," interjected Norrin.

Nanci quickly cut Norrin off. "Actually, that's not a bad idea. What do you have in mind?"

"Nance, wait a—"

Sam followed Nanci's lead by also cutting Norrin off. "If you could get into the thick of Mason's organization, not only could we acquire direct information about its running and functionality, but, we could also plant little bombs here

and there to ensure its final dissolution. Destroy it from within.”

“You maniacal schemer, you,” said Wade. “You should’ve been a bad guy.”

Sam smiled and lifted his eyebrows twice.

“Okay, everybody shut up,” demanded Norrin. Everyone turned and looked at him. “I do not like the idea of my wife being used as bait.”

“She’s not being used as bait,” replied Sam. “She’s infiltrating and providing intelligence.”

“Don’t try to dress it up and make what you’re planning to do to her sound suspenseful and exciting,” said Norrin. It was clear Norrin was on the verge of becoming angry. It was evident in his face and by the tone of his voice. “I know you. Better than anyone in this room. I know you’ll manipulate a person or situation to bend them to your will. And you do it so well, that they don’t even realize they’re being manipulated. You lead them to believe it’s as much their idea as it is yours.”

“Nanci, am I manipulating you?” asked Sam.

“Probably,” she responded. “But, in this case, I don’t mind.”

“See. She doesn’t mind,” said Sam, looking toward Norrin.

“I’m serious, Sam!” This time, Norrin had raised his voice. It wasn’t something Norrin normally did when speaking to Sam, and definitely not in front of other people, namely his wife. “You need to come up with another plan,” said Norrin, in a more even tone.

“Norrin,” Nanci spoke up. “I wanna do this. I think I can handle it,” she said, in a mild tone. Nanci realized that provoking her husband when he was already riled was not the way to win him over.

“Nance, it’s not safe,” said Norrin.

“Safe?” Nanci questioned, with an irritated tone. “Don’t you start talking to me about what’s safe. This entire life you’ve insisted upon living is not safe. These missions you’ve chosen to throw yourself into for the better part of your life aren’t safe. I’ve seen things this year that I never imagined I’d see nor imagined existed. I’ve seen men that turn into Wolves that talk, and I’ve seen you get shot. Don’t you talk to me about safety! If you were so concerned with safety, you’d have never gotten involved in this life! But, you did. And here we are. We all agreed, everyone in this room, that we’d finish this last mission and retire. Fine, we accepted that. But, I told you, Sam, Wade, Cyndi, and Rachel that I was going to be involved in this, fully, completely, one-hundred percent involved! That was my choice and my condition. You agreed. I wanna do this, Norrin.”

Norrin was silent. He let his eyes drop from Nanci to the floor and back to Nanci. He had a look of confusion on his face coupled with desperation. Finally,

he conceded. "Okay, okay. You win."

Nanci smiled. So, did Sam.

"But, you are going to be incredibly careful," insisted Norrin. "Sam, Wade, or myself will know your whereabouts at all times. There will be no unnecessary risks! Am I clear?" said Norrin, looking intently at Nanci.

"Yes. Absolutely," she responded.

Norrin turned to Sam with that same intent stare.

"Quite. Crystal," said Sam.

"Good," said Nanci, seemingly pleasantly pleased. "What's the plan?" she asked, directing her question toward Sam.

Sam began explaining. "Cyndi and I were talking, and she mentioned that every one of us had something unique to add while working on this mission. She informed me that I may have been negligent in putting some of the skills and talents which you specifically possess, to use for us. Think about it. What is one of the prime things men of power and wealth always want? Expensive cars, flashy clothes, state of the art toys, and," Sam paused.

"Beautiful women," said Wade.

"Beautiful women," agreed Sam.

"I appreciate the compliment," said Nanci. "But, I don't want to be one of those undercover cops that pose as a hooker to entrap men that are already obviously sad, pitiful, and lonely. Those cops are so pathetic. They should be out putting my hard-earned tax dollars to good use by stopping murderers, rapists, pedophiles, and drug dealers. You know, people that commit real crimes."

"You wouldn't be like an undercover cop posing as a hooker," informed Sam. "You'd go in as a gold digger, a thrill seeker, the type of girl that'll pledge her affections to the guy in the room with the thickest wallet. That's at least two steps above undercover cop playing hooker," commented Sam, with a slight smile.

Nanci returned his smirk. Norrin and Wade looked at one another and couldn't help but smile, too.

"Give me a few hours and I'll make your already-stunning features so dominant no red-blooded male will be able to resist you," said Cyndi. "I think a new wardrobe and make-over would be in order."

"I'm not cutting my hair," informed Nanci. "I've never cut my hair."

"You don't have to," said Sam. "When you're in costume, no one ever sees your hair, unless a lock or two comes out and attacks them. Your habit-like head covering ensures that. That long hair of yours will make you all the more alluring."

“So, grab your purse,” said Cyndi, “And let’s take a trip to Owings Mills Mall.”

Nanci looked at Norrin, almost as if she were awaiting his approval. Norrin winked at her and motioned his head toward the exit as if to say, go ahead. Nanci didn’t waste time lingering around. Both she and Cyndi kissed their husbands goodbye and made their way to the path leading back up to the house.

Cyndi and Nanci stopped briefly once they had reached the house; just long enough for Cyndi to grab her purse, keys, and to make sure she had her credit cards. After that, they headed for the parking garage. Once inside, Cyndi pointed to a cream-colored 1989 Mercedes-Benz 560 SL. “That’s yours now,” said Cyndi. “Or at least your alter ego’s,” she corrected.

Nanci looked at Cyndi in a confused manner.

“Actually, your alter, alter ego’s,” clarified Cyndi. “Not Gorgon. This new person you’re about to become. We need a name for her. Have any favorites?”

“I like my own,” responded Nanci.

“So do I, but, it wouldn’t be wise to use your real name,” said Cyndi. “It could come back to bite you.”

“I get to pick my own name,” chuckled Nanci. “That’s a first. My parents called me Nanci. Sam called me Gorgon. What should I call myself?”

“How about Natalia?” suggested Cyndi.

“Do I look like a Natalia?” asked Nanci.

“A little bit. Maybe not.”

“How about Colette?”

Cyndi cringed. “Sounds kind of like a Euro-slut.”

“Yeah. You’re right.”

“What do you think of Desire?”

“Eww! I hate that name.” Nanci paused. “What do you think of Jessica?”

“I have a cousin named Jessica.”

“I know. I like that name. I was thinking that if I have a daughter, I might like to name her Jessica.”

“It’s a good name.”

“Then I’m Jessica.”

“Good. We’ll iron out the rest of the details while we drive.”

Nanci drove her new Mercedes to Owings Mills Mall. She spent the time getting to know the feel of the car and how it handled. It was different than what she was accustomed to, but she was sure she could easily get used to it.

Both she and Cyndi spent the drive creating a past for Jessica. Her name would be Jessica Savin. She was 24 years old, born in Landover, Maryland, to

Russian immigrants Vladimir and Anastasia. Her father, Vladimir, had died about a year ago. A heart attack would be sufficient, not overly dramatic but tragic nonetheless. Her mother, Anastasia, had recently returned home to the former Soviet Union for an extended visit, now that the country was free of communist rule. Vladimir's life insurance policy had left both she and Jessica with enough to live comfortably for some time. Instead of joining her mother, Jessica had chosen to stay in America, the land of her birth, the land of opportunity.

Here her love for the finer things, her affinity for materialism, could be easily quenched. At home in the good ol' U.S. of A., where nothing is prized more than the almighty dollar, Jessica would live her life in a manner to ensure she got whatever she wanted at any particular moment.

"I really don't like her, Cyndi," said Nanci.

"You're not supposed to like her. She's not real," reminded Cyndi. "This is no different than an actress learning her part. You have to know your character inside and out, backward and forward. It's not important that you like her, in fact, I'd be worried if you did. What's important is that you know her, who she is, how she thinks, how she might react in any given situation. I can help you. This is my line of work, remember? But, more's at stake than an entertained audience or rave reviews. Your very life and the lives of both of our husbands are on the line."

"What about Wade?"

"No one cares about Wade," said Cyndi.

For a moment, Nanci seemed dumbfounded. That was until Cyndi replaced her serious expression with a broad smile and began laughing. "Of course, we both know Wade's invulnerable, and that I'm kidding. I'm fairly sure Wade will be okay, though."

"I just don't want to leave him out," said Nanci. "I worry about him sometimes, you know. Always putting on a brave face. Always cracking a joke to hide his true feelings. And nobody ever really bothers to take the time to really find out how he is, or how things have been going for him."

"Are you okay?" asked Cyndi. "I feel a strong sadness radiating from you."

"I don't know. This whole Mason thing has taken its toll on all of us. Norrin and Sam seem edgy all of the time. Irritable sometimes. We're all irritable. And you, you're pregnant, for God's sake, and your husband's out playing super hero. That's gotta be eating at you emotionally. And what's that doing for your baby? Me, I'm always angry lately, it seems, overly aggressive. I mean, I, I—" Tears were beginning to well up in Nanci's eyes. "I've been beating the crap out

of people for the last few months. And I'm not talking about gaining the upper hand, defending myself, or retaliating against an attacker. I'm talking about gratifying cruelty. Using that extra move, hold, lock, or pinch that I know really hurts, when they're already clearly detained. Kicking them when they're down." By now, tears were rolling down Nanci's cheeks.

Cyndi reached over and gently wiped Nanci's tears with the back of her fingers. "I know it's been hard, sweetie. And you're right, it's taken its toll on all of us. Sometimes, I think it's been hardest on you," stated Cyndi.

"Oh, please," said Nanci, trying to gather herself together. "Don't make me the martyr. You've had to deal with just as much as I have."

"We've both had to deal with the divided attention of our husbands and have been plagued with constant worry for their safety," said Cyndi. "But you, you don't have the consolation of a telepathic connection with Norrin. No matter what may happen, no matter what I may say or Sam may say, even what we don't say, we both always know how the other truly feels. We always have that connection. Unfortunately, you and Norrin don't. Norrin can tell you how much he loves you a million times, but if he does something, intentional or unintentional, that causes you to question that, you don't have the ability to read his heart and know he does love you with all his strength. I can tell you that Norrin loves you more than anything. I've felt that from him many times. But you haven't. Not in that indisputable way. Most likely, you never will. That's why I say, I think sometimes, this life has taken its toll on you worst of all."

"I make do," said Nanci, trying to put on her brave face.

"Now who's trying to use words to hide their true feelings? Seems Wade's got competition," remarked Cyndi, with a smirk.

"You're right. Sometimes, I do try to make a brave show of it. I guess I'm not fooling you. Or Sam."

"No. You're not. But, if it's any consolation, sometimes Norrin and Wade are fooled. Most of the time even Rachel's believed that I'm-so-tuff-I'm-not-afraid-of-anything front you put on."

"Rachel. God, Rachel. I can't even remember the last time I picked up the phone and just called her to say, hi, or called to ask how she was doing."

"Now that you mention it, I've been a bit negligent there myself."

"She probably thinks we've forgotten about her. She must totally hate us."

"I doubt that. But, she may be a bit disappointed in us."

"Call Rachel. Need to put that at the top of my 'to do' list."

Cyndi nodded her head in agreement.

Soon after that they had reached the mall. Once Nanci had located a central

parking spot fairly close to the food court, she parked. As she and Cyndi entered the mall, Cyndi began referring to Nanci as Jessica.

They walked around stopping at the more expensive clothiers. At first, Nanci began looking at items geared toward her personal tastes. Cyndi, at that point, steered Nanci away from those items asking, "Jess, this seems more like you, don't you think?" Picking up on Cyndi's cue, Nanci turned her attention toward the name brands, the pricey items, the kind of clothes one might buy when money is no object.

Clothes weren't the only thing on their agenda. Jewelry, shoes, accessories, and makeup were also necessities in the creation of Jessica Savin. A quick stop at Zales added several necklaces, a few rings, a bracelet, and even some earrings. For a moment, the two had considered heading to Macy's for shoes and a make-over, but a quick realization that although Nanci didn't work at this Macy's, someone working there might recognize or even know her, caused them to alter their course to Woodward and Lothrop.

Once inside, the two visited the shoe department first. Nanci chose seven pairs of shoes to match the outfits she had purchased so far. Then, she and Cyndi headed to the makeup counter. Cyndi made suggestions to the woman working the counter as she worked on Nanci's make-over. Cyndi encouraged the woman to focus on Nanci's high cheekbones, her almond shaped eyes, her perfectly shaped lips. In the end, between Cyndi's guidance and the cosmetics specialist's expertise, the final outcome was beyond words. Nanci wasn't much for makeup, in fact, she usually didn't wear much more than lipstick. But this was almost an artist's masterpiece. Just the right amount of coloring, not too much or too little around the eyes, the cheeks, and the lips, made Nanci look like an entirely new person. This, of course, was the goal from the beginning, to bring Jessica to life; making her a person with likes, dislikes, goals, wants, and needs. Becoming Jessica was no less important than Nanci being Gorgon, or Cyndi being Mind Reader, or Norrin being Scorpion.

After leaving Woodward and Lothrop, Cyndi and her new friend, Jessica, ate lunch in the food court at the café closest to the exit where they had parked.

"In keeping with Jessica's tastes, I chose the prime rib," said Nanci, sitting down with her tray of food. "I kept more toward Nanci's tastes, though, opting for the rare cut."

"I just can't eat my meat like that," said Cyndi. "First of all, I need it to be dead. Secondly, I like it cooked."

"Mmm, not me. I like to hear it moo as I bite into it."

"Ew, that's disgusting," said Cyndi, smiling as she winced.

The two laughed and finished their lunches. From time to time during the course of their conversation, Cyndi would grill Nanci with questions about Jessica. For the most part, Nanci answered all questions correctly. She fumbled in a few places forgetting a detail or two but, all in all, her responses were right on track.

After finishing, they both stood up to leave. Once on her feet, Cyndi cuddled her stomach momentarily. "Little one's a bit restless. Even though he's not too big, he still projects feelings. They're rudimentary and much different from what I'm used to, but I feel him."

"Him?" questioned Nanci. "I thought you and Sam had decided not to know the baby's sex until it was born."

"We did and I'm not completely sure but, when people project their feelings, you can almost always tell their gender," informed Cyndi. "This one's feelings tell me he's probably a male. I'm not one-hundred percent sure but, if I had to bet on it, I'd bet male."

Nanci moved closer, right up next to Cyndi. "May I?" she asked, reaching toward Cyndi's belly.

"Of course," responded Cyndi.

Nanci gently rubbed Cyndi's belly, smiling and feeling a sense of calm she hadn't known in a long time. Both she and Cyndi jumped as they felt a slight kick. With a broad smile on her face, Nanci said, "I want this, ya know, for Norrin and me. I want this so much."

"You'll have it," said Cyndi. "Just a little while longer. We all just need to be patient a little while longer, through this final obstacle, and we'll have everything we want. You'll have it, Nanci. I promise."

Nanci smiled as she looked into Cyndi's eyes, listening to her words of comfort and encouragement. For the first time in a long time, Nanci allowed herself to feel something she hadn't allowed in such a long while. Hope.

CHAPTER XXV

The Beginning of the End

“Come here often,” asked a dark-skinned man, as he seated himself at the bar next to the beautiful woman with unusually long hair.

“That the best you’ve got?” she questioned, as she sipped from her drink.

“I’m sorry?”

“Your pick-up line—it sucks,” she replied. “Come here often?” she repeated, in a mocking tone. Then, continued sipping from her glass.

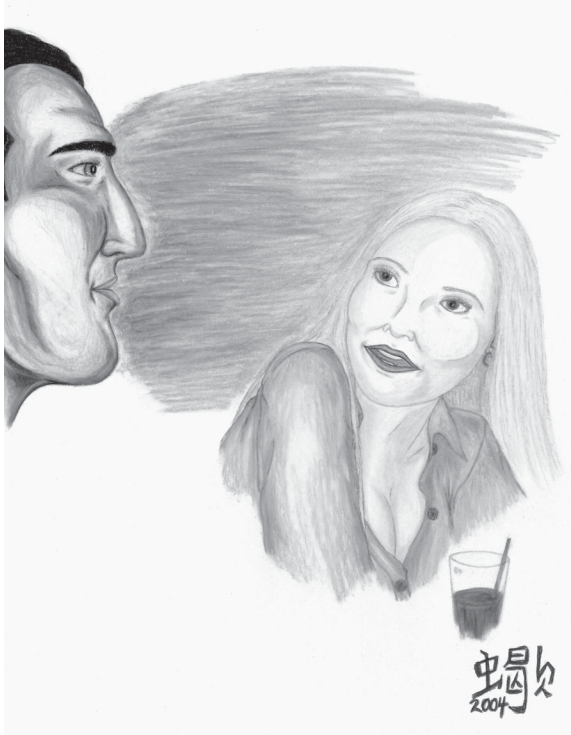
The man tried fumbling for a comeback or at least a retort but nothing came to mind. He smiled and chuckled. “You know, I don’t even have anything to say to that. I come here a lot and I’ve never noticed you before. I figured, here’s a beautiful woman, she’s sitting alone. Maybe, I could buy her a drink. Talk a little. Get to know her.”

“Who knows,” the woman interjected. “Maybe, I’ll buy her a drink, two, maybe even three. She might lower her guard, get a little buzzed even. By the end of the night, who knows, I might even get lucky,” she said, not even looking at the man.

The man was speechless. Then, “Well, it looks like I have no charm, whatsoever, tonight. I guess I’ll leave you to your drink,” he said, standing up from his stool.

“You always give up so easy?” she asked, still not looking at the man once he had stood up and begun walking away.

He stopped and looked back at her over his shoulder. “Not always. I just assumed you weren’t—”



“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Jay,” he said, as he returned to the bar reclaiming his seat.

“Jay, what?” she asked rhetorically. For Nanci knew full well the man’s name was Abhijay Patel, Jay for short. His family had originally emigrated from New Delhi. He had been born in America, Pikesville Maryland specifically. His date of birth was November 14, 1967. His parents were Rajiv and Vanita. He lived at 3524Dakin Court apartment A. And last, but not least, he was a cocaine and heroine dealer for Michael Mason.

“Patel, Jay Patel,” he answered. “And you?”

“Jessica. Jessica Savin,” said Nanci.

“That’s a pretty name, Jessica,” he said.

“And that’s another lame line, Jay,” she retorted.

“Wow. I can’t buy a break, can I?”

“Buy me another drink and tell me a little bit about yourself, and we’ll see,” answered Nanci. This time, she turned completely toward the man. Her blouse was unbuttoned just enough to give Jay a sample of what was concealed behind it. She had Jay’s full attention.

Nanci had spent the last few weeks preparing for her new role. She had gotten to know Jessica’s background as though it were her own. She had also begun an exercise program and martial arts refresher course with Sam. This was to sculpt her body giving it a more toned look, as well as to ensure her fighting skills were still up to par. During her training regimen, Nanci lost seven pounds, not that she needed to. To prepare for her role, she also checked out several books from the library on the Russian language. She didn’t try learning the entire language in the short amount of time that she had to prepare, but she did familiarize herself with many words and several key phrases. Jessica Savin wasn’t fluent in Russian but, growing up with Russian parents, it would require her to know at least a bit of the language. She also worked on using a thicker Maryland accent. It would be Jessica’s trademark. Nanci, herself, had only a slight Maryland accent. It could only be heard when she pronounced words with a short “A” sound, such as water, or a long “I” sound, with words such as ice.

Norrin’s felt a deep concern for Nanci’s well-being but, in seeing the amount of effort she was putting into perfecting this new role, he couldn’t help but be proud of her and put faith in her abilities. Both Sam and Cyndi seemed very confident with Nanci’s progress, as both played an intricate part in her mastering her role.

After Jay had all but spewed his entire life story, embellishing several parts to make himself seem more impressive than he actually was, which Nanci noticed many men seemed to do when trying to impress a woman, he finally got around to asking her about herself.

“Me?” she asked. “Nothing so extravagant as you, I’m sure. I’m actually a first-generation American. My mom and dad came here from Moscow in 1962. I was born not long after that. My dad died about a year ago, so, my mom decided she’d go back home now that the iron curtain’s fallen.”

“Your father died?” asked Jay. He reached for Nanci’s hand and, after covering it with his own, said, “I’m so sorry.” He attempted to appear consoling but, more likely, was trying to score points.

Nanci looked down at Jay’s hand touching hers. “I’m dealing with it,” she said, slowly taking back her hand and reaching for her drink with it.

“It couldn’t have been easy for you,” he continued, playing the comforting-

friend card. "Our parents are such an import part of our lives. We start out idolizing them, then, we can't stand them, and finally, we eventually realize how lucky we are to have had them. The good ones, at least."

"That's very insightful, Jay," commented Nanci. She didn't want to like this guy. In fact, she was trying very hard not to, but his charm and seemingly genuine sincerity was making it somewhat difficult. She knew he was a drug dealing slime but his demeanor and words made him seem almost human.

Nanci had to keep reminding herself to stay in character, to play her part. Jessica was supposed to be the type of girl that was tough and cynical, not allowing anyone an edge over her. Jay's allure was making that difficult. It also didn't help that Nanci had a personal fascination with India and its people. She loved the food, some of the customs, the architecture, and the apparel. Nonetheless, Nanci resolved herself to focus on playing her part.

"You don't let up, do you?" asked Jay.

"Why should I? People tend to use and walk all over those who allow them to do so."

"That's pretty cynical. An attitude like that cuts you off from those that might genuinely care about you and be there for you, if you'd just let them."

This guy was good, thought Nanci. His tone, his facial expressions, if Nanci hadn't known any better she would have thought that Jay was a rather decent fellow. She had to keep reminding herself that the man sitting to her side was a drug dealer, a pusher for Michael Mason.

"I suppose you're one of those people," said Nanci, responding to Jay's comment.

"I don't know. You're kinda scary, and definitely not the nicest person I've ever met," said Jay sarcastically.

Nanci smiled, looking toward the man returning her smile. "I've let people in before," she admitted. "I haven't met anyone yet that hasn't weaseled their way into my life, disrupting it, just to see what they could get out of it."

"Well, that's because you hadn't met me before, until tonight. It took us a while to find each other, but look, here we are."

Nanci couldn't help but broaden her smile.

"Ooh, I bet that hurt," said Jay facetiously.

"How many times have you used that line in the past month?" asked Nanci.

"Just one."

"Uh-huh," she responded, still smiling at Jay. "So, Jay, tell me, what do you do for a living?" It was the question that would eventually lead up to Nanci infiltrating Mason's organization.

"I do a little of this and that," he said.

"That's vague."

"I guess I'm a bit of an independent *entrepreneur*. I do a lot of different things, import, export, consultations, that sort of thing."

"You work fast food, don't you?"

Jay laughed. "No. Not really, no."

"What's the name of your company?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, I don't have a specific company or company name. I pretty much do whatever I want for whoever is willing to pay my fee."

"Sounds like a hooker. You're not a hooker, are you, Jay?"

Jay laughed even harder. "No. No, I'm not a hooker."

"Me neither."

"You know, for someone who seems to act serious all of the time, you're pretty funny. I'd like to see you again. Is that a possibility?"

"Yeah, I guess it's a possibility."

"Okay, let me rephrase that. I'd like to call you sometime. Can I have your phone number and give you a call, so that we can set something up for a later date?"

"Date? That's rather quick. Besides, I just met you. I don't know you well enough to give you my phone number."

Jay's began to reflect an expression of disappointment.

"However," Nanci continued, "If you want to give me your number, I may just call you."

Jay's smile returned to his face. He reached for a pen on the bar's counter and scribbled his name and phone number on a napkin. "You can call me anytime," he said. "If I'm not there and you leave a message, I'll call you back."

"I told you, Jay, I'm not giving you my number yet. If you're not home when I call, I'll call again at a later time."

"So, you're gonna call?"

"I thought we just established that. You're kinda slow, Jay."

Jay smiled and reached over to give Nanci a hug. She returned his hug, but only half heartedly. She was growing impatient, as Jay's hug tightened and was lasting longer than she had felt comfortable with. Finally, he released her, said goodbye and left the bar.

A chill ran up Nanci's spine and, once she was sure that Jay had left the building, she rushed to the restroom. She slammed open the restroom door and ran to one of the stalls. Once inside, she pushed close the stall door behind

her, not bothering to lock it and vomited profusely into the toilet. She fell to her knees forcing up dry heaves once everything in her stomach had been emptied. After finishing, she rested her head against the cold porcelain gasping for breath.

Nanci felt ridiculous. She had fought against drug dealers, serial killers, arsonists, bank robbers, money launderers, individuals that possessed gifts and abilities just as she did, but, had chosen to misuse them for selfish gain and to harm others. Most recently, she had even faced wolf like humanoid mutants that had discovered she and her friend's secret identities. Yet through each of those circumstances, Nanci had shown a brave face. She met each trial head on and overcame them with the help of her husband and friends. But now, for some reason, she felt like a frightened child separated from its parents. Fear tore at her intestines. Perhaps, it was due to the fact that in the majority of other circumstances, she had worn the uniform of Gorgon, the heroine. A veil or cloak that allowed her to be a larger than life super being and, with her husband and friends at her side, there was a feeling of invincibility. Perhaps, it was because she felt a deep fervor within to execute the role of Jessica Savin flawlessly. Either that, or the excitement of the encounter had literally caused Nanci to become sick.

After several minutes had passed, Nanci gathered herself together, picked up what belongings she had, rinsed her face and hands, after exiting the stall, and opened the door to leave the restroom. As she walked out, she was startled. Sam was waiting outside the woman's restroom. He was dressed in casual clothes and was staring intently.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay," responded Nanci.

"Are you sure? I can almost hear your heart beating."

"You shouldn't be here," said Nanci abruptly. "If he sees—"

"He's gone. I watched him get into his car and drive off. After that, I immediately came here and waited for you. I could sense your trepidation."

"I'm fine."

Sam took Nanci's hand. "Look at me," he said, staring down at her. She looked up at Sam with anxiety still reflected in her eyes. "If this is too difficult for you, we can do this another way. There's no reason to put yourself through this much—"

"I said I'm fine," interrupted Nanci, pulling her hand from Sam's. "I'll be okay. I just wasn't used to this, that's all. I'll be fine now."

"You're sure?"

Nanci forced a smile, "Yes, I'm sure."

She drove herself home feeling an unsettling cold within. That same cold feeling visited her again and again over the next few weeks, each time she met with Jay. However, with each meeting it seemed to dwindle bit by bit, until it was no longer there.

Nanci had proven her abilities yet again, showing that not only could she put on a costume and battle heinous villains but, also, she could venture in among society's leeches and its nefarious element and gain their trust and confidence.

After Nanci and Jay had spent more time together and had become seemingly friends, one day, she mentioned that she was interested in scoring some cocaine. She told him that she enjoyed using it recreationally just to relax and wind down. Nanci played her part well. She told Jay that if he was opposed to that type of activity or uncomfortable with her talking about it, she wouldn't mention it around him. In typical male fashion, Jay fell right into Nanci's trap. In an attempt to impress her and embellish upon his own egotistical sense of self importance, Jay assured her he could provide whatever she might want.

During the course of their next meeting, Jay made advances toward Nanci. He no doubt felt that he had provided her with something that she wanted and he hoped she would be grateful. He took the liberty of holding her hand; he put his arm around her, he hugged her tightly and even occasionally kissed her. They weren't passionate kisses, usually just pecks, but kisses nonetheless. Nanci would not allow things to escalate past that. Jay imagined that she was simply playing hard to get and her indifference made him want her all the more. In Nanci's mind, she was doing just enough to keep Jay interested without being unfaithful to her husband.

At times, Nanci felt uncomfortable and would find herself apologizing to Norrin after spending time with Jay. She would confess to Norrin everything that had taken place over the course of the time she would spend with Jay. If he had touched her hand, or hugged her, or even kissed her, although she always stressed that she never returned Jay's kiss. Norrin, although not happy with this man's advances toward his wife, let Nanci know he understood what was going on. He told her that he understood that she was not opening herself up to a new relationship nor being disloyal to theirs. She was simply playing a part and doing her best to achieve the results she and her friends were after.

During this period of time, secret weekly meetings were held between Maryland's governor, Baltimore's mayor, and three other individuals, one of whom was a special agent with the FBI. These individuals were those the governor had insisted upon being kept abreast of the progress that the vigilantes

were making toward dismantling Michael Mason's organization. The special agent was there to pacify his superiors and confirm that the vigilante's activities would in no way, compromise the agent that the FBI had already placed inside Mason's organization. The governor, who had seemingly become an advocate of the vigilantes, ensured the FBI that Mantis, Scorpion, and Toad were not hampering the progress of their sting in any way. In fact, they had done more to help than the governor himself had expected. Various storehouses where Mason kept his merchandise were made public to the governor and the authorities. The vigilantes had also played an important part in apprehending several of Mason's associates.

It had been reported that Mason was beginning to become more and more skittish. He seemed terribly frustrated and ambivalent as to why so many unexpected adverse events seemed to be hitting him from all sides, all at once. The quick-witted, carefree attitude Mason had once seemed to have was now replaced with paranoia and cynicism. It appeared as though every distributor he put in place whether in Towson, Perryhall, Essex, Downtown Baltimore, Pikesville, Randalstown, Silver Spring, Landover, Annapolis, Timonium, Ocean City, or anywhere else in Maryland kept getting arrested, assaulted, or both. Stories continued creeping up of costumed men, ridiculous accounts of fantastic visions and occurrences. Mason's employees reported suddenly finding themselves in an open plain in the middle of some mid-evil battle, where warriors in plated armor were riding horses, swinging swords and axes, and volleys of arrows filling the skies. Others reported finding themselves in swampy jungles being chased by Viet Cong and, then, without notice, standing on a street corner surrounded by police officers. Still yet, others reported Native Americans dressed in skins and painted like death, stalking them, and attempting to kill them with various bladed weapons.

As Jay spent more time with Nanci, he was opening up regarding his activities and the specifics of the role he played in Mason's organization. The majority of his product he tried to move in the Towson area. He had taken over Derek King's old trafficking route. Much of his business came from college students, some professors, and the successful business owners.

One day while having lunch, Jay alluded to a large shipment of drugs coming into Maryland but was reluctant to go into specific details about it. "It's big, Jess," he told her. "My boss has been having problems with flaky distributors making stupid decisions and getting themselves caught. I know he's trying to clean house and keep only the dependable distributors. I know I'm on his "A" list. I haven't been a total screw-off like some of these other morons. I handle my business, get in, get out, and that's it."

Nanci thought to herself, “The only reason you’re still in business is because my friends and I allow you to continue. You’re a pawn, Jay. A dupe, a stooge and you don’t even know it.” Still, a part of Nanci felt bad for Jay. If not for his chosen career, he seemed as though he could be a great guy. The type of guy who bragged too much about himself, but, even still, a great guy.

That was one of the qualities Nanci appreciated that Norrin didn’t share with most men. He wasn’t the type to feel the need to brag about his accomplishments, nor was he the type to embellish them. Nanci recalled once asking Norrin why he hadn’t tried to talk himself up or brag about some of the things he had done, while they were dating. She found it odd that so many males, including Sam when he was younger, would embellish certain aspects of themselves, but Norrin never seemed to do that. Norrin’s response was, “I know what I can do, and I know what I can’t. I know what I’ve accomplished, some things under my own steam, some with a little help from others, some with a lot of help from others, and some just by dumb luck. I don’t need to try and make myself look good by talking too much, or taking credit for something I needed help with, or something that happened to inadvertently work out in my favor. In my opinion, people that do that are stupid. They crave attention and try to get it by making others think that they’re something they’re not. They know they’re sad and pathetic, but try to convince themselves and others that they are not.”

Nanci’s mind was wandering, and she had to remind herself to stay focused. “You’d better be careful. Maybe, it’s not that Mike’s employees are total morons. Maybe, someone’s tipping off the cops or, maybe, the cops have someone on the inside. Don’t you watch *Jumpstreet*?”

“Nah. Anyone else and I might say maybe. But, Michael Mason, no way. He’d find out in a minute, a New York minute. And when he did, whew, I’d feel sorry for that fool. Believe me, it’s the distributors. They’re imbeciles.”

Nanci thought to herself, “Obviously. I just told you exactly what’s going on in Mason’s organization, right under your and his nose, and you just blew it off.”

“So, tell me about tonight,” inquired Nanci.

“I don’t know,” said Jay, rubbing his hand across Nanci’s. “You’re so distant and mysterious. How do I know I can trust you?” he asked, with an ogling smirk.

Nanci flared her nostrils and gave him a look as if his last comment was ridiculous. She looked him right in the eyes, leaned over, placed her hand on the nape of Jay’s neck, and kissed him passionately.

As their lips separated, Jay tried to regain his composure. “When are we gonna party together?” he asked, with a smile left imprinted on his face.

"I told you before," said Nanci, while running her fingers through Jay's hair, "I party alone."

"That's no fun. I've been hooking you up at my cost and even giving you freebies sometimes. Don't you wanna share the experience with me?" he retorted, now, running his fingers through her hair near her ear, and stroking through to the nape of her neck.

"Maybe, eventually. But, for now, it's a personal way for me to relax and wind down, kinda like taking a warm bubble bath. I don't have too many things that are just for me. This is one of them. You can understand that, can't you?"

"I guess that makes sense," he said begrudgingly. In Jay's mind, if he could get Jessica high and lower her inhibitions, he might be able to take things further than just a simple kiss.

"Don't rush things, Jay. They'll come. People who rush things tend to wind up disappointed and are left watching the thing they most wanted slip through their fingers. People who wait and are patient wind up reaping the benefits of their patience."

"Sounds like something my parents would say," replied Jay.

"And they'd be right. Don't ya think?"

Jay smiled. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess you're right. How'd you get so smart?"

"Experience, Jay. Lots and lots of experience. So, tonight, what's going on that's gonna put you at the head of Mike's organization?"

Nanci had asked just the right question in just the right manner. Jay looked at her desperately wanting to tell her, but feeling conflict as to whether he should or not.

"Ah, come on. You know it's killing you. You know you're dying to tell me," taunted Nanci.

Jay smiled even broader. "Well, we're expecting a very nice shipment that's docking in the harbor this evening. It's coming by way of Amsterdam, South Hampton, and finally sailing into Baltimore's harbor. With all the stuff that's been going on, Mike's only taking two people to meet the boat. People he can trust."

"You?"

"Yup. Me and this Japanese guy named Hideo."

"I wanna go."

"Are you kidding? Absolutely not. Mike would kill me if he knew I had even told you about this."

"Oh, come on. I'm just some little girl. I'm no threat."

"Jess, I'm serious. There's no way you can go. Maybe, once Mike meets you

and gets to know you a little better. But, if I show up at something this big, this important with some stranger, Mike will kill us both. I'm so serious. He's been kinda paranoid lately with all the internal problems in the organization, merchandise getting confiscated, distributors getting busted. It's just not a good idea. Not now."

"Fine. Whatever."

"Hey, don't get mad. With this shipment, as long as everything goes smoothly, I'll have cemented my position in the organization. I'll be able to have a lot more freedom as to what I do and who I bring in. You know that little speech you just gave about patience? Now would be a good time to put your money where your mouth is."

Nanci smiled, "Okay. Okay. I don't want you getting in trouble on my account and I definitely don't want to get us both killed. But, I do want to meet Mike. I think I could be a good distributor for him."

"You?" Jay chuckled.

"Yeah me. What's so funny about that? You said it yourself: I'm pretty tough. I don't have any reservations about doing what it takes to be respected either. If I have to waste a cop or two, I don't care. No big loss. I'm surely not gonna be some bumbling fool like those morons who've been getting arrested, either. You won't find me making up pitiful stories about some guy in tights chasing me down. Anyone comes up to me wearing their super hero jammies gets a slug in the head. I mean, please, costumed characters? Where do these idiots come from? Can't they make up something more original?"

Jay laughed. "Yeah, tell me about it. Okay, after we meet the boat tonight, as long as everything goes well, I'll talk to Mike about you. Let him know you want to meet him. We'll see what he says. As long as all goes well tonight, I'm sure he'll be receptive."

"Cool."

"Now, I need to get out of here and go home to get ready for tonight. I'll call you tomorrow?"

"You'd better. Especially since you got me this thing." Nanci held up a rather large mobile phone that usually only the rich or yuppies were seen using. Since Jay prided himself as both and wanted, what he believed to be, his girlfriend to have a means in which he could easily reach her, he had given Nanci this cumbersome telephone. Originally, she had denied him her home phone number, so, this was also a reason to give her the gift.

In the weeks that Nanci had been getting closer to Jay, Sam set Jessica Savin

up in an apartment on Joppa Road. It was agreed that if things got to the point where Jessica needed proof of residence or needed to give a home telephone number to her new associates, so as not to rouse suspicion in them, she would need an apartment.

In keeping with the facade of Jessica living off of a hefty sum of money left by her father's life insurance policy, the apartment was furnished in expensive modern decor. Inside was found the latest in electronic equipment, large paintings, and imported furniture. At first, Nanci rarely went to the apartment. However, she realized that if she were to gain Jay and Mason's full trust, eventually, she'd no doubt have to take them both there.

Before leaving, Jay kissed Nanci goodbye. Kissing Jay was becoming more common place, like tying one's shoes, brushing one's teeth, or combing one's hair. The first time Nanci did it, she felt disgust. Now, it didn't seem to bother her at all. It was something she had become accustomed to and hadn't even realized it.

Nanci drove the Mercedes she had come to think of as more her own than Jessica's back to Sam and Cyndi's house, where they, Norrin, and Wade were awaiting her return. While driving, she began to fantasize of how things might be for she and Norrin were they rich and privileged, to enjoy the finer things in life. Imaging a large house like Sam and Cyndi's, expensive imported cars, the latest in fashion hanging in their closets, and even the laughter of children echoing throughout the house, she and Norrin's children. She saw her family going on vacations to foreign and exotic lands where they'd experience so many new things. It was a fabulous fantasy and seemed unending, until she found herself at the gates of Sam and Cyndi's estate. It was an abrupt end to such a satisfying dream.

After parking, Nanci made her way to the underground lair. There Sam, Norrin, and Wade were discussing their next move.

"Whatever you three are talking about, forget it," said Nanci. "We've hit pay dirt. In fact, if we play this right, this entire mission could be over within just a few hours."

Sam, Norrin, and Wade's eyes were on Nanci as though she were relaying a story and had just come to the most crucial climatic part.

"Don't leave us hangin' here," Wade spoke up. "Share with the rest of the class."

"There's a boat coming into the harbor tonight with this huge shipment of drugs aboard. Mason's going to be there. My new friend Jay is going to be there, as is the FBI's nark. They're meeting the boat when it docks. It's coming from

Amsterdam,” said Nanci, obviously pleased with herself for the information she had obtained.

“Where?” asked Sam.

“Amsterdam,” responded Nanci, in an abrupt manner as if displeased Sam had not been paying attention.

“No. I mean where is it docking? Specifically and when?” clarified Sam.

“Don’t know,” responded Nanci. “Somewhere in the harbor tonight.”

Sam looked at Nanci flaring his nostrils and forcing back the corner of his mouth.

“Hey,” she responded, “It’s not that big a place, and I got as much from Jay as I could without interrogating him. I wonder if the cops know? I bet they do, since the FBI guy is gonna be there. They’ll probably get there extra early waiting to pounce.”

“I’ll contact the governor and find out,” informed Sam. “Meanwhile, I suggest you all get some rest, get something to eat, or do whatever you may need to do before tonight. Whether the cops are there or not, we will be.”

CHAPTER XXVI

The Best Laid Plans

“Everyone check in,” Sam whispered into the small microphone resting on his chin.

“Scorpion here.”

“Toad.”

“Gorgon here.”

“There’s a boat coming in to dock,” said Sam. “I believe this is it. It’s lowering anchor. Everybody see it?”

“I see it,” responded Norrin, looking through his undersized binoculars.

“I see the boat, but where’re Mason and his boys?” asked Wade.

“They’ll be here,” said Nanci confidently. “They’re probably already here.”

“Stay hidden. Keep to the dark shadowy areas and take cover behind large objects,” instructed Sam. “The FBI are here, and I don’t want to spook them or Mason and his men. I told the governor we’d serve as backup only if necessary. For now, we’re just here as observers.”

“Observers,” huffed Norrin. “Your little governor and his merry band of FBI agents want all the glory and prestige of this bust. They want us here to save their butts if the you-know-what hits the fan. We’re here to ensure their victory.”

“This is not an us versus them, Scorpion. If Mason goes down tonight, it’s

everyone's victory," said Sam. "We all win. The FBI gets their collar and we get our lives back."

Upon hearing Sam's words, each person interpreted them in their own way. Nanci longed for an end to this incessant chaotic routine. Strangely, though, the fervent desire she had once felt to put this life behind her, seemed to have somewhat waned. To Norrin, Sam's words were bittersweet. They were an end to a large part of who he was and, also, a beginning to a life full of possibilities regarding who he might become. Wade's feelings were altogether different. To him this was an end to an era, a final goodbye to the memories of youth. Though he would never vocalize it, Wade yearned for simpler times; times when he and his friends felt youthful, times when he and his brothers shared an equal passion for adventure. But, those days were long gone, and the remnants of their existence were too coming to an end. Truthfully, it saddened Wade, but that was a part of himself he shared with no one, not even his brothers.

"There's Jay," said Nanci abruptly, interrupting everyone's moment of reflection. Sam, Norrin, and Wade quickly lifted their binoculars to the lenses of their masks and scanned the dock. The dock was not very well lit but Jay was recognizable. Two men walked with Jay toward the docked boat. One man was Asian and the other a well-dressed Caucasian.

"That's him," whispered Sam. "That's Mason. The white guy. No offense, Gorgon," snickered Sam.

"Ha, ha," responded Nanci, in a monotone voice.

The four continued watching as a walkway was lowered from the boat to the dock. Four men disembarked the boat walking toward Mason and his associates. The man in the lead was bronze-skinned with a Roman nose and wore his dark black hair slicked back. He was wearing a very fashionable three piece suit. Behind him was one of the crew, perhaps the captain or his first mate. Bringing up the rear were two men dressed slightly more casually than the man in the lead. They didn't appear to be part of the crew.

Both parties continued toward one another and, upon meeting, the bronze-skinned man in the suit embraced Mason and kissed him twice, once on each cheek.

"So, he swings that way," commented Wade.

"No unnecessary chatter Toad," instructed Sam. "Stay focused."

"Are the cops and FBI in place?" asked Norrin.

"There are several individuals present aware of what's transpiring here," informed Sam. "Cops, FBI, or school crossing guards for all I care. Just stay alert. I want us prepared to move swiftly if need be."

Mason, Jay, and Hideo were all apparently at ease in their surroundings, shaking hands with all that had disembarked the boat. Each was positioned so that the four hidden vigilantes could easily see each of their faces. Sam and Wade had stationed themselves atop highly stacked crates while Norrin and Nanci kept closer to the ground. Each watched intently, although they were unable to hear the conversing men on whom they were spying.

“What are they saying?” asked Nanci.

“I can’t tell,” responded Norrin.

“No, not you,” responded Nanci. “Mantis, what are they saying?” she repeated.

Sam hadn’t yet read the minds of the men at the dock. He had been focused on getting himself and his friends into position and ensuring their readiness to strike should the need arise. His attention had also been divided scanning the area for law enforcement officers, making sure they were present and ready to make the bust. Sadly, his attentions had not been focused in the right direction.

Sam noticed the man in the suit, who appeared to be either Hispanic or Italian, unexpectedly, stop his conversation with Mason mid-sentence. His head turned to the left and then the right.

“What’s going on?” asked Wade. “Did something startle him? Did one of those stupid cops not hide themselves well enough, or make a noticeably loud sound?”

“I don’t know?” replied Sam.

“Well, read his mind. Find out,” said Norrin, in a manner that sounded more like an order than a suggestion.

“I can’t,” answered Sam, his mouth hanging slightly open.

The man in the suit was still seemingly scanning the area looking in all directions. Finally, he looked straight ahead and, although he was a considerable distance away, it appeared as if he was looking exactly in the spot where the four vigilantes were hidden. It was almost indiscernible but, looking through his binoculars, Sam noticed the man’s nostrils expand and then contract. Suddenly, the man began smiling while staring straight ahead toward Sam, Norrin, Wade, and Nanci. As they looked through their binoculars toward the man, they could see his grin but, why? Why was he grinning while looking in their direction? There was no possible way that he could see them from where he was standing. He was too far away. It was dark outside and the four were hidden which, also, would have made his spotting them improbable. It was not humanly possible for them to have been detected and, yet, the man continued staring eerily in their direction as if he had not only discovered their location but, also, knew why they were there.

Without warning, Sam began to feel people dying all around him. "Oh no," said Sam, as he dropped his binoculars.

"Mantis? What was that?" asked Norrin. "Repeat."

"Everyone defend yourselves!" shouted Sam, over his microphone. "Evasive maneuvers! Protect yourselves at all costs!"

"What's going on?" yelled Norrin, into his microphone. As he uttered the last word, out of the corner of his eye Norrin noticed a figure over his shoulder. It was large in stature and standing directly behind him. There was a huff of fowl humid air followed by a low pitched throaty growl. Norrin didn't bother to turn or attempt to take a defensive position. He knew he was about to be struck and there was no avoiding it, so he did the only thing that he could. He activated his adrenaline factor and braced himself as best he could.

As he flew several feet, sailing through the air and finally landing in a pile of crates, Norrin's thoughts turned to Nanci. "Nanci!" he screamed into his microphone, hoping it was still functioning.

"Little busy, Scorpion," she responded. "One of you invulnerable or nearly invulnerable guys wanna get over here and lend a hand?"

"I'm closest," Wade answered quickly. "I'm on it."

The sounds of dogs yelping, growling, and even barking echoed over each of their earpieces. Each of them listened hoping the sounds they were hearing weren't that of their friends being devoured or torn into pieces.

They had each been caught off guard. Even Sam and his power of telepathy had proven useless. For, although he could read the mind of an individual or make mental contact with someone whose mind he may have touched in the past, though they may be thousands of miles away; Sam still could not touch the mind nor sense the thought patterns of a Wolf. And there were Wolves. Not merely one or two but an entire pack. Wolves generally traveled in packs of 25 but, in this instance, there were 30 present.

They had each come to ensure the safety of the docked boat as well as its passengers, its cargo, and the patrons purchasing its cargo. They had also come to do away with the intrusive FBI agents and any other uninvited law enforcement officers foolish enough to show their faces there, by robbing them of their lives. Not one of the agents, special agents, lieutenants, detectives, sergeants, or rookies present for that matter, walked away from that dock that night. They were all violently slaughtered by creatures that each dead body would never have believed to be real. Each creature moved stealthily, unseen, unheard, undetected, until it was too late.

The bodies were rent into several pieces. The police cruisers and unmarked

cars were gashed and scarred. Their windows were cracked and broken. On some, the tires were flattened and bits of rubber torn from them. The sting had ended a complete failure.

Although the ruckus was heard by the bronzed-skinned and his companions as well as Mason and his two companions, the bronzed-skinned assured all that things were under control.

“What’s going on, Demitri?” insisted Mason.

“Nothing to concern yourself with my friend,” answered the suited bronze-skinned man. “Though I believe, now would be a most opportune time to step onto my docked boat and, perhaps, find a less conspicuous place to set anchor.”

“What was all that noise?” demanded Mason.

“I will explain everything to you, Michael, but, we do need to leave, now,” urged Demitri. “Please,” motioned Demitri toward the boat. “Everyone, please go aboard.”

All seven men walked toward the plank that connected the boat to the dock. Without notice, Demitri, who was in the lead stopped. He turned back toward the men following him and said, “Not you,” as he pulled the trigger to the gun he had pulled from his inner lapel. The remaining five men froze as they watched Hideo take a slug to the chest and fall head first into the harbor’s waters. Mason immediately pulled his gun and aimed it at Demitri.

“Before you pull that trigger, Michael, know that the man on his way to the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay was working for an enemy of my father and posing as an FBI agent. In fact, there were several members of the FBI here tonight expecting to disrupt our business. I guarantee you, they will never disrupt anything ever again,” informed Demitri.

For a moment, Mason stood there still pointing his gun at Demitri. Then, he slowly pushed the hammer back into position and tucked the gun back into his pants. “FBI huh?” said Mason.

“No, he had infiltrated the FBI and made them believe he was one of them, just as he infiltrated your organization and made you believe he was one of *you*. In actuality, he had been a trained soldier of a Yakuza head named Sayuri Toshikazu.”

“Who is he?” asked Mason.

“She, as I just stated, is a Yakuza head; an incredibly powerful Yakuza head. Quite possibly, the most dominant Yakuza head on the earth’s surface. Now, may we please go aboard the boat, or would you prefer I leave you behind?” asked Demitri.

Mason looked toward Jay. “I guess you checked out,” he said. Turning back to Demitri and motioning toward Jay, he asked, “Do we need to kill him?”

Jay's heart was in his throat and, for a moment, he would have sworn he'd watched his life pass before his eyes.

"I don't have a problem with him," said Demitri. "However, you can kill him if it pleases you."

Mason turned back to Jay. Jay believed he had felt his pulse stop for almost four seconds. It took that long for Mason to put Jay's mind at ease replying, "Nah. He can live for now."

At that, the six men boarded the boat and, soon after, its anchor was lifted and walkway retracted. After reversing and clearing the dock, the boat was on its way headed toward a safer less conspicuous port.

Nanci had narrowly escaped being skewered by razor sharp claws attached to an inordinately large hand. Recalling her training, she had acted almost instinctively, ducking, rolling out of the way, and turning to face her enemy. Pulling several *shuriken* from a pouch on her belt, Nanci flung them toward her opponent. Four *shuriken* were embedded deeply into the creature's chest standing mere feet in front of her. The beast let out a bloodcurdling wail that would have sent chills up anyone's spine. If the *shuriken* had been constructed of basic steel, the Wolf would have pulled them from its chest and the opened wounds would have quickly healed. But, soon after returning from Paris, Sam began tipping most of his weapons with silver.

The Wolf did pull the *shuriken* from its chest but the wounds were not closing. They weren't fatal but definitely painful. The beast barked at Nanci in an attempt to frighten her, but Nanci stood her ground. She didn't flinch. She didn't tremble. She didn't recoil. Wearing an angry expression, she looked directly into the beast's eyes and waited for it to move. It was unlikely Nanci would be able to dodge an attack again. Wolves moved fast, much faster than the reflexes of an average man or woman. Nanci had only a few *shuriken* and a couple of throwing knives left on her belt and that was not enough to stop a Wolf. Slow it down a bit, maybe, but definitely not stop it.

Nanci stood courageously, ready to meet death. The life that she had fought so hard to attain would no longer be within her grasp. She felt that, perhaps, this was her penance, for the blatant remorseless attacks against the many drug dealers she and her friends had encountered over the last few months. With a clear advantage over any one of them, she ruthlessly assaulted them even after they had been restrained. Nanci didn't believe in destiny, fate, or karma per se, but she did believe that an individual would inevitably be held accountable for their transgressions. It seemed for her that time was now. But, she was wrong. It was not her time.

Wade came thundering down with his fist slamming into the back of Nanci's attacker. The Wolf collapsed to the ground unconscious, and reverted to its human form.

"You okay?" Wade turned toward Nanci, almost yelling at her.

"I'm fine," she responded.

"It's the Wolves," said Wade, in a more even tone.

"Ya think?" commented Nanci, looking in all directions for any more Wolves that might be readying themselves for an attack.

A loud cry from above startled Wade and Nanci, causing them to look upward after assuming defensive positions. Three Wolves flew across the sky and plunged into the water.

"If you are still conscious, report!" yelled Sam, over everyone's earpiece.

"I'm fine," said Nanci.

"I'm right next to her," reported Wade.

Sam and Norrin's uneasy feelings were curbed.

"Scorpion, report now!" ordered Sam.

"I'm here. I'm fine," responded Norrin. "What just happened? I just got smacked by a Wolf and landed in a pile of crates. It tried to tear a hunk out of my chest with its teeth but it only succeeded in leaving a few holes in my costume. I took a chunk out of its face and dislodged one of its arms."

"Where is it now?" asked Sam.

"Ran away after I wounded it," answered Norrin. "With a bit of a limp."

"I have one here," said Wade. "It's a woman. I hit her pretty hard. She's alive but unconscious."

"How do you know it's a woman?" asked Norrin.

"When she went unconscious she reverted to human form," informed Wade. "She's pretty much naked. Last time I checked, those parts are female."

"I'm above you," informed Sam, flying over head. "Look up."

Looking skyward, they were all able to see him. Pointing to his left, Sam advised Norrin, "Scorpion, Gorgon and Toad are over there."

Norrin moved in the direction in which Sam was pointing and, after making his way around crates, storage sheds, and a forklift, regrouped with Wade and Nanci. Once there, he grabbed Nanci and held her tightly to his chest. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, looking into the lenses of Norrin's mask.

"Thanks, Toad," said Norrin, looking toward Wade.

"No problem," Wade responded.

Nanci was annoyed with Norrin's comment of gratitude. To her, Norrin

might as well have said, "Thanks, Wade, for saving my defenseless, incapable, useless wife. She's too weak to take care of herself." Nanci put her hands on Norrin's chest and pushed him away.

"I'm not completely incompetent, you know," said Nanci. "I was actually holding one off before he showed up," she said walking away.

"I didn't—"

Before Norrin could finish his statement, "They're dead," said Sam, as he descended to the ground. "They're all dead."

"All the cops?" asked Wade.

"Yes," said Sam. "And the FBI agents, including the undercover agent. I saw the man in the suit shoot him in the chest."

"Why?" questioned Norrin. "Why would they do this? Why now?"

"It's Mazella," said Nanci. "He's following through on his promise."

"Perhaps," said Sam. "Mazella said he controlled one of the largest cartels on the eastern seaboard. Mason and his boys were here to pick up drugs. It's possible those drugs were provided by Mazella."

"The governor and the mayor are not going to like this," said Wade. "What are we going to tell them?"

"The truth," responded Sam.

"You're gonna tell the governor of Maryland that humans with the ability to change into Wolf-like creatures just slaughtered his men?" commented Norrin.

"Yes. I'm going to tell him exactly that," said Sam.

"He'll never believe you," retorted Norrin.

"He has no choice," returned Sam. "We've got bigger problems, though. The man in the suit, he saw us. I saw him through my binoculars look directly at us and smile." Sam paused "Before that, he had lifted his head and it looked as if he was sniffing the air."

"A Wolf?" questioned Nanci.

"He was in human form, if he was," said Norrin. "He wouldn't be able to use a heightened sense of smell in human form."

"How do you know?" asked Sam.

"It just stands to reason," replied Norrin.

"We don't even begin to have enough information about Wolves to speculate about what they can and can't do," stated Sam. "Forget about what you've learned from Hollywood and monster stories. These aren't actors in make up. They're unpredictable, vicious killers and we might've been lying dead alongside each of those poor victims if not for our quick reactions. From here on we don't assume anything."

“What about She-Wolf here?” asked Wade, pointing to the woman he had knocked unconscious.

“We leave her,” answered Sam. “The rest of the Wolves might come looking for her when they realize she’s missing. I don’t want to be here when they do. We’re definitely not taking her with us. Those Wolves could probably pick up her scent from miles away.”

“What if they don’t come back for her?” asked Wade.

“She’s a big girl. If she thinks she’s bad enough to kill, then she’d better be bad enough to make it on her own,” stated Sam.

“She is naked,” reminded Norrin.

“Not our problem,” reiterated Sam. “She’s on her own. Let’s go.”

“Okay, Demitri, spill it. What just happened back there?” demanded Mason.

With all the recent complication in his life, Mason was now further frustrated by what he felt was a deal gone sour. He, his companion Jay, Demitri, and his three companions had boarded what appeared to be an old cargo ship. Once aboard and after going below, the old adage *don’t judge a book by its cover* could have been aptly applied here. The lower interior resembled that of a yacht more than an old cargo ship. Inside were shiny hardwood floors, finely crafted cabinets, large area rugs, several cushioned seats, a desk, a table surrounded by chairs, a full bar, and various other luxuries.

“Have a seat, Michael,” encouraged Demitri. “Let me make you a drink,” he said, pulling fine crystal goblets from a cabinet.

“Scotch. Neat,” said Mason, as he plopped down in one of the cushioned chairs. “Sit down, Jay,” he instructed.

Jay was still standing, trying to get past the fact that Hideo was now lying at the bottom of the harbor with a hole in his chest.

“You have any Heineken?” Mason asked Demetri. After Demetri nodded, Mason requested Demetri bring one for Jay, pointing his thumb at him.

Once the drinks were prepared, Demitri brought them over for Mason, Jay, and one for himself. The crewman that had accompanied Demitri onto the dock had seemingly gone about his duties. The other two men were standing at their post outside of the door.

Mason took a few sips from his drink, closed his eyes, and let out a deep sigh. “Okay, Demitri, I’m relaxed now. I’ve had a difficult last few months, and this has just added to it. You know what happened back there at that dock, and I want to know, too. I heard a lot of commotion and what sounded like dogs barking and growling. What was that?”

Demitri smiled as he reclined in his seat. “I’ll answer your question, but first, let me tell you a story. You may feel free to join in at any time. You’ve been having difficulties conducting your business as of late, correct? My story is about a group of individuals. One wears green, another red, and yet, another, tan with a white underbelly. There’s even a woman involved. She has the ability to wield fire. These individuals are dressed in costumes and wear masks to hide their identities. These individuals are capable of things only found in mythological stories and books. They are capable of mind-boggling feats such as lifting cars, flying under their own power, moving objects without even touching them, and some are even invulnerable to physical attack.”



Mason’s eyes grew larger, as he set the drink he was holding down on the small table next to him.

"I take it my tale is a familiar one, no?" said Demitri. "One perhaps you are not hearing for the first time."

"How do you know about this?" questioned Mason. "I never told—"

"You didn't have to," interrupted Demitri. "I've known of them for several months now. They were there tonight at the dock."

"How? I didn't see them. How could they have known?"

"They were hidden. Perhaps your Japanese friend at the bottom of the bay informed them. Perhaps they found out on their own. They are rather resourceful. In any event, they were there. I saw them. There were also several law-enforcement officers near the dock, as I had mentioned before we boarded this ship. They're all dead now. My people took care of them. But, these costumed characters, they are much more difficult to kill."

"Who are they?"

"They have such colorful names. They call themselves Mantis, Scorpion, Toad, and Napalm. Even with their unbelievable powers, I believe they can be defeated. I can give you all you need to destroy them."

"Why is it so important to you that they be eliminated?"

"Other than the obvious, that they are interfering with my father's business," Demitri paused. "They shamed me. I want their defeat to be degrading and permanent." He took a sip from his drink. "Do you have a problem with this?"

"Oh, yes, Demitri," said Mason sarcastically. "You know how strongly I feel about the sanctity of human life."

Demitri smiled and silently chuckled. "Very well, then, I will give you what you need to destroy them and, once they're gone, neither your nor my business need suffer any further."

The men enjoyed the remainder of their drinks while the ship made its way to a safer port.

CHAPTER XXVII

The Secret's Out

"Fifteen! Fifteen dead men and women! This is a complete fiasco!" yelled the governor, as he slammed a manila folder onto his desk. Inside were the names, pictures, and current statistics on each of the law enforcement agents that had been slaughtered at the dock.

"I know, Mr. Governor. I was there," responded Sam calmly.

It had only been a day since the massacre but that was more than enough time to survey the situation and count up the losses. The attempted sting was costly and the governor, the mayor, the FBI, and the four vigilantes had received absolutely nothing for the price they had paid.

"I wish there was more we could have done, sir, but—"

The governor did not let Sam finish his sentence. "More? More! I don't see how you could've done any less!"

"With all due respect, we were told to go in as back up," responded Sam, in a tone that differed from the way he had normally addressed the governor. This time he was sterner and less meek, more challenging and less docile. "If you, the mayor, and the FBI wanted us there to protect your men, you should have had us by their sides and not lurking in the shadows."

"I couldn't have you by their sides," said the governor, sitting back in his

chair with frustration spread across his face. “This is all unofficial. Do you understand unofficial? We can’t just go informing every agent and officer that we’ve partnered ourselves with vigilantes, oh, and by the way, they’re super heroes. Do you have any idea what kind of an incident that would cause if it became public knowledge?”

“Quite frankly, Governor, I don’t care,” answered Sam.

Norrin began smiling and, if it had not been for the lenses of his mask, one might have seen a twinkle in his eye. He felt quite satisfied that Sam was finally standing up to the governor and that he was no longer Uncle Tomming it up.

Sam continued. “You have no idea what you’re up against. You think my friends and I might cause fear amongst your political entourage? You don’t have the slightest idea what true fear is. Fear is a nine-foot-tall creature that’s neither man nor beast, with three-inch fangs, and claws sharp enough to disembowel a man with a single swipe of its wrist. That’s what tore your men to pieces, Governor.”



“Not that you care, Governor,” interjected Norrin, seemingly mocking the governor’s title, “but, they also attacked us. We could be dead right now beside your officers. If it weren’t for our abilities, we would’ve been. These creatures Mantis describes have no compassion. They don’t feel pity for those they attack. Their consciences don’t nag at them after they’ve committed murder.”

“What are you telling me, Scorpion?” asked the governor. “The boogeyman is real?”

“They call themselves Wolves,” explained Sam.

“Wolves?” questioned the governor, in a sarcastic manner. “As in werewolves? Please. You’re gonna try and convince me that werewolves killed 15 law enforcement officers and allowed Michael Mason and his cohorts to escape?”

“I told you he’d never believe it,” commented Norrin, under his breath.

“And you were right. The only things I’ve seen even remotely close to a cross between a man and an animal are you three,” stated the governor. “You with your animal, bug, or whatever it is you’re supposed to be costumes. And him,” said the governor pointing to Norrin, “he has fangs like an animal. If an animal attacked my men, how do I know that it wasn’t you?”

Sam could sense Norrin’s anger beginning to swell. His own was almost beginning to get the best of him as well. “You should choose your next words very carefully, Governor. Your accusations are bordering on labeling us murderers,” said Sam, chewing the inside of his cheek. “As I told you when we first met, if we wanted you or anyone else dead, they would be. You explain the logic of my friends and me coming forth and exposing ourselves to you and then killing your men.”

“He can’t,” asserted Norrin. “He’s making the typical politician, big-business, managerial, gutless move. When things are going well, he accepts all the praise, puffs out his chest and says, ‘What a great governor I am.’ But, when things go sour, does he accept responsibility or admit his wrong, and try to find a way to make things right? No. Of course not. He points fingers, tries to move attention away from himself, and makes some poor innocent unsuspecting sap his scapegoat. Well, I’ll tell you right here, right now,” said Norrin, standing up and pounding his index finger against the governor’s desk, “We’re not going to be your saps or your scapegoats, Billy. Turn on us and see what happens.”

“Are you threatening me?” asked the governor, assuming an offensive posture.

“I’m forewarning you,” retorted Norrin.

“Enough,” interrupted Sam, ending the duel of words. “We didn’t come

here to threaten,” he said, looking toward Norrin. “Nor did we come to be falsely accused,” continued Sam, turning toward the governor. “We have our own problems now. The Wolves hold grudges. We’ve encountered them before, and they saw us at the docks last night. They’ll be looking for my friends and me, Governor, and it won’t be to count coup,” said Sam, as he stood up. “So far, all you and the FBI have done is proved to be a mild irritant to them. If you persist in your actions against Mason and those he’s chosen to affiliate himself with, I’d be prepared to add to that list of dead men and women you have there.”

Norrin followed Sam as the two moved to leave the mansion.

“If this is real, and I’m not saying I believe it is,” commented the governor, “What are you going to do when they come looking for you?”

Sam stopped. “Defend ourselves. The same thing we always do, Mr. Governor.”

Nanci had now been having Jay to Jessica’s apartment not long after Sam had provided it for her. This night, Jay was visibly disturbed. All the hustle and bustle of the previous night had taken its toll on him. Nanci was fully aware of what had transpired up until Jay had boarded the cargo ship, and, now, it was her responsibility to uncover every detail from the moment he boarded, until the time he disembarked.

“Wanna drink?” asked Nanci.

“Definitely,” responded Jay, sounding exhausted.

“What’s wrong with you?” she questioned. “You’re not developing a problem are you? You sound almost desperate for a drink.”

“I am. I need something,” commented Jay, pulling a small vial from his pocket. He popped the top, opening the vial, and held it upside down at an angle. He then tapped it gently so as to spill some of its contents onto the glass table in front of him. Directly before him was a small pile of cocaine. Jay pulled a hundred dollar bill from his pocket, rolled it, and used it to sniff the cocaine into his nostril. Nanci looked over at him as she finished pouring their drinks. She felt quite uncomfortable having someone in her living room snorting cocaine. But, this wasn’t her living room. It belonged to Jessica and Nanci had to remind herself of that. Jessica wouldn’t care if someone was snorting cocaine, smoking pot, or shooting heroine for that matter. After all, Jessica liked to party herself.

“Feel better now?” asked Nanci, handing Jay his drink.

“Mmmm,” he responded, taking his drink and taking hold of Nanci’s lower arm, drawing her down to him. “I feel much better,” he said.

“Good,” responded Nanci. “So, drink your drink and tell me how sweet last

night was for you,” she said, knowing full well that last night had not been at all sweet for Jay.

He smiled and handed her the rolled bill. Nanci took it from him and said, “Thanks,” placing it in her pocket.

“No, no, no,” said Jay, still smiling and speaking in a jovial manner. “Go ahead. Have some,” he said, motioning to the cocaine.

“Yeah, maybe later. I don’t really feel like it right now,” said Nanci.

“Ya know,” said Jay, still speaking in a playful manner, “I’ve never seen you do any coke. You talk about it. You take it from me, but I’ve never seen you actually do any.” Jay paused, and a very serious expression engulfed his face. “Why is that, Jess?”

“I told you before,” she restated. “I like to party alone.”

“Ya know what happened last night, Jess? I saw a guy I’ve known for several months now get shot in the chest. He fell into the Chesapeake Bay and, as far as I know, he sunk to the bottom.”

Jay’s tone and explanation of events she was already familiar with made Nanci uncomfortable. It also wasn’t helping that Jay’s hand was still holding her arm, nor that his grip was getting tighter.

“I felt I could trust him. Mike felt he could trust him. But, the guy we were meeting, the guy we were making the buy from, knew Hideo was a nark. He was working for the FBI. Actually, he wasn’t, but, he was pretending to. The FBI believed he was working for them. I thought I knew him. I thought I could trust him. But, he was lying to us. The entire time he was betraying us. You never know who’s really your friend and who’s lying to you.”

Nanci smiled and tried to break Jay’s train of thought. “You’re starting to sound like me. My teachers always told me I was a bad influence.”

“Do some, Jess,” said Jay. His tone sounded as if he was giving her an order.

“What?” she responded.

“Do some.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. Who do you think you are?”

Jay began squeezing Nanci’s arm even tighter and it was beginning to hurt. He yanked her closer to him. “Who are you?” asked Jay. “Are you a cop? Are you FBI?”

Panic started to overtake Nanci. Her arm was really hurting and her instinct was to grab Jay’s arm with her hair and force him to let her go. If she were to do that, any hope of further infiltrating Mason’s organization or getting close to him, close enough to strike the fatal blow, would be over. She could hit Jay with her fist but, then, he might retaliate. Jay was already high and working on getting

drunk. In his current condition, his threshold for pain was higher than normal and, should he attack, he might prove to be very dangerous. Nanci could immobilize Jay but, again, that could end in her losing the foothold she had built in trying to further break into Mason's organization.

Nanci knew what she had to do. She didn't like it but, even undercover cops sometimes had to sample the product to make a good show of it.

"You're paranoid," she responded. "I don't know what happened to you last night, but you're being a total loser. Now, let me go before I break your nose," she threatened. "With that coke you just sniffed, that should make for a nice mess."

Jay slowly loosened his grip on Nanci's arm. As he did, she snatched her arm back, staring at Jay with a displeased expression. Nanci reached into her pocket and pulled the hundred dollar bill she had not so long ago put there. She rolled it tightly, placed it into the neat pile of cocaine, and, for the first time ever, snorted it into her nose. It burned at first and she could feel her entire head tingling. After a few seconds passed, her head felt as though it were expanding or swelling, and her thought process seemed to have little or no focus. She felt completely light headed and the tingling from her head had moved to the rest of her body rather quickly.

Nanci sat completely still, in a daze for a few moments, until she slowly was able to regain focus. She turned to Jay with a scowl on her face. He was looking at her with a ridiculous grin.

"Happy now?" she questioned, slightly slurring her speech. "Was it all that you hoped it would be?"

Jay's expression now reflected something resembling a cross between a slovenly, unfocused gaze and a chastised look of a child.

Nanci's face changed to what might be thought of as the look of a crazed woman. "You ever touch me like that again, Jay, and I'll snap your neck."

A few days had passed since the dock incident and, to immerse himself however so briefly in the day to day activities of the real world, Sam made a trip to his publishing company to check on its operations and catch up on some work. Since his and Norrin's meeting with the governor, Sam had recommended that everyone lie low and refrain from going out in costume. He had even advised that Nanci lessen the time she spent with Jay, at least for now. Sam acknowledged that Mazella and his pack of Wolves might strike at he and his friends at any moment, but there was no reason to place themselves out in the open as an easy visible target.

While at the office, Sam met with Curtis, his assistant. They discussed the usual topics, new publishing possibilities, sales of popular books and charts,


graphs and reports detailing the company's earnings and its spending. For a time, Sam's mind was able to focus on something, anything other than vigilante activities. It was a welcomed refreshing change. Sam thought to himself that soon, these would be his regular daily activities. After contemplating that thought, another popped into his mind. "I am too young to feel this old." Yes, time and exertion had even begun to take its toll on Sam, both physically and mentally. The past several months spent focusing so much time, effort, and energy on disassembling Michael Mason's organization hadn't helped either. Sam's thoughts turned to his unborn child. "He or she will never live this life," thought Sam. "It takes far too much and gives so little in return."

As Sam sat at his desk contemplating the raising of his child and the future of his family, there was a knock at his half open door.

"Hey, Sam," said Curtis. "Just received an express package for you."

"Oh, thanks, Kip," said Sam, extending his arm. Curtis' closest friends often referred to him as Kip or Kipper.

Curtis handed Sam the package and, after leaving the room, returned to his duties. Sam began to open the cardboard box at one of its ends. Inside the cardboard box was a wooden box. Its dimensions were approximately nine inches, by six inches, by four inches. The box was decorated quite intricately. It was multi-colored with various wooded stains. The designs were very ornate and had been crafted using the art of marquetry. Sam was very impressed with the box and, although the package it had come in displayed no return address, he surmised it was a gift from Cyndi. Sam lifted the top of the wooden box wondering what might be inside, a velvet or silk interior perhaps. But, as the top opened, Sam's smile quickly faded. His eyes began to squint, his nostrils flared, and the corners of his mouth dropped.

Inside of the box was a Praying Mantis. It had been nailed to the inside of the box with very thin nails. It was clear that it had been alive before being impaled. Its bodily fluids had dried after dripping onto the inside of the box and onto the nails that had been driven through its body. Sam's eyes moved from side to side, scanning for anyone that might be watching. There was no one. Inside of the box there was a small note that read, 'Interfere with my business again and this won't be the only dead mantis.' It was signed, .

Sam slammed shut the box's top, his face reflecting an incensed expression. After standing up, he grabbed his sport coat and walked out of his office with the wooden box and cardboard box in hand. He then walked to his car, all the while looking and mentally scanning for individuals that might intend to harm him. Once at his car, Sam unlocked it, opened the door, threw the two boxes

onto the passenger seat, and drove toward home.

“Cyndi?” he projected.

“Hi, babe,” responded Cyndi. Instantly, she could feel Sam’s mental and emotional state were abnormal and immediately asked, “Are you all right? I can sense you’re really distressed.”

“Have any packages been delivered to the house today?” questioned Sam.

“No. Why?”

“If any deliveries come, do not open the gate. Tell the delivery person to leave the package at the gate and I will get it when I get home. I’m on my way now.”

“Sam? Deliveries? What’s going on?”


“Just do it Cyndi! Just do it. I’ll explain as soon as I get home.”

Sam ended his connection abruptly. Under normal circumstances, Cyndi may have probed further into Sam’s thoughts but, for the sake of the baby she was carrying, she chose not to. Also, Sam, being far more powerful than Cyndi, was limiting the amount of information that he was voluntarily projecting. At that moment, Cyndi wasn’t receiving anything that Sam didn’t want her to.

After driving the better part of an hour, Sam had made it home. As he pulled toward the gates of his house, he noticed Wade’s truck parked in front of them. Wade was standing outside of the truck and Norrin alongside him. Sam pulled up next to the truck and rolled down his car’s automatic window. It was evident by their facial expressions, as well as the waves of anxiety emanating from both Norrin and Wade, that something was wrong.

“You receive any messages today?” asked Wade, “For Mantis?”

Immediately, Sam knew why Wade and Norrin were there.

“Norrin and I received messages for Scorpion and Toad today,” continued Wade. “When I got home from work, I parked my truck next to my car. As I walked passed my car, I happened to glance inside. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing, so, I unlocked the driver’s side door and opened it. Inside the car there were 63 toads; I counted them as I placed each one into a plastic garbage bag. Some had had their feet and legs cut off. A few were still alive even after being mutilated. Those that were, I quickly put out of their pain and misery. Along with the toads I found a note. It was taped to my steering wheel and said, ‘Stay out of my business and I’ll stay out of yours.’ It was signed, .

Sam’s eyes reflected horror. It was unconscionable that someone would do such a thing. One dead praying mantis was one thing, but 63 mutilated toads, some still alive, was sadistic.

“Wade’s not the only one,” added Norrin. “He’s striking out at all of us. I got a call this morning from the Walter’s Art Gallery. They told me that the painting they’d bought from me, for their Modern-Day Artists exhibit, had been vandalized. I went down there to see what had happened and walked into a crime scene. The two guards working the graveyard shift were dead. There were no visible signs of attack. No bruises, no bullet or stab wounds, no broken bones. A cop on the scene told me the security tapes had been taken. Once I actually got inside of the museum, I went to where my painting was hanging and saw it had been trashed. It had been spray painted over and several cuts were in the canvas. A note had been painted on the wall directly across from my painting. It said, “You’ve pissed me off most of all. Screw with my line of work and I’ll screw with yours.” The cops questioned me for over an hour, asking stuff like, had I been in any altercations recently, or did I have any enemies, or had I been involved in any illegal activity where someone might be looking for payment or payback.”

“What did you tell them?” asked Sam.

“Nothing,” answered Norrin. “I told them I had no clue why someone would attack me or my work. I know they weren’t buying it. Nothing was touched except my painting. They asked about the note painted on the wall and I told them that it made about as much sense to me as it did to them. I told them that if I had any enemies, I wasn’t aware of it. Right as I was leaving, I overheard one of the crime scene investigators say it seemed as though the two guards had been poisoned. They mentioned some type of deadly venom, like from a spider or something. They weren’t sure. Each guard had multiple puncture wounds near the lower portion of the back of their neck.”

“He used scorpions. I’m sure of it; for the irony if nothing else. Probably dropped them in the back of the guards’ collars before they even saw him, if they saw him,” deduced Sam.

“Mason? Mazella? The two working together?” questioned Wade, unable to hide the concern on his face.

Sam could sense that the tragic ordeal Wade had witnessed had left him deeply disturbed. Whoever was behind this, Mason or Mazella, had orchestrated an extremely well-thought-out plan. They had used the most effective means of toying with the minds of the three men, for even Wade, the comedian of the group, had been shaken.

Sam wasn’t the only one to sense the distressed feelings of the two men. Without notice, Cyndi appeared at the gate.

“What?” she insisted. There was fear in her eyes, for very little could effect

Sam, Norrin, and Wade in such a way as to cause each the degree of distress they were emitting right there at that moment.

Sam's eyes met Cyndi's and defeat seemed to be reflected in them.

"What?" she now demanded, raising her voice.

"Let's go up to the house," responded Sam. "I'll explain there."

Cyndi joined Sam inside his car, taking a seat on the passenger's side. Neither a word nor thought was shared during the drive from the gate to the house. Norrin and Wade followed close behind in Wade's truck.

Once everyone was inside of the house, Sam walked into the *sala* holding Cyndi's hand. His intentions were that of comfort, but Cyndi's telepathic abilities only fed her Sam's troubled feelings.

The next several minutes were spent explaining to Cyndi what he, Norrin, and Wade had been discussing outside. The look of horror on Cyndi's face was worse than Norrin's, Wade's, or his own. Sensing Cyndi's disturbance and feeling concern for his unborn child, Sam cut short the discussion.

"I'll take care of this," ensured Sam.

"*Como?*" asked Cyndi, in a cross manner. "*Como te vas a arreglar esto?* It's Paris all over again! They know our identities, where we live, where we work! What's to stop them from going to the news media? Before we know it, our pictures could be plastered across the front page of *The Sun*. Our homes, our workplaces could have reporters camped out in front of them 24 hours a day, talking to our neighbors, the people we work with! If that happens, do you think the governor or mayor will look the other way? They'll issue warrants for our arrests so quick that our heads will spin. The rest of our lives will either be spent in jail or as fugitives from the law! Either way, the lives we've known are over."

"Cyndi," interrupted Sam. "Getting overly excited and working yourself all up is not healthy for you or the baby."

"The baby," said Cyndi, placing her hand on her stomach and broadening her expression of worry.

"Stop, Cyndi," insisted Sam. "Stop it now. You have to calm yourself. You have to do it now." At that, Sam assisted Cyndi in calming down, implanting soothing feelings by way of his telepathic abilities. After a few seconds, Cyndi's anxiety had decreased and her breathing had resumed its regular pattern.

"Sorry," said Cyndi. "The news just hit me hard."

"No need to apologize," said Sam. "But, I don't want you preoccupied with this. Your job, your only job, is to take care of our baby. Norrin, Wade, and I will handle this. From what we can tell, nothing was sent to you, right? You didn't get a call from the theater, did you?"

“No,” responded Cyndi.

“Good. Just in case, though, you should probably make a call just to make sure everything is okay,” encouraged Sam. “Don’t be conspicuous. Just tell them you were calling to make sure everything was business as usual down there. I’m going to check with Rachel to make sure she’s all right.” Sam looked at Norrin, “Anything happen to Nanci, as far as you know?”

“No,” answered Norrin. “She had left for work before I got my call this morning. As far as I know, she never called home. There weren’t any messages on the answering machine when I finally got home, before I called Wade. She should be home now.”

“Call her,” said Sam. “Use the phone in the kitchen. If you don’t reach her at your house, call Jessica’s apartment. If you don’t reach her there, call that mobile phone she carries. I know we’d said we weren’t going to do that, since Jay sees the bill and pays for it, but, this is an emergency.”

Norrin nodded and headed for the kitchen.

“Wade, I want Michael Mason’s home address, his favorite place to buy a drink, his favorite item on the menu at McDonalds. I need it all and I need it yesterday. Get in touch with your contacts. Set up an appointment with Leather, do whatever it takes. I need something, anything. If you can find out any info of Mazella being in town, see about that, too. If you find anything, no matter how small, you call me,” ordered Sam.

“Okay,” Wade agreed. While walking toward the front door, he stopped and turned. “Make sure Rachel’s okay,” said Wade solemnly.

“I will,” assured Sam. Sam knew Wade had feelings for Rachel. Everyone knew, even though the words had never been spoken.

After hearing Sam’s confirmation, Wade left the house, got in his truck, and drove away.

Sam spent the next several minutes consoling Cyndi and holding her hand, while Norrin contacted Nanci to make sure she was all right, and to give her the abbreviated version of the day’s events. Sam continued as the attentive husband, sitting with Cyndi and rubbing her hand until Norrin returned from his phone call.

“I found her,” said Norrin. “She was at her apartment. Jessica’s apartment, I mean. I let her know what happened and told her to be cautious. We don’t know if Jay knows or what information may be making its way through Mason’s network, but I told her to assume they know everything.”

“Yeah. For now, it’s best to assume that,” agreed Sam. “We can find out for sure later.” Sam gave Norrin a look letting him know that it would be best, due

to current circumstances, that he and Cyndi spend some time alone.

Norrin picked up on Sam's signal and said, "Yeah, I better go home. Nanci was headed there and I know she's gonna want to talk. If, uh, if either of you need anything or something happens, contact me right away. Don't worry about picking up the phone, just contact me."

Sam looked to Norrin with a slight smile and nodded. Before leaving, Norrin stopped to give Cyndi a hug and kissed her cheek. As she returned Norrin's hug, she clung tightly to him. Sam stood up and hugged Norrin also.

"It's going to be okay," said Norrin, trying to encourage his friends and convince himself.

"I know," said Sam, forcing a counterfeit smile.

Though Norrin had spoken words of comfort, he himself didn't really believe them. Deep inside, he felt that before things could get better, most likely, they'd get much worse. He had no idea of how right he was.


CHAPTER XXVIII

Answers Revealed and a False Step Taken...

Spanning the next three nights Wade combed the streets of Baltimore, searching for any information he could find regarding Michael Mason. All other activities were placed on the back burner, even work. Wade notified his top three foremen that, for at least the next week, they'd be in charge of overseeing all job sights.

Sleep was a luxury in which Wade partook only when he was so exhausted, that his eyelids could no longer stay open on their own. Wade was giving one-hundred-ten percent, he always did. His abilities, which had granted him impenetrable invulnerable skin, had also caused him to suffer a guilty conscience. Wade knew that most any danger that might possibly be thrown his way was obsolete. No matter what situation he found himself in or that he might be forced into, Wade felt there was never any real threat in it. His friends, however, each had vulnerabilities, even Norrin, though he'd scarcely admit to it. To Wade, they were the real heroes. They did what they did despite what they had to lose. And that motivated Wade all the more. He felt it imperative that he never let any of them down.

However, Wade found it difficult at times to remain focused on the task at hand. His thoughts turned to Rachel as he was genuinely concerned for her.

After speaking to Rachel, Sam had let Wade know that she too had received a shipment via overnight delivery. Hers was as grim as Wade's discovery. After opening the 24 x 15 x 15 box, Rachel removed an airtight container filled with water. Inside the container was a very small kitten, an orange tabby, with a weight tied to the collar on its neck. It had to have been alive when placed into the container, otherwise, the weight would have been unnecessary. Inside was a note which read, "Even fire has its weakness. Get in my way again and you'll be joining the cat." It was signed, .

Sam spent the next two nights at Rachel's home. Cyndi had joined him there as well. The two did their best to console and lift Rachel's spirits. The first night, Sam had to promise Rachel he would stay awake and stand guard while she slept. Normally, Rachel didn't suffer too many fears, but the two experiences she'd had with the Wolves had bothered her on a subconscious level, more so than she had realized. The thought of them returning and following through on Mazella's threat of retribution, literally sickened her. She remembered how Mazella had informed she and her friends that he had been spying on them in their hotel rooms in Paris, and how he knew who their family members were. That unnerved Rachel all the more.

Sam assured Wade that Rachel would eventually be okay and, that if necessary, he and Cyndi would stay with her as long as she needed them to. That set Wade's mind at ease. There was safety in numbers. A part of Wade wanted to go to Rachel and protect her himself, but he surmised that he could best serve his friends by following through with Sam's request.

One of the prime informants Wade most wanted to meet with was a man known as Leather. Leather's given name was Matt or Matthew but only his mother was permitted to call him that. If anyone else were to call him Matthew they would probably be punched in the face. Leather was a man of German decent that stood six feet four inches and had a toned but not overly muscular build. He had noticeably bushy eyebrows and blue eyes. His hair was sandy blonde and he had a Roman-shaped nose. Leather was a very intelligent man and always a wealth of information. Norrin had always thought of Leather as one of the wisest men he knew and, due to the fact that he was eight years Norrin's senior, his added years of experience had afforded him that.

Leather had earned his name due his personal choices in apparel. He dressed similar to a biker. He always wore his waist length tattered faded leather jacket with chrome spikes along the waist line. He also wore fingerless leather gloves with chrome studs on the knuckles. During summer months Leather usually

wore black T-shirts and during winter black turtleneck shirts. His jeans were always blue and often torn, and he always wore black leather boots with straps that held chrome circular metal accessories, similar in appearance to a horse's bridle.

Leather's physical appearance contrasted his choices in clothing in that he was always clean shaven and wore a clean cut hair style. When he wasn't wearing sunglasses, he wore standard prescription lenses.

When traveling from place to place, Leather rode a fully restored 1951 Indian Chief motorcycle. Leather was quite an accomplished fighter. He was well trained in the lowest and dirtiest street fighting tactics. He had even taught Norrin a few moves that had never been included in any of Sam's sparring sessions. Whether Leather had been instructed in these techniques by a trainer or if he was self taught was unknown but, one thing was for sure, he was good. Leather believed strongly in public safety, especially his own. He wore a concealed gun strapped to his ribs beneath his jacket. Leather always preached the importance of being well prepared, especially for the unexpected.

Leather was a wealth of information, in fact, he was an information broker. In his line of work, he made it his business to be aware of many things, including the existence of people who lived in society that possessed powers and abilities above and beyond that of the average man or woman. He was well aware that Sam, Norrin, and Wade were Mantis, Scorpion, and Toad. He was also familiar with the fact that David, Sam's mentor, possessed abilities similar to that of Sam. Leather knew a few others, including Norrin's father, Leonard, and was aware of his abilities to change into a humanoid catlike creature, as well as a panther the size of a rhino. He of course knew Cyndi, Nanci, and Rachel and was aware of each of their gifts as well. So, when Wade had finally gotten in touch with Leather and scheduled a meeting, he knew he could be forthright with him. He wouldn't have to worry about beating around the bush or remembering to remain relatively vague.

The meeting place was a bar called Knepp's in Loch Raven. The two men would meet there at an agreed time on an agreed date. Appointments were always required when meeting in an official basis with Leather. Normally, they had to be scheduled 72 hours in advance. For friends, however, exceptions were made. In those instances, 24 hours' notice was sufficient.

Arriving at the bar, Wade found Leather already seated at a booth in the rear of the bar facing the door and drinking a beer. Leather had also ordered a beer for Wade and had it waiting for him.

"Leather," greeted Wade, as he approached the booth.

“Wade,” greeted Leather. “I took the liberty of ordering you a beer. I hope that’s okay.”

“Absolutely,” Wade responded. He took a seat opposite Leather and took several sips from his mug.

“You look exhausted,” commented Leather.

“I am,” said Wade, as he chugged down more of his beer. “Tell me you have good news for me.”

“I have news for you. Good is relative,” said Leather. “But, as you well know, I offer a service. I don’t give charity.”

“What do you need?” asked Wade. Usually, Wade might joke a bit, or have some witty comeback, or even haggle for the price of Leather’s services. But, not tonight. He was far too tired and far too disheartened to joke around.

Leather could tell by Wade’s countenance and demeanor that he wasn’t in the mood for small talk, so Leather got right to the point. “I need certain services. Your services, to be exact.”

“Mine?” questioned Wade, unable to conceal the smile forming on his face. “I’m not that kind of guy. You think after one beer I’d cave so easily. You’d better get your wallet out pal, the night’s still young.”

Leather was also smiling at that point. That was the Wade he knew. “It’s not for me, actually,” he said. “It’s for my mother.”

“No offense man but, nah.”

“Funny, Wade. My mom needs a new roof. Roofs are expensive. I’d like to give her a new one as a present.”

“That’s a pretty hefty payment. For that, you’d better have some pretty useful information.”

“You be the judge. I’ll tell you what you came for and, if you don’t think it’s worth it, this’ll be a freebie.”

Wade looked at Leather for a moment. “Gimme your mom’s address and the day you want the work done by.”

“But, I haven’t given you any information yet,” said Leather, wearing a smile. He then lifted his mug and took a swig from it.

“The offer you just made let me know whatever you’ve got; it’s gold.”

Leather never gave anything for free. As he had just told Wade, he wasn’t in the habit of giving charity. Sometimes, he exchanged information for money. Sometimes, information was exchanged for favors and, in other cases, for information.

Roofs weren’t cheap, so Wade knew he would definitely be paying for the information he received. But, should the information prove as useful as he felt

it would be, the price would be worth it.

Leather looked toward the bar and, after getting the bartender's attention, he held up two fingers. The bartender nodded and sent two more beers over to Leather's table.

"Well, for starters, you and the vigilante squad have become quite a thorn in the side of one Michael Mason," informed Leather. "I'm betting that's one of the reasons you're here."

"Always two steps ahead of everyone," commented Wade. "That's why everybody comes to Leather for info."

"Yeah, well, word on the street was that he had contracts out on all of you. Well, not all of you, but he had them on you, Sam, and Norrin. Mason spread the word that if anyone saw a man in a red costume and delivered his dead body directly to him, he'd give them a grand. If it turned out to be the right guy in the red costume, he'd give them five grand. You and Sam were only worth two."

"Two? I'm at least worth two and a half. Come on."

"Earlier this week, Mason rescinded those contracts. He didn't need them anymore."

"Must've been about the time he learned our secret identities."

"Must have."

"Have you ever heard of a man named Dominic Mazella?"

"Who hasn't?"

"I hadn't until like six months ago."

"Dominic Mazella is the biggest Don there is. I mean, anywhere, the entire planet. You can bank on the fact that the majority if not all of the drug trade and illegal weapons deals that go on anywhere in this state, at some point, originates with Mazella."

"Have you, by chance, heard of him being in town right now?"

"Nope. I haven't heard anything like that. However, one of his sons is. Demitri Mazella, the man that gave you to Mason, brought his personal yacht into Baltimore's harbor five days ago. You might remember it. It looks like a freighter or cargo ship on the outside. On the inside I hear its amazing, though I've never been inside myself."

"We fought one of Dominic's sons six or seven months ago. He was the first Wolf we encountered. Have you ever heard that expression before, Wolf?"

"Yes, I have, and, yes, I know about your first encounter. This happens to be that same Wolf."

"Are you sure? How do you know?"

"I know, Wade."

"Sam said he saw us at the dock."

"He did. Probably smelt you before he saw you."

"Smelt us? He was in human form."

"Wolves' heightened senses work even in human form. Forget about Hollywood, Wade. This isn't a movie. The only attributes their transformations add to their already enhanced human abilities is strength, speed, and the appearance that freezes you in your tracks."

"How do you know all of this?"

"Now, Wade, you know I can't answer that. If I started giving up my sources I'd be out of the information business real quick."

"So, Demitri's looking for revenge."

"So it would seem. Michael Mason was convenient, a tool Demitri could use to get his revenge. Demitri has wanted revenge since your first meeting. But, his father ordered that you and your merry band of super heroes not be touched."

"Why?"

"He wanted to study you and meet you, which he did in Paris. After your little encounter there, Dominic thought it best not to provoke you. It seems, Norrin threatened to kill him before he left your meeting."

"He didn't." Wade paused momentarily and, then, after closing his eyes placed his forehead in the palm of his hand. "Yeah, he did."

"Yes, he did. Most people stupid enough to threaten Dominic Mazella wind up real dead, real quick. But, word is, Dominic saw something in Norrin's eyes. Something that left him with the impression Norrin wasn't making idle threats."

"There was a telepath there named Grey," said Wade. "He took over Norrin's mind and forced him to assume an attack posture hovering over Nanci. I know Norrin was pretty pissed about that. He blamed Grey because Grey was the one pulling his strings. But, it was Mazella pulling Grey's strings. So, in the end, Norrin blamed Mazella more. I can definitely see him threatening Mazella. Norrin has a short fuse sometimes."

"Sometimes? That's an understatement. But, Norrin's threat must've shaken the old man. Make no mistake, if Dominic feels the need to go to war with you guys, he will. But, I believe he'd only go that route as a last resort. He's seen what you six can do. He's in no hurry to tangle with you again. Especially, since his oldest foe, Sayuri Toshikazu, seems to have been striking out at him lately. He doesn't want to have to fight the both of you at the same time. He knows that if he did, he'd lose. All in all, he may have more Wolves than she does foot soldiers, but—"

"She?"

“Yeah, she. But, even outnumbered, Sayuri’s foot soldiers are trained assassins, and they do not fail. Failure means certain death.”

“This is getting intense.”

“Before it’s over, it might become even more intense. Demitri won’t actively come after you himself or send any in his pack after you. He won’t put out a public hit or contract on you either. If he were to do either of those things his father would have his skull, literally. But, Mason already knows you exist and of the amazing abilities each of you possess. He’s seen Norrin with his own eyes. Demitri knew if he fed Mason what he knew about you, he’d come after you. And, if Mason should happen to kill one or more of you, Demitri could feign ignorance.”

“Demitri sounds like a little calculating manipulative so and so.”

“He’s a fool. He’s signing his own death warrant. If or should I say when, Dominic finds out that Demitri has deliberately defied him, he’ll kill Demitri. When Norrin finds out Demitri is the mastermind behind Mason’s little attack on you all, he’ll probably kill him. Either way, Demitri’s toast. Not too bright for an 82-year-old, is he?”

“I wouldn’t worry about Norrin killing anyone. He might hurt him pretty bad, though. Last two questions. Why were Cyndi and Nanci excluded from Mason’s little gift giving list and where can we find him?”

“Demitri attended the school of old-world chivalry. You don’t attack the women without provocation—only the men.”

“Mason sent a package to Rachel.”

“She attacked Demitri. If someone attacks him, male or female, he can’t let that go unanswered. That’s why she received a package. Neither Cyndi nor Nanci attacked Demitri. For now, information on those two hasn’t been offered to Mason. For the remainder of you, however, he knows your real names, he has pictures of you, he knows where you live, and where you work. If you all continue interfering in his business, he will come after you and, this time, he won’t just send warnings. If he probes further into your lives, you can bet he’ll find out about Cyndi and Nanci.”

“Not gonna happen. We’re gonna get him first. Where’s he live?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“You don’t know?”

“I didn’t say that. I said, ‘I can’t tell you that.’”

“You what?”

“I said I’m not sharing that information with you.”

“What do you mean you’re not sharing that information with me?”

"I mean exactly that. I could say it in German or Spanish if you'd prefer."

"Why? Are you afraid of him? We'll protect you if—"

"Wade, don't insult me. I'm afraid of no one. I can't tell you where he lives because I have a previous arrangement."

"With Mason?"

"Whether with Mason or some other party, that information isn't for sale. I have to stick by some code or principles, even if they're only my own. Otherwise, I become a mercenary, not an information broker."

"Information broker? We're your friends, Leather. Not some client off the street tryin' to one up a competitor. You prepared to watch one of us die for your principles?"

"I'm a realist, Wade. Say I ignore my principles and give you Mason's address, and you're even able to collect him. Say a few months after that, one or more of you meet some untimely accident and wind up dead anyway. Then, you're dead or some of you are dead, and I'm out of business. Everybody loses. Maybe, after that, someone gets lucky and takes me out because I welched on my word. I'm not willing to, so unnecessarily, place myself in harm's way. I have to watch my own back because I don't have five other people to do that for me. And, I have to make a living for myself, friends or no."

Wade stared at Leather. His expression was somewhere between anger and disbelief. "Great. Then we're screwed. As long as Mason has more on us than we do on him, we're at his mercy."

Leather looked down at his beer. "He has a warehouse. A building he owns in Downtown Baltimore. It's not far from the inner harbor. That's where he keeps his merchandise, the bulk of it anyway. All of his drugs, all of his guns, and other illegal weapons are stored there. I can give you the address, even draw you a map if you'd like. That's the best I can do, and that's worth more than just a roof."

"A lot more than a roof. I'll have Sam get you two grand as a bonus."

"Keep it. Like you said, you guys are my friends. Just make sure my mom's roof is some of your best work."

Wade nodded. The two men finished their drinks, talked just a bit longer, and finally, went their separate ways.

Nanci was relaxing at Jessica's apartment when her mobile phone rang. "Hello," she answered.

"Hi, Jess. It's me," said Jay.

"What do you want, Jay?" responded Nanci coldly.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me the other night."

"Well, you've said it. Anything else?"

There was a momentary silence.

"It's just that after Hideo, and then this mob boss guy, Demitri, telling us these costumed characters are real, and with the FBI showing up, I freaked!" admitted Jay. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry. You've gotta believe me!"

"Wait a minute. Back up. FBI and costumed characters? What are you talking about?"

Nanci knew full well what Jay was talking about, but she continued to play her part convincingly.

"Jess, Demitri, he's the guy we were buying from, he told us the FBI were at the docks. He told us that he has people that work for him inside the FBI and they had tipped him off. He told us he had several of his people planted at the dock before we or the FBI showed up. His people took out all of the FBI agents, all of them. I heard barking dogs growling and metal screeching, but not a shot was fired that I heard. Not one. Demitri's guys must be really good."

"Jay, have you been doing lines?"

"Jess, no. I swear. His people took out a bunch of FBI agents. Twenty, maybe 30. Maybe they had some sort of trained attack dogs, pit bulls or something. But, those FBI agents didn't fire once, they didn't squeeze off a single shot before they were attacked. Demitri wiped them out, all of them."

"I see."

"And the costumed characters, they're real! There's four of them, and one's a girl! No offense."

"Four?"

"Four. I'm not even gonna tell you the things he said they could do. You'd never believe me if I did. But, that's okay. He gave Mike all of their names, their real names, and their pictures, their home addresses, the places where they work, all that kind of stuff. Mike sent them each a little message letting them know that if they interfered with our business again, he'll expose them, maybe kill them, or both. We're on top right now. I almost wish one of those costumed losers would bother us again. It'd be over for them, real quick

"Okay. Sure. Whatever. Costumed characters. Anyway, my meeting with Mike, when is it?"

"I haven't exactly—"

"Don't tell me you haven't talked to him yet."

There was a silence.

“Look, I don’t even know why I’m talking to you right now,” asserted Nanci. “You promised me a meeting with Mike, and you haven’t delivered. You left bruises on my arm, after yanking me around like some rag doll. Then, you started ordering me around like you own me. Ya know what, don’t call—”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll call Mike right now. I’ll set something up for the three of us to go to dinner in a few hours, all right? I at least owe you that. Between now and then, can you at least think about forgiving me?”

“I’ll think about it,” answered Nanci, in a reluctant manner.

“Fine. That’s all I ask. I’ll call Mike and set it all up. We’ll go some place nice.”

“You’re slowly regaining credibility. Slowly.”

“Cool. Fine. And, I’m sorry, okay. I’m totally, totally sorry.”

“Just be sure it’s a very nice restaurant,” advised Nanci.

“I will. Okay, I’m calling Mike right now, and I’ll be by to pick you up in like three hours, okay?”

“All right.”

“Jess?”

“Yeah.”

“I, ah,” Jay paused. “I love you.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know,” she said, at a whisper’s volume. “I’ll see you soon, okay? Bye.”

As Nanci hung up the phone, she felt guilt tugging at her throat and tearing at her lungs. Fighting the so-called bad guys was something Nanci knew how to do. With practice, attacking and subduing her enemies became second nature. It was easy. Nameless thugs and faces she did not know never ate at Nanci’s conscience, when she and her friends destroyed the lives that those individuals had known and led. She was doing what needed to be done, righting wrongs, and making life better for the good people.

But now, her enemy wasn’t nameless or the face of an individual she didn’t know. Yes, he was a drug dealer and a criminal, but he was also a human being. A human being with interests, goals, and feelings. Feelings Nanci was preparing to trample all over to achieve what she wanted. Suddenly, this had become apparent to her. Mason and Jay did the exact same thing, didn’t they? They used others to achieve their goals, but instead of using manipulation and deceit to attain those goals, they sold drugs, weapons, sex, or some other commodity.

Nanci kept telling herself that she was doing the right thing, that she was one of the good guys. But, somewhere within her, a little voice kept repeating the same thing, “Liar.”

Anxiety began overpowering Nanci and her emotions were forcing their way

to the surface. She needed a reprieve, a release. She wanted to feel something, anything other than the way she was feeling. She looked toward the cabinet in Jessica's living room. She began walking toward it with some hesitation, but she wasn't stopping. Once there, Nanci opened the cabinet. On the second shelf from the top there laid a brick of neatly packed cocaine. Jay had given it to Jessica to use when she wanted to wind down or relax. From time to time, Nanci would take a little from the brick and flush it down the toilet, giving the appearance that she had been continually partaking of it.

This time, Nanci didn't take a little and flush it down the toilet. She used it. She inhaled it into her body, snorting it through one of her nostrils in hopes of making her feelings of guilt subside. Sadly, the result of her choice would inevitably have the exact opposite effect.

CHAPTER XXIX

...Thou Shalt Not Kill...

The taking of human life for any reason, which, by Sam, was considered cold-blooded murder, was expressly forbidden among the group of vigilantes that had accepted him as their leader. There were no exceptions. Although Norrin had pushed the letter of that law, occasionally maiming or separating an individual from one of their appendages, even he never crossed that line. A lecture from Sam was one thing, but to have him alter your brain's ability to utilize your birth endowed gifts and to possibly spend the remainder of your life in a six-by-six cell was something entirely different.

Morally, murder felt wrong. After all, did not Cain suffer a guilty conscience after killing his brother Abel, the first premeditated human murderer in the Holy Bible? Every society and government on Earth implements penalties for a citizen that might commit a premeditated willful murder. Some countries, such as the United States of America, even have laws for what they consider second degree murder, murder committed in an act of passion, unintentionally, without premeditative thought, or perhaps while in a psychotic rage.

Dressing it up or trying to reduce its significance by giving it another label, does not make murder any less horrific or permanent. And yet, Nanci stood over the man whose neck she had just snapped with unimaginable conflicting

feelings of guilt, while in her mind trying to rationalize what she had just done. She had no words, nor was she able to undo what she had just done. Within moments, Nanci heard footsteps approaching the room in which she was standing, and she knew quick thinking was essential. As the door to the bedroom opened, Michael Mason stood in the doorway. First he looked at the body on the floor. Its neck had clearly been broken and there was a look of shock on its face. Mason then turned his attention to Nanci.

It had been nearly a month, almost to the day, since Nanci had attended her first meeting with Michael Mason. Jay had arranged the meeting. Initially, the setting seemed more of a formal dinner than an introductory interview. Jay had made reservations for three at a restaurant called The Parthenon, where formal attire was required for all of the restaurant's patrons. He was sure to remind Mason of this when he called him asking that Mason join he and his girlfriend for dinner. At first, Mason didn't seem to be overly enthusiastic about the idea, but after some prodding and an assurance that Jay would cover the bill, he eventually agreed to the invitation.

Arriving at the restaurant shortly before Mason, Jay and Nanci waited for him in the parking lot. Jay did his best to make amends with Jessica, complimenting her on her appearance and making small talk. Nanci tried to maintain an amiable dialogue while keeping in character, not allowing Jay to feel overly comfortable or come to the mistaken belief that all was forgiven. She forced a smile or two and was sure to make them appear forced. Nanci wanted Jay to feel slightly uncomfortable with her and to sway his thinking that she might reciprocate the feelings he had expressed for her. It was far too late for that.

As Mason pulled into the parking lot, Jay informed Jessica he had arrived. The two exited their car and began walking toward Mason.

"Hi, Mike," said Jay, extending his hand greeting Mason. "Glad you could make it."

While the two men were shaking hands, Mason's attention was divided when he caught his first glimpse of Nanci. At that point, he was no longer paying attention to Jay.

Nanci was wearing a black, strapless dress, a pearl necklace with matching earrings, three-inch black heels, her makeup was flawless, and she was wearing her hair up. Nanci wanted to make an impression on Mason, which she had clearly done. She also wanted to remain as unrecognizable as possible to any that might see or know her. Her efforts had not been in vain. Mason was unable to

take his eyes off of her. Being a lover of fine art, he was enamored by this woman's perfect marriage of old-world beauty and modern sophistication.

"Hi. I'm Mike," said Mason, almost ignoring Jay and stepping past him to shake Nanci's hand.

"Jessica," responded Nanci, taking hold of Mason's hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Somewhat uncomfortable with the seemingly forthcoming introduction being made, Jay interrupted. "Well, we have an 8:30 reservation and it's already 8:35."

The three entered the restaurant and, shortly there after, were seated. A bottle of wine was ordered and three quarters of the way through it, dinner arrived. As usual, the restaurant's fine Greek cuisine was exquisite. Dinner conversation was informative, at least for Nanci and Mason. The two exchanged backgrounds, interests, past experiences, and goals for the future. Jay, however, was feeling like a third wheel, even though he had been the organizer of this event. To him, it was strange. Jessica and Mike were hitting it off, acting as if they were old friends finally reunited after years apart. Normally, Jessica was so standoffish, but, now, she was conversing with a man she had known for less than an hour as if she had known him her entire life.

During the course of their conversation, Mason mentioned, "So, Jay says you're his girlfriend." The words sounded more like a question than a statement.

"Am I? I wasn't aware of that," responded Nanci. "Not officially anyway." Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the hurt spread across Jay's face. She could feel it in her heart. Jay tried to hide it, so as not to appear weak in front of Mason, but it was evident Nanci's words had struck a nerve. She had become quite the accomplished actress over the many weeks she had played the role of Jessica Savin, so, although Nanci's heart sank within her chest as she noticed Jay's expression, her own body language gave no indication of it.

Not one word of business was spoken during the course of dinner. It seemed the two new found friends were much too involved in their own interests. As a matter of fact, the bill had arrived before Nanci or Mason had finished their meals. To Jay, the time spent at the restaurant felt like an eternity. When the waiter approached the table with the bill, he handed it to Jay. In turn, Jay handed the man his American Express card. He couldn't believe what a disappointment the night had been, and yet, he was still paying for everything.

As the three stood to leave Jay reached for Nanci's hand but, without even making eye contact, she moved it just out of his grasp. Nanci was doing her best to make subtle, as well as not so subtle, indications that her relationship with Jay

had ended. She had finally gotten where she needed to be, both as Nanci and as Jessica. Jay was no longer a necessary part of the equation, and Jessica was discarding him like an obsolete piece of garbage. That's the type of person Jessica was. However, Nanci's heart was breaking. Not only because she had clearly devastated Jay, trampling all over his feelings, not even slowing down to assess the damage; but, also, she was mimicking the behavior of those she'd spent the last several years despising. Despising the acts of a man or woman who would do whatever it took, including destroying the lives of others and not giving it a second thought, to get what they wanted.

That's who Jessica was, not Nanci, and yet, although individually each had their reasons for their course of action, essentially they were both doing the same thing. Nanci hadn't grown to develop genuine romantic feelings for Jay. She loved her husband very much, and in her mind, there was no other man for her. That being the case, she had come to know Jay as a person, perhaps even developing the type of feelings one may have for a close friend or a family member. She didn't want to hurt him. She didn't want to be responsible for his heartache.

Nanci tried to cover over her compassion by telling herself Jay was just a drug dealer, a low life, a leech on society. But, that didn't suppress or eliminate her tortured conscience. It continued to eat at her. Jay was a man, a human being. He liked jazz music and Italian food. As a young boy he had built model cars and when he was 12 and a half, had fallen from a tree in front of his house and fractured his wrist.

Trying to put these things out of her mind, Nanci forced a smile as the three made their way to the restaurant's exit. On their way there she said, "I need to stop at the ladies room."

Once inside the restroom, Nanci entered one of the stalls locking the door behind her. She didn't feel the need to throw up, as she had after her first meeting with Jay. If anything, she just wanted to break down and cry. But Nanci knew that if she did, when she walked out of the restroom with puffy red eyes and running mascara, suspicions would be roused and all credibility would be lost.

Reaching into her purse, Nanci removed a small vial of cocaine. She held it in her hand looking at it as though she were studying it. Finally, she opened the top and sprinkled some onto her right hand, on the piece of skin between the thumb and index finger's knuckle. She snorted the cocaine into her right nostril expecting to ease her crippled conscience. This wasn't an occasional treating of one's self but, instead, it had become a habit, a craving, a dependence, an addiction.

After the first use, Nanci realized that the relaxing feelings, the high of indulging in a little cocaine, calmed the nerves. It made her feel good, at least for a short while. So at first, it became an occasional thing. She used it only when she needed it. But not before long, her occasional use had become a regular practice. It helped her through the rigors of the more taxing days. It did at least until the high wore off. After that, the effects of a scarred conscience, a flawed heart, the stain of sin caused Nanci's feelings of guilt to triple.

Toward the beginning of Nanci's addiction, her husband and friends took note of subtle changes in both her behavior and attitude, but dismissed them as Nanci being overworked or even a bit edgy. Everyone was edgy. The normal physical signs one might detect of a drug user were not evident with Nanci. It may have been because of her genetic make up or the fact that her DNA slightly differed from that of the average human being. In any event, the physical signs were not there.

At one point, Sam had confronted Nanci questioning her mental state as well as her emotional well being. Nanci's retort was almost an attack against him.

"What? Have you been reading my mind?" she questioned.

Sam assured her he hadn't but that he could tell by her continuous mood swings, irritability, and quick temper that something was wrong.

"Do it!" she taunted. "If you don't trust me, do it!" she insisted. "Read my mind. Read my thoughts. All of them!"

Perhaps she was daring Sam, challenging him to discover the truth and face her. Perhaps she was screaming out in a desperate plea for help. Either or, it didn't matter. Without reading Nanci's mind and discovering the truth for certain, Sam concluded Nanci's outburst was attributed to feelings of anger toward him for what she may have misinterpreted as distrust on his part. He quickly apologized and comforted himself with the thought that once all of this was over, everything would return to normal, whatever that was. With all that had been going on it was hard to recall.

Sam wasn't alone in noticing changes in Nanci. Norrin, too, had noticed changes in his wife. He lived in the same house with her and spent more time with her than any of the others, although as of late, that wasn't by much. The body he recognized as his wife seemed to spend more time as Jessica than she did as Nanci, and that included the time spent at Jessica's apartment.

After the discovery of their identities, the vigilantes kept a low profile not often appearing publicly. According to the information Leather had shared with Wade, Demitri Mazella hadn't given up Cyndi or Nanci to Mason. Leather's information had never failed the group in the past, so, Sam proceeded under the

assumption that what Leather had stated was fact. Cyndi was in no position to offer much during this last mission, so, Nanci continued as the wild card. Sam still hadn't gotten the opportunity to get a solid lock on Mason's thought patterns, enabling him to read Mason's thoughts or pinpoint his location, wherever that might be. Sam could try and get close enough to Mason to take the few seconds needed to procure that mental lock but, in doing so, he'd be taking the chance of Mason seeing him. If that were to happen, with all the information Mason had in his possession regarding the team of vigilantes, he'd be able to deal a crippling if not death dealing blow. With his business, personal life, and the safety of his wife and unborn child on the line, that was a gamble Sam was not willing to take.

Though Nanci's efforts had been key to the progress of working toward the downfall of Mason's organization, Norrin feared it had become too much for her. Her personality changes, her harsh attitudes, one minute upbeat and the next seemingly in a depression, did not fill Norrin with confidence regarding Nanci's emotional stability. The limited amount of time he was spending with her was as time spent with a stranger. He could see a glimmer, a sparkle of the woman he had once known, but there was no question that she had changed. Her gentle, empathetic, nurturing nature had all but disappeared. Her attentiveness had seemingly ceased to exist. The little things she did to say, "I love you," were distant memories. One of the few traits which Nanci had seemed to retain was her enjoyment in love making, but even that had changed. The intensity in which she made love was unfamiliar to Norrin, although not unpleasant. She did it with every inch of her body and, at times, it seemed to be more an act of aggression or a competition than the sharing of an intimate moment.

After indulging in just enough cocaine to calm her nerves and settle her guilt, Nanci exited the restroom and found only Mason outside waiting for her.

"Where's Jay?" she asked.

"He had to take off. I promised I'd make sure you got home safely," Mason informed her.

"Really?" responded Nanci.

"Yeah. I hope you don't mind. You did say the two of you weren't serious, right?"

"Yeah, well, we've kinda been spending time together for a couple of months now, but you don't see a ring on this finger, do you?" said Nanci, raising her left hand and wiggling her ring finger.

"Exactly," answered Mason, and with that, he walked Nanci to his car.

Within moments, the two were on the road headed toward Jessica's apartment. At the beginning of the drive Nanci felt apprehensive, anticipating Mason would, at any moment, spring the news that he knew exactly who she was. She honestly expected him to pull a gun and aim it toward her head. For a short while, she played out the scenario in her mind as to how she'd react if he did. It would be essential to gain control over the gun immediately and, whether using her hands or her hair, Nanci felt confident that she could do that. Next, she'd have to immobilize Mason and, then, either gain control of the car or jump out of it.

But as time passed, Mason made no offensive move. He gave no indication of knowing who Nanci was, nor that he had any ill will toward her. In fact, he made pleasant conversation all the way to Jessica's apartment, occasionally smiling and, overall, acting quite charming. Mason was nothing like the man Nanci had pictured in her mind. She was expecting a soulless evil man whose only goal was to further his own advancement. Instead, she found a man with charismatic qualities, who was humorous and had an interest in history and art.

Throughout the course of her life, Nanci had never seen those considered criminals, or "the bad guy," or those that might even be labeled evil as people with true human feelings. They were always just faces. Nameless faces that had no more depth than the paper their mug shots were printed on. And yet, she now had known two people considered "the bad guy," that possessed many human qualities, some of which she possessed herself.

Guiding Mason along the way, it wasn't long before Nanci found herself in front of Jessica's apartment complex. Mason parked directly in front of Jessica's building and, after exiting his side of the car, he walked around to the passenger's side and opened her door.

"Thank you," said Nanci, stepping out of the car and onto the pavement. "Such a gentleman."

Mason smiled.

Nanci returned his smile, and said, "Well, this is my stop."

"Looks that way," responded Mason. "Would you like any company?" he asked.

Still smiling, Nanci said, "My, aren't we forward?"

"In my experience, I've found that those who hem and haw around usually wind up at the bus stop, waiting for the bus to come. Those that don't, drive by those waiting for the bus in their Jags."

Unexpectedly, Nanci leaned in and began kissing Mason quite passionately. The kiss lasted several seconds. As Nanci's lips slowly separated from Mason's

she said, "In my experience, I've found good things come to those who wait." Their faces were mere inches apart as Nanci ran her index finger across Mason's cheek. Gradually pulling away, she winked at Mason and headed toward the door of Jessica's apartment building. "Call me, Mr. Mason. I wouldn't want to think you've forgotten about me." And with that, she disappeared inside of the building.

Over the next few weeks Nanci found herself spending more and more time with Mason. At times they spoke on the phone, other times they spent their leisure moments together. Nanci had expressed to Mason her interest in playing a more active role in his organization and, so, on two separate occasions he took her along to business meetings he had arranged with some very important distributors and clientele.

At that point, it was no secret that Jay was no longer in the picture. Mason allowed him to continue as a distributor because thus far, Jay had not proved himself unfit, which so many others had. Unknown to both Mason and Jay, Jay's apparent efficiency was due to toleration on the part of the vigilantes. They could have stopped him long ago at any time had they wanted to. But, instead, they chose to use him as a means to an end.

Jay's relationship with Jessica had become nothing but a memory. Even when the two saw one another, usually at times when Jay was picking up merchandise or dropping off money to Mason, Jessica treated him like he was some stranger. Inside, Jay was dying. He had truly developed what he believed were genuine feelings for Jessica. To see her shun him time and time again was unbearable. He even considered severing his ties with Mason, but the money he made was such a strong draw that Jay opted to deal with things as they were. He began relying heavily on drugs and alcohol to help him through the more difficult days.

As Jessica and Mason's relationship grew, he continued presenting her with gift after gift. These weren't small gifts or little tokens of appreciation. These were thousand-dollar pieces of jewelry and large additions to Jessica's wardrobe. Mason also offered to refurnish her entire apartment, but she declined his offer stating, "I like my furniture. I wouldn't have bought it if I didn't."

As the days passed, the lines between Nanci and Jessica had blurred if not faded entirely. The life Jessica lead seemed so alluring. She had money, expensive clothing, luxuriant jewelry, an eye catching car, men who craved her attention, and all other things a woman in the prime of her life could hope for.

Nanci had spent several of her teen years and the first few years of her twenties helping other people. She had never known wealth, nor had she been

overly comfortable monetarily. There was a satisfaction in being Jessica Savin. Her every want was fulfilled and the effort required in making that happen seemed so minimal. Jessica's life had enticed Nanci. The desire to make it her own had affected her heart, her thinking, and her everyday habits. Nanci was now an abuser of illegal drugs. She was hiding things from her friends and allies and lying to her husband. Through it all, she was able to keep these secrets from those who loved her most.

Norrin continued to feel the effects of Nanci's transformation more and more. Her presence at home had become more atypical than the norm. The time the two spent together was spent more so in silence than in conversation. Norrin surmised that Nanci had completely embraced the vigilante life he had always hoped she would. It was the life she had long opposed him leading, although in the past, he had never fully understood why. Norrin had accepted the fact that he, Sam, and Wade had, as a necessity, fallen into the background unable to parade around town as they once had.

Nanci had been essential in the continued efforts to destroy Mason's organization. Her work had proved invaluable and yet, Norrin began regretting that she had ever gotten so deeply involved in this last mission, and that he had willingly conceded she do so. For the first time, Norrin believed he now fully understood why Nanci had so fervently opposed him being Scorpion. Not only was there the concern for his safety but, also, his devotions seemed divided. At times, the moments Norrin spent with Nanci may have seemed more token than having any degree of regularity, and she may have perceived that being Scorpion took precedence over being husband. All that Nanci was asking was a life with the man she had chosen to marry. Was she asking so much? Indeed, for the first time Norrin fully understood. Not only did he understand, but, surprisingly, he had exchanged places with his wife. He was now the neglected spouse craving a bit of attention.

The only prospect that somewhat comforted Norrin was that soon this would all be over. When that day came, he would have his wife back and things could return to the way they used to be, the way they were supposed to be. Suddenly the idea of putting Scorpion away for good was no longer an unpleasant undertaking but, instead, a heartfelt wish.

It was now December 31, 1989, and one of Mason's well-to-do clients was throwing a big New Year's Eve celebration at his home. It was an invitation only *soirée*, the invites going to the more elite individuals with affiliations in the various facets of organized crime. In the past, Mason hadn't been much for

parties, but it was New Year's Eve and, now, with a significant other that specifically did have a taste for parties, he was willing to make an exception.

Mason had advised Jessica of the party a week before it was to take place, giving her ample time to buy a new dress, shoes, and accessories to match. Nanci had informed Mason that she wasn't much for spontaneity and always liked plenty of advanced notice regarding attending any major events or functions. The excuse she gave for this was that she may have scheduled a previous engagement, which might conflict with any spur of the moment plans. Also, she stated she liked plenty of time to make preparations for attending functions, being able to purchase a new outfit if necessary or arrange other events in her schedule around a specific event. In truth, the more notice given regarding any of Mason's activities was an opportunity to report them to Sam. In doing so, he could plan for any counter-actions should the need arise.

The dealings Sam had initiated with the governor and all other officials with whom he had originally formed alliances had all but ceased to exist. The governor was noticeably frustrated with Mantis' choice to cut him off, especially after having become the advocate for the three vigilantes among his peers in law enforcement. The governor surmised that Mantis and his two companions were still angry with him, due to the discussion they'd had after the fiasco at the dock at Baltimore's harbor. He had tried calling out to Mantis mentally but received no response. That was until mid-evening on December 27.

"Hello, Governor," Sam projected, directly into the governor's mind.

The governor was caught completely off guard and the sudden contact startled him. "What!" he jumped.

"It's Mantis, Governor," responded Sam.

"So, you decided to actually contact me. I've been calling you for weeks with no answer."

"I know. I felt it best for both the safety of you and those in law enforcement, as well as me and my people. My warnings regarding the Wolves were not something you should've taken lightly."

"Did they come after you and your friends?"

"Not directly."

"Indirectly?"

"Yes." Sam was momentarily silent, and it was obvious that something was troubling him.

"Are you okay?" asked the governor.

"Do you care?" Sam snapped back.

"I guess I may have deserved that," admitted the governor. "About the

things I said in my office last time we were all together, I might've said some things that—"

"I'm not looking for an apology, Governor. This isn't the part where we all hug and huddle around the campfire to sing songs. I'm contacting you for one reason and one reason only. I want Michael Mason to be nothing more than a distant memory. At one point, I could have handled this alone, but now, things have escalated. If my friends and I go in and attack Mason and his cohorts, the repercussions to us could be irreparable."

"I don't understand. All of your powers, the things you can do, I thought Mason was normal. Is he like you?"

"Mason is nothing like us and, as far as I know, he's normal, whatever that is. But, sometimes, power consists of more than just who has the best bag of tricks. Sometimes it's the one with the best secrets."

"What?"

"Nothing," projected Sam, realizing the tone of his projection was starting to sound like self pity. "In four days, Mason will be attending a party. Several individuals involved in various criminal activities will be attending, from the buyers to the suppliers. I can't go in with my people in full costume and apprehend them all. But, if you and a large battalion of police officers, feds, marines, or militia for all I care, go in and make the bust, we won't be tied to it."

"How do you know all of this, and why are so concerned about not being tied to any of this?"

"I have someone on the inside who's been keeping me informed while Scorpion, Toad, and I keep a low profile. As far as being directly involved in bringing Mason in, well, glory and prestige have never been my thing. You and your squad can take all the credit and reap all the rewards. My friends and I just want to be left in peace to retire and fade away from people's minds."

"Well, if that's how you want it. Where's this party supposed to be taking place?"

Sam went on to explain when and where the party would be held. He gave the names of those who would be attending, as well as the illegal activities in which they were involved. There were a few supposed upstanding individuals such as politicians, some in law enforcement, lawyers, and prominent wealthy business men scheduled to attend. Sam gave the governor those names as well. As Sam detailed the specifics, the governor took notes and made a list he could refer to once the entire operation was complete.

"Your operative, will he be there?"

"Yes. *He* will."

"We can take him into custody and let him go once everything is over. That way, Mason will never know who betrayed him and try to seek some type of revenge. I just need a name."

"Don't worry, *he* can take care of *himself*. I have no doubt *he'll* be long gone before you cuff your first drug dealer."

"Just in case, I can—"

"Sorry, Governor, you're not getting a name."

The governor could tell that Mantis was not going to budge on this issue so, he let it go. His final words on the subject were, "Well, if by accident we arrest him, let us know. We'll definitely release him."

Sam didn't acknowledge the governor's attempt at a reconciliation. He was no longer interested in cementing good relations, just bringing the ordeal to a close with all parties walking away content with the outcome.

"This will be our last conversation, Governor," advised Sam. "Our collaboration is over. If you call me again, I will not respond."

"Look, if you're still mad—"

"I'm not mad, sir. Just tired. It's time for me and mine to make a well-deserved permanent departure."

"I see. Well, I guess this is goodbye, then. I'd say keep in touch, but, that's not going to happen, is it?"

"No sir, it's not. Goodbye, Mr. Governor."

"Goodbye, Mantis," projected the governor. "Oh, and tell Toad and Scorpion that I said goodbye to them as well."

"I will."

There was a brief pause and, then, the governor sent one last thought, just in case Mantis might still be listening. "Good luck, son."

Surprisingly, there was a response. "And you, sir."

That was the final time that the man who was governor of Maryland during this period in history and the man known as Samuel and Mantis ever shared a telepathic connection.

The time had come for the New Year's Eve party that Mason and Nanci would be attending. Mason had agreed that Jessica would pick him up at his home and drive the two of them to the party in her Mercedes. Where Wade had been unable to attain this essential piece of information, Nanci had again proved her worth in attaining it. When she arrived to collect Mason, he greeted her with an especially long kiss. Mason and Jessica's relationship had far exceeded the degree of physical activity which had been shared between her and Jay. In fact,

most would agree that due to Jessica's escapades, Nanci's status of faithful wife was no longer fitting.

Once the two had finally separated, Mason found a moment to compliment Jessica on her appearance. She, in turn, complimented him. Soon, they were on their way and, after a serene drive, they reached their destination. Mason had informed Jessica that the party was being held at one of his best client's home. But, what Nanci's eyes beheld was no typical home. It was an immense and exquisite mansion sitting on at least two hundred acres. It somewhat reminded Nanci of Sam and Cyndi's house, only, it was much larger and its design seemed more Greek or Roman than Spanish.

"This is your friend's house?" asked Nanci. "This place is huge."

"Actually, it's just one of his houses," informed Mason. "Joseph is possibly the richest man on earth. He has ties to almost every business you can think of, both legal and illegal. For some reason, he chooses to buy his drugs from me. I don't know why. He could get them anywhere, I'm sure. Even if he's not available or nowhere near wherever I happen be, he'll arrange for one of his people to pick up from me. And he pays very well, too."

"He must really trust you."

"I hope not. He's extravagant, maybe even a bit eccentric, not stupid. We have an arrangement. I supply him with whatever he needs, and he pays me to make sure I always deliver, no matter what it is or how much he wants. I've handled a few contracts for him, too, nothing all that difficult, but, they were in my neck of the woods so he called on me."

"Hmm, he sounds serious."

Mason noticed Nanci's eyes light up, so he said, "Don't get any ideas, love. Joseph hasn't kept any woman for longer than a weekend as long as I've known him."

"Hey, you know I only have eyes for you," she reassured. "This Joseph sounds pretty impressive, though."

"He's the type of guy who gets what he wants, but, so am I. One thing I did find interesting, maybe even out of character for Joseph, was his obsession with this one woman. About a year ago, he sent me to San Diego to kidnap her. He expressly insisted that I not kill her, just kidnap her. She was the wife of some tinkering entrepreneur-inventor guy. Joseph's terms were also that I not kill him or their little girl. It was funny; the kid was actually there when I took her mother. Normally, I don't believe in loose ends, but it was Joseph's nickel and he had specified not to kill the kid."

The words, San Diego, had sent a brief shudder through Nanci's mind.

Norrin's family lived in San Diego, his father, step mother, and sisters. Norrin's very presence seemed to haunt Nanci as feelings of guilt and shame began to tug at her.

Mason continued, but Nanci had lost all focus on him. "After acquiring the woman, I delivered her to Joseph. I always wondered what he'd done with her. What was her name, Deana, Dani? Didi. That's it, Didi. Hmm, oh well, I don't care. I was paid quite nicely for that job. I even got a bonus on top of my payment. As I recall, a rather generous bonus." Mason noticed Nanci seemed to be in a daze, so he called out to get her attention. "Jess. Earth to Jessica, you still with me?"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry Mike. I just really like this spread."

"Wait 'til you see the inside."

The two left their car with the valet and made their way to the mansion's front doors. They were large oak doors with oversized, lion faced, oxidized copper knockers, one on each door.

"Joseph has a flair for the dramatic," said Mason, as he lifted and lowered one of the knockers, banging it three times against the door.

A man dressed in a tuxedo answered the door wearing a subdued expression. He greeted the two guests and welcomed them in. Another man took their coats and, in exchange, gave each a colored chip with a number on it. As Mason and Nanci entered a large ballroom, they took notice of all the other guests. Every man in sight was either wearing a designer suit or some other expensive outfit they had pieced together. The women were wearing evening gowns, uniquely tailored dresses, designer shoes, gold, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires and pearls. Mason pointed out the more noticeable guests as he and Nanci made their way through the immense palace, identifying them by name and their affiliation with Joseph. Eventually they located the event's host.

As Mason and Joseph walked toward each other they both had smiles on their faces. Once they were within arms length, the two men embraced.

"Michael, it's so good to see you. I'm pleased you could make it," said Joseph.

"Good to see you too, Joseph. How's business?" asked Mason.

"Business, business. No talk of business tonight, my friend," insisted Joseph. "This is a party. I want all of my guests to have a good time this evening and forget about business. As a matter of fact, don't I usually miss you at the majority of these type functions when I hold them? I'm surprised you chose to honor me with your presence."

"Well, in all honesty, it is New Year's Eve, and I wanted to show my new lady

friend a good time,” said Mason, taking hold of Nanci’s hand and motioning her forward. “After thinking about it for a while, I came to the conclusion, where could I possibly take her that might compare with one of Joseph’s parties? So, here we are.”

Joseph smiled. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure, Ms?”

“Savin. Jessica Savin,” said Nanci, extending her hand.

“Savin? That’s Russian, isn’t it?” asked Joseph, taking hold of Nanci’s hand and gently kissing it.

“Yes. It is,” she said. “How astute.”

“My line of work requires that I travel quite frequently. I like to keep abreast of names, customs, and so forth of the lands I visit. I find knowledge can often prove beneficial when the need arises. By the way, I’m Joseph Smith, the organizer of this small gathering.”

“Small?” responded Nanci. “If this is small, I’d like to see your idea of big.”

“Oh, this is just an intimate party for me and a few of my closest friends,” declared Joseph, in an almost arrogant manner. “You should see one of my larger galas at my home in Crete.”

Nanci lifted her eyebrows portraying a look as though she were impressed. In actuality, she had already dismissed Joseph as yet another man trying to play on his own over-inflated sense of self importance by bragging about his accomplishments. Norrin didn’t do that. “God,” she thought, “Norrin, why do I keep thinking about him? Not now. I have to stay focused,” she kept telling herself. But, the things she had done, the things that she had allowed to happen continued pricking at her conscience. Now was not the time to lose her edge or get sidetracked. Now was not the time to fall apart, not when she found herself right in the center of the lion’s den. One wrong word or some perceived mistaken body language might feign that she was a weak animal, and an easy target as prey. Panic was trying to force its way into Nanci’s heart. She began feeling the need for relief, perhaps, even a bit of courage.

As Joseph and Mason continued talking, Nanci noticed herself becoming fidgety. “Excuse me,” she said. “Mr. Smith, is there a place I might freshen up?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “And please, call me Joseph. If you walk up those stairs,” he said, pointing to a curved staircase, “You’ll find three restrooms along the hallway and several other rooms. Feel free to make use of any you choose.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Before she could leave, Joseph momentarily detained her. “Oh, before you go, please allow me to introduce my date for the evening.” Joseph extended his hand toward an exceptionally attractive Asian woman that was walking toward

him. As he took hold of the woman's hand, Joseph made introductions. "Michael Mason, Jessica Savin this is the Lady Sayuri Toshikazu."

Lady Toshikazu bowed slightly toward Mason and Nanci and, in return, they both bowed as well. Nanci, feeling the desperate tug of dependency, excused herself not recognizing the name, even though Wade had shared it with she and her friends after his meeting with Leather. Mason, however, did recognize it. It was the name Demitri had mentioned as a prominent enemy of his father, the female Yakuza head.

It made Mason uneasy to have her so close to him. After all, he had built strong ties with the Mazella household. Mason was no fool. There was no doubt in his mind that the woman standing only a few feet away knew exactly who he was and of his affiliation with the Mazella family. He also realized that he was Joseph Smith's guest, and that it was unlikely Lady Toshikazu would even make mention of his involvement with the Mazellas in this environment. Most likely, should the two run into one another through the course of the evening, Sayuri would act as though Mason were an unknown acquaintance and maintain a pleasant well mannered demeanor.

Not long after leaving the others, Nanci had made her way upstairs and stumbled into one of the many bedrooms. Once inside, she shut the door behind her, not closing it completely. Through her craving for a fix, she happened to notice the creative way in which the room had been decorated. It was beautiful not only in the pieces of furniture chosen to accentuate it but, also, the art which graced its walls. The colors were vibrant. Murals were painted from ceiling to floor of blue skies with fluffy, cotton-like clouds and old world buildings made of marble and stone, some pristine, some in ruins. There were also various characters from mythology such as Zeus, Hades, Aries, Apollo, Athena, Demeter, and Poseidon depicted. Their appearances were so life-like that it seemed if one were to reach out and touch them, they may in return reach out and touch them right back. In the center of this elaborate room was a large king size bed. A canopy surrounded the bed with vast flowing draperies of silk and linen.

After sitting on the bed, Nanci opened her purse and removed a vial of cocaine. She had been sure to bring enough to last throughout the entire night but, before realizing it, she had used the vial's entire contents. Her head and body felt light and tingled all over. She felt as though she were floating in the air. She leaned back onto the bed and began to flutter her arms and legs. Her body rolled from side to side as she moved her back making "S" shapes on the bed. All inhibitions were gone and in her euphoric state, Nanci's hair unloosened

itself from its position and began to flail about on its own. Nanci let out a laugh as she watched it, then closed her eyes while running her hands across her body and losing herself in the moment.

“Jesus!” exclaimed a man, who had unexpectedly entered the room. He had taken notice of Nanci walking up the stairs alone, and decided he’d follow after her in the hopes of a quick romp. He had caught her by surprise and she him.

Startled, Nanci gasped as her hair fell to the bed and across her body. The man standing just inside the doorway stood speechless.

“This is not what you think,” Nanci blurted out. It was a stupid thing to say, but it was the only thing that had come to mind.

Nanci scrambled to her hands and knees, still on the bed and, as she did, the startled man moved backward.

“No. Don’t leave!” begged Nanci.

The man reached for the door knob with his mouth hanging open, although he was still facing Nanci. She jumped to her feet and quickly moved toward the man. Frightened by Nanci’s sudden movements, he turned and finally grabbed hold of the door knob. As he did, the door was forced shut by Nanci’s thrusting her body against it. She grabbed hold of the man’s hands with her own, a look of helplessness on her face.

“Lemme go!” insisted the man.

“No, it’s okay,” pleaded Nanci. “Don’t, don’t, it’s not—” But there were no words. She couldn’t hide what she had done. The man standing so close had probably never seen a person with such unimaginable abilities and, if by chance he had, he’d probably never seen them actually use those abilities.

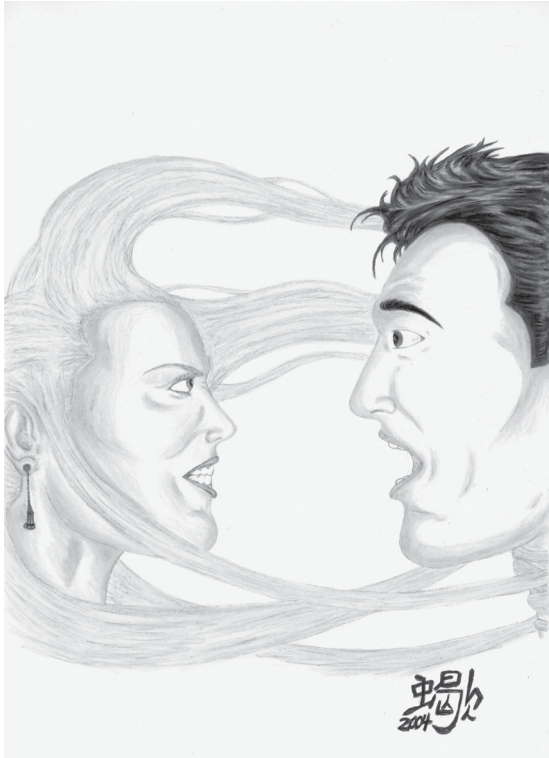
Nanci continued pleading with the man, but it seemed as though he was not acknowledging her pleas. Finally, panicked and disturbed, the man yelled at Nanci, demanding she release him. He then grabbed hold of her shoulders and shoved her away, causing her to fall to the floor.

Quickly, the man turned and again grabbed hold of the door knob attempting to pull open the door. This time, it wasn’t Nanci’s hands that had slammed shut the door but, instead, her hair. The man turned his head toward Nanci, staring at her as though she were some frightening monster. Nanci’s face no longer reflected fear or desperation. It now reflected an almost insane look of anger.

“You wouldn’t listen to me,” said Nanci, grabbing hold of the man with her hair. First, she grabbed each of his wrists, then wrapped her hair around his chest. She squeezed tighter and tighter until the man was gasping for air. He tried to speak but was unable to do so due to the constriction of his chest. Nanci

taunted him, turning her ear toward his lips saying, “What? What was that? I can’t quite hear you.”

As the man reached the point of passing out, Nanci released her grip around his chest. He struggled for air, taking in deep breaths and trying to fill his lungs. Though she had released his chest, Nanci maintained her grip on the man’s wrists.



“What should I do with you?” she asked.

“Lemme go, please!” begged the man.

“If I do that, you’ll run to Mike, won’t you? You’ll run right to him and tell him about the woman with the living hair, right?” yelled Nanci. There was still a crazed look in her eyes. “You’ll ruin everything, won’t you? All my work, all my hard work, all I’ve suffered,” she said, as her face sank into a saddened state. “All I’ve sacrificed, my lost self-respect, my lost dignity.”

Tears were forming in Nanci’s eyes as her heart dropped. Her crutch had become her downfall, suffering a multitude of emotions changing from one minute to the next.

“Look, I don’t know you. You don’t know me. I don’t know this Mike you’re talking about. I’m not going to tell anyone. It’ll be our secret,” swore the man.

Nanci’s despair was quickly replaced with aggression. “No. You’ll tell. I know you’ll tell and it’ll all be over!” Without fully realizing it, her hair had wrapped around the man’s neck.

“I won’t! Believe me! I don’t even know you,” confessed the man.

“You will. You will! I won’t let you. I won’t let you!” exclaimed Nanci.

The man tried to resist, but the more he did the more Nanci tightened her grip. The man struggled further and as he did, Nanci yelled, “No! No!”

The man twisted and turned but he could not escape. Suddenly, his neck snapped and his body fell limp. Nanci looked into the man’s eyes as life seemed to drain from them. She stared at him in anger until, all at once, it hit her. She had just killed a man in cold blood. She had committed murder.

Nanci released the man and stumbled backward, her hands raised in the air, her palms open. The man’s dead body laid on the floor, its head turned in an unnatural position. Its lifeless eyes stared up at Nanci, accusing and condemning her for the heinous act.

Feelings of desperation filled Nanci. For the first time in as long as she could remember, she honestly did not know what her next move would be. Standing in shock, Nanci jumped and gasped as the door to the room flung open. Standing in the doorway was Mason. He looked down at the body on the floor and, then, back toward Nanci. Her hair had returned to its former position, though a bit disheveled. Her mascara was running where tears had rolled down her cheeks.

“What happened?” asked Mason, with a look of confusion.

“He, he,” Nanci reached for an answer, any answer. The only thing that came quickly to her lips was, “He tried to rape me.”

Mason looked down at the man after hearing Nanci’s response. “Looks like he failed. Are you all right?” he asked, turning his attention back to her.

“No. I’m not all right,” she answered. “I think I wanna go home, Mike.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll tell Joseph we’re leaving and explain what happened here. He’ll have someone come and clean this mess up. I’ll grab our coats and be back in just a few minutes.”

Mason left the room and headed downstairs. As he walked toward Joseph, an explosion echoed throughout the house. The front door had been blown off of its hinges and transformed into splinters. Suddenly, an endless stream of law enforcement officers swarmed the mansion like a colony of roaches. A gun battle ensued, but there was no doubt that the police had the upper hand, as they

far outnumbered the guests. Several people searched for cover. Mason was able to find it behind a pillar, after pulling his gun while trying to assess the chaos. He happened to notice Joseph and Sayuri standing not far away. He watched in disbelief as Joseph's eyes began glowing blue, electricity sparking around them and small bolts moving from eye to eye.

"Not here," counseled Sayuri. "We're far outnumbered."

Heeding Sayuri's words, Joseph fled with his companion toward their escape route. Mason headed back to the stairwell firing his gun several times. Once at the top of the stairs, he ran toward the room where he had left Nanci. But, when he arrived she was no longer there. The dead body was still lying on the floor, but the woman he had known as Jessica was no where to be seen. He called out to her several times but she did not respond. Mason knew that if he stayed and tried to find Jessica, the chances that he may get caught or be shot and maybe even killed were high. Reluctantly, he left the room, abandoning Jessica to whatever her fate may be, and endeavored to find his own escape.

CHAPTER XXX

Sins Laid Bare

Sam, Norrin, and Cyndi were discussing plans to seal up the secret entrance located below Norrin and Nanci's home when, for no apparent reason, Sam stopped speaking in mid-sentence. It was clear by the expression on his face that something was wrong.

"What is it?" questioned Norrin.

For a moment, Sam was silent. "It's Nanci," he said.

"Is something wrong? Is she all right?" questioned Norrin, his eyes beaming toward Sam and his voice unsteady.

There was no answer. Before another word could be spoken, Sam took off, moving considerably fast. He was not walking or even running, he was flying. Norrin was right behind him, moving as fast as he could on foot. He had no idea what had so worried Sam, but he knew Sam wasn't the type to be riled easily, and the expression on his face closely resembled fear. For that reason, Norrin had activated his adrenaline factor. Cyndi followed the two men but, in her condition, she could move only so fast.

Sam had flown up the path leading up to his house and, before he had reached his office, had telekinetically opened the secret entrance. The same had been done before reaching the front door to his home. As a rule, Sam was always certain to make sure the coast was clear before using his telekinetic gifts around

the grounds of the estate. There was always the concern that someone might see him. This time, however, he had foregone the routine cautionary procedures, flying right out the front door and down the path leading to the gates. As he neared the gates, Sam altered his trajectory and flew over them, stopping in mid-air, pivoting, and landing on the pavement just outside of them.

Once on the ground, Sam looked toward Nanci, who was curled in a ball leaning against one of the brick pillars of the gates. She was sobbing and breathing heavily.

"Nanci?" said Sam.

She lifted her head from her knees and looked into Sam's eyes. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Many emotions were reflected on Nanci's face, sorrow, fear, remorse, and guilt to name only a few. These things were not only apparent on her face but, also, in the thoughts that she was involuntarily projecting. Nanci's feelings were so intense that to mask them or hide them would have been impossible.

Up until that point, Sam had respected Nanci's right to the privacy of her thoughts. But, in her current condition, Sam felt it essential to uncover the reasons behind Nanci's apparent break down. What he discovered pained his heart. Not only his, but also, Cyndi's. Upon sensing Sam's distressed feelings, Cyndi broke the rule she had set for herself and, even though pregnant, read Sam's thoughts. So overwhelmed with what he had just taken in, Sam hadn't thought to make the information he had just ascertained inaccessible to his wife. The news so troubled Cyndi that the child within her womb, feeling her sadness, became agitated, thrusting back and forth. Immediately, Cyndi's attention turned toward her baby. She rubbed and patted her stomach telling the baby inside her that everything was fine, and that everything would be okay.

"I don't understand," said Sam, at a whispers volume as he stood beside Nanci.

At that point, Norrin had arrived. He saw Nanci sitting on the ground staring up at Sam, who was standing directly in front of her. The expression on Sam's face looked as though the weight of the world had just been placed on his shoulders.

"Nance? What's wrong? What happened?" asked Norrin, after deactivating his adrenaline factor. "Where's Wade?"

Sam had sent Wade to ensure Nanci would safely escape the mansion where she and Mason had been attending the New Year's Eve gala. However, Wade was nowhere to be seen.

"Wade doesn't know she got away," explained Sam. "He does now. He's on his way here."

Norrin knelt next to Nanci placing his hand on her back. “Honey, what is it?”

Nanci looked into Norrin’s consoling eyes, unable to contain her intensely felt grief. She could see in Norrin’s face his genuine concern for her well-being and his heartfelt desire to make right whatever it was that had wronged her. This grieved Nanci’s soul all the more. In her mind she deserved condemnation, not empathy.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” confessed Nanci. “Norrin, I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” asked Norrin, rubbing his wife’s back affectionately while holding her hand. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You’ve done nothing to be sorry for.”

Norrin’s words of comfort gave none. Their only effect was to add to Nanci’s already bothered conscience. Sam looked at Norrin and as he did, Norrin saw something unbelievable, tears welling in Sam’s eyes. He didn’t understand any of this and his expression clearly reflected that.

Sam nodded a few times, then instructed Norrin to pick Nanci up and carry her to the house. Norrin lifted Nanci, cradling her in his arms and, after Sam had telekinetically opened the gates, walked toward the house with Sam right behind him. Cyndi was headed toward them, moving as fast as she was able in her condition.



Once inside, Norrin set Nanci down on a love seat in the *sala* and took a seat beside her. Sam and Cyndi sat across from them on a reupholstered antique sofa. They were holding hands and looking sick with despair.

Sam spoke up, "I don't understand. How, how could this have happened? When? It makes no sense."

"Give her a moment," prompted Cyndi, speaking in a hushed tone and patting her husband's hand. "Let her gather her thoughts."

"What's going on?" questioned Norrin, still in the dark as to the happenings all seemed aware of but him.

Nanci looked at Norrin, her eyes begging forgiveness though her heart feeling undeserving of it. "I've done things, Norrin. Terrible things. I—"

Nanci's heart was pounding inside her chest and her lungs found it difficult to properly function. She could not hold back her tears and neither could Cyndi. The intense emotions projected by Nanci, as well as her very apparent weighed-down physical state, were having their effect on Cyndi. Sam managed to swallow the lump in his throat suppressing his emotions, something he had become quite skilled in doing.

"Take it slow, Nanci," counseled Sam. "Don't force it."

Telepathically, Cyndi encouraged Sam to mentally aid Nanci in contending with her emotional state, but he refused. He responded to Cyndi commenting that Nanci must come to terms with what she had done and recognize her wrongdoing before any aid could be offered her. To make it easy for her would silently condone Nanci's actions, and Sam would not do that. Recognizing her wrongdoing would be essential for Nanci's recovery, as would the understanding for her need for help. The ordeal was something she'd never be able to get through on her own. She would first need the support of her husband and, secondly, that of all others who loved her.

Nanci tried composing herself, so as to explain all that had taken place over the last few months. "I've been um, I've been doing cocaine since, well since shortly after what happened at the harbor with the Wolves," confessed Nanci.

Norrin's eyes widened as he stared intently at Nanci. Seeing his bewildered stare, Nanci's eyes turned from him. She could not bear to see the disappointment in her husband's eyes. They were accusing, not excusing.

"What?" questioned Norrin. "You're not serious," he said, sounding considerably aggressive.

"Norrin," Sam interrupted. "Heated responses won't help this already difficult situation."

Norrin looked toward Sam and was momentarily silent. "You're right. I'm

sorry,” apologized Norrin, turning toward Nanci. Her head was still turned from him. “Nance, how, how could this happen?”

“It happened after that night at the docks,” explained Nanci. “I was at my apartment, I mean, I mean, Jessica’s apartment, and Jay came over. He was really upset about that guy who was working for the FBI. You know, the one that got shot.”

“Uh huh.”

“He was so angry and confused. He grabbed me, grabbed my arm and told me to do a line,” explained Nanci.

“He what?” questioned Norrin, with gritted teeth.

“He grabbed me. I didn’t want to blow our only in so, so, I did it. I snorted a line.”

Nanci’s words struck a chord in Sam. After all, it had been his idea to have her infiltrate Michael Mason’s organization as an undercover operative.

“He forced you to do this?” Norrin’s eyes were beaming forth his anger. Compassion had quickly left them. “He is going to—”

Nanci quickly turned to Norrin cutting him off. “I could’ve said no, Norrin. I could’ve stopped it right there, but I didn’t. I know sometimes cops will taste a bit of product while undercover making a buy or a bust, just to make it look convincing. I figured I’d be okay. Maybe I took too much, I don’t know. But, it made me feel so good, and that’s what I wanted, to feel good. Taking it eased the pressures, it calmed me down. Everything was piling up and crashing in on me, ya know. I just wanted a little break. A little relief,” Nanci wiped the tears from her cheeks, then turned to Sam. “I should’ve told you, I know. I should’ve said something. But, ah, but before I realized it, I was hooked.”

Norrin quickly turned to Sam. “Did you know about this?” he asked accusingly.

“No I didn’t,” responded Sam. “I know how you all feel about me reading your thoughts without permission. I assumed her mood swings were due to being edgy, fatigued, maybe even overworked. I didn’t want to invade her privacy, so I dismissed them.”

“You thought she was fatigued and overworked and, yet, you still pushed her, didn’t you?” accused Norrin.

“Norrin! This is not Sam’s fault,” insisted Nanci. “It’s mine.”

Nanci was shaking and biting her thumbnail. Norrin could see how distressed she was, so he placed his hands on her shoulders and started to gently rub them.

“Shhh,” he said. “We’ll work this all out. We’ll get you all the help you need.

Sam can help you,” pleaded Norrin, turning to Sam. Although he had just verbally attacked Sam, Sam knew Norrin was emotionally weak, and in his current state Norrin was striking aimlessly at anything in his path.

Before Sam could answer, Nanci divulged more. “I killed a man,” she said, staring at the floor.

Norrin’s heart dropped as the words reached his ears. Sam’s eyes closed and Cyndi wiped her nose as tears continued flowing.

“I killed him for no reason. He saw me when I was high and my hair was moving all around by itself. I wasn’t thinking clearly. I didn’t want him to give me up, so, I broke his neck. I wrapped my hair around his throat and broke his neck,” admitted Nanci.

“You didn’t mean to,” said Norrin. “It was a mistake, an accident. You weren’t responsible.”

“Wasn’t I?” responded Nanci. “Then who was? Huh? Who? His eyes, his dead eyes stared at me as if he knew I was a hypocrite. As if he knew I had just defiled everything I’d ever fought for and believed in. I killed him as if he were nothing. He was a man. He probably has a family somewhere. He had hobbies, hopes and dreams, maybe he even—”

“Nanci!” Sam interrupted. “Don’t do that to yourself. Torturing yourself won’t bring him back.”

There was a deafening silence before Nanci solemnly said, “I guess I’m going to jail.”

“No you’re not!” Norrin fervently asserted.

“I killed a man, Norrin. I killed him for no reason. Even under the influence of drugs, I’m still guilty of second-degree murder.”

“I don’t care! You’re not going to jail!” insisted Norrin.

Nanci looked at Norrin as tears welled in both of their eyes. “If you came across some junkie who in a drug induced rage killed somebody, what would you do? What would you do?” she whispered.

Norrin grabbed hold of Nanci’s hands and looked directly into her eyes. “You’re not a junkie,” he said, as tears rolled down his cheeks. “You just need help, that’s all. Help. We’ll get help.”

As Sam listened to Norrin’s words, he felt like such a hypocrite, for he too felt just as Norrin did. He wanted to help Nanci, and yet, he had spent years of his life battling against drug dealers and drug users. Also, on more than a few occasions, he had apprehended murderers. Now, the wife of one of his own best friends had involved herself in both of these transgressions, and he was contemplating sweeping Nanci’s misdeeds under the figurative rug.

Overlooking her crimes was wrong, and Sam knew it, but what was he going to do? Send her to prison? Norrin would never allow that, and Sam still felt a degree of responsibility for Nanci's downfall. He had encouraged her to take on the role as Jessica Savin. He, although having the opportunity to read Nanci's thoughts at anytime, chose not to. Perhaps if he had, perhaps if he had disregarded her personal feelings and her right to privacy, he may have put an end to this long before it had the opportunity to escalate to the point of addiction and fatality.

Sam could sense Nanci was about to tell Norrin the final bit of information that, no doubt, would have crushed his spirit entirely. The fact that her relationship with Mason had escalated to a physical level had not been openly revealed.

"Norrin, I, there's—" as Nanci spoke, Sam quickly cut her off.

"Norrin, there's going to be a rough road ahead," said Sam. "Nanci's going to need your love, assistance, and your understanding more than she ever has before."

"She'll have them," swore Norrin, still protectively looking upon his wife.

Nanci's eyes turned to Sam. She realized he had stopped her from admitting infidelity. Perhaps he felt that it was more than Norrin could bear at this point and, so, he stopped her.

"With time and repentance, Nanci, all can be forgiven," counseled Sam. "You have a difficult road ahead but, I promise, it's one you won't travel alone. We'll stand by your side. All of us."

Nanci tried to smile but her grief coupled with the incredible loyalty being displayed by her friends was more than she could withstand. She burst into tears and began sobbing. Norrin held her close, kissing the crown of her head and reassuring her that, eventually, everything would work itself out.

After things had somewhat calmed, Sam encouraged Norrin to take Nanci to one of the upstairs bedrooms and allow her to get some rest. Norrin walked with Nanci, hand in hand, up the stairs and into one of the guest rooms, where he laid beside her while she slept. At first, Nanci seemed to quiver and breathe irregularly while she slept but, after awhile, she became more restful. Once Norrin saw that she was sleeping peacefully, he too fell asleep.

Downstairs Cyndi dried her eyes and tried to regain her composure. "What's going to happen to her?" she asked Sam.

Looking at Cyndi, Sam truthfully said, "I don't know."

"She killed a man," said Cyndi. "I can't believe that. It wasn't in battle. It wasn't even to save someone else's life."

"It was because of the drugs," said Sam angrily. "People want to pretend that

drugs don't affect them when used recreationally. People want to believe that they have everything under control, that they can stop at any time. They feel that no one has the right to tell them what they can or cannot do with their own bodies.

"And yet, those same people suddenly become victims when they finally realize that they can't stop at any time. Now, suddenly, they realize they're addicts, and that if they had listened to those that have unequivocally proven drugs are harmful, not only to themselves but others, they wouldn't be stealing from their friends and family. They wouldn't be indebted to some pusher who's threatening to cut off pieces of their bodies, a little at a time, until they've paid in full. They wouldn't be lying in a pool of their own urine and vomit too blasted to utter a word, much less comprehend one. And let's not forget the four-year-old girl, whose body is crushed to death by a two-ton car because some imbecile decides to get behind the wheel while in a drug-induced stupor. If they'd only taken the time to listen, they wouldn't be lying in some gutter in a pile of their own defecation, thin, pale, and dead due to an overdose."

Sam had become incensed and his feelings of compassion had seemingly vanished. Although still feeling partially to blame for Nanci's actions, Sam couldn't believe she would be so foolish as to travel down a path that she knew would lead to a dead end.

Cyndi quickly reminded Sam, touching the back of his arm, "Remember, she's going to need our love, understanding, and assistance to make it through this," she said, using Sam's own words.

"I know," he said. "It just really upsets me that something like this could've even happened, that this could be our reality. Not in a million years could I have ever seen this coming."

"None of us could've, hon. This may be our biggest struggle to date," stated Cyndi. "It'll be a true test of who we are and how strong our steel is, *isn't it?*"

"She'll need rehab, that's for sure," said Sam, lifting his hand to his forehead. "I can't send her to jail. Doing that would mean publicizing her abilities and ours as well. I can't, I won't do that. Still, I can't just slap her wrist and tell her she's a bad girl either."

"If you're suggesting that we take the responsibility of acting as judge and jury, the only thing we can do without repercussions to us as well as her, is to remove her abilities. We'd have to take away the gifts she was born with."

"Do you realize that in doing that, it would be like paralyzing any other person? It would be no different than taking away the use of their arms or legs."

"Yes, I do. But, what Nanci did, murdering a man, is an unspeakable crime.

And no matter how much we love her, no matter how much this affects us personally, we can't let this action go unanswered. To excuse this would be like saying we have the right to decide who lives and who dies. I'm not qualified to make that type of decision. Are you?"

Sam's silence more than answered Cyndi's question.

"We have two options," continued Cyndi. "We can turn her over to the authorities and allow *them* to judge her in *their* courts, or we can deal with this issue ourselves. It happened in our community among one of our own people. If Nanci is the person I know she is, living with the guilt of what she's done, as well as accepting the punishment we administer, will duly compensate for her crime."

"Tell that to the man whose neck she snapped."

"I know what she did was horrible, but we don't have a lot of options here, Sam."

"I know. I know. We'll put it to a vote then. You, me, Norrin, and Wade."

"Norrin will never—"

"Norrin will do the right thing. He may not like it, but, he'll do the right thing. I'll talk to him."

"Talk to him about what?" asked Wade, as he entered the room. "What's going on? Why did Nanci leave without me? I thought we were supposed to regroup to make sure she got away safely and unnoticed."

Sam advised Wade to sit down before explaining to him what had transpired. Wade unzipped his uniform down to his belly and then took a seat. Sam began relaying to Wade what he had acquired after reading Nanci's thoughts, as well as the things she had openly confessed. As Sam divulged the information he still could not believe it was real. He shared everything except for certain personal information unnecessary that Wade know. The thought of Nanci sharing any intimacy with Mason sickened Sam, and there was no need to burden Wade with that knowledge, nor have him share in those feelings of disgust.

Wade listened to every word that Sam said although it was nearly impossible to believe them. "Are you sure?" asked Wade. It was a ridiculous question but it was the only response that came to mind. Of course Sam was sure. His abilities empowered him to be nothing less than sure. The expression worn on Sam's face in response to Wade's question said all of that, without speaking a single word aloud.

"What now?" asked Wade, accepting his first question had already been answered.

"I'm not sending her to one of *their* courts to be sentenced and rot in jail, if that's what you mean," said Sam unflinchingly.

“I can understand that,” commented Wade. “But killing a man, you can’t just overlook that. The drugs are one thing, but murder, that’s something else entirely.”

“I have no intension of overlooking it,” replied Sam. “She’ll pay for her crime. She’ll pay in the worst way one of our kind can. She’ll be denied the use of her abilities.”

“You’re gonna take away her ability to utilize her hair?”

“We’re going to put it to a vote. You, me, Cyndi, and Norrin. Majority rules. A tie leans in Nanci’s favor.”

“Norrin will never vote against Nanci.”

“Norrin knows right from wrong. He knows what Nanci’s done is inexcusable. By all rights she should stand trial in public court. But, for that to happen, all of our lives would wind up thrown into chaos. I won’t have that. This is an internal matter, and we must deal with it internally.”

“Have you told Norrin and Nanci about this yet?”

“Soon. She’s resting now. Norrin’s with her. First, I’ll discuss this with him and, then, we’ll set up a time and date after that. Nanci needs a few days to recoup, to try and get her head on straight. After that, after she’s thinking more clearly. We’ll deal with this then.”

CHAPTER XXXI

Gone Are the Days of Youth and Innocence

Four days into the new year Norrin, Nanci, and Wade gathered at Sam and Cyndi's house. All five assembled in the underground lair for an unpleasant but necessary meeting. The time had come for Nanci's fate to be determined as to whether she would be allowed to keep the extraordinary ability of utilizing her living hair, or if it would be stripped from her.

Surprisingly, when Norrin, Nanci, and Wade had reached the lair, they found Rachel seated and waiting for them.

"I'm here as an observer only," she said. "And, then, support once this thing is over."

The others each took a seat, Sam, Norrin, Wade, and Cyndi in four consecutive chairs and Nanci in a seat facing them. Anxiety was nibbling at Nanci, but she wasn't going to feel sorry for herself or hope for the best. She knew what the outcome of this gathering would be and she hoped for nothing more than to face it with bravery and dignity.

Sam began speaking clarifying why they had all assembled and the circumstances surrounding the decision that had to be made. Emotions were high in the room and each individual tried their best, not to visibly allow those emotions to overtake them. No one made it through the process without, at one

point or another, having to force back tears.

After all was said and done, Sam asked Nanci if she wanted to testify in her own behalf or if she had anything she'd like to add to what had been said.

Her response was, "No. I'm guilty. Nothing I can say will rectify what I've done."

"Very well then," said Sam.

It was a secret ballot. Each person was to write innocent or guilty on a piece of paper, fold it and pass it to Sam. Once he received each ballot, he placed them into a small container and shuffled them around. After doing that, Sam pulled each ballot, one by one, and read them aloud. It was unanimous. Nanci was guilty.

"The verdict is unanimous," said Sam. "You have been found guilty by a jury of your peers of drug abuse and murder. It is the decision," Sam stopped. Tears were forming in his eyes and before he could continue, he had to regain his composure. Sam was looking at Nanci and she at him. Nanci could see how difficult this was for Sam, so she tried to force a smile and nodded for him to continue.

Sam swallowed the lump in his throat, licked his lips and did his best to continue. "It is the decision of this body that you be denied your natural-born ability to utilize your living hair as an appendage. From this day forth, it will be nothing more than a dead, useless limb."

For more than half of her life Nanci had enjoyed the use of her hair; it functioning like any other necessary part of her body. And now, she was going to be denied that privilege for the rest of her life. Sam's analogy was exact. She would now feel no different from a person who had become paralyzed.

"Before your sentence is carried out, we offer you one last opportunity to use your ability, if you'd like," extended Sam.

Nanci stood up and walked over to her husband, kneeling in front of him. She took hold of Norrin's hands with her own and with a lock of her hair, she wiped the two tears rolling down his cheeks. Afterward, she stood up and returned to her seat.

There was a brief silence and, then, Sam said, "So long Gorgon." With that, the life in Nanci's hair was gone and it was now as dead as any other human head of hair. Nanci's four accusers sat silent until Sam finally said, "This meeting is adjourned."

Once those words were spoken, all except Sam moved speedily toward Nanci. They embraced her, reassuring her that everything would be okay, and that each one of them loved her very much. Sam stood back as conflicting

feelings of sorrow and a sense of justice each took their turns possessing him.

Through the crowd, Nanci looked at Sam. She called his name and he lifted his head toward her.

“Sam, I am so sorry,” she said, moving toward him. Sam grabbed hold of Nanci and held her tightly to himself. It was an unexpected burst of feeling rarely shown by Sam. Nanci returned his hug with her whole strength.

“It’ll be okay,” he whispered in Nanci’s ear. “You’ll get through this, both of you.”

The three days that had preceded the committee meeting were difficult days to get through, as were the following three. Those that become addicted to drugs often find that their bodies go through withdrawals when they attempt to stop. Nanci went through the typical withdrawal symptoms, cold sweats, shakes, and some delirium.

Through it all, Norrin stayed right beside her. When she suffered depression, he consoled her. With every victory, just making it through each day, he cheered her on. Norrin was determined to see Nanci through this and work toward ensuring the life she wanted, the life he felt she deserved.

Nanci had enrolled herself in a drug rehabilitation program to get the professional assistance she would need to get clean and return to a normal way of life. The type of program she was enrolled in allowed her to return home each day, but, she was required to pass a drug test every day while at the rehabilitation facility. Should she fail the test, the program would require that she become a temporary resident of the treatment center for a minimum of one month.

After the first week, Nanci’s cocaine craving began to wane somewhat. It would take time and a great deal of effort to fully overcome the desire but Nanci was committed to the achieving of that goal. From time to time, she thought about losing the ability to utilize her hair and, on occasion, found herself attempting to reach for an item or close or open a door with her hair. It never seemed to take very long for her to realize that doing those things was no longer an option. It troubled Nanci that there was no longer life left in her hair but, even so, she honestly believed her punishment was a just one. She never complained or looked for sympathy because of her handicap; she simply learned to live with it.

Sam had made arrangements for Jessica Savin’s apartment to become nothing more than a memory, a bad memory. When he had originally set up the apartment a one year lease was required. Sam had to buy out the remaining months to break the lease, but he was willing to do whatever it took to close this disgusting chapter in everyone’s life. After removing all traces of illegal activity, Sam called in the Salvation Army to empty the apartment and take everything

away. And they did take everything away; the furniture, the kitchenware, the nick knacks, the entertainment equipment, the clothes, the jewelry, and anything else that was there.

As the truck pulled away Sam found himself deep in thought. In true form, Jessica had tainted the lives of those around her and, without remorse or even giving it a second thought, she had removed herself from the equation, leaving those behind to pick up their own broken pieces. It was the type of person Jessica Savin was. Sam was gratified knowing that she was dead, never to return.

Nanci spent the next week and a half making progress in rebuilding her life. She worked hard to regain the trust of her husband and friends and did her best to make them proud of her progress. She still had not told Norrin of her infidelity. A part of her wanted to bury that memory and deny it had ever happened, a trait in which women often seem to excel. But, Nanci realized that if she were to truly have a strong foundation for her marriage, it was vital that she tell Norrin the truth. She owed him that. Although she wasn't sure exactly when that would be, she felt it had to be soon. The burden of the secret was becoming too much to bear, and forcing Sam and Cyndi to remain silent while they waited on her was unfair to them.

Nanci had put Jessica Savin's life behind her. All traces of that person's existence had been erased, all but one. It was something that Nanci had completely forgotten about. On the morning of January 17, while at home alone in her bedroom, Nanci heard a familiar sound. It was the ringing of the mobile phone that Jay had given her toward the beginning of their short-lived relationship. Nanci had stuffed it into one of her handbags and forgotten about it. At last she had remembered the phone had been turned off, but, somehow, either by being jostled or something hitting against the handbag, it had been activated. It rang six times before Nanci removed it from her handbag and answered it.

"Hello," she answered. There was an unsteady tone in her voice.

"Jess? Jessica? It's Mike. Are you okay?" asked Mason.

"Uh, yeah Mike. Yeah, I'm okay," she replied.

"When the cops showed up at Joseph's, I tried to find you. I looked everywhere. Where'd you go?"

"When I, ah," there was a pause. "When I heard all the gun fire, and screaming, and things breaking, I got out of there. I mean, I looked for you, but I couldn't hang around there too long. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Where've you been? I went by your apartment a couple of times within the last few days and knocked but you never answered. I happened to run into one of your neighbors and they said you'd moved."

“Um, no, not really. The, ah, the cops must’ve known I was at the party or somehow connected to illegal activity. However they got their information, they went to my apartment and raided it. I wasn’t there when they showed up, but they took everything. I’ve been staying with a friend the last couple of weeks.”

“Where? I’ll come and get you.”

Nanci realized that Mason coming and getting her was in no way an option. She quickly changed the subject. “What happened to you? Where’ve you been?” she asked.

“I went looking for you at Joseph’s place when the gun fight broke out. I looked forever, but when I couldn’t find you, and things were obviously too difficult to stay; I shot my way out of there. Those new armor-piercing bullets I recently started stocking came in handy. After dropping a few cops, I made my way to a car, hot-wired it, and got out of there. I drove down to Virginia and have been hiding out there waiting for things to calm down.”

“Where are you now?”

“A hotel in Randallstown. I can come and get you if you want. “

“And go where?”

“I’m getting out of Maryland, at least for a while. Things have been too weird here over the last several months. I could use a fresh start; find a new place to hang my hat.”

“I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know? You don’t have any reason to stay here. Your mom went back to Russia. You don’t have any real ties here, right? Come with me.”

There was a silence.

“Can I think about it?” asked Nanci.

“What’s wrong, Jess?” asked Mason

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. It’s just that things have gotten really weird recently, more so than I’ve ever known them to be. I need a few days to think, that’s all. Is that too much to ask?”

“In three days I’m having a truck pick up all the stuff I have stored at the warehouse I keep downtown. A driver and crew will load everything that night and move it to a location I’ve arranged in Norfolk. I’ll call you that afternoon. Pack a bag. Say goodbye to your friends and I’ll come and get you. It’s not like you can’t come back to visit.”

Again there was an uncomfortable silence.

“Okay,” said Nanci. “Call me on Saturday. I’ll have made my decision by then.”

After hanging up the phone, Nanci’s stomach started churning and a shiver

ran up her spine. Everything about the past several months, everything she had spent the last 17 days trying to put behind her came flooding back to mind. She had thought Mason forever gone from her life, he and his organization. The very thought of the man and all of his disgusting involvements sickened Nanci. Recalling how low she had allowed herself to sink into the filth of Mason's debased and disgraceful way of life felt abhorrent.

And yet, a small voice in the back of her mind, an unconscious exhortation and prodding from a thing, a soulless creature called Jessica Savin, goaded Nanci to accept Mason's invitation. What did she have to gain by staying in Baltimore? A continued marriage to an animal trying to pass himself off as a man. A mediocre life working at a clothing store with little to no recognition or appreciation for her efforts, barely making ends meet. Association with supposed friends that believed they were better than her. Pointing at her. Laughing at her. Judging her. They had, after all, robbed her of her most precious living hair and sentenced her to a life of disability. Michael was offering her a future. What else was anyone purposing that could contend with that offer?

The two conflicting notions warred within Nanci. She was still very fragile and this was an unfortunate time for her to face such a test. It was far too soon. She wasn't ready.

It was shortly after 4:00 P.M. on January 20, when Michael Mason pulled up to a warehouse building in Downtown Baltimore driving a rental car. He was wearing sunglasses and an oversized skiing jacket. As he stepped out of the car, Mason scanned the area making sure all appeared safe. He fumbled with his keys, eventually finding the one that fit the lock for the warehouse. Approaching the door, Mason took one final look around. Once convinced the coast was clear, he inserted the key into the lock and turned it. As he did, a hand touched his shoulder.

Mason quickly turned taking an offensive position. "God! Jess! You startled me," said Mason, relaxing a bit once he recognized the familiar face.

"God? I thought you didn't believe in God," said Nanci.

"I stand corrected," said Mason, a smile spreading across his face. "So, ah, so it looks like you decided to join me after all."

"I told you on the phone not two hours ago, I would."

"I know. I just had a feeling you might have second thoughts. You seemed a bit hesitant while we were talking."

"Well, the friend I was staying with, it was hard to say goodbye."

“You can always come back and visit. Once we’re established in a new place you can come back whenever you want.”

“Nah. I’ve said my goodbyes. There’s nothing left for me here.”

“Cool. I wanna grab a few things before the guys come to load up tonight. Then, we can take off.”

After unlocking the second lock, Mason slid open the warehouse door and Nanci followed him inside. As Mason looked toward the far wall, he noticed that the room where he stored the majority of the guns and ammunition imported from Russia and Germany was not locked. Not only was it unlocked, but the door was wide open. Mason walked slowly toward the room, approaching cautiously with a look of confusion on his face. Only steps from the doorway, he noticed the Masterlock on the ground, as well as a combination lock. The lock attached to the door must have been picked as it was not visibly damaged. When Mason finally entered the room he found it empty. As Nanci caught up to him, she too saw that the contents of the room had been removed. Her eyes were wide and her face reflected confusion.

“Mike, what’s—”

“Shhh,” said Mason, cutting Nanci off as he put an index finger to his lips. He motioned to Nanci to stay behind him as he pulled a gun from the front of his pants. The two made their way to the stairs leading to the second level, both moving quite cautiously.

Mason kept his gun poised, his arm slightly bent at the elbow. Once at the top of the stairs, he peeked around the corner to see if anyone was there. After he was convinced all was clear, Mason continued moving with Nanci right behind him. On this level there were two large rooms. Assessing the situation, it was clear that the locks on these rooms had also been opened and all of the contents from each room emptied. The drugs, the weapons, illegal magazines, photographs, and video tapes imported from Europe and Asia had all been removed.

“Mike, what’s going on?” insisted Nanci. “I thought you—”

Mason turned to Nanci and, with a stern expression, said, “Quiet.”

He proceeded down the hallway and to the stairs leading to the third and final level. At the top of the stairs there was a door. Normally, as all other doors in the warehouse, this door would be locked. This particular room housed the purest, the highest quality drugs including Colombian cocaine, heroine from Amsterdam, the highest quality marijuana, not that cheap crap from Tijuana. The door to the room was closed but not locked. Mason quietly turned the handle and flung open the door, fully extending the arm that held his gun.

Mason scanned the room from right to left. He saw nothing but the tinted windows and the rectangular center support beam in the middle of the room. Mason looked at Nanci obviously confused. A look of fear spread across Nanci's face. Mason stepped into the room and relaxed his arm, tucking his gun back into the front of his pants.

As Nanci entered the room, her mouth hung open as she scanned the barren area. She continued walking, passing Mason until she had reached the center of the room. As she passed the center support beam, Nanci stopped and turned back toward Mason. The look of surprise had disappeared from her face. It was replaced with a straight-faced stare.

"It's over, Michael," said Nanci.

"What?" replied Mason.

"Your operation, your business, your organization, your life as you know it, it's all over," responded Nanci.

"What are you talking about, Jessica?" asked Mason abruptly.

"My name is not Jessica," answered Nanci. "It's Gorgon."

"Gorgon? What are you talking about?" demanded Mason, growing more irritated.

"You heard her," said the man in the red costume, stepping from behind the center support beam. "She said her name is Gorgon. You may wanna have a doctor check your hearing," advised Scorpion. "I hear prison doctors are fairly capable."

"You!" responded Mason, visibly caught off guard. He turned and looked at Nanci. Her stone-faced expression had not changed.

Mason started to smile and even chuckled a bit. "You're one of them, aren't you?" he asked rhetorically, as he shook his head, unable to believe the snare he had just stepped into.

Nanci didn't respond. She simply continued staring at Mason.

Still laughing, he said, "The whole time you were with me, with Jay, you were working for them. It's my own fault, really. I've always told myself, never get too comfortable with just one woman," said Mason, lifting his hand to his face and still chuckling.

"Norrin," projected Sam. "Everything under control there?"

"Yeah," responded Norrin.

"We're taking him to jail, right?" continued Sam, inferring that Mason was to be taken alive, without using those exact words.

"That's the plan. For the rest of his life," affirmed Norrin.

"Good," responded Sam, feeling more at ease.

“Get the truck ready to transport our prisoner to the local jailhouse.”

“Wade and I are on it. We’ll be waiting for you at the truck,” said Sam.

“You’re coming with us, Mason,” said Norrin aloud. “We’re gonna introduce you to a friend of ours. He has a guest room all set ready and waiting for you to arrive. It’s the six-by-six luxury model.”

“You set me up and I fell right into your trap,” said Mason. “How stupid am I?” He continued on as if he either he hadn’t heard what Norrin had just said, or as if he wasn’t paying attention.

“Make it easy on yourself, Michael,” recommended Nanci. “Just—”

“Shut up,” said Mason, who had pulled his gun and was no longer displaying a jovial expression. He had replaced it with a look of rage. His eyes turned toward Nanci, condemning her for betraying him, as he said, “You whore. You cheep whore.”

Incensed at Mason’s comment, Norrin stepped forward.

“Yeah? Go ahead hero,” taunted Mason, pointing his gun at Norrin. “You think you’re some cartoon character or something? I’ve heard some pretty wild stories about you. Let’s see how tough you are with a bullet in your gut.”

Norrin smiled and patted his chest. “Kevlar,” he said.

Pausing, Mason’s expression seemed to indicate he that was impressed. Then, he began smiling. He held his gun in the air, his arm bent at the elbow, and began waiving it back and forth. “Armor-piercing bullets,” he retorted, with a grin.

Norrin’s face began to scowl as he said, “You’ll only get one shot.”

“I’ll only need one shot,” assured Mason.

“Even if you do kill me, Mantis and Toad will never let you out of this building in one piece.”

“Mantis and Toad? How pathetic. Three little boys that never grew up.” Mason paused. “Your lives as you’ve known them are over,” he said, throwing Nanci’s words right back at her.

“What? You gonna tell the world who we really are? Gonna reveal our secret?” taunted Norrin. “Go ahead. See if anyone believes the insane ravings of a convicted felon. Oh, and just in case anyone does,” said Norrin while smirking, “Mantis will just erase those memories from their minds,” he continued, arching forward as if accepting Mason’s challenge. “Maybe yours, too.”

Mason stiffened his arm, pulling the hammer back on his weapon.

“Michael no! It’s over,” said Nanci. “Don’t make this any harder on yourself.”

Mason looked into Nanci’s eyes as they stared back at him. He saw the face of the woman who had intoxicated him with her beauty. The woman whose

strength and determination was unmatched by any other woman he had ever known. The woman whose cunning had so impressed him. His arm dropped lifeless at his side and his head collapsed to his chest, as though it were too heavy a weight to lift.

Seeing that caused Nanci to breathe a sigh of relief. That was until Mason, unexpectedly, lifted his arm and with a crazed look in his eyes pulled the trigger one, two, three times. There was no time to react, no chance to evade, only a brief point in time to watch helplessly and await the outcome.

The bullets tore through cloth and flesh, one by one, as they passed through Nanci's body. Norrin looked on in disbelief as his wife's body violently thrashed about, falling backward with the last shot. Instinctively, he grabbed her, cushioning her fall as the two collapsed onto the floor.

Norrin looked into Nanci's eyes as he witnessed the pain, fear, and terror on her face. He tore off his mask and grasped Nanci's hand. He looked to the doorway but Mason was gone.

"Nance? Baby? You're okay. You're gonna be okay," said Norrin, trying to comfort her.

Nanci was in shock and severe pain. She found it nearly impossible to focus. "Norrin? Norrin?" she called out.

"I'm here baby. I'm right here."

"Norrin? What, what happened?" she asked, as pools of blood grew larger beneath her.

"Oh, oh, baby," responded Norrin. His breaths were heavy and his voice cracking. Tears formed in his eyes as he wiped the hair from Nanci's face. She began coughing, once, and, then, again. With the second cough, blood spewed from her mouth, spattering forth, dripping from one of its corners and staining her teeth. She tried to grip Norrin's hand tightly, but she hadn't the strength.

"Hold on, Nance. Just hold on. Sam and Wade will be here in a few seconds. We'll get you help. We'll get—"

Norrin was unable to finish his sentence as the emotion within him could no longer be contained. He began sobbing and crying.

Though weak, Nanci lowered her eyebrows and reached for Norrin's lips. "No. Nah-no. Don't cry. Shhh," she said.

Her arm was too heavy to hold in place and collapsed to the ground. Norrin gasped as it did, then pulled Nanci to his chest, cradling her in his arms. Barely able to lift her head she looked into Norrin's eyes.

"Love you," she mumbled.

"I love you too. I love you so much."

“Nev-, never stop—”

The pain was beginning to overtake Nanci and even speaking was now too much for her. Even still, she mustered enough strength to say, “Never stop being Scorpion.”

Nanci knew that she had nothing else to leave her husband. She’d given him no children to remember her by and felt as though she had left Norrin with one too many painful memories. It was the only thing left she could selflessly give.

“Nanci, I—”

Before Norrin could finish his sentence, a final bullet made its way from Mason’s gun to Nanci’s temple. She died instantly. Mason had been hiding in wait for Norrin right outside of the door, expecting that he would pursue him. With one last insult, he flashed Norrin a smile and fled down the stairs.

Quickly turning back to his wife, Norrin looked upon Nanci’s silent bloodied face as he held her lifeless body in his arms.

“AAAHH!!” he cried out, lifting his head as pain coursed through his entire body.

As Sam and Wade emerged, running up the stairs and through the doorway, the sight they beheld was heartrending. Norrin was holding Nanci’s limp body to his own, cradling it, clinging to it, as though making a vain effort to console a lifeless corpse.

Taking light steps, Sam carefully approached Norrin.

“Norrin?” he whispered.

Norrin lifted his head, his eyes meeting Sam’s. Tears were streaming down his face, his skin was flushed, and his expression reflected complete and utter defeat. Sam felt his own face beginning to drop as he knelt down beside Norrin, putting his arm around him.

“I’m sorry,” said Sam. The words could not have been any less adequate but Sam felt it necessary to say them nonetheless.

Norrin began rocking back and forth. “We have to help her, Sam. We have to help Nanci.”

“Norrin, we can’t help her. She’s, she’s beyond our help,” responded Sam, as he felt the lump rise in his throat.

Norrin looked helplessly at Sam. “Something, there’s gotta be something.”

Looking upon his best friend with a sorrowful expression, Sam shook his head. A gasp of air forced its way into Norrin’s lungs as he turned back toward his wife, gripping her even tighter.

“Norrin, we have to go,” said Sam, as the sound of sirens in the distance were becoming louder and louder.

“Okay, okay,” said Norrin, somewhat incoherently. “I’ll carry her. I’ll carry Nanci.”

“Norrin, we can’t take her with us,” informed Sam.

“What?” Norrin’s heartache quickly seemed to vanish as he turned toward Sam, confusion and anger reflected on his face.

“We can’t take her with us,” said Sam again. “Look, look around you. Nanci’s blood is all over this room. Her fingerprints are probably all over this building. She’s not wearing gloves, Norrin. This is a crime scene now. If we take her with us and the police find her prints here, much less her blood all over the place, but no body, it’ll raise even more questions than if they were to find her here. Too many people know about Mason and this place now. We just delivered all of his stuff to the cops with a map and directions on how to get here. Don’t you think they’ll eventually figure out that the loathsome vigilantes were behind that? If they follow the trail it will lead them back to us. Our identities, our very lives would be compromised.”

Norrin stared at Sam as though he were a madman. The very thought of leaving Nanci behind seemed absurd and there was no way he was going to allow that to happen.

“I know, I know what you’re thinking,” continued Sam. “But, if they find Nanci here, we can at least come up with a credible story. Nanci’s been in rehab, there’s documented proof of that. Mason’s a drug dealer. It’ll all add up and they’ll leave it alone.”

“So, Nanci becomes a junkie who couldn’t get clean, couldn’t cut it, and ran back to her filthy pusher with open arms?” questioned Norrin.

“A deal gone bad,” answered Sam. “It happens all the time.”

Norrin looked at Sam with disgust. “We’re not leaving her.”

“Norrin, there’s nothing we can do for her!” insisted Sam. “Maybe, there’s one last thing she can do for us.”

“Screw you!”

“We need to leave, Norrin. Now.”

Norrin looked down at Nanci’s still body and all his aggressions disappeared. They were quickly replaced with grief. “Not leavin’ her. Not leavin’ her, Sam. Not leavin’ Nanci,” he said, rocking back and forth again.

“Norrin, I’m sorry,” said Sam consolingly. “I wish there were another way.”

“Uh-ah. Not leavin’ her,” insisted Norrin. “I won’t leave you, Nanci. I won’t leave you, baby.”

Sam could sense reality quickly fading from Norrin’s mind as his one focus seemed fixed.

The sirens were getting closer and Sam knew action was urgent. “We don’t have time for this,” he demanded.

Feeling he had no other option, Sam touched Norrin’s mind with his own, causing Norrin to fall unconscious. Sam looked to Wade and instructed him to carry Norrin out of the room and down to the delivery truck. Wade lifted Norrin, carrying him over his shoulder, and headed for the exit. Stopping just short of the doorway, Wade stopped and turned to look back. On the portion of Wade’s face that was visible, there was an obvious sadness.

“Go, Wade,” repeated Sam.

Wade turned and exited the room.

Sam stood from his kneeling position and looked down one last time upon Nanci’s lifeless body. “You were truly a hero,” he whispered. “You are a hero.” There was a brief pause and, then, “Goodbye, Nanci,” said Sam. He then turned and left the room.

There was a blackness followed by a blurred outline. Slowly, things shifted into focus. Norrin began to blink his eyes, now able to recognize his surroundings and see things clearly. At first, it felt as if he were waking from a deep sleep and as memories began to piece together, a part of him thought, “What a horrible dream.”

But, as he looked around more carefully, Norrin realized that he was lying down in the back of the delivery truck he and his friends often used as a decoy when out on missions. He glanced at his hand and his arm seeing they were clothed in red material. He was in costume and that meant that his memories weren’t of a dream, they were of actual events. Events he had experienced and suffered through.

Quickly, Norrin was on his feet. “Where is she?” he demanded. “Where’s Nanci?”

Sam was sitting in the front of the truck in the passenger’s seat and Wade was driving. Wade took a deep breath and tried to stay focused on the road. Sam, however, stood up and walked through the opening leading to the storage compartment of the truck. He held onto a railing which ran along the roof from the front to the rear of the storage compartment.

“I’m sorry, Norrin,” said Sam.

“Where’s Nanci, Sam?” asked Norrin a second time. “Where’s my wife?”

“We had to leave her behind, Norrin,” answered Sam. “I’m sorry.”

“You son of a—”

“Norrin if we’d have brought her, what’s left of our lives would be over.”

“I don’t care! I don’t care about your life! My life is over!”

“Getting past this will be the hardest thing you’ve ever had to do, maybe even harder than getting past the death of your mother. But Nanci wouldn’t want you to give up on life. She’d want you to continue on and try and find some peace through all of this.”

“Don’t tell me what Nanci would want! You didn’t know her! You have no idea what she would want!”

“Norrin—”

“You don’t care about her! You never did! Don’t stand there and pretend that you know her! You used her! You manipulated her as an end to your means. And now that she’s dead, you’re still trying to do it to her!”

“I know you’re upset and confused, and that your emotions are running high causing you to say things you don’t really mean.”

“You bet I mean them. I’ll tell you something else, Mantis, I’m gonna find Mason and I’m gonna kill ’im.”

“Norrin—”

“That’s right. I am going to kill him. Kill him slow. And you, if you have any inkling of having anything to do with me from this moment forward, you had better be right by my side. You got a lock on his thought patterns at the warehouse, right?”

Sam was silent, but as he looked down at the floor paneling with discouragement on his face, the answer was clear.

Wade, who had remained silent until this point, repeated Norrin’s question. “You did get a lock on him, didn’t you?”

“I was a little preoccupied, Wade,” responded Sam, not turning his head but looking backward over his shoulder.

Anger and frustration spread across Norrin’s face as his eyes dropped.

“Norrin, we don’t kill,” admonished Sam, in a soft tone.

“HE DIES!” demanded Norrin, using his altered voice.

“Norrin, the minute we start making decisions like who’s allowed to live and who’s condemned to die, we set ourselves up as gods. We don’t have that right.”

Norrin pointed to his chest with his thumb and, with glowing eyes and still speaking in his altered voice, said, “He dies. I am going to kill him, and I’m going to do it with my own claws. I am going to gut him, disembowel him, and when he begs for death, then, then I may let him die.”

“Norrin—”

“And God help anyone that gets in my way.”

“Norrin, listen to me, please, I want Mason just as—”

As Sam was speaking, his words were interrupted, though not by Norrin. The interruption was not a spoken word but, instead, one heard only in his mind.

“Sam,” a thought was projected, ever so faintly.

It had been several weeks since Demitri had first divulged to Mason information regarding the vigilantes known as Mantis, Scorpion, Toad, and Napalm. Demitri had given him their true names, home addresses, and for those who had specific locations, their places of business.

Once in possession of this information, Mason hired four separate individuals to go to the homes and workplaces of the four vigilantes and take photographs. First, they each photographed the homes. After that had been done, Mason sent each photographer to the workplace of an individual whose home they had not photographed.

There was a method to Mason’s madness. He had been advised that some of the vigilantes had the ability to read thoughts, so Mason sent in photographers unaware of why they were taking pictures of people and places unfamiliar to them. Switching the individuals around to complete their task was a clever way to avoid any suspicion that may arise.

Pictures of Sam were taken at his publishing company, pictures of Rachel were taken at the hospital, and pictures of Wade were taken at the various job sites in which he worked. Norrin worked from home, so the photographs of him in his home environment were sufficient, or so Mason believed.

The individual responsible for taking pictures of Norrin at home had only gotten pictures of him. They had gotten none of Nanci. During this time, Nanci was so involved in her role as Jessica Savin that the time spent at she and Norrin’s townhouse was minimal. When the photos of Norrin were delivered to Mason, he surmised that Norrin was single.

The photographer that had gone to Sam’s house, however, had caught glimpses of Cyndi walking about the estate grounds through his long lens. After receiving these pictures, Mason did some investigating. He was able to find out that the woman walking the grounds was Sam’s wife. Her name was Cyndi and the two had been married for more than two years. They were even expecting their first child. Why Demitri hadn’t shared all of this information with Mason eluded him. Nonetheless, he stored the information in a safe place in case, one day, the need arose to use it. That day had come.

Cyndi was curled up in a chair reading aloud from one of her favorite Bronte novels. She liked to read aloud during her pregnancy. She knew that the baby

would hear her voice and perhaps recognize its soothing tone. Secretly, she hoped that the baby may grow up with the same fervent love for reading that both of its parents shared. Reading aloud regularly would, hopefully, go a long way toward instilling that love in her child.

As Cyndi read, she allowed herself to focus on the feelings of the child within her. Again, they were somewhat primitive and unfocused but Cyndi didn't care. She could recognize contentment and the feelings surrounding a sense of safety. Her baby was projecting both.

Cyndi's attention had been so divided, that the feelings of ill will and the sudden stinging in her left arm had completely caught Cyndi off guard. She looked down and saw a small round casing hanging from a needle imbedded in her arm. Its effects were almost instantaneous. Her head began to feel light and she found herself unable to focus. She tried to stand but found her legs unable to straighten. Feeling as if they were made of rubber, Cyndi's legs buckled and she came crashing to the floor. She looked upward as a figure approached, but she was unable to discern who it was. She squinted her eyes and tried to see more clearly. To her chagrin, it was a face that she recognized.

Cyndi had never met Michael Mason. She had never spoken to him or, to her knowledge, even passed him on the street. That being the case, she still recognized him from the picture Sam had projected into her mind so long ago, before they had even known Mason's name. She also recognized him from the images that had been attained after reading Nanci's mind.

Mason was unaware that Cyndi possessed telepathic abilities. He was also unaware that those abilities would be rendered useless due to the amount of sedative with which he had just dosed her. The dosage was more than enough to eliminate any fight she might have in her but not quite enough to render her unconscious.

Mason approached Cyndi with a crazed grin as she lay defenseless on the ground. His first dreadful act was to kick Cyndi in the face. As her head flung sideways, she felt her jaw snap and blood spurt from her mouth. She tried propping herself up on her hands but it was nearly impossible. Mason continued his merciless attack, kicking Cyndi again and again, this time in the ribs. Her body spun before landing on her back. Cyndi felt pain coursing through her body though the sedative seemed to dull it somewhat. Even still, she feared for her child.

"Please," she begged, striving to speak clearly with a broken jaw and a clouded mind.

"What was that?" taunted Mason. "Please?" he said mockingly, imitating

Cyndi's slurred speech. "Please. That must mean you want another. Okay."

Mason stomped down with all his might on Cyndi's right ankle and, then, her knee. She shrieked as the pain shot through her body. The sedative no longer seemed to be doing its job.

"My, my baby," pleaded Cyndi, looking to Mason for mercy.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I wouldn't want the little tyke to feel left out," said Mason, before kicking Cyndi in the stomach twice and, then, a third time. "That better?"

In pain and gripped with fear, Cyndi cried out. "*Ay!*" she screamed, as tears flowed from her eyes.

Mason looked around and noticed a brass lamp sitting on a glass table. He walked over to the table and grabbed the lamp, then pulled the chord from the outlet and tore it from the lamp. As he approached Cyndi, she was holding her stomach with one hand and crying uncontrollably.

"I know, I know," said Mason. "It sucks. But, if your freak of a husband and his band of little pals would have stayed out of my business and kept their noses in their own, none of this would've been necessary. Jessica, or whatever her real name was, wouldn't be dead right now and I wouldn't be here, beating the life out of you," he said, wearing a grin.

Cyndi shuttered at Mason's words. Jessica dead? Nanci dead? She wanted to reach out to Nanci's mind and see if what Mason had just revealed was true, but beaten and drugged, she was unable to do so.

"I've gotta send a message to your husband," continued Mason, walking around Cyndi and looking down at her. "He needs to understand that not only was he a nimrod to pick me to build his little crusade against, but, he also needs a reminder to never involve himself in my business again."

Mason began striking Cyndi with the lamp, again and again. He struck her over and over until his arm grew tired. At that point, he exhaled deeply, after which he stood up and took a moment to admire his work. Cyndi was motionless. She laid there in a pool of her own blood, her body severely bruised, bones fractured and broken, and her face nearly unrecognizable.

"That should do it," said Mason. He tossed the lamp to the ground and wiped the dust from his hands.

Mason had been gone for only a few minutes when one of Cyndi's eyes opened. The other was swollen shut. In her condition, Cyndi should not have been able to move. But, somehow, she reached deep inside herself and, with what little strength she had left, crawled outside, making it as far as the fountain. Once there, she reached for the water. She was on her hands and knees and barely able to support herself. Inches from the water, Cyndi's body gave out and

she fell to the grass. Her physical energy was gone. She had nothing left. With one last act of desperation, Cyndi focused. There was no telling if she'd be able to reach him or not, but she had to try. Cyndi strained and struggled and gave her best effort to send a thought to Sam. She wanted to tell him she loved him. She wanted to call for help. She wanted to send some useful piece of information, knowing it may be her last. The only thing she was able to faintly project was, "Sam."

As the fragile projection made its way to Sam's mind, his eyes widened and a startled expression came across his face. Without warning, the delivery truck's rear doors flung open and Sam, rushing past Norrin, flew through the opening. Norrin rushed to the opened doors grabbing hold of the door jam and looking to see in which direction Sam had sped off. He was moving too fast for Norrin to discern which way he had gone. Never had Norrin seen Sam move so quickly. He ran to the front of the truck peering out the windshield. The area was not unfamiliar; they were only a few miles from Sam and Cyndi's house. Sam must have been heading in that direction.

"What just happened?" asked Wade.

"I don't know. He busted through the back doors and took off," replied Norrin. "I've never seen him move so fast."

As Norrin finished those words, it was as if, for a moment, he and Wade's minds had become linked. There could be only one reason Sam would react in the way he had. The two men turned to each other and simultaneously said, "Cyndi."

Wade pressed the accelerator to the floor and pushed the engine for all it had. As he sped toward the gates of the estate, he advised Norrin, "Hold on." Wade drove the truck right through the gates tearing them from their posts. Both he and Norrin could see two figures progressively drawing closer directly in front of the fountain. As the truck came closer it was apparent that those figures were Sam and Cyndi.

Wade slowed the truck bringing it to a stop. Norrin was out of the truck before it had come to a full stop. As the two men approached, they saw Sam holding Cyndi's severely beaten body in his arms. Both men's hearts sunk.

Wade looked on in horror. "No," he said, in a single breath.

Sam was checking for a pulse and desperately trying to reach Cyndi's mind, though it was not evident.

"Cyn, Cyndi?" Sam said aloud, praying for a response.

She did not respond. She could not respond.

"Oh Cyndi," said Sam, his heart shattered, his soul drowning in anguish.

Norrin and Wade looked on silently as Sam gently ran the back of his fingers across Cyndi's cold and bloodied cheek.

"He killed her," said Sam. "He beat my wife to death."

Tears formed in Sam's eyes as the words escaped his lips. Dripping from his eyes, the tears landed on Cyndi's face. Sam leaned down and tenderly kissed Cyndi's forehead. There was no life in her. Sam's chin became weak with grief and anguish consumed his soul leaving him desolate. Normally, he did his best to conceal any distress he may be feeling, but Sam had neither the strength nor the will. He held Cyndi to his chest, weeping uncontrollably.

Norrin stepped toward Sam, stopping directly in front of him. Sam lifted his head as tears ran down his cheeks and his swollen red eyes stared up at Norrin. Norrin's eyes were squinted. There was no compassion in them.

Gritting his teeth, Norrin looked into Sam's eyes and said, "Now, now are you ready to kill him?"

A man's true convictions can only be tested when they are directly challenged and laid before him. When under the most difficult distressing circumstances he makes a choice, whether to abide by and stick to his beliefs, or yield and succumb to his accuser.

With puffed eyes and a wet face, Sam answered Norrin's challenge. "No, Norrin. We do not kill. We'll find Mason, capture him, and make certain he rots away in a deep dark cell for the rest of his life."

Once that was said, Sam turned back toward Cyndi, holding her close and woefully repeating her name, again and again.

EPILOGUE

A funeral was held at the cemetery on Rossville Boulevard two weeks from the date that Cyndi and Nanci had been murdered. Sam and Norrin both arrived alone. Wade and Rachel, however, arrived together. They both had the good sense to rely on one another during this trialsome time. Cyndi's parents, the Selias, were present as were Nanci's parents, the Leighs. Their sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and several cousins were also in attendance. Many friends as well as workmates, including Tracey Spinnerman and her family, had also come to pay their last respects. Sam's mother and father had come to lend him their love and support during this difficult time. Norrin's family, his father, sisters, step mother, as well as aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents had all offered to come to be with him and strengthen him during this arduous time. He refused all of their offers. He requested that he be allowed to face this on his own, to deal with it in his own way. It was not a wise decision, but sadly, youth and wisdom rarely go hand and hand.

During the course of the eulogy, the minister did his best to share encouraging passages from the bible, such as Revelation 21:4, which promises death being done away with and mourning and outcry being things of the past. Neither Sam nor Norrin found any comfort in his words.

The three graves were near one another, each decorated with elaborate flower arrangements. There was a marker for Cyndi and her unborn child,

whose name had been inscribed as Samuel, and one for Nanci, whose grave sat silently by itself. As Norrin stared at the cold stone marker prepared for his wife, he noticed the inscription. It read, "Beloved wife, Selfless to the end." The words were inadequate, empty; they tried to sum up all that Nanci encompassed in an abbreviated blurb of sentiment. Norrin wanted to dash the headstone to pieces, to declare that Nanci was so much more than a brief description inscribed in some polished stone. But, he kept silent. He maintained decorum. After all, this ceremony wasn't for him. It was for Nanci and Cyndi's friends and family. He and Sam were simply extras at their own wives' funeral.

Norrin scanned the crowd, he and Sam making eye contact only once. When their eyes met, they did not extend comfort to one another. They did not exchange sympathies or encouragement. They stared accusingly at one another, Norrin accusing Sam of manipulating his wife, leading to her abuse of illegal drugs, the murder of another human being, the loss of her most precious and beloved living hair, and, inevitably, her untimely death. Sam's stare accused Norrin of selfishness, his insistence upon doing things his own way, and his delay of action, although prompted of the need to leave a precarious situation multiple times. Precious moments, seconds lost, that had they not been, Sam may have had arrived in time to stop Mason, to have saved Cyndi's life. If nothing else, to at least have said goodbye. Norrin had gotten to say goodbye, to hold his wife in his arms. Cyndi died alone, afraid, in pain, and alone. At a time when the two should have been coming together, a time when they should have looked to one another for strength and support, they were building walls and severing ties.

After the service had ended, all of the guests said their goodbyes and, one by one, departed the dismal setting. Once all had gone, Sam, Norrin, Wade, and Rachel stood silently staring upon the graves. The air was crisp and cold and snow flurries had begun falling from the sky. Rachel had shed tears during the service, but tried her best to maintain her decorum. Suddenly, she was no longer able to do so. Standing next to Wade, she broke down starting to sob and wail. Wade held her close to his chest and allowed her to unleash her grief. Sam and Norrin continued standing silent, not taking their eyes off of the gravestones.

Once Rachel had released enough pain to regain a degree of composure, she lifted her head from Wade's chest and looked toward Sam and Norrin. Letting go of Wade, she approached Sam. She grabbed hold of him and held him to her body; desperately trying to absorb some of Sam's hurt into herself. Sam reciprocated her embrace, but it seemed half hearted. He then released his grip. Rachel looked into Sam's eyes, then kissed him on the cheek. She then made her

way to Norrin. As she stood before him, he actually divided his attention long enough to make eye contact.

In a hushed voice, Rachel said, "I'm so sorry."

"Me too," responded Norrin.

At that, Rachel leaned in and hugged him. He returned her hug as tightly as she had hugged him. It was Norrin's way of putting aside his own feelings and comforting and consoling Rachel. She kissed his cheek and then walked back to Wade. He put his arm around her and looked toward Sam and Norrin. They looked to Wade only for a moment, and then turned back toward the graves of their wives. Wade and Rachel whispered goodbye and walked off together arm and arm.

Sam and Norrin stood alone at the grave site for nearly 20 minutes. The air grew colder and the flurries had turned into full fledge flakes of snow. Neither man spoke a word to the other. In fact, it was as if each man were acting as though they were standing completely alone.

Finally, Norrin turned and looked toward Sam. At first, it seemed as though Sam was intentionally ignoring him. Then, unexpectedly, he turned and looked toward Norrin. It was only a few seconds but it felt like an eternity. There were no words spoken but so much was said. In that instant, the love between brothers, the bonds between friends, the respect between a master and his pupil had ended. The two turned from each other's face and went their separate ways.

Upon arriving home to an empty house, Norrin received a call from his father in San Diego.

"Hello," answered Norrin.

"Hi, Norrin," said Norrin's father, Leonard, speaking in a soft tone.

"Hi, Dad," Norrin replied, in an even tone.

"How'd everything go today?"

"Everything went fine. Lots of people came, the Leighs, the Selias, friends, and family. It was a nice service."

"Did Larry Cooper perform the service?"

"Yeah, he did. Thanks for asking him for me. Everyone seemed to appreciate it."

There was a brief silence. Leonard knew his son was in considerable pain, as he himself was no stranger to the pain of losing a spouse. Even still, Norrin had chosen to hide his grief from his father. He had tried to keep it hidden from everyone in fact. As a boy, when he was saddened or hurting inside, Norrin would willingly share it with his father. But, somewhere between his teenage years and growing into a man, those feelings became something retained only

for himself. It wasn't that Norrin's father discouraged him from sharing these types of feelings, in fact, it was quite the contrary. But, perhaps somewhere inside, Norrin felt to do so would make him weak, less of a man, that expressions of grieved emotions were something shameful and something to keep hidden.

"Norrin, why don't you come home?" encouraged Leonard.

"I am home."

"Home with us, with your family in California. We're here. Most of your mother's relatives are here. Your sisters miss you. They keep asking how you're doing and if you're okay."

"How are Marketta and Lenora? They're getting so big."

"They're all right. Trying to make sense of everything that's happened the best way children can."

"Give them my love."

"I will."

"Look, I, I've got a few things I need to take care of. I'm gonna have to let you go."

Leonard could tell grief was attacking Norrin and that this was a battle he wanted to tend to in private. "Okay," he said. "I'll call you in a few days and see how you're doing, all right?"

"Okay. Tell everyone I said hi."

"I will."

They both said goodbye and hung up their phones, at which time, Norrin allowed grief the triumph of this battle. He slumped to the floor and broke down in tears.

For days, Norrin stayed in his house. He didn't change his clothes, he didn't bathe, and he didn't eat. Everywhere he walked within the house, every room he entered, Norrin saw Nanci. She was in the living room, the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom, his office, even the spare bedroom. Every room in which he saw her, she was smiling at him, laughing at one of his jokes, or something funny he had said, telling him that she loved him. Occasionally, Norrin would go into their bedroom and grab Nanci's pillow or an article of her clothing and smell for her scent. It wasn't long before the pillow had lost her scent.

As the days passed, Norrin continued agonizing over the loss of his beloved wife. If it were possible for a man to be alive and yet dead at the same time, this must be what that was like.

After two weeks, Norrin finally showered. After which, he shaved, but he did not shave his mustache. For some reason he had decided to leave that. Those two tasks were remarkable feats within themselves, but Norrin took it one step further, he put on clean clothes. Once dressed, he walked downstairs and into the kitchen, lifting the receiver of his telephone. With hesitation, he dialed Sam's number. The phone rang continuously and on the fifth ring the answering machine picked up.

"Hi, you've reached Sam and Cyndi's house. We're not here to take your call, but please leave your name, number, and the time and day you called, and we'll get back to you as soon as possible. Thanks, bye."

It was strange to hear Cyndi's voice on the recorded message, knowing that the recording was all that was left of her voice.

There was a beep, and, after gathering his thoughts, Norrin began to speak. "Sam, it's Norrin. I, ah, I think we should talk. At the funeral, I know we, we both, well, this has been extremely hard on both of us. Maybe, we should talk. You have my number. Gimme a call when you get the chance."

The days passed, and eventually, Norrin left his house. He drove around, bought a few groceries, and even took out his trash. He received calls from his father every few days, following up and making sure he was still coping. Still, no return call came from Sam. Norrin continued leaving messages but there was never an answer, never a response.

One night, Norrin decided to leave the house for something to eat. As he walked toward the front door, he noticed a framed picture. It was the picture that David, Sam's friend and mentor, had taken at his restaurant more than a year ago. It was a picture of Sam, Wade, Cyndi, Nanci, Rachel, and himself laughing and enjoying themselves. That time seemed so long ago. The life of some other Norrin, certainly not him.

Taking one last look at the picture, Norrin decided to change his plans. Instead of going to Ginos for a bite to eat, he drove to Sam's house. He had decided he was no longer willing to wait for an invitation. He was going to Sam's house, unannounced if necessary, but he was going.

Upon arriving at the estate, Norrin noticed the gates had not been repaired. They were still on the ground damaged and twisted where Wade had crashed through them. Norrin drove toward the house and parked by the fountain. He exited his car and looked around the grounds and at the house. Everything was dark and gloomy. Not a light in the house could be seen from outside.

Norrin rang the bell but there was no answer. He rang it again and again. Still,

there was no answer. He pounded his fist against the front door, and still, nothing. Norrin grew angry and fed up with Sam's persistent neglectful behavior. He activated his adrenaline factor and, again, pounded his fist against the door, calling out, "Sam! Sam! Open the door!" Still, Norrin's calls fell on deaf ears. "Fine," he uttered, "Have it your way."

Suddenly, the two large doors crashed inward upon one another and Norrin walked through the gaping passageway they had left. It was dark inside. There were no lights visible in the entire house as far as Norrin could see. He flicked on the light switch closest to the doorway and was surprised by what he saw. The house was chaotic. Everywhere he looked there was disorder, things disheveled, out of place, broken and dashed to pieces.

"Sam?" Norrin called out, after deactivating his adrenaline factor.

Norrin searched the house, both upstairs and down. Every place he looked, every room he searched was in shambles. Things torn to pieces, even furniture had been ruined. It was evident that some items had been destroyed by Sam's hand, others could only have been done by the use of his telekinesis.

Eventually, Norrin made his way to the lair. He thought Sam may have had retreated there in an attempt to convalesce from his ordeal. Once he had reached the lair, he found it in worse condition than the house. The computers were destroyed, the files and file cabinets torn apart, the costumes and mannequins which they sat upon ripped, torn, and tossed about. The rear rooms were smashed and all of their contents tossed about. Even the *Lamborghini* was in pieces. It appeared as if it had been crashed at high speed into a building. Through all of this, Sam was no where to be found.

It was evident that Sam was no longer there and Norrin felt unsure as to whether he would ever be coming back. If the house was any indication of the answer to that question, Norrin would have to have guessed, no. Regretfully, Norrin gave up his search and headed home.

The following day, Norrin called his father.

"Hello," answered Leonard.

"Hi, Dad," said Norrin, his tone quite docile.

There was a silence.

"You ready to come home, son?" asked Leonard.

Norrin was quiet for just a moment. "Yeah, yeah I am. There's nothing for me here anymore."

Norrin had finally come to the realization that home was not some geographical location on a map, but instead, home was wherever his family was, wherever his father was.

"I can come and help you get everything together," offered Leonard.

"No, no. That's all right. I'm only bringing a couple of things. The rest I'll either throw away or give to someone."

"Okay. We'll have a place for you when you get here."

"I won't stay too long. Just until I can find my own place."

"As long as you need."

This was a good step in the right direction. If Norrin was to heal, it wasn't going to be in a house full of ghosts or a city full of memories flooding in on him at every turn. He needed a change and a strong support system. His father could provide both.

"Dad?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks."

"No problem. Hurry home."

Again, the two men said their goodbyes and Norrin immediately began making preparations to leave Baltimore for good.

All of Nanci's things Norrin gave to her mother, father, and sisters. He packed three large boxes for himself and shipped them to San Diego via UPS. All of the furniture in his house was given away or picked up by the Salvation Army. His car he sold. Two suitcases were packed and those he would take with him. Norrin was now prepared to say goodbye to Maryland and all of its memories.

A picture, the framed photo of he and his friends taken at the Silver Dolphin Restaurant had not been packed. Norrin had planned on carrying it in one of his suitcases. As he picked it up, there was a knock at the front door. Carrying the picture with him, Norrin walked to the door and opened it. A middle-aged taxi driver stood in the doorway.

"Hi. I'm here to take somebody to BWI airport."

"Yeah, that's me," said Norrin.

"Got any luggage?" asked the driver.

"Just these two," answered Norrin, motioning to the two suitcases sitting near the door.

"I'll grab 'em and wait for you in the cab," said the man. He picked up the suitcases, one in each hand, and was out the door.

Norrin looked around the empty townhouse. Even bare, he still felt Nanci there. He looked down at the picture in his hand and ran his fingers across Nanci's face. Consumed with a sudden burst of anger, Norrin flung the picture against the wall that separated the kitchen from the dining area. He didn't bother

to pick it up, he simply walked out of the front door, and, after turning the lock on the doorknob to its locked position, he closed the door behind him.

Rachel and Wade continued counting on one another for support. They would call each other when they needed to and made it a point to get together at least once every two weeks. They remembered their friends with laughter, sometimes with tears. They never developed a romantic relationship between the two of them, but, through it all, remained incredibly close friends.

Mason fled to Norfolk where he continued in his line of business with a partner named Theo Sekkas. The minuscule amount of trust he had once possessed had now completely departed from him, and that proved evident in his dealings with his new partner. Mason had become more ruthless and more inhumane than he ever had been.

Jay, upon hearing the news of what had transpired between the woman he had known as Jessica Savin and Michael Mason, put the barrel of his gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Whether it due to a concern that Mason might blame him for the entire fiasco, or whether it was the thought of the woman he had come to love being gunned down was unclear. It was a mystery that would never be solved.

It was dark outside and it had been roughly four hours since Norrin had locked the door of his townhouse behind him. Had one been inside the empty house, they might have noticed the lock on the doorknob slowly turn to its unlocked position. Then, they would have seen the door open and a silhouette standing in the doorway. It was Sam.

As he walked in, Sam began telekinetically flicking on light switches. The house was empty. There was no furniture, no sign that anyone was living there or ever had been, except for one thing.

Sam walked over to the wall separating the kitchen from the dining area and noticed a broken frame on the ground. Without touching it, he lifted it into the air and began removing the damaged frame from around the picture. Once finished, he reached forward and grasped the picture with his hand. It was the picture of him, his wife, and his friends laughing and enjoying themselves at David's restaurant, so long ago; an eternity ago.

Sam stared at the picture for more than a minute. Without warning or expectation, grief lashed out at Sam. For a moment, it seemed as if it had won yet another battle, but Sam was tired of losing battles. He defeated grief, swallowing the lump in his throat, and forcing back the tears doing their best to escape his eyes.

Sam took one final look at the picture and placed it in the inner pocket of his sport coat. He then walked toward the door and exited the house. Once he had, the lights went dark and the door closed tightly behind him...

