



Wayfarer

By Norman Thomas Hood

The Attack

42 days from now

“Gotcha, you sneaky bastard!” The large man loomed over him.

Wade looked around, desperate for an exit, but found none. He was cornered. The brute walked forward slowly, careful to close off any lanes of escape. Just before he could get his hands on him, Wade lunged forward and kicked the right knee out from under him. The thug’s leg buckled, sending him to the floor with a crash!

Wade jumped over him, determined to run the smaller man over on his way out. Suddenly, he felt his right foot being lifted into the air. The large man swung his arm upward, just in time to send him tumbling. The smaller man blocked the door as Wade landed on the floor between the two. The big one got to his feet before Wade and grabbed a board he saw lying on the floor. He swung it hard, trying to take his victim’s head off! Wade’s instincts sent him backwards, barely avoiding the two-by-four. The smaller man leaped forward and shoved Wade back toward his attacker. The large one swung again, this time catching Wade in the ribs. Pain shot through his body as he felt his chest give way to the force of the blow. In the corner of his eye, he saw the man raising the board again.

“Kick my knee out, huh? Ya little bastard! You ain’t gonna *have* any knees when I’m done with ya!”

Wade's eyes shut in anticipation of another blow as the beast swung his weapon a third time. He tried to move out of the way, but it was too late. Just as the board hit its mark, an ear-piercing sound filled the room.

"Watch out! You coulda got me!" the large one shouted, "Quit firin' that damn thing!"

Wade had doubled over in agony, clutching his ribs. He remained that way for a moment, frozen in pain, until both legs collapsed beneath him. Blackness swept over his eyes as he fell to the ground near the feet of the big man. Wade's head met the floor with a resounding thud. The air in his lungs burst through his lips as the echoes of gunshot played tag on the office walls. Swirling balls of dust and filth rose from its tattered floor, illuminated by a single beam of sunlight that had wrestled its way through the boarded windows.

Wade's body lay motionless on the floor as the stirred debris began to settle across his broken frame. A once-white Oxford told the story of his vicious beating.

The large man panted heavily now. His shadow loomed over Wade's broken body. He wiped a deluge of sweat from his face and staggered forward. With an exhausted grunt, he tossed the broken two-by-four onto the floor, still struggling to catch his breath. The shooter stood over Wade as well, his pistol hanging loosely in his palm now, a deadly extension of his murderous hand. He grinned proudly like a hunter who'd just killed his first buck.

"Not as fast as you *thought* you were... huh, asshole?" he taunted, kicking Wade's leg.

There was no reaction, just a momentary rocking of his victim's leg. The large man laughed at his partner's words, slinging fresh sweat from his reddened face.

"Shoot him again... just to be sure," he told the gunman.

"I'm sure enough. I got him in the heart. He's not getting up from that. My ammo's worth more than his shoes and I wasted enough on that lock and chain!"

"Well, then, if yer done with yer braggin', let's get the hell outta here and get paid. He's done fer... and I'm hungry!"

The smaller man picked up his bullet casing and the two men exited the room, leaving Wade to become the latest addition to the abandoned building.

Eventually, the remaining dust settled, and everything in the room became still once more.

Chapter 1

The Square Peg of Youth

“He’ll be lucky to live past his first birthday,” a man in white told Wade’s parents three decades before. “I’m sorry. This is the part of the job I really hate. I wish I had better news for you.”

It was written in his chart, scribbled down in the usual, illegible handwriting of a doctor. Wade’s symptoms and blood test pointed to a rare diagnosis, Wolman's disease. Literally, the fats in his infant body would build to a toxic level in his organs, shutting them down, one by one. Ultimately, it would kill him.

“It’s a hereditary disorder,” the doctor explained. “One of you must be carrying the recessive gene.”

Wade figured he was lucky the doctor’s frightening prognosis was wrong. Maybe it was a botched blood test, or some other poor kid's results. Or maybe, just maybe, he was just a shitty doctor. Wade never got an explanation from his parents, but without much effort, he’d proven the doctor wrong twenty-nine years and counting. In a few months, it will be thirty. But as his birthday crept in closer, he couldn’t help but reminisce about his lackluster childhood.

Wade's youth could be summed up with a single word; feckless. For someone regarded as a medical miracle, he mostly felt out of place. In school, he was the quiet one. Awkward and shy. He avoided interactions with the other students. That made him an easy target for bullies. Mostly though, his classmates just ignored him. He did manage to make one friend during junior high, though. And that proved to be enough for Wade.

Tony lived on Wade's street and was nearly as much an outcast as he was. He needed Wade's friendship as much as Wade did his. The two made a decent pair. He played the part of Robin to Wade's Batman.

Palling around with Tony gave Wade the kind of childhood he'd always longed for. They ruled their neighborhood, finding the same excitement and trouble other kids did. Even school became less terrible for the two boys. Wade's childhood became exciting. That is, until Fate lifted its ugly head to intervene.

Tony's family moved out of Illinois the year before he and Wade would start high school. Wade was devastated. All hope disappeared down the street as the family's car left their driveway for the last time. Shortly after the move, Wade sent Tony a letter with some baseball cards enclosed. He heard nothing back. A few unreturned calls later, Wade gave up trying and withdrew back into his shell, alone again.

Wade's father was a doctor, but not the kind who specialized in giving shitty news to frightened parents. He was a geneticist; and a good one. Enough so, that three research facilities fought for his talent before he finished his residency. He ultimately decided on a privately funded company in Chicago, only a twenty-minute train ride from their Brookfield, Illinois home.

Dedicated to his research, he spent most of his weekends working at home, locked away in his den.

He'd resurface a couple times a day for a quick sandwich and coffee. Wade would wait until he heard the den's door open before deciding to fix something to eat, too. It was practically the only time he saw his father before dinner. But when the den's door was closed again, it meant no unwanted interruptions.

Wade often snuck to his father's door, checking to see if it was locked. He'd lean quietly against it and turn the knob ever so slowly until he felt it stop, confirming it was locked. At that point, he'd let it return to where it began before carefully letting go. It was just a little game he played from time to time.

One Saturday, after his father's daily lunch break, Wade heard the door close and lock again. When it had, he leaned against it and slowly turned the cold knob, like he had so often. But this time, Fate must have wanted to play as well. The knob didn't stop turning. When Wade realized what was happening, it was too late to let go! The door swung open! Wade was so startled he didn't let go of the knob and ended up on the floor, inside the office! His father spun around in his chair, accidentally knocking his coffee onto the floor. His father cursed loudly and glared at Wade.

"Dammit, boy! What are you doing in here?" He shook hot coffee from his hand and waited for an answer.

"I... I'm sorry," Wade said, "I was just leaning on the door and it... I didn't mean for it to happen, really!"

His father sat in his chair, coffee dripping from his sleeve. His stare frightened Wade more than the door swinging open. He picked up the empty cup from the floor, locking eyes with Wade as he did. The boy trembled as he waited for more scolding, but none came. His father just stood there, staring a hole through Wade's terrified face.

Wade took his father's cue and quickly scooted out of the room. His feet had just cleared the door when it slammed shut. His heart sank. Wade ran to his bedroom and shut himself in. A few hours later, his mother called him down for dinner. There was little talk between Wade and his father at the table that evening.

Weeks later, after a morning of prodding from Wade's mother, his father took an early break from his weekend research. He went to the garage and rummaged through some old storage boxes.

It was a typical hot Saturday in July. Wade was eight, and like every Saturday morning, was seated in front of the TV, pretending he was part of the Mystery Gang. Wade would help Scooby-Doo solve the morning's mystery. But that Saturday, as he and Scooby were running through a haunted house, something suddenly landed in his lap.

Wade jumped backwards, finding a baseball glove on the floor. He spun around to see his father, standing in the hallway. He was holding a half-eaten sandwich in one hand and a baseball glove in the other.

“Wade, your mother thinks it’s far too nice a day to waste inside. She suggested we go out and get some sun together. What do you say? Wanna play some catch?”

“Yes sir!” Wade was on his feet and moving in half a second.

The warm grass felt good under Wade’s feet, much better than the family room’s carpet. It was his first time sharing the yard with his dad in two years.

His father threw like a machine, returning each catch as soon as it hit his glove. Some of his throws were hard, too. They stung Wade’s hand. But Wade liked it, nonetheless. It was *something*, anyway... a real, father and son moment that didn’t happen very often.

Wade threw one hard, too, trying to mimic his dad. It snapped as it landed in his father’s glove. The man seemed impressed, nodding at Wade’s effort. Wade made his next throw even harder. It made a loud pop when it hit his dad’s glove. The old man pulled his hand from the glove and acted like it had stung his palm, grinning all the while. Wade felt a rush of adrenaline. He tried to make every throw like the last, perfect. His father’s pace slowed as he seemed to relax and enjoy himself.

“Nice one! Keep ‘em coming, son... just like that! Try not to overdo it.” He paused for a second before throwing one back.

“Wade, I’m planning on having more time to do things like this in the future. Why don’t we make this a tradition?”

Wade’s adrenaline surged even more. He felt like a walk-on pitcher being asked to join the Cubs! He threw even harder, hitting its mark perfectly. But, just as he grew confident in his new skill, fate crawled out of the shadows again. One got away from him, sailing just out of his father’s reach. Pieces of wood exploded into the air as the ball broke through the garden trellis. Wade was mortified. His father walked to the trellis and pulled his glove off. He bent over and picked up the wayward ball, along with some broken pieces of wood. He inspected them for a moment, then shook his head.

“Well, son... I think that’s probably enough excitement for today,” he said, showing his disappointment. “Please pick up the wood before you come in. We

can't have the lawnmower finding them. And be sure to apologize to your mother. She really loved that trellis... painted it herself."

Wade watched as his father returned to the house. His heart sank. After cleaning up the mess, he stayed outside a few minutes longer. He wanted to make sure his father was back in the den before he came inside.

The next time Wade was that close to his father was the day he watched him being lowered into the ground. Three months had gone by since the exploding trellis, with no further offers to play catch. It was a cloudy and dismal day, textbook for funerals.

At least it's not raining, Wade thought as he looked up, though the clouds looked like they could burst open any moment.

He watched some birds converging in a nearby tree as an old man dressed in black read a bible. Wade thought the man's words sounded like a Shakespearean play. He paid little attention to them, though, as he was more interested in the birds he'd spotted. One seemed to be watching him intently. It was bluish-green, with a bit of yellow in its tail feathers. Wade thought it was beautiful. The other birds paid no attention to him, but this one was noticeably interested. Wade stared back at the bird, deciding to make a little game of it. Whoever looked away first would lose. Wade was determined to win, but soon felt a tug on his right sleeve. It was his mother. Wade watched her as she tossed a bouquet of flowers on top of his father's casket.

"Now throw yours near mine," she whispered. "It's a tradition."

Wade felt all eyes were on him. He took hold of his bouquet and leaned over the grave. His heart pounded at the thought of his father lying inside the coffin. He imagined his father's eyes open and staring at him through the wooden lid. His hands were shaking as he let go of the flowers. As fate would have it, he'd disappoint his father one last time. The bouquet missed the coffin completely, plunging into the dirt below. He looked at his mother, fighting an urge to cry. Determined not to, he bit down hard on his bottom lip. His mother noticed and whispered to him.

"Your father did his best, Wade. His intentions were always good, and you need to know that he loved you in the only way he knew. We'll both miss him dearly."

Wade couldn't stop the tears from welling up in his eyes. Before he knew it, they were trailing down his cheeks. His mother returned her stoic posture and attention to the service. The man in black read the last of his verses and closed the bible.

The funeral marked the week Wade's headaches began. And the headaches continued, every month or two for the next twenty-one years. Similar to migraines in severity, Wade's doctor told him they were most likely psychosomatic in nature, triggered by a mental or emotional disturbance Wade must have endured in his youth.

No shit, Wade thought, realizing the irony.

His whole *youth* had felt like a mental and emotional disturbance. The headaches were just ugly reminders that followed him into adulthood.

When they came, he couldn't eat, sleep or think straight. He could only lie down and play the waiting game.

Tonight was one of those nights. Wade left the bedroom for the couch. He grabbed a bottle of aspirin and his prescription. Janet was sleeping soundly in their bedroom and he wanted to keep it that way.

He turned on the TV, lowered the volume and sunk into the sofa's cushions. He knew it'd take some time to fall asleep again, and the TV made good company.

The dull, throbbing of his head worked to amplify all the sounds of the house not noticeable during the day, making sleep even more difficult. The hum of their old refrigerator annoyed him the most. He tried clearing his mind from the noise, tossing and turning, until eventually his face was buried deeply between the seat cushions and the back of the sofa.

At some point, Wade would sense the noise gradually fading, along with his headache. That's when he knew sleep was near. But then, the dreams came. They'd often manifest the nights of his headaches.

More like nightmares, really, they'd ruin what little sleep he got. Some he'd remember, but most were lost upon waking. Fragments of them sometimes resurfaced during the following day.

His dreams seemed to follow a familiar construct. Wade would find himself standing in a crowd of strangers. Mist covered the ground and there was no visible sky above. The strangers appeared to be lost and confused. They wandered around in no particular fashion, much like zombies. At some point, one would notice him standing among them. The confused expression on their face suddenly turned to shock and desperation. Soon, everyone there was aware of his presence. They'd converge on him, reaching out wildly to get his attention. Some even tore at his clothes, begging him for help. It was truly terrifying! They'd all talk at the same time, desperate for his attention. Wade, frightened to the core, would scream at them to leave him alone. He'd tell the people he couldn't help them, but their pleading continued. He would struggle to get away but always felt boxed in. In any direction he looked, there were oceans of people, climbing over one another to reach him!

Sometimes, during the excitement, he'd see a man standing in the distance, watching everything. Wade would recognize him as his father and cry out for help, but the man would then vanish from sight. After Wade's distress reached a high enough level, he'd suddenly wake from the nightmare, shaking and covered in sweat.

Wade never understood the dreams or why they plagued him as they did. He took the issue to his doctor, but was given the same answer he'd received concerning the headaches. Soon, another prescription would follow.

He hated using the pills. It'd take him until noon the next day to shake off the effects. But, just maybe, tonight he'd only have the headache to deal with. The dreams wouldn't come, and sleep would carry him safely into tomorrow.

Chapter 2

Winnie the Pooh for the Win

"Babe," she whispered.

At least that's what Wade thought he heard. Or was he dreaming? He burrowed deeper into the couch.

"Hey... you getting up?"

The words sounded like they were spoken a mile away, in the dead of night. Much like neighbors talking on their back porch, sound always travels better after dark.

"Wade! It's seven-thirty. You had one of your nights again, I see... sorry babe."

She sounded closer now. Wade slowly realized where he was. He felt Janet's soft hair draping across his face as she leaned over him. It smelled of her... the sweet, familiar scent he had known for nine years.

Wade met Janet during his junior year at Stanford, on his way to class one morning. He noticed a girl trying to coax something out from the bushes on campus. She was near the cafeteria, so he figured it was a stray cat or dog, hanging around for scraps. The young student had decided it needed rescuing, willing or not. She knelt down near the bush and sweetly called for the animal to come out.

After several attempts, she noticed Wade watching her. She straightened up and looked directly at him. Wade's nerves took over. He quickly turned his head away, pretending not to have seen her.

"Got a scared little kitty over here," she said, pointing to the bushes.

"Oh, yeah... looks that way."

There was an awkward pause while the two locked eyes. Wade was struck by how beautiful she was.

"So... you wanna help a girl out, or what?"

Her long, brown hair cascaded across the side of her face as she waited for his answer.

"Sure..." he cleared his throat, "so... what do you want me to—"

"Just walk behind the bush and make some noise, silly!"

Wade walked to the other side of the bush and stomped around a few times. Nothing happened.

"You'll have to do better than that, dude," she laughed. "Come on... get wild. Help a girl out!"

Wade stomped around some more, clapping his hands this time. He felt pretty stupid after hearing some students laughing nearby.

"Don't worry about them... just focus," she said. "Focus!"

Wade stomped around harder now, this time yelling at the feline.

"Get! C'mon, get out of there... get!"

Wade's efforts got the best of him, causing him to stumble into the bush. The kitten ran out the other side and jumped straight into Janet's arms. She laughed loudly, trying to keep her grip on the cat.

When she got it to calm down, she looked at Wade, who was brushing leaves off of his shirt. She walked over to him, still laughing from the encounter. When she got close, his nerves took over again. He automatically shifted his attention to the kitten.

It was a dirty, sick looking thing. Its white hair was almost brown with dirt and dried blood. It looked like it had been in three fights and lost four. Wade agreed it needed rescuing.

The young woman soothed the kitten, gently rubbing the back of its head. After a few seconds, the kitten began purring. The girl looked at Wade and smiled softly. That was the moment Wade knew he had completely fallen for her.

The kitten became hers that morning, and two years later, it became theirs. Wade remembered that as the day Janet rescued them both.

She was a third year psychology major. Wade figured that's what drew her to him. She must have sensed a challenge to fix him. But whatever her reasons for noticing him, he was happy, and thankful.

Life began to change for Wade. Janet was bold and engaging, the exact opposite of him. It gradually rubbed off, though, breaking him out of his lonesome shell, once and for all.

"Wade!" The voice once again broke through his slumber.

He lifted his head and gingerly opened his eyes to meet hers. They were still as green and bright as when they'd first met. Janet kissed his forehead softly and stood over him, waiting for a reply.

"So... I guess I managed to sleep a little this time, huh?" he asked, though his words were hardly discernable.

She nodded yes, her expression indicating how pitiful he looked.

Wade was thankful he'd slept this time. He'd missed several days of work already this year. His eyelids, still heavy, closed again. When they did, his head sank back into the couch cushions.

"Babe!" she said, shaking his shoulders.

"I know, I know honey... I'm up... I promise. Yeah, I had one of those nights again. But I'm ok now."

She looked skeptical. "Bad dreams again?"

"No, I took a pill this time. Avoided them altogether."

He swung his legs over the side of the couch and sat up. The dull ache of his feet hitting the floor resonated up his spine. He looked the room over with a disappointed yawn.

This place is too damn small, he thought.

The house definitely *was* on the small side. "Quaint" was the word their realtor used when showing the listing.

"It's a Craftsman home, built in the 1930's," she'd told them, hoping to impress.

But in reality, it was really just an old, small two-bedroom starter home. Still, it was the type of place he and Janet were looking for at the time, and in his

hometown as well. It wasn't much to brag about, but it was something they could afford and call their own.

Five years and counting, he grimaced. *It's time to find a bigger place in a different city.*

"I'm brewing it strong for you, babe," she called from the kitchen, "I figured you'd need it to get moving. How's the headache today? Manageable?"

"I think so." He tried to match her energy. "Yeah, it is... it's pretty much gone now."

"Good. I was going to cook eggs, hon... but when I saw you lying on the couch, looking so pitiful, I decided on toast and jelly. Good enough?"

"You know me well." Toast was enough. Anything more would have given an encore.

Wade listened for her to say more, but when she didn't, he allowed his eyelids to meet again.

Seconds later, he felt Janet's hand squeezing his shoulder again.

"It's ready, dude." She pulled him to his feet.

Janet walked him to the kitchen, where he flopped into a chair by the window, nearly turning it over.

"Easy, babe, these have to last us a while!" she said.

He took a bite of toast and reached for his coffee. It was strong, like she said. After a few sips, he could feel the fog beginning to lift. He looked at her with clearer eyes now. She sat directly across from him, arms folded and leaning forward. It was obvious she was still assessing his condition. After a moment or two, she sat back in her chair, offering a kind and sympathetic smile; the kind you'd give a child who scraped his knee.

The sunlight from the window shimmered off her neck and shoulders. It caught Wade's eyes, and his attention. Now he *was* fully awake. She was wearing her favorite pajamas. The top was pink and low-cut, just enough to show the curves of her breasts. It seemed strange to Wade why a company would make *Winnie the Pooh* pajamas for adult women, but he wasn't arguing.

Janet noticed his stare and leaned further across the table, arching her back as she did. Winnie seemed to be winking at him from the center of her top. Wade took another sip of coffee and wondered if he was being tempted to be late for work again. His man-timer began ticking. How much time did he have before a

quick sprint to the train station? Maybe Winnie could end up sandwiched between them again. He'd been there before. Wade joked the bear enjoyed a good threesome. He took another drink of coffee and checked the clock. It was later than he thought.

"So, honey," she said in a serious tone, "what's new on your agenda today?"

She'd caught him off guard. He spit out some coffee, laughing at her sarcasm.

"Well, that's really funny, smartass!" He wiped his chin. "Oh, I don't know, dear... solving world hunger? Discovering cures for cancer? Those are the kind of things we accountants do, you know. Nothing but exciting shit happening up here!" He pointed to his head.

"Oh, *really*... and who's being the smartass now?" she asked, sitting back with her arms folded.

He raised his hand, pointing his finger in the air.

"That's *Mr. Smartass* to you, babe."

She stood now, her hands on her hips.

"Oh, definitely, sir... and it suits you, really."

She faked a yawn and stretched her arms above her head, pushing her chest out. Wade watched as Winnie rose up to her chin, lifting her pajama top just enough to reveal the bottom of her breasts. He put down his coffee, his eyes watching her every move.

"Pity you only have a few minutes, sir. I could put a real smile on that pitiful, little face of yours."

She sauntered past him, brushing against his arm as she passed. "Oops, sorry dear... didn't mean to bump you."

Wade exhaled fully, like a deflating balloon.

Without looking back, she continued down the hall, adding,

"But I sure don't want you blaming *me* for missing your train again, babe! Maybe tonight we'll make Winnie blush again? If you're *up* to it, that is, Mr. Smartass."

He nodded an unseen 'yes' as she disappeared into the bedroom, thinking about what she'd said.

Train. Yeah, the train. My chariot to mediocrity.

He looked at the clock again. "Dammit!"

It was the same commute his father had made five days a week for much of his life. But, in Wade's opinion, his father had a good reason for making it. He was a pioneer in stem-cell research. Some called him a genius. Wade was envious at times. His father's work benefitted the world. It really *meant* something. Wade's meant nothing as far as he was concerned. He crunched numbers forty hours a week for a company that barely knew his name. He felt like a walking, talking calculator wrapped in a dime-store sport coat, working in one of thirty identical cubicles.

He sat at the kitchen table, his thoughts turning to new career ideas until he realized the time again. He shuffled down the hallway for a quick shower, knowing there was never enough hot water to rinse away the dullness of his job.

Chapter 3

On Track to Nowhere

The train ride to Chicago played like an old record. Crackling and popping, it repeated the same, familiar sounds Wade had heard for the last seven years. He sat in the same seat whenever possible. It was *his*, he figured. He'd earned it. Each year it showed a little more wear. To Wade, it served as a visible history of his career, written on cheap vinyl. It revealed everything but accounted for nothing.

The trip itself was bearable, though. It could even be quite soothing at times, especially after a long and sleepless night. Wade knew every sway and vibration of the train's commute. Sometimes, if he wasn't careful, it would lull him to sleep. But since it was too easy to wake up without his phone or wallet, he tried his best to stay awake.

He saw the same, familiar faces each ride. Most mirrored his closely; depressed and bored, zoned out and living their lives with a common exhale of submission. Wade only knew a few of their names, but he knew more than he wanted to about their lives. Conversations were hard not to overhear in such a tight setting. Most sat with their phones glued to their heads, chatting away. Some talked quietly, while others spoke as if everyone needed to hear their

nonsense. It could be very annoying, especially on Fridays. But Wade learned to deal with it.

The ones that weren't talking usually worked on their laptops during the commute. Not Wade. He left his job at work. He wouldn't end up like his father, married to his career. He and Janet didn't even *have* a den for an office, and he was glad of it.

Wade felt content to sit back and relax to the vibrations of the train. He used to bring a newspaper, but the movements of the train were enough sometimes to make focusing impossible. He didn't want to tempt a headache, so he'd just close his eyes and daydream. But, as always, his dreams came to an end too soon with the stopping of the train.

Walking into Bergstrom-Levy felt no different than it did as a child. Wade remembered lagging behind his father as they walked through the marble lobby. They'd take the first elevator to the ninth floor. He remembered being about four or five years old then, but had no idea when the trips to his dad's office actually began. They continued for a few years, though, two Saturdays each month. His father called them 'wellness visits', saying it was foolish to pay for healthcare when Bergstrom-Levy had their own doctors and nurses.

The lobby on the main floor boasted a massive waste of space and money. Gray marble covered the walls, much like the kind used in courthouses. The walk felt cold and foreboding to Wade. As a child, he counted thirty-nine steps from the front door to the elevator. It was a game of his to see if he could space his steps out to end up with the same number each time. His father would nod politely to the security guard each morning when they passed. The guard would nod back, but he never smiled. The man would often stare at Wade, following his movements until the elevator door closed behind them. Wade didn't know why he watched him like that, but his stare frightened him. His instincts told him it was meant to.

During one visit, Wade's father had him wait outside his office door while he talked to someone inside. Wade got bored and figured he'd spend the time running to the end of the hall and back. He did so a few times, pretending to be the *Flash*. Just before he reached the end of the hall on his third try, something jumped out from around the corner. It grabbed his shirt collar and snatched him up into the air, preventing Wade from seeing what had him! Wade couldn't

breathe or move. The thing was huge... and powerful! Wade flailed his arms and feet, but couldn't get free. He tried to scream, but nothing came out. With one more failed breath, he passed out.

A few moments later, his eyes opened, and he realized he was still in the grip of his captor. He struggled again, trying his best to get loose.

"Hey! Quit kickin' me, you little brat!" it growled. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

Wade looked at its face expecting to see the same kind of monster he'd seen watching Scooby Doo. But this was no monster. It was the security guard from the lobby. To Wade, it made no difference. He was thoroughly terrified! The guard stared directly into his eyes.

"What the hell you doin', little man?! Trying to wear out my floors?" His face contorted more with every word. "You're causing a ruckus in my building!"

"I... I was just running," the boy said, breathing heavily now. There was little air in his lungs to form words.

"Well, quit it! This ain't no place for runnin', boy!"

The guard planted Wade on his feet again but quickly grabbed his wrist. His grip was strong; it hurt Wade. The guard noticed and released some pressure as he walked Wade to his father's door. When they reached it, he bent over, putting his face an inch from Wade's. Wade thought his breath smelled like tuna fish.

"Don't make me come up here again, you understand? I ain't getting' paid to babysit your ass... got it?" He looked around before continuing, his voice softer now. "I know who you are, boy... but you ain't *that* special, got it? I've got better things to do around here than chase *you* around!"

"Yes-s-s sir. I'm sorry," Wade managed to say before the frustrated guard disappeared around the corner. He remained seated outside his father's office until he was asked to come inside.

Wade remembered very little of what happened during the 'wellness visits', but he did remember getting shots occasionally, plus some nasty, brown medicine to drink from a cup. Nurse Patterson is what his father called her, but she told Wade to call her Ms. Becky. She was tall and slender, with curly red hair. Ms. Becky smiled a lot and always carried sweets in her purse.

During each visit, she'd tell Wade she had some candy with his name on it if he was good. She'd give him a small cup of the nasty drink and follow it up with

juice and cookies. Wade liked her. She made the Saturday visits bearable. During one visit, Wade asked her why her hair was so red. She told him when the stork was delivering her to her parents, it flew too close to the sun, turning her hair fiery red. Wade believed her. Each story she told ended with a warm hug and smile, and she had lots of them.

Wade's mom didn't tell stories. She stayed too busy with the house and her afternoon TV. Wade missed Ms. Becky. She moved out of Illinois over twenty years ago, around the time Wade's father was killed. Wade remembered the day he got the news.

Chapter 4

The Phone Call

Wade was eating an apple at the kitchen table when his mother got the call. He had just turned eight and was wearing his birthday hat from the week before.

“Hello...yes, this is Dorothy Richards.” Her voice sounded unsure for a moment. “Yes, he *is* my husband, and who is this?” There was a long pause. “What? Why? Not until you tell me what it's about.” There was a longer pause now. “No... No! That can't be true! Is he okay? Tell me! Where is he right now?” Her fingernails scratched at the wallpaper.

Wade stopped eating. He'd rarely heard his mother raise her voice before. He listened closely from his seat. He could hear a man's voice on the other end, but couldn't understand what he was saying.

“Which hospital?” She pulled a chair closer to her, but remained standing. “No, I'll drive myself.” After another pause, she looked out the kitchen window. “Yes, I see it. Fine, I'm coming out, but I'll need a moment with my son!” Wade heard a click.

His mother put the phone down slowly. Her hand was shaking. She saw him watching and gathered her composure.

“Wade, come outside with me. You’re going next door... right now. I need you to stay with Mrs. Taylor until I get home. You know her... she’s nice. I have to go downtown... Wade! Are you listening to me?” He nodded yes.

“Go get your shoes. Now, Wade! Don’t make me ask you again!”

Wade found his shoes and hurried out the front door with his mother.

There was a shiny, black car parked on the street. A man dressed in gray was standing beside it, his arms behind his back. The rear door of the car was open. Mrs. Richards motioned for him to wait as she hurried Wade next door. She knocked once, then quickly again.

“Oh... hello, Dora.” Mrs. Taylor smiled, opening her door. She was drying her hands on a small towel, but she stopped when she noticed her neighbor’s demeanor.

“Is everything alright?”

His mother’s lips started to quiver, but then suddenly stopped. She looked down at Wade.

“Wade, sit here... on this step,” she directed. “I need to go inside and talk to Mrs. Taylor for a moment. Don’t move from this step. Do you hear me?”

“Yes Ma’am,” he said, sitting down. He looked across the street. The man was still standing beside the car, watching.

Mrs. Taylor’s door closed. Wade pressed his ear to it but only heard Mrs. Taylor’s words, “Oh, God... Oh, God Dora... no!”

Seconds later, the door opened. Wade’s mother reappeared, motioning him to his feet.

“Wade, Mrs. Taylor is in charge of you until I get back. Be good for her and stay inside while I’m gone.”

“Can’t I just go with you?”

“No! Just... Wade, do as I say, please!” She squeezed his shoulder and knelt down to his level. “Wade, I need you to stay *here*. I promise I’ll be back for you as soon as I can. You’ll be fine with Mrs. Taylor.”

Before leaving, she kissed Wade on the forehead. The show of affection startled him. That sort of thing didn’t happen very often. He knew then that something bad must have happened to his father.

Wade’s mother hurried to the black car. With each step, she picked up her pace, nearly running by the time she reached it. Mrs. Taylor took Wade’s arm and

brought him into the house. He ran to the nearest window and watched his mother get into the car. The man in gray closed her door, walked to the other side and got in. Seconds later, the car sped to the end of the street and turned left. Wade never felt as scared as he did, watching it disappear around the corner.

That afternoon turned out to be the last time Wade's father would walk through the marble lobby or nod at the guard. Before he boarded the train for his trip home, he stopped, as usual, at a smoke shop to get a newspaper. This time, however, he arrived just before a robbery took place. A man rushed into the store wearing a dark jacket and a handkerchief over his face. He pulled out a pistol and waved it in the air, telling everyone to be quiet and not move. The clerk handed him money from the register while Wade's father and the others did exactly as they were told. The robber, money in hand, ran to make his exit. As he did, no one moved a muscle. The thief was three steps from the door when he suddenly stopped and swung his gun around! He fired it, shooting Wade's father just below the neck! He fell to the ground instantly. The shooter quickly leaned over him and fired two more shots into his chest before continuing his escape.

The police told Wade's mother that her husband must have made some kind of movement or sound when the robber passed by, causing him to panic and shoot.

"Just a horrible fluke," they told her. No one will ever know for sure, though. Witness accounts varied, and the shop owner said he didn't see the shooting because he was scrambling for his *own* gun. The only thing anyone could agree on was that the newsstand had been robbed, and a man lay dead because of it. The incident made the Tribune the next day but was never covered again. The murderer was never caught.

Today, Wade is the only 'Mr. Richards' who walks through Bergstrom-Levy's lobby. The company offered him a job in the accounting division after he graduated from Stanford. Wade assumed it was a kind gesture made to him and his mother. He wasn't thrilled about working there, but needed a job. The offer paid more than most of the other companies he applied at.

On his first trip through the building since a child, Wade noticed they'd hung a portrait of his father on the wall, next to Alan Bergstrom's. Wade rarely looks at it today, though, as it reminds him of the distant relationship they'd shared. He

usually just keeps his head down as he walks to the elevator. And he *never* looks at the old guard, as he still sensed the same disdain from him he felt as a child.

Only twenty-eight steps to the elevator these days, then a short ride to the accounting floor.

Chapter 5

Corporate Cougar

“Thank God!” Josh said as the doors opened.

He stood with the same annoyed look he donned every time Lucy had him wait by the elevator. She enjoyed having employees sent straight to her office first thing in the morning. Instead of putting a note on their desk, Lucy would have Josh wait near the elevator to relay the command personally. It was a senseless, unnecessary power play, and this time it was for Wade. He understood why Josh felt so annoyed. But regardless, whenever he saw him on the other side of those doors, he knew his day had gone to shit.

Lucy Greene wasn't your usual accounting manager. Five feet, four inches of blonde hair, implants and attitude, she was pushy, loud and unusually crude. A solid Type-A personality with no sense of ethics, she blazed new trails in the world of sexual harassment.

Wade often wondered why she picked accounting for a career. She didn't fit the stereotype in any way. But she quickly worked her way into management, and if the rumors were true, chiefly on her back. Wade remembered the shakedown he received his first day on the job, over seven years ago now.

“This is not an interview, Mr. Richards. They told me that was already handled up the chain. So why the hell am I even reading this? Hmm, I see you’re... yes... married,” she said in a suddenly dismal tone. “Fresh out of college. Stanford... good weather there. Any kids yet? God, I hope not. Way too young to have rugrats running under your feet.”

Before he could answer, she had already moved on.

“What do you like to do in your spare time?” Again, she left him no time for an answer. “You like to stay in shape, I see,” she said, looking him over. “That’s important to me... you know, for your health, of course. You’re not a religious guy, are you? If so, don’t preach it. No room for any pious stiff around here, honey! You think you can handle a strong woman being your boss? If so, then we’ll get along just fine, sugar.”

She skimmed through the remainder of his resume.

“Okay, the rest of this is just the same old shit. You can go find your desk now, hon. Half way down, on your right. There’s a packet on it I need you to read and sign. Have it on my desk before five, capeesh? General codes of ethics, conduct... attendance. Bullshit, really.”

He waited a second to see if she had anything else to say before he left. She looked up at him with a puzzled expression.

“Why are you still here, sugar? Time for you to start earning that money!”

Wade stood to leave. “Thank you, Ms. Greene.”

“It’s Lucy,” she said with a wink.

That was the first of many cringe-worthy winks. Wade left her office realizing he wasn’t given a chance to say *anything*. It didn’t matter, though. The meeting’s purpose was to show him who *she* was, not to hear anything from him. And the wink... that’s when Wade knew he was in trouble. Three months later, he’d learn what her wink really meant concerning her male employees.

Lucy cornered Wade outside the men’s bathroom during the department’s Christmas party, six years ago. She carried a glass of Woodford Reserve in one hand and a small, giftwrapped box in the other. Wade had worked there less than six months.

“Heyyyyy, you!” she said in a bourbon-laced tone. “Gotcha something!”

She was clearly drunk, her body swaying forward and back. Her dress was low-cut, showing off her upgrades in all their shining glory. Wade noticed an abundance of glitter on them.

“Just a little something from *meeeeee* to *you*,” she whispered, leaning her girls into him.

“Oh, thanks, Ms. Greene,” he said, easing himself backwards. She waved a small box in his face.

“It’s *Lucy*, remember? It’s a party, Wade. It’s a *parrrrrrty* night! Don’t be so damn formal!”

Her eyebrows raised significantly as she smiled, exposing three large wrinkles across her forehead. Wade couldn’t help but notice how deep they were. Bits of caked makeup were missing from the cracks.

“It’s not gonna bite ya, dude... I promise!” She put the box in his hand, “Or will it?” She smiled again; this time even broader.

Her wrinkles emerged again as she lightly dragged her fingers across his wrist. He shivered.

Wade remembered how the Grinch looked as he planned to steal Whoville’s Christmas presents. Lucy shared that same, sinister smile. He took another step backwards.

“Janet’s at the table waiting for me, so I’d better—” He turned to walk back to the conference room.

“Hey! This isn’t really a couples’ gift, sugarpants!” she grabbed his shirt, stopping him from leaving. “Shhhh! This is from *me* to *you*, okay?” she said, her lips pressed to his ears. “And it needs to *stay* that way... if you know what I mean.” She managed a quick wink. “So, go ahead...open it, Wade. Now!”

“Ms. Greene...” he started to say, beginning to sweat.

“It’s Lucy, dammit! Lucy during the day and, ‘*Oh, Lucy!*’ at night... if you’re lucky.” She poked his chest playfully with her finger, impressed by her own humor. “C’mon, open it before I take it back,” she demanded.

If only! he thought, unwrapping it.

As he opened the box, a single key was revealed.

Oh, shit! This was it. His number had come up.

“Ta-da! Everyone needs a go-to person to hold an extra house key, right? You know, in case of an emergency,” she winked. “Like if a girl accidentally got locked

out of her own apartment naked, for example? You're gonna to be my new go-to guy, Wade. I'm trusting *you* with my house key."

The gravity of what she said sent waves of dread down his spine.

"Listen, Ms. Gre— I mean Lucy... I don't feel comfortable having a key to your—"

"It's non-negotiable, sugar!" She closed his hand around the box. He noticed how moist her palms were, and unusually hot. Her ears were red as well. It was obvious the alcohol had raised her blood pressure.

"But don't get your hopes up. I *may* never call you." She poked his chest again, noticing how rigid he'd become. "Loosen up, Wade... not *everything* on you needs to be so damn stiff!" She laughed again at her own humor. Wade didn't laugh. He was more uncomfortable than ever now. Lucy noticed and changed her approach.

"Look Wade, all of my family lives out of state, and I need someone close by who I can rely on, that's all. And *you* thought you were gonna get lucky! Well, dream on, big boy!" She walked back to the bar, feeling triumphant she had completed her mission.

Wade was left standing outside the men's room, trying to process what had just happened. When he walked back to his table, he decided not to mention the key to Janet. He'd wait until they got home, where they'd decide together what to do about it. Maybe *she* could keep it, or he'd just give it back to Lucy after New Year's, telling her to find someone else to be her go-to guy. That would send her the proper message, he figured. Lucy had other options in the department, anyway. She didn't need him.

As he sat at his desk, reflecting on the encounter, he realized it had been a few years since her latest offer. As far as he knew, she'd taken him off her list the day that key landed back on her desk.

"Have a nice weekend!" Wade heard someone say as he neared Lucy's office.

"Enter!" she said after he had already knocked three times.

Lucy never answered on the first knock. It was another power-play of hers.

"Josh said you needed me," Wade said as he walked into her office.

“Josh, yes... Josh,” Lucy said in a disgusted tone. She paused for a moment then whispered to Wade, “How can a man want another man’s hairy ass? I mean, really... I don’t get it.”

“Ms. Gre—”

“Doesn’t it *bother* you? Him playing for the other team and all? Such a waste if you ask me... speaking as a heterosexual woman, of course.”

“Not at all... it’s his business,” Wade replied.

He wanted to say more to her homophobic rant, but he knew it would make no difference. Nothing he said would change how Lucy thought or acted. Wade knew she was still kicking herself for not finding out Josh was gay sooner than she did. He remembered her look of shock when she found out. She almost face-planted right there, in her office! Josh wasn’t going to be eligible for her list of key-masters like she’d hoped.

Wade waited for her to say more, but she didn’t. Still, she never lost eye contact with him. Wade sensed she was stalling about something. His anxiety heightened. She slowly picked up a folder that was lying on her desk. Wade noticed an airline ticket sticking out of it.

Oh, shit! Not again, he thought.

“Listen up, Wade. I need you to go to Atlanta on the twenty-sixth to back up our numbers for the Whitman division. Carlson fucking quit on me today, and your name is on the reports they’re squawking about anyway. They’re being audited by the feds and they need their numbers to line up. They’re holding a closed meeting just for you. Two o’clock that afternoon. Can you believe it? All those big-wigs willing to meet in the afternoon? Missing their precious tee-times and hookers? They must be scared shitless about something.”

“The twenty-sixth? That’s this...” he tried stalling as well, trying to think of something that would make him not available for the trip.

“Yeah, this Friday, Wade! Listen, no one else knows their spooky little account like Carlson and you. I know *I* don’t. Hell, I don’t *want* to. You’ll be back home in your own bed the same night, maybe in time for a late dinner with that wife of yours.”

“Janet. Listen Lucy, I might have run a few numbers for John and signed off on a couple of his reports, but I don’t know anything about—”

“You’re all I *got* right now, Wade... so don’t leave me hanging! I need someone there I can count on. Someone who worked closely with Carlson. There’ll be questions asked, and we sure don’t want to look stupid, do we?”

So, there it was, he figured. He was going to Atlanta specifically to save Lucy’s ass.

At least it’s not the whole damn weekend this time, he reasoned.

“Okay Lucy... I’ll handle it. When’s my flight?” he asked in a defeated tone.

“5:45am.” She looked up from her desk. “Oh, quit looking so fucking sad, big boy. We’ll be back the same night, remember? So, don’t even think about any hanky-panky, got it?” She winked as she leaned back in her chair.

“We?” He felt his coffee in his throat.

“Yes, we!” she said. “Don’t get your panties in a wad, Wade. It’s a freakin’ day trip! You won’t have time to scratch your balls before we’ll be on a plane, flying back here.”

Wade took that as her way of saying she wouldn’t try anything this time.

“Look, it’s *my* ass on the line. Well, the whole department’s ass. I need to be there, understand?”

He understood perfectly. She had it right the first time.

“Ms. Greene, I didn’t see John leaving when I came in. When exactly did he quit?”

“The little shit faxed his resignation to me from home this morning! It was on my printer when I came in. Five years I’ve taken care of his lame ass, and this is how he repays me? He probably found a job somewhere offering more money. It was always the money with him! Thanks for the fucking notice, right?” She nodded yes to her own question.

Wade realized what must have really happened. Two weeks ago, John told him Lucy took a photo of the both of them together in a hotel room. It was during their last ‘business trip’. They were doing bourbon shots on the bed. Evidently, Lucy liked the way the camera framed her tits so much she texted him a copy with her face cropped out. The message read, *Miss these babies yet?* She sent it during a meeting to watch John squirm at the conference table. But it never happened. The next morning, John told Wade he’d left his phone at home the day of the meeting and his wife saw the text, as well as who it was from. She had an immediate meltdown and threatened to leave him if he didn’t quit his job. After a

week of telling her no sex happened and the picture was just a bad joke, John thought it all might blow over. But while he showered one night, Debbie checked his wallet and found a condom. She immediately started packing her things. John came clean about everything and begged her to stay, promising to leave Bergstrom-Levy.

Wade knew John had quit to save his marriage, not because he needed more money. Lucy was just pissed to lose one of her precious boy-toys. She cared nothing for how their little tryst affected his marriage.

"So that leaves you, big boy. We fly out early, so you'd better have any paperwork you need ready by the end of Thursday... got it? These people are *real* old school. They won't watch a PowerPoint. You'll have to print out whatever you want them to see."

Wade stood numb, her last words still spinning in the air as she waited for an answer.

"Sure... Thursday," he said. "I'll have it ready. Anything else, Lucy?"

"Nope! That's it for now, sugar... but I'll let you know," she winked, looking even more like the Grinch now than seven years ago.

The conversation was still plaguing Wade's brain as he walked back to his desk. The more it did, the more his blood began to boil.

Later that afternoon, Lucy made her rounds and winked at Wade again as she walked by. Seeing he wasn't thrilled to see her, she pretended as if she didn't notice. He thought to call Janet about the trip, but didn't want to ruin her afternoon venting about Lucy. He figured it could wait until he got home.

Chapter 6

The Mailbox

Janet finished taking her shower and walked into the kitchen to turn off the coffee pot. It was midmorning. As was her custom, she turned on some music. She never liked how quiet the house became after Wade left for work in the morning. The only prolonged silence she conceded to was necessary for her morning meditation. Other than that, she liked the sound of things going on around her. The constant stimulus made her feel less alone during the morning.

Janet volunteered at a local nursing home when she turned sixteen. She loved working with the older patients. It didn't take long for her to realize most weren't visited by family very often; some not at all. Many of her patients had gone months without seeing anyone other than the hospital's staff before she came along. Janet spent most of her time with those patients, dropping in to read to them or just talk for a while. She quickly became a welcomed visitor. Their faces lit up when they'd see her coming through their door.

Almost fifteen years later, she'd continued her work with the elderly. Having a clinical degree and such a pleasant personality, Janet could have made more money somewhere else. But, money wasn't her main priority. Several corporations tried to hire her, but she chose a small senior care facility that could barely afford to keep one clinical psychologist on staff.

Working for a little more than half of what her peers earned meant she and Wade had to make sacrifices. The kind of sacrifices most of her colleagues had long put behind them. Her peers drove new cars and ate out at restaurants most of the time. Janet cooked at home and drove the same car she bought a year after graduating college. But she was happy, and that underscored the difference between her and her peers.

Janet's decision to work at Serenity didn't come easily, though. The night before she accepted the position, she approached Wade with her list of possibilities. She had sent resumes to several places, interviewed at many and was offered full-time positions by three of them. Serenity Place offered her a position as well, but it was part-time, as it was all they could afford. The conversation over her job prospects happened more than six years ago now.

Janet had walked in the family room holding up a notebook. It was a Friday night in January, and Wade was already sinking into the weekend.

"Babe, I have a dilemma," she announced, sitting down on his lap. She intentionally blocked his view of the TV, so Wade would know they were about to have a real discussion.

"Now's not a good time," he said, pointing to the TV. "It's double jeopardy, dear."

"Quit it!" She slapped his leg and waved her notebook in his face. "I need to know what you think about this."

"Oh, God, not the yellow notebook!" He covered his eyes with his forearm.

"Stop playing, Wade. I need your attention, and *now*, please." She looked serious.

"Okay, okay. I was just kidding. Which job to take, right?"

"Yes. And they're *all* good places," she said, "but I'm kinda leaning towards one of them over the others. We talked about it the other night."

She looked nervous. Wade knew exactly which place she meant now.

"Honey, we talked about *all* of them the other night," he reminded her. "How am I supposed to remember which ones you liked?" She didn't react.

"Okay, hold on a minute... let me review your notes," he said, gently pulling the notebook from her hands.

He began leafing through it, looking up at her occasionally.

“Hmmm... the first two are pretty big places, babe. Reputable, secure practices... and both pay a nice salary. Hey! One of them even offers a free gym membership... for both of us! We could work out together, babe, get our *burn* on,” he said, nodding. “Oh, and *this* one offers four weeks paid vacation, starting on year two! Oh, but wait... there’s another one here at the bottom of the page. Hmmm... it’s quite a bit smaller... pays *way* less than the others. It’s a senior care facility. Oh, wow... they’re only offering part-time right now.” Wade rubbed his chin as if he was thinking. “Knowing you, I’d say you’re leaning strongly toward the least desirable one... this one,” he said, pointing to the bottom of the page. “Because we both know you are a verified sucker for old folks.” He looked up and smiled again. Once more, she gave no reaction.

“Are you just going sit there and make fun of me?” She started to get up.

“No, babe, I’m not. Really... don’t go anywhere,” he said, grabbing the sides of her pajamas. “But you left one thing off your pros-and-cons list you really should have added. You know, the ‘*which position would give Janet the most satisfaction in her life*’ consideration. And if I know *you*, and I think I do... I think you’d pick the one at the bottom of the page, Serenity Place.”

“Yeah, you’re right, dummy... of *course* that’s the one I’d pick, but you understand what that would mean, don’t you? It’s only part-time, four days a week. And I don’t know if they’ll ever be able to afford more than that. We’ll really have to watch our money. And that’s not really fair to you, considering how hard you work.”

“First of all, I don’t have to work *that* hard at what I do. Numbers come easily to me. I’m like Einstein’s nephew when it comes to accounting, not that I’m bragging. And watching our money is nothing we haven’t done all along. But, babe, and I’m being serious now, it’s more important to me that you love what you do than how much money it brings in. That way, I can live vicariously through you instead of dwelling on my cubicle of calculations.”

Wade saw her green eyes start to tear up. He knew the decision had really taken a toll on her. Wade threw out a lifeline.

“But, to be honest... and I didn’t want to say it, my ultimate motive is purely sexual. I figure with it being part-time, you’ll be working less hours and have *plenty* of extra energy when you come home each night,” he told her, eyebrows raised.

She squeezed his inner thigh and leaned into him.

“Mister, you can’t handle me *now*, regardless of when I get home... let alone with extra energy.” She wiped her eyes. “Plus, I’d be off at five every day and working closer to home. So, *you’d* be coming home to *me* each night, dummy.”

“Yes, exactly... my master plan all along, loser! Now... away with you, wretched part-timer. I’m missing my regularly scheduled programming.” He pointed to the hall in a kingly fashion, turning his eyes to the TV once more.

She took the remote out of his hand, turned off the TV and draped her arms around his neck. Pressing forward, she whispered to his ear.

“You wanna forget the TV for a while and play some *real* double jeopardy?”

His remote hit the floor at the same time as her top. Soon, Wade forgot everything he knew about *Jeopardy* and Alex Trebek.

Thoughts of that evening were enough to make her message him, ‘*Part-timer loves you, Jeopardy Boy!*’ A few seconds later, her phone lit up. ‘*You forgot ‘Double’. Love you more.*’ was his reply.

“Nope, not a chance, dude,” she said aloud as she sat down in the middle of the living room floor. It was time to meditate.

A few minutes into her routine, the face of a little girl popped unexpectedly into Janet’s head. She reminded Janet of her own pictures as a child. She did her best to refocus her mind back into a state of calmness, clearing it from any outside thoughts or worries. This time it was hard to do, though. She had woken earlier that morning, thinking about her difficulties getting pregnant.

She and Wade had waited several years before trying to get pregnant. But now, two years after their wait ended, she still hadn’t conceived. It scared her to think she may never have a child of her own.

Wade was tested and cleared of any issues, so she placed the burden squarely on herself. So far, none of the advice they’d been showered with from doctors or friends worked.

Janet’s meditation was peppered with intrusive thoughts of their struggle. Twenty minutes later, she gave up altogether and changed into her work clothes.

Still plagued with the intrusive thoughts, she grabbed her car keys and stepped out the front door. She immediately stopped, noticing a strange vehicle was parked in front of her mailbox. She watched the car for several seconds, thinking it would eventually move on. It didn't. She knew it wasn't a mail vehicle. The car was a tan sedan and looked to be an older model. The driver's window started to lower, and Janet saw a man reaching towards her mailbox.

"Hey! What are you doing?" she shouted. "That's a private mailbox!"

Startled, the man saw her and slammed his foot on the accelerator. He tossed something in their yard before speeding down her street. Shaken by the encounter, Janet waited a minute before venturing into the yard.

She looked down the street to where the car had driven. It was gone and all was quiet now. She bent down and picked up a yellow envelope from the grass. Only '*W. Richards*' was written on the front, and there was no stamp or return address. She started to open it, but stopped midway, her pulse still racing. She decided to wait until Wade got home and open it together.

Janet walked to her car and laid the envelope on the passenger seat. She couldn't help but think how familiar the stranger seemed to her. Whatever it was all about, she knew something wasn't right.

Chapter 7

The Owie Toe

The wink. It plagued Wade's thoughts all day. Lucy's cringe-worthy gesture explained more than anything else that rolled off her diseased tongue that morning. It remained center-stage in Wade's mind for the entire ride home. The wink meant control and ownership. Basically, *You're my bitch, Wade!* When he played it back in his mind he imagined it happening in slow motion. He'd see the caked curves of her right cheek rising obediently to meet her wrinkled eyelid as it came crashing down. The edge of her mouth also followed suit, opening just enough to allow a bit of coffee-stained enamel to peak through its lipstick prison. He'd seen that wink a thousand times in the years he'd worked for her, maybe more. At some point, he expected it to evolve into a nervous twitch, maybe even a pirate's squint.

Every wink from Lucy meant bad news and more bullshit. Extra assignments thrown his way and weekend homework. Or like today, a last-minute work trip with her bourbon-fueled ass. His only hope was that she would catch herself a fly from Whitman's team and wouldn't sling her silicone beacons in his direction.

As Wade boarded the train for his trip home that afternoon, he couldn't help but think about his trip to Dallas with Lucy, five years earlier. It was a weekend of

ignoring her innuendos and fending off her sexual advances. Dallas was the worst trip he'd ever been *volunteered* for.

He thought he'd made it safely through the first evening, until at 1 a.m, when he heard someone frantically knocking on his hotel room door.

"Wade! It's Lucy! Open up! Hurry, hurry please! It's an emergency!"

He'd been asleep for about an hour. Completely flustered, he fell out of bed trying to get to the door.

"What's wrong?" he asked, opening the door. He looked down the hall, expecting to see smoke, people running or some other crisis. But everything was calm and quiet in the hallway, all except for Lucy.

She hurriedly bullied past him, knocking him into the doorframe. She had on lingerie that appeared to be straight out of a *Victoria's Secret*. It looked like a twisted ensemble of red lace and shoestrings.

"Thanks! The little flipper thing in my bathroom broke. You know, the one on the toilet? It won't work. And I drank so much water during dinner, you know... so I need to use yours." She continued to the bathroom.

Wade knew she had one glass of water during dinner, and it came with the menus. She didn't even drink most of it. The rest of her drinks arrived in short, squatty glasses. Bourbon on ice. The bathroom door slammed shut behind her, and he heard the seat slamming down. He had left it up, not expecting any company, especially a woman.

"You could have still used yours, you know. Maybe just call them in the morning?" He said, loud enough to be heard in the bathroom. "Just because it won't flush doesn't mean you couldn't use—"

"That's just gross, Wade! Who the hell raised you, anyway? A bunch of apes?"

Seconds later, Wade heard the toilet flush. The door sprung open and she began her walk out. She abruptly stopped in the bathroom doorway.

"Ow! Son of a bitch!"

She pressed one hand against the doorway and lifted her right leg until her foot was resting in her left hand. She acted as if she was in pain.

"I stubbed my damn toe!" she said, limping across the room towards Wade. He stepped aside to let her by.

"Just now? I didn't see---"

“So, you didn’t see it, Wade... who cares? I stubbed my damn toe!”

Lucy passed the room’s only chair and sat down on the end of Wade’s bed. She reached down and rubbed her toe, exposing much of her cleavage.

Tired and annoyed, Wade turned his head away, trying to ignore the display.

“Owie! Do you think I broke it?” She looked at him as if he were a doctor.

Wade refused to look in her direction.

“Hey Wade... over here!” she said, upset he wasn’t taking in the view.

“Well, I don’t... hell, I don’t know, Lucy. I’m sure it’s fine... just give it a minute. Where’d you hit it?”

“In the *bathroom*, dumbass! Here... come feel it,” she instructed him.

Lucy extended her leg toward him. Wade didn’t move an inch. He didn’t want to touch her toe or anything else attached to her leg.

“Dammit, Wade! Don’t be such a choir boy! What the hell? Do you need to take off your wedding ring first? Just come over here and feel it! My toe might be broken, Wade. I’m serious!”

He reluctantly knelt down and took her foot into his hand. She winced and let out another loud ‘Owie!’ as he felt along the bones of her big toe.

When he couldn’t find any breaks, Wade looked up to tell her so. He got more than an eyeful. Her top was hanging open now, showcasing ten thousand dollars’ worth of saline and pride. Her nipples were erect, and Wade saw what looked like a hickey on the left one. He immediately dropped her foot and tried to stand. She sprang up first and yanked off her top like it was on fire! One quick step forward and she was covering Wade like a coat of paint! Her momentum caused them both to spin around, falling backwards onto the bed. She hooked both legs around his waist and pulled him down to her by his shirt.

“Lucy! What the hell? Stop it!” he grunted, trying to stand again.

She held on tightly, causing him to lift her off the bed as he did. She grinded her hips into his and forced her lips onto his mouth. He felt her tongue swiping across his teeth. The taste of bourbon and mouthwash almost made him gag as he struggled to pull loose from her grip.

Lucy dug her hooks in even deeper. Both came crashing down on the bed again. Wade finally managed to unhook her legs from his waist and push away from her. Lucy stood up quickly and grabbed his left hand, planting it on her breast. Wade noticed it was warm and soft, almost natural. Not at all what he

expected. He quickly came to his senses and yanked his hand away, upset it lingered there more than a second.

“Lucy! Quit it! I’m not *doing* this! I’m fucking married!” he yelled, backing away from her.

She tilted her head and stared angrily at him. For a second or two, Wade thought he might have to fight her crazy ass. Then suddenly, her expression shifted from anger to shock and confusion.

“Doing *what*?” she asked. “I fell, Wade! So don’t get your dick in a bind! Did you cop a good feel while you were on top of me, pervert?”

Wade was dumbfounded. Lucy scanned the bed for her top. She couldn’t find it. She scuttled around the room looking for it, covering her breasts with both arms, pretending to be modest. Wade was still reeling from her comment. He spotted her top in the corner of the room.

“It’s on the floor by the lamp,” he said, pointing. “Must have come off while you uh... *fell*, huh?” He used every bit of sarcasm he could muster for his words.

Lucy glared angrily at him again while retrieving her top. She almost tripped over the corner of the bed while doing so.

“Watch that toe! Don’t want to break another one,” Wade cautioned as she went into the bathroom to dress.

A minute later, Lucy stormed out of the bathroom, and his hotel suite, even faster than she’d come in, with no limp from her so-called injured toe.

Wade struggled to get back to sleep as he wondered what would happen the next morning. But he soon reasoned it really didn’t matter, job or no job. He wasn’t going to be next in her body count, and she really knew it now. But, to his amazement, the next day Lucy acted as if nothing happened the night before! She was even pleasant to be around, unusually professional and focused on the upcoming meeting. Wade was skeptical how long it would last, but happy not to have to deal with her wrath, at least not yet.

The meeting went smoothly. So smoothly that Wade thought Lucy must have experienced a mental reset after the night before. They ate a late lunch together and flew back to Illinois that afternoon.

Janet heard the whole story after Wade got home from Dallas. He expected her to be irate, and she was. But after they talked a while, she assured Wade she wasn’t mad at him... just Lucy. The only thing they disagreed on was what to do

about it. She wanted him to report Lucy to H.R., but Wade was against it, knowing what a convincing liar Lucy could be. He'd probably end up the one being fired, possibly even charged with assault! Janet agreed to drop it, but let him know if anything like that happened again, it was her right to handle Lucy herself. Wade agreed, upset he let Lucy in his room in the first place. He promised never to make that mistake again.

Later, he crawled into their bed, exhausted from the trip and the explaining he had to do concerning it. He was almost asleep when Janet came into their room with something folded under her arm. She walked past him without a look or a word on her way to the bathroom. Wade figured she was still upset, so he turned on the TV and waited for her to come out, ready to apologize again.

Minutes later, Janet emerged from the bathroom wearing only a long, red t-shirt of his. She grabbed her big toe and began to whine.

"Owie! Oh, Wade... please *help* me, Wade! I neeeeeeeed you!"

He laughed, but before he could say anything, she jumped onto the bed and pinned him down.

"Come on big boy, rub my toe! Rub my freakin' toe! Cougars just *love* to have their toes rubbed, you know. It's part of our mating ritual! Rub it now or find yourself another job, boy-toy!"

She tried her best to growl like a cougar. Wade laughed at the attempt. That is, until her shirt came off.

She grabbed his hand and put it on her breast. This time, Wade didn't pull it away.

The train started to slow as it approached Wade's stop. Thoughts of that night made for a nice trip home. The doors opened and he hopped out, eager to see his wife. After walking a block or so, he picked up his pace significantly.

The smell of garlic bread hit him squarely in the face as he opened the front door. It was a familiar welcome. As far as he was concerned, work was a million miles away now, and so was Lucy and her bullshit. His nose told him dinner was either lasagna or spaghetti. He didn't care which, as both were good. As he made his way through the family room, he heard Jack Johnson's 'Bubbly Toes' playing, with Janet singing along. It was rare to hear her sing anything. She had told him she sang in a choir as a teen, and was good. She told him she sounded like a

young Billie Holiday. But he'd have to catch her by surprise if he wanted to hear her.

He tip-toed in, leaving his briefcase on the couch. He was almost to the kitchen when a floorboard creaked beneath him. Janet heard it and whirled around, slinging a stick of butter she'd held across the kitchen.

"Shit! You scared the hell out of me, Wade! I never even heard the front door open."

"Sorry babe!" he said, gently grabbing her waste. "But that's how I roll, you know... ninja style. Once you know I'm here, it's already too late."

"Ninja, my ass. Ninjas don't make *any* sound when they attack, doofus! The floor creaked like a rhino was walking across it!"

"Bullshit! I caught you by surprise... admit it!"

"Wade, the music covered most of your 'surprise', or I would have heard you even sooner!"

"Well, we can agree to disagree, dear... but admit it, I've still *got* it."

"Hmmm," she answered, nose to nose now.

"Fine... I'll give you that. You've got *something*, alright! I don't know what it is, but you've got *something*. You might just be on the spectrum!"

"I've got your spectrum right here," he said, beginning to point. She smacked his hand away and pointed to the butter on the floor.

Chapter 8

Saline Selfies

The spaghetti was good, but being home was better. After they ate, Wade threw a blanket over the two of them as they settled into the couch. Entangled like strands of rope, they melted into each other while the TV flickered in the otherwise darkened room. It wasn't long until they were both asleep, but only for a short time.

An image of Lucy's twisted face suddenly appeared in Wade's mind. He woke up startled, which woke Janet as well.

"Sorry," he apologized while getting his bearings, "I had a shitty day at work, and I guess my brain wasn't done processing it."

"Really... what happened? Let me guess."

"Yeah, Lucy," he groaned. "I should have told you about it earlier. John Carlson quit this morning, so she volunteered me to take his place in Atlanta this Friday for a save-our-ass meeting. It's just a day trip, though. I'd be back late that night."

Janet tried to mask her disappointment, saying, "Awww, no over-night with Betty Boop this weekend?"

"Not this time. But I dread the thought of sitting on a plane with her skanky ass again."

“Damn, you really *are* unhappy with this trip, huh?”

“It’s not just the trip,” he said, “It’s John.”

“Yeah, right... weren’t John and she...” she began, purposely letting her words trail off.

“Yep... screwing. But John’s wife found out and it all blew up. He had to quit to save his marriage. He told me last week. I haven’t talked to him about it since, though. Lucy doesn’t think I know anything about it. She’s telling everyone he left because he wanted more money.”

“Figures... did Debbie catch them in the act?”

“No, but she might as well have. Lucy took a topless selfie while they were in bed, and liked it so much she sent it to his phone a few days later, to mess with him. He’d left his phone at home the day she sent it, though. Debbie saw it and the rest is history.”

“Damn, babe...I hope they’ll be okay,” she said, “but, you know, John deserves whatever he *gets* for messing around with that bitch. He’ll be lucky if he doesn’t get an STD. So, I don’t feel bad for him at all... just Debbie. And I’m glad she found out, too. He played a stupid game and won a stupid prize! But you know, Wade... it’ll never be the same for them now, even if they manage to stay married. It will always be in the back of Debbie’s mind, and I don’t blame her a damn bit.”

“Yeah, I agree babe, but since he’s quit, I have to take his place with Lucy for *his* damn meeting. Meaning, I have to sort through a bunch of shit and report on a shady account that John didn’t want in the first place. Those people use more bullshit write-offs... you have no idea. Seriously... like tens of thousands every quarter, and no one dares to question where the money goes.”

“But you’re only working off *their* receipts and documentation, right? It’s not like you’re *producing* them. But back to Lucy... why do you think she picked you for the trip over one of her boy-toys?”

“She picked me because I worked with John on some of that account. I even signed off on a few reports when Lucy was out, even though everything didn’t line up. John promised he’d accidentally left some stuff from the account at home and would have it all straightened before the meeting. So right now, I don’t know what needs to be added or amended!

I tried John earlier, but he didn’t answer his phone. Something doesn’t seem right to me about this, babe. The way John acted while I reviewed the account

last week... he was nervous, and that's not like him. Said told me again he left a folder at home.

As far as Lucy goes, she claims ignorance to all of it. So right now, I'm her best bet for getting through this trip without Lucy getting her ass reamed or receiving a termination letter from corporate."

Janet's eyes widened as she remembered the mailbox event from earlier that morning.

"Oh! Speaking of shady shit and *letters*... and yes... I heard what you said, but I have to tell you this! Something really weird happened to me this morning, babe. When I was leaving for work, I caught this guy trying to put something in our mailbox. And *no*, he wasn't the mailman. He acted *really* suspicious. I yelled at him, and he took off, spinning his tires and everything. He had a dark beard and was driving an old, tan car. He was wearing a ball cap, pulled down low. Oh, yeah... and something else. When I saw him, he looked familiar to me... his face, his eyes. He had a beard, though. That's about all I saw. Anyway, the way he ducked down and drove off so fast... he definitely didn't want me seeing him. The whole thing really freaked me out!"

"That is weird," Wade agreed. "Did he leave anything in our mailbox?"

"Yes, an envelope... but not in the mailbox. He dropped it in our yard as he drove off."

"Well, what's in it? Did you open it?"

"No, I waited for you. It's right here... has your name on it."

She took it off the coffee table. Wade looked it over and opened it. He pulled out a single, folded piece of copy paper.

"It's a list of names," he said, "nine of them, with states listed by each name. No street addresses or cities, though. Mine's on here. There's an 'S' next to it."

"What's *that* about?" she asked, looking at the paper. "Do you know any of them?"

"The second and third names are scribbled out." He said, showing her the letter. "Like, *all* the way out, so you couldn't even begin to read them. I don't recognize any of the other names except mine. Underneath the list it reads, *Project Second Chance*, whatever that is."

"Babe, that's your work-email address on there, hand-written at the bottom. And there's our home address, too! How'd he get that?"

"I have no freaking clue. To my knowledge, they don't put the company's accountants' names or personal information on the website."

"Well, did you even *check* your work email today? Maybe you got something from him."

"You know the answer to that," he admitted, "But I will tomorrow." She stood there with her arms folded. "Okay, I'll do it tonight," he said, looking at the clock.

"Yes, tonight. I'm not going to sleep until we know what this is about. That guy really scared me!"

Wade opened his case and pulled out his laptop.

"You're right. Let's just find out now." He opened his laptop and logged on.

"Holy shit," he said. "There's four new emails, all titled 'list', with attachments. Looks like the guy sent the same email four times. All of them were sent last night."

"Damn, the guy really wanted your attention. So... open one!"

Wade scanned the newest email and opened the attachment.

"It's the same as what was in the envelope, babe. In fact, the attachment looks to be a scan of this letter, but without my email and home address." He turned his laptop toward Janet.

"He wanted you to see this pretty bad," she said, "spamming your email..."

"Yeah, and I'm sure it means something, but I've no idea what. Probably trying to sell us something. His email address is *PSClist123@gmail.com*. Looks like he set up a special email account to send these from. I'd say PSC probably stands for *Project Second Chance*. I'll message him back tomorrow and find out what the hell the list is about, along with the mailbox bullshit."

"You know what? I agree.... tomorrow's better. I can't take any more of this tonight. I won't be able to sleep! I've had enough drama for today."

"I'm sorry he scared you, babe. Tomorrow I'll Sherlock Holmes it and figure this out. You can play Nancy Drew when I come home tonight if you want. In a short, plaid skirt, please." He wrung his hands together.

"Not if you don't figure this out. But it wouldn't be a red skirt, anyway. I don't want you mistaking me for Lucy. I've decided to retire that color from my closet. I'm over it."

"Agreed!" he said. "No more 'Lucy- red' in the house. It's a real trigger for me, anyway, babe. Makes me want a penicillin shot."

Chapter 9

Shaky Hands

Wade heard a door being opened with force. He looked in the direction of the sound. Before he could react, something jumped on the bed and was on top of him, crushing his ribs. It was dark, a hulking figure.

Wade struggled to move, turning his head to the right, thinking Janet was next to him. She wasn't there. Looking across her side of the bed, he noticed the bedroom walls looked different than before. There was a small chair and desk where the dresser should have been! Wade immediately realized this wasn't their bedroom!

Wade panicked as he fought to get free. He could tell by now it was a very large man on top of him! There was a smaller man with black hair by the door. He was holding a gun!

As his struggle continued, Wade realized he was fighting for his life! He couldn't get out from under the man and was quickly losing his breath. He was much heavier than Wade, and stronger. All Wade could discern in the dimly lit room was that the man had on a ski mask and a dark jacket.

The man's left forearm pressed hard against Wade's chin, working its way down to his throat. Wade resisted, but felt his jaw beginning to crack! Then, all at

once, the man swung his other arm downward. Wade felt something hard hit his head, then again. His eyesight blurred to the point he could no longer see. He lay there, barely conscious, then felt himself being lifted up by his shirt.

“Yer gonna write somethin’ for me or we’ll be killin’ three of you tonight instead of one! You really want that for your pretty wife and daughter?” the intruder asked, releasing Wade to fall back into the mattress.

Daughter? Wade thought, *He’s got the wrong guy! I don’t even have a daughter!*

He felt the man grip his collar again. Wade tried to speak but couldn't find any air. In one swift motion, the man pulled him up into a sitting position. He shoved a pen into his hand and pulled a piece of paper from his jacket's pocket. Wade felt his hand being squeezed painfully around the pen.

“Yer gonna write down everything I tell ya, and just *how* I tell ya... got it? Or I’m shoving this barrel in yer mouth and pullin’ the trigger,” The man commanded. “And if you botch it, I’ll visit that pretty wife of yours after I’m done with you!”

Wade took the pen in his hand and started to write down everything he was told. With a shaky hand, he wrote, ‘I’m sorry J—’

Suddenly, Wade heard his name being called. It was faint, but he heard it again!

“Help!” He tried to yell the words, but they just wouldn’t come out. Strangely, he felt his hand was still writing.

Wade heard his name being called again. It sounded like someone talking to him from closer now. He felt an instant release of pressure. He looked up at the man. He had vanished.

“Wade... Wade!” a woman cried out to him, “Wake up!” He knew the voice. It was Janet. She suddenly appeared in bed, next to him. Wade was covered in sweat by now, his arms were flailing. She tried without luck to steady him.

“Honey! Stop! Are you okay?” She tried desperately to calm him.

Wade sat up suddenly and scanned the room. The man wasn’t there. The walls were recognizable now and the dresser was back where it should be. He was back! He realized the whole ordeal had been a terrible nightmare. Wade collapsed onto the bed and tried hard to catch his breath.

“Wade! Are you okay? Talk to me!”

"I'm back... I mean, I'm okay," he answered, still breathing heavily.

"Babe! What the hell happened? What were you dreaming about?"

"I don't know," he said, panting, "I was in bed alone. I woke to the sound of a door being forced open. Suddenly, some huge guy was attacking me! He hit me on the head several times and said I had to write something on a piece of paper for him or he was going to kill you and our daughter."

"Daughter?" she asked, confused even more. "And write something? What did he tell you to write?"

"I don't know, I really don't. It was crazy! I don't understand any of it, really. But it all felt so real. There was another man there, too, standing by the door. He was a little guy... jet black hair. Babe... the fear, the pain... thank God it was just a nightmare!"

He spoke the words dramatically, as if he was trying to convince himself it *was* just a nightmare, not her.

Janet brought him a glass of water. He sipped at it while she watched him. When he'd taken a few drinks, she took the water from him.

"Okay, babe, you're going to take a shower while I change these sheets. You're covered in sweat, and so is the bed!"

As he washed off, he noticed the top of his head was sore, and in the same spot he was injured in the nightmare. He figured he must have done it to himself in his sleep and dreamed a reason for it. By the time he got back in bed, Janet had the TV on. The sound helped them both unwind from the drama until they could eventually fall back to sleep.

Soon, sunlight found its way under Wade's eyelids. After the night before, he was almost relieved to be going to work.

The ride to Bergstrom-Levy seemed longer than usual to Wade. He was still in a mental daze from his nightmare. He was used to crazy dreams, but nothing like that! It didn't have quite the same feeling as his other dreams. This one felt very real and 'in the moment,' like he was actually there, especially considering the pain aspect of it. Even the air in the room was discernable. It smelled stale, the same as his grandmother's home when he was five.

When his stop arrived, Wade stepped off the train and began his usual walk to Bergstrom-Levy. After last night's dream drama, he hoped not to find Josh waiting on the other side of the elevator doors when they opened. He wasn't. Though, on the way to his cubicle he noticed Trey was standing next to his desk.

"Dammit!" Wade said under his breath. He knew Trey either *had* some gossip or wanted it.

"Dude, I heard about John," Trey said quietly, leaning against the cubicle. He looked like a spy hoping to trade information. Wade wasn't in the mood to play.

Trey was the newest addition to the department. Corporate transferred him to Chicago a few months ago. He was twenty-four; slim, dark-haired, and built just like Lucy preferred; athletic.

"Yeah, I got the news yesterday... from Lucy, herself," Wade said, hoping to keep the conversation short.

"So... going to Atlanta Friday, huh?" Trey asked, wanting more details.

"Yeah, just another field trip."

Trey scanned the room before continuing.

"Yeah... Cindy was just about to knock on the queen's door yesterday when she heard Lucy screaming out 'Fuck you, John!' several times. She thought John was in there, getting his ass reamed. But when she walked by the office, she noticed Lucy was in there alone, screaming at her copier. Soon after, we heard he faxed in his resignation. What a legend!"

"Huh... wow," Wade said, visibly uninterested. "All I know is I inherited his trip."

"Yeah, *that's* going to be an interesting work trip, huh? Got your *Mace* with you?" he laughed. Wade tried not to react, but it *was* a valid question. He was just surprised Trey already knew about Lucy's behavior.

"We'll be back that night," Wade said, relieved at his own words. "No *Mace* necessary."

"Okay, well... oh, later dude," Trey said, quickly walking to his desk. Wade knew there must be a reason he left so fast. He turned around to see Lucy coming his way.

"Hey sugar... got all your shit ready for Atlanta?"

Wade could almost hear the 'woosh' from all the nosy heads turning around at once.

“I haven’t had time to go through all of it yet but I’ll have it together before lunch Thursday.”

“Oh, I *know* you will, hon.” she said, scanning the room. “At least I can count on *someone* around here to get shit done!” She said it loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. After a quick wink to Wade, she strutted back to her lair.

Wade switched his computer on and waited for it to come to life. When it booted up, he immediately logged into his email account. There were no new messages, and he found himself staring at the email titles he saw the night before. As he opened the latest one, he tried to think of how to answer, or if he even should. He had no way of knowing what kind of nut-job was on the other end of those emails. After thinking about it for a few moments, he decided he had to respond.

You upset my wife yesterday. It’s against the law to put things in people’s mailboxes unless you’re a mailman. So who are you and what’s the reason for the envelope you left in my yard? I’m not familiar with any names on that list but my own.

I would also like to know how you got my email and home address in the first place. Our company doesn’t make that information public. Please explain and clear this up asap before it goes any further.

‘W. Richards

After hesitating a moment, he pressed ‘send’ and logged out. Next to his keyboard, he saw John’s files on the Whitman division. With an exasperated sigh, he picked them up and skimmed through them before suddenly putting it all back down. He knew this was going to be a shit day and needed more coffee first.

Chapter 10

Death Has Its Own Smell

The motel's parking lot was empty except for two cars. Like many others in the old Chicago business district, it was out of date and rundown. Clumps of grass pushed their way through broken asphalt to observe the building's daily matinee of falling paint chips. Heat waves rippled off a lone patrol car while three men gathered outside room 108.

"Police! Open the door!" officer Vince Shelton commanded.

"I told ya, there ain't nobody *in* there... except the one," the old man said, shaking his head. "I know what I saw."

"Quiet, please," the officer said. He shouted out again, "Police, open the door!" No one answered, and there were no sounds of movement. "Okay, open it," the officer directed the old man.

The hotel manager's hand shook as he worked to get his key into the lock.

"Thank you... now please, step back sir," Shelton instructed.

The motel manager gladly backed away, then positioned himself behind the second officer.

Shelton pushed the door open and took a step inside, his weapon drawn. The overwhelming smell of fecal matter caused him to quickly cover his mouth. But that wasn't the only smell in the room.

"I'm sorry," the old man said, stretching his neck to get a look, "I was gonna open a window, but wasn't sure if I should. Vultures, you know... they can smell death a mile away. Ugly bastards! I don't need them dirty bastards gettin' in here."

"It's alright," Shelton replied. "You did the right thing in keeping the room secure. Just remain outside while we assess the scene, okay?"

The old man complied without objection. The room's stench outweighed his morbid curiosity anyway. He was content to watch everything safely from the parking lot.

The room was typical for a rundown motel, complete with old, chunky pine furniture, a tube TV and shag carpeting. Nothing was knocked over or broken. There were no signs of forced entry or struggle. In fact, nothing in the room looked out of place except for the dead male in the bed, propped up against the headboard.

There was a blood-soaked piece of paper lying on his chest and a handgun on the bed, just to his side.

Shelton put on a pair of latex gloves and walked over to the right side of the bed. He leaned over and placed two fingers against the dead man's throat to confirm what he already knew, he was dead. Looking down, he read the bloody note, written in what appeared to be very shaky handwriting.

I'm sorry Julie. I just can't take it anymore. I love you.

"Looks like suicide to me," the younger officer announced, looking over the senior officer's shoulder.

Shelton ignored the rookie and continued taking in the scene. He noticed a wallet, credit cards, cash and a set of keys on the dresser. He saw no other personal effects in the room except a pile of folded clothes on the seat of a chair and some shoes on the floor. Shelton figured the keys belonged to the tan sedan parked outside.

The dead man's skull decorated the knotty-pine headboard. His jaw was partly open, revealing some broken teeth and a mouthful of dried blood. Shelton knew if the head was tilted, he'd find the exit wound.

He walked to the dresser and took a look at the items lying on top. Of the cards that were scattered around, he saw a Michigan driver's license issued to Charles M. Ashby. Except for a few coins, no money was present. Shelton took another look at the man's head. He noticed three gashes on top. The skin around the cuts had already turned black.

"Eric, call detective Turly down here. But use the phone, not the radio." Shelton told the rookie.

"Because of his broken teeth?" his partner laughed. "He probably did that to himself... shoving the gun in his mouth!"

Shelton gave him a look as if to say, 'Just *do* it!'

The junior officer accepted the unspoken direction and walked out to make the call.

Jim Turly stared at the picture on his desk with enough anger to burn a hole through it.

He and Crystal got married twenty-seven years ago, right out of high school. She still looked much like she did in their wedding photo. He, on the other hand, had packed on fifty pounds and lost most of his wavy brown hair.

As he sat there, finishing the last of his diet soda, he wondered if his marriage would make it another year. Memories from one critical afternoon caused him to think that way.

Two years ago, a fellow officer and buddy of Jim's noticed Crystal's yellow Camaro parked outside a downtown motel while he was on patrol. It was pouring rain, but he was sure it was hers. Jim was working at his desk when he got the discreet call.

"You'd better get down here, Jim. I think I see Crystal's car parked at 5th and Baker."

Jim knew exactly what was at 5th and Baker. His mind raced through possible scenarios as he sped to the location.

The officer who tipped him off saw Jim's car pull in and skid to a stop. He waved apologetically, worried about what may happen next. Jim walked directly

over to the Camaro. It was Crystal's alright. Locked, with her purse sitting on the floorboard.

His heart pounded at the thought of what it meant. Jim unsnapped his holster.

"Take it easy, Jim!" the other officer said. "Dammit, Jim! I knew I shouldn't have called you. Just take it easy." Turly ignored him.

He walked to the closest motel room and banged on the door. No one answered. Sounds coming from the room next door drew his attention. He walked over and heard a man inside, moaning. He took a breath and peered through a section of the window that wasn't completely blocked with drapes. What he saw next confirmed his suspicions.

Crystal's head was voraciously bobbing up and down on the man, delivering a service Jim only received on his birthday... and not *every* birthday! His blood instantly boiled! He pounded on the window, cracking the glass. He announced he was a police officer and demanded they open the door.

Jim heard a fast shuffling of feet and Crystal panicking, "Oh, shit, John! Oh, shit!"

Seconds later, the door unlocked and cracked open unabatted. Jim charged into the room with his weapon drawn. Crystal's lover backed away from the door and into the corner, the officer's gun aimed squarely at him. He instinctively put his hands in the air, dropping the pillow he was using to cover Crystal's lunch. Jim wanted to shoot him right there! The man was deathly terrified and pleaded with the officer.

"Don't shoot! Nothing h-happened! I didn't know she was married... I swear!"

Jim continued pointing his weapon at him. A moment later, the other officer yelled loudly.

"Jim! Don't be stupid, man. I called you *down* here, remember? We'll *both* burn for this. Just take it easy. This douche isn't worth our badges!"

Jim barely heard the words. His mind was numb from what he'd just seen. The patrol officer called out his name again. Jim, regaining some sense of awareness, holstered his gun and pointed his finger angrily at the man.

"Don't you move a fucking inch, asshole!" he warned, sweat dripping from his forehead. "You try to leave and you're a fucking dead man!"

He turned his gaze from the terrified man to scan the rest of the room. Crystal wasn't there. He saw the bathroom door was shut. He walked to the door and tried to open it. Just as he figured, it was locked. He slammed his fist against it, then again.

"Open the door, Crystal!"

Before he could hit the door a third time, it burst open, and Crystal darted past him with her nose in the air, as if she was annoyed by his presence. She snatched her keys from the dresser and was out the front door before Jim knew how to react. Stunned, he followed her outside.

She got to her car and locked herself in before he could reach her. He tried the handle and smacked the driver's window.

"Get out of the car, Crystal! Get out of the car right fucking now!" Crystal didn't move an inch.

He smacked the roof of her car with both hands this time, causing the whole vehicle to rock. Crystal just sat there, hands gripped tightly around the steering wheel and staring straight ahead. She was shaking nervously.

"Get out of the damn car, Crystal!" he commanded again.

The other officer tried to intervene again.

"C'mon, Jim, just let her go. This shit is getting out of hand! Other units are gonna show up soon if you don't back off!"

Jim didn't respond. Crystal continued to remain still, making no eye contact with him.

Jim's fury had now reached the point of no restraint. Clinching his fist, he drew back his arm and punched the center of the driver's window. Crystal screamed as it exploded around her! A barrage of broken glass blanketed her long, blonde hair as she shielded her eyes.

Jim suddenly realized how far he'd gone. The other officer ran over to the car, his radio in hand. Blood poured from Jim's knuckles as he staggered away from the car. He searched for the words to address what he'd done. With his anger paused for the moment, he looked at Crystal again, hoping she was okay.

As he stood outside her door, she raised her head slowly, until her eyes met his. Pieces of glass began to drop from her hair as her expression transitioned from fear to rage. Jim took a step toward her, but stopped when she began shouting.

“Get away from me you crazy fuck! Stay back!”

She fumbled for her keys as Jim stood frozen, not knowing what to do. Crystal started the engine and threw her car in reverse. The Camaro’s back tires gripped hard against the pavement, spinning the car around and nearly taking out both officers before speeding out of the lot! Jim staggered over to his car. He noticed some kids standing on the corner, watching him. They’d seen it all. One of them was holding up a phone, obviously recording everything. They quickly ran away when he saw him making eye contact.

Great! he thought. *Icing on the fucking cake!*

He regained his composure and suddenly remembered the man he’d left standing in the motel room. He fought back the urge to go back in there, knowing what could happen. He knew he’d probably end up losing his badge, if he hadn’t already. The beat-down that piece of shit deserved wasn’t worth his career. He decided to drive home before anything else happened.

Jim pulled into his driveway, blood still dripping from his hand. He pushed the button on his garage remote and watched it slowly open. With every creak and groan of the door, Jim’s heart pounded even harder. He wasn’t surprised to find the garage empty. He didn’t know whether to feel relieved or angry she wasn’t there. His instinct was to get back in his car and drive around until he found her, but he instead decided to leave it alone. He didn’t want to chase after her. He’d sit back and wait as long as it took. She would have to come home eventually, and face him. For now, though, he needed to close the wound on his knuckle. For that, he’d need a quick trip to Urgent Care.

At 4 a.m. the next morning, Jim heard the garage door rumbling. He was sitting on the living room couch, which he had turned to face the door. He hadn’t slept a single minute. He wanted his tired, pissed off face to be the first thing Crystal saw when she opened the door. It was.

The next few weeks were tumultuous. There were countless tears, threats, name-calling and blame being dealt out from both sides. Luckily, the only casualties were a table lamp and a fist-sized hole in the drywall.

Two bitter years and three thousand counseling dollars later, their marriage had deteriorated into living more like roommates than husband and wife. It wasn’t what Jim signed up for. He hated his marriage now.

Jim felt waves of anger crash over him as he continued to stare at the photo on his desk. He grabbed it, intending to throw it in the trash can by his desk. Instead, he flipped it over, unable to look at it any longer. The marriage counselor had suggested that he keep Crystal's picture around where he could see it, to remind him what he's fighting for. Mostly, though, the photo just pissed him off.

The phone on his desk began to ring. It was a welcomed sound, something to take his mind off his shitty marriage for a while. He listened to the excited officer on the other end and grabbed for a pen. When the call had ended, he shook his head and slammed the phone down. He'd just been called down to the scene of a possible suicide at 5th and Baker.

Chapter 11

The Room Speaks

Jim felt sick irony as he pulled into the motel's parking lot. He'd not been back there since he caught Crystal gagging on her lover. Now, besides being a trigger for bad memories, it was currently the scene of a fatal shooting. He didn't want to be there, but he knew Vince wouldn't have called him down without a good reason.

Jim parked his vehicle, took a deep breath and grabbed his leather satchel from the passenger seat. He eyed the run-down motel with pure disdain as he walked towards the officers.

"Whatcha got down here, Vince?" he asked, shaking his hand.

Before Vince could answer, the younger officer spoke.

"We got a ripe one with a suicide note, detective! Pretty open and shut!"

Turly sighed, turning to address the young officer.

"Pretty open and shut, huh? What's your name, son?" he asked, looking him in the eyes.

"Dennison, sir! We've met before." The young man said, straightening up.

"No, no... what's your *first* name, officer Dennison."

“It’s Eric, sir,” the rookie said, proud the detective would address him by his first name.

A smirk appeared on Officer Shelton’s face. He knew exactly what was coming.

“Oh... it’s Eric?” the detective asked, acting confused. “It’s not Vince? You sure? Because I could have *sworn* I asked Senior Officer Vince Shelton for *his* assessment. But for some reason, when I asked him, *you* answered instead. So, then I thought to myself, maybe we have *two* Vinces in the department.”

He paused for a second, acting puzzled again.

“Huh... *two* Vinces. Wow, I bet that’d get a little confusing, right? I’d have to figure out some way to know which one I was talking to. Hell, I’d probably have to come up with special nicknames for both of you. Nicknames like, *Senior Officer Vince With Twenty Years Experience On The Force*, and *Rookie Vince*. You *do* understand which nickname you’d get, right?”

“Yes, sir. I understand which one... I mean, I’m sorry for interrupting, sir,” answered the young, embarrassed officer. Turly put his hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, son... I’m just messing with you. I earned the same speech about twenty-two years ago and remember how it feels to be fresh out of the academy. You wanna do well, but sometimes end up jumping the gun. So let me give you the same advice my captain gave me that day. ‘Your mama blessed you with two ears, son, but only one mouth. If you want to be a good officer, learn to use them accordingly.’ Lesson concluded.”

“Got it, sir.” Dennison replied, looking quite somber now.

Turly returned his attention to Shelton, who was fighting hard to suppress a laugh.

“So, for the second time now, whatcha got down here, Vince?”

“You’d better come inside and take a look, Jim. But be ready for the smell,” he warned, “It’s a couple days ripe in that room.”

Turly nodded, and the three of them walked towards the room. The stench grew worse the closer they got, but Jim wasn’t thinking about the smell.

His mind was battling flashbacks from the past. He felt his heart beating faster as they reached the door.

The same room. It had to be the same fucking room. I must be cursed today!

The motel manager stood outside the open door with a handkerchief pressed firmly against his face.

"I'm sorry," he said through the cloth, "he paid for three days and asked not to be bothered, so I didn't. Someone said they thought they heard a gunshot a couple days ago, but how was I to know it was him? You always hear shots in this part of town."

The three officers entered the room. Dennison covered his mouth and nose from the stench as Vince began to speak.

"I wanted to give you extra time to see this before the boys came down and started bagging and tagging, Jim. I knew you'd want to get your pictures while it wasn't too crowded. The best I can tell is he's been dead a couple days. Gunshot to the head. He took it through the mouth while seated, considering the headboard behind him. A note written to someone named Julie was found right here," he said, pointing. "And this pistol, here, by his leg. I noticed some gashes on the top of his head. Possibly caused by the butt of a handgun. We haven't touched or disturbed anything, and we were gloved-up, of course. On the dresser, we found a Michigan driver's license. The name on it is Charles M. Ashby. Also, these credit cards, a receipt for a local gas station and a set of keys. The picture seems to match, but as you can see, it's kinda hard to tell. That's most of it, Jim."

"Thanks, Vince," detective Turly said as he pulled his camera out from his satchel. The two patrol officers stepped outside. Vince lit a cigarette while he waited for Turly to take pictures. After a few minutes had passed, Jim motioned them back inside.

"Let's see what this room can tell us," the detective said.

Turly put on a new pair of latex gloves and began walking around the room, inspecting the floor and carpet. Next, he observed the room's furniture and placement. He walked toward the bathroom but stopped for a moment.

Flashing back to that painful day, he imagined the door bursting open and Crystal rushing out past him. He shook off the painful thoughts and returned to his inspection. Walking around the soiled bed, he looked the deceased over for a couple minutes before reading the suicide note. After that, he carefully eyed the gun. There were several dark hairs caught between the cylinder and the frame. He used his phone to zoom in and get a better look.

Next, he looked at the deceased's wounds, focusing his attention to the three gashes on top of the man's head. After studying them for a moment, he turned to his fellow officers.

"I think we have enough here to warrant a homicide investigation," he said, taking his gloves off. Dennison appeared puzzled by the detective's statement, but kept his mouth shut this time.

"What'd you see, Jim?" Shelton asked.

"Two things about the note bother me," the detective explained. "It's saturated with blood, alright, but it looks to have soaked up through the *bottom* of the paper. If you'll notice, there's blood splatter on the front of the man's shirt, but no droplets on top of the note. I don't think the blood from underneath would completely wash out any splatter on the top side. Considering where we found the note, it should be covered with heavy spatter. Everything around it is. That suggests the note may have been placed there *after* the shooting. I don't think our guy could have pulled that off having just eaten what looks to have been a hollow-point.

Secondly, I didn't notice a pen lying around. Most suicides write their notes just before they kill themselves unless it's a long note. This note is barely one line. So where's the pen?

As far as his hands go, there was blood on the right hand, but none on the left. That indicates he shot himself with one hand, not two. I think our guy would have used two." Dennison appeared to be confused again. Truly noticed.

"You see, Eric," the detective explained, "taking one's life is usually a very deliberate and well thought-out act. Sure, some people will do it spontaneously if the situation is ripe for it, but just think about it for a second. This guy's address is several hours away from here. Still, he comes to Chicago, rents a motel room, supposedly writes a suicide note, then sits up on that bed right there to blows his brains out. That doesn't seem very spur of the moment, does it? People like our guy, a mouth shooter, usually carry out their suicide in a precise, methodical way. When they're positioned and ready to do it, they'll bring the gun up to their face using *both* hands for control. Extra control because their hands are likely shaking. Then, if they still have the balls to go through with it, they'll open their mouth, place the barrel inside and squeeze the trigger. Why two hands? Like I said, control. They'd only use one hand if they were shooting themselves in the

side of their head. The one thing a suicide-by-mouth guy is more scared of than pulling the trigger is having the gun fire a little too far left or right. He could end up firing the bullet through his jaw instead of the back of the head. He'd likely pass out, but if help arrived fast enough, he'd survive the whole thing! Then, for the rest of his life, he'd have to live with a screwed-up face and the fact he botched the *one* thing he thought he'd have control over. And as far as the blood on his right hand? It's present on the index finger and thumb but not the other three fingers. *Those* three fingers would have been used to grip the gun, and yet they're spotless. It looks like they were shielded from the blood splatter, but with what? The other hand was clean. Maybe someone helped our guy put that gun in his mouth. In any case, we can't rule out foul play, so let's treat it as a homicide and hope forensics can tell us more. By the way, I'm guessing it was the gashes on top of his head and the dresser that caused you to call me down here first. Right, Vince?"

"Exactly," answered Shelton, nodding.

Dennison listened intently for another needed explanation. Turly stepped closer to him.

"Make a fist for me, Eric," he said. "Go ahead."

Dennison held up his right hand and made a fist.

"Now, pretend you're angry at yourself. Maybe trying to get up the nerve to shoot yourself. Now, imagine you have a gun in your hand. Go through the motion you'd use if you were hitting yourself in the head with that gun."

Officer Dennison acted as if he was hitting himself in the head. After three strikes, Turly stopped him.

"Notice where you hit yourself?" he asked, pointing. "Here, above the temple. Now try hitting yourself directly on *top* of your head, where those gashes are. It's not a natural movement, is it? The deceased's gashes are located top-center on his head. I'm thinking he had some help with those injuries. Oh, and the broken teeth you mentioned over the phone? Chips like that don't usually happen while putting a gun in the mouth. People are instinctively careful with their teeth, even if they're suicidal. Another reason for using two hands. Teeth get broken when the gun goes off. Either from the recoil or from biting the barrel in reflex... sometimes both."

The young officer's jaw dropped as he took in the detective's words.

“And by the way, Eric,” Turly said, placing his hand on the young officer’s shoulder, “these are things you only learn by watching and listening to those who have investigated longer than you. Officer Shelton is as good as any of the detectives I work with, better than most. You’re lucky to be paired with him.”

He turned to Vince. “And we’re all still waiting for you to take that test, my friend.”

“Yeah, someday, Jim... someday,” Shelton said.

“How did the dresser tip you off, Vince?”

Dennison asked.

“Well, two things. First, the receipt on the dresser was for a gas station a couple miles from here. It’s dated two days ago, for 9:54pm. It reads he got \$31.18 in gas and paid \$100 in cash. So where’s his change? Ten o’clock at night is a little late for dinner, and we know the body is a couple days apart from having a heartbeat. There’s exactly 82 cents in coins on the dresser, but no paper money. Do the math. Someone probably took the \$68 and left the change. The fact the credit cards weren’t taken rules out crackheads and other addicts, or they’d be gone, too. Someone purposely left them, not wanting to take a chance on being caught with them.”

Turly nodded in agreement and pointed to the police cruiser.

“Okay, well then... let’s get the boys down here before Martin asks me where the hell I am, and what took you two so long to call forensics. I’ll tell him I kinda fell into this one. Was already in the area and happened to see your cruiser.”

Dennison made the call to the station as Jim put his satchel away, eying the motel room the whole time.

Keep it together. One thing has nothing to do with the other. Be fucking professional!

Chapter 12

Un-Frequent Flyers

The airport was too cold to be comfortable. Wade sat quietly at Gate 17 with his arms crossed and a carry-on sitting between his legs, trying his best to stay warm. Lucy stayed busy on her phone, flooding the world of social media with her airport selfies.

Wade noticed her perfume smelled unusually strong for a work trip. He figured she was probably trying to cover up some serious funk underneath. He watched her peck away on her phone in her bright red attire.

Red, of course. Why would I think she'd be wearing anything else to a corporate meeting?

Her chest looked as if it was trying to escape the too-small business suit she wore, leaving little to the imagination. At any moment, Wade expected to watch a button fly off. Her twins might end up going viral before she even boarded the plane!

All of this because of you, John. Screwed up your own damn marriage and my weekend, too!

Wade shut his eyes and tried not to think about the next ten hours. He wanted nothing more than to put this trip behind him. Janet had gotten up early and

took him to the airport, sending him off with a warm hug and kiss. He wished he could just ditch Lucy, hail a taxi and get back home to her.

“Finally!” he said, as the woman behind the podium called their flight.

He was on his feet and in line quickly, as if it could make the next ten hours go by faster. People began to file in line behind him. He looked around and spotted Lucy several feet away, talking to an airport security guard. She ignored the call to board, immersed in her conversation.

“Ticket, sir?” the woman asked, her hand extended.

“Oh, yes... sorry.” Wade gave it to her as he looked around for Lucy again. He didn’t see her this time.

Come on Lucy... shit! Where are you?

“Excuse *me*, dude!” Lucy said, cutting in line behind Wade. “We’re together, asshole!”

The older man she’d pushed aside shook his head while giving her space.

“Perfect,” Wade said, visibly aggravated.

“What was that?” Lucy asked, pretending she didn’t hear him.

“Nothing... can we just get on the plane, please?”

“Well, what the hell *else* are we doing, Wade? Let’s go, sugar... move it!” she snapped her finger, showing her authority to anyone who was watching.

The flight began smoothly. So smoothly, that Wade fell asleep and dreamed he was on the train, riding home from work. But every stop on the commute looked like the last, as if it was caught in some kind of time loop. The train seemed to be moving much faster as well. He looked at his watch and knew he should have made his stop a while ago, yet the train continued on.

Frustrated, he looked to the other passengers to see if they’d noticed the same thing. As he looked around the car, he noticed everyone was glaring at him, as if they were angry. Every pair of eyes was locked onto his.

Across the car from Wade, a man stood. He stared at Wade intently, as well. He was about Wade’s height, wore a white T-shirt and gray sweatpants, both covered with what appeared to be fresh blood. His face was also covered in blood,

the hair above his left ear matted down with it. Wade could not believe what he was seeing!

What the hell happened to him? he wondered.

Wade shifted his eyes away from him for just a moment to find that, except for the two of them, the train car was empty now!

Where the hell did everyone go?

He knew the train hadn't stopped moving for a few minutes. He looked back at the man. He was suddenly nose to nose with Wade now. Blood began to pour out of his mouth. Wade instinctively backed up a step.

"Hey, man! Are you okay?" Wade asked him, knowing he wasn't. The man slowly raised his arm and pointed at Wade.

"I can never go home now!" he shouted, though his lips never moved. Wade was completely terrified, and speechless. The man slowly turned and walked to the rear of the car. The back of his head revealed a glistening hole, the size of a tennis ball. There were bits of bone and brain tangled in the hair surrounding it. Wade was frozen in terror!

The man disappeared into the back wall of the train car as if he were a ghost. Suddenly, Wade felt a sharp pain behind his eyes, then another.

"Holy shit!" someone said in his ear, "Looks like we hit some turbulence, big boy! Wake up! Your head bounced off that window like a basketball! Hell of a ride, huh?"

Wade woke to find himself next to Lucy, on the plane. He didn't care about the turbulence, but was just glad to be out of his nightmare! He turned his head to see her leaning over his armrest, her caked smile just inches away from his face. He sat up straighter, taking in his surroundings as he wiped the sweat from his face.

"Wasn't going to bother you, champ," she said laughing, "but that head of yours bouncing off the window should have *been* your wake-up call! We're landing soon. Someone from Whitman is supposed to be waiting for us, so put your game-face on. You look like you just saw a ghost!"

Wade cleared the cobwebs from his brain as he tried to rid his thoughts of the horrid dream. The plane touched down safely, as Lucy had predicted. They disembarked and looked for their contact person.

'Carlson', the sign read.

“That’s us!” Lucy announced.

The young man holding the card looked about as enthused to see them as Josh did about elevator duty.

“Didn’t you tell them I was substituting for John?” Wade asked.

“No, why the hell would I? They’ll ask about him, yeah... and when they do, I’ll tell them something! The bastard deserves whatever I decide to say.” She looked at her phone. “The meeting’s at noon. They said they’d have lunch waiting when we arrived. It better not be sandwiches and chips this time... I’m feeling Italian!”

“Yeah,” Wade said, though he didn’t care about the lunch menu. The anger he’d had for having to fill in for John subsided at the thought of how shitty the man was about to be portrayed by Lucy.

The ride to the Whitman building didn’t take long, which turned out to be a good thing. Lucy’s perfume was poisoning the air in the SUV. Wade lowered his window and found the morning air much more breathable.

He leaned back and looked out his window. *Too crowded* were the words that entered his head as he saw multiple lanes of traffic darting in and out. *Crowded and crazy!* This was Atlanta.

Lucy was pleasantly surprised by the lunch waiting for them. It consisted of Lasagna, bread, salad, and several new men to flirt with. At 1pm, the two made their way to the conference room. A few moments after they sat down, an older gentleman walked in and greeted them. He was rather tall and walked as if he had a board strapped to his back.

“Well, hello again, Ms. Greene,” he said with a forced smile. “Welcome back to Atlanta. I was asked to escort Mr. Carlson to Mr. Bergstrom’s office. That’s where we will be meeting today. I wasn’t aware you were attending.”

“Mr. Bergstrom?” Lucy asked, ignoring the rest of the man’s words. “Mr. Bergstrom has an office *here*?” She spawned a look of excitement coupled with fear. Wade was also shocked to hear the name.

“He doesn’t use it very often, but yes. He keeps an office here, as he does at some of our other facilities,” replied Mr. Long. “And forgive me for noticing sir, but you are *not* Mr. Carlson.”

Wade began to answer, but stopped as the man turned his attention back to Lucy.

“Where is Mr. Carlson, Ms. Greene?” he asked.

Lucy froze for a moment as she searched for an answer.

Wade saw her distress and extended his hand to shake Mr. Long's.

"Sir, my name's Wade Richards. I'm standing in for John today." The sides of the man's mouth turned downward, erasing the illusion of the smile he'd maintained up until then.

"Mr. Richards... yes, well this is unexpected. Again, Ms. Greene, where exactly is Mr. Carlson?"

He was noticeably agitated now. Lucy suddenly became mute again.

"Sir, he's—" Wade began.

"He's been fired!" Lucy interrupted. "I found he didn't share the honest values we require in our employees. He was stealing, in fact. I fired him last week. But *Wade* here... he's worked with John hand in hand on your account and is completely qualified to pick up where John left off, I assure you." She appeared very proud of her response.

Wade was astonished at the level of bullshit he'd just heard.

Hand in hand? He played the words back in his head.

At that moment, he realized just how firmly she just set him up to be the fall guy. If things didn't go well, he'd be the one held responsible. And the way she lied about John truly shook him.

"Isn't that *right*, Wade?" Lucy asked with a *don't screw this up!* expression on her face. Wade stood there, tight-lipped for a moment. Lucy's expression didn't change.

"I'll certainly do my best, Mr. Long," Wade managed to say, with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. Mr. Long didn't look persuaded.

"Well, as I said... this was certainly, *certainly* not expected," he said, his eyes fixed on Lucy. Then, with a forced smile, he followed up, "but we will manage, I'm sure."

And with that, he opened the door and led his guests over to a waiting elevator. When the doors closed behind them, he pushed the button for the top floor.

The elevator was slow-moving, but quiet. Classical music played softly through the speaker on its wall, yet did very little to relieve the tension in the small car.

Mr. Bergstrom's office sat at the end of a wide, classically decorated hallway. The doors to the office were huge, solid mahogany. Wade could only imagine what the inside looked like.

When they arrived at the threshold, Mr. Long stopped and knocked quietly. A well-dressed lady with silver hair opened both doors and stepped out into the hall. She closed the doors behind her before greeting them.

"Ms. Greene and Mr. *Wade Richards* to see Mr. Bergstrom, Lana," Mr. Long said quietly. The lady nodded, seeming a bit unsettled as she looked at Wade.

"Mr. *Wade Richards*, did you say?" she asked gingerly.

"Yes, Lana, that is correct. Apparently, Mr. Carlson has been let go." Long replied, glancing at Lucy.

Lana quickly retreated into the room, closing the doors behind her. Moments later, she emerged again, asking Mr. Long to join her inside for a moment. Wade and Lucy looked at each other, wondering what was happening.

A minute later, Lana opened the doors again, revealing an immense room on the other side. The walls were paneled with the same mahogany as the door. The classic furniture looked to be dark cherry, exquisite and expensive. Wade marveled at the large, extravagant rugs. He knew their worth had to be more than he made in a year.

How can anyone justify a room like this... just to be used as a satellite office?

In the center of the room sat the biggest desk Wade had ever seen. Behind that desk sat a portly man he had met only twice before, as a child.

"Wade Richards!" the man said warmly from his leather chair, "Come in, of course! Let me get a good look at you! And Ms. Greene... this was quite unexpected, but welcome to Atlanta."

Lucy looked bewildered over Bergstrom's warm greeting to Wade.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Bergstrom," Wade responded. Lucy was suddenly dumbfounded.

"You know, Wade, the last time I saw you... well, you remember that day, I'm sure." Bergstrom commented, more somber now.

"Yes sir, I had just turned eight years old," Wade answered, "my father's funeral."

"Yes, your father... God bless him for his kind friendship and the many contributions he made to our company. We would not be where we are today if

not for him and his many sacrifices. May he surely rest in peace.” Berstrom looked down at his desk for a moment then lifted his head. “He’s missed every day, Wade... I assure you. And you may not know this, but I have often inquired about you and your lovely mother over the years, just to make sure the two of you were doing well.”

“No, sir, I didn’t know that... but thank you. And thank you for the kind words about my father.”

At this point, Lucy looked like she was about to pass out. Bergstrom noticed her distress.

“Oh, Ms. Greene... you didn’t *know* who you had working for you, did you?” Bergstrom asked. The color had fully left her face by now.

“No sir... I was unaware that Wade—”

“Wade’s father is the *reason* you have a job here in the first place, Ms. Greene,” he said sternly. “All of us, really. His research paved the way for the success that made us who we are today. It brought us the resources necessary to grow and employ the generous number of accountants you now have on staff. Wade never told you then?”

“No sir, he never mentioned his father to me,” she said, looking at Wade.

Her expression seemed to carry a new respect for Wade now, but coupled with fear, considering her past antics.

“Well, no bother. But I *am* concerned that Mr. Carlson is not here.” His face became serious. “We were not told of his recent departure from the company,” he said, looking at Lucy for a needed explanation. She cleared her throat before answering.

“Yes, sir, it happened a few days ago. I caught him stealing from the company and fired him myself. But, Wade can answer any questions you have about the account, I’m sure of it!” She looked to Wade again, this time with an added degree of desperation.

“Ms. Greene, did you happen to *consult* with Mr. Carlson about this meeting *before* you let him go?” Bergstrom asked her.

“I didn’t find it necessary, sir. I have complete faith in Wade to sit in for him.” Wade knew she was peacocking, trying to show her authority again.

After a notable pause, the old man spoke again.

“Well, if he’s anything like his father, I’m sure he’ll do fine. Andrew, please escort Ms. Greene back to the conference room.” Lucy looked both confused and dejected.

Bergstrom saw her discomfort and explained.

“This was to be a closed meeting between Mr. Carlson and the board of directors, Ms. Greene, and no one else. It was in my letter. I thought you would have known that. *Now* I find we’ll be meeting with Mr. Richards in his stead. I am wondering, though, how was it that the second airline ticket was purchased? We only allocated for one ticket.” Bergstrom waited patiently for her answer.

Lucy gathered her remaining nerves. “I took it upon myself to request it, sir. I wanted to make *sure* Wade had everything in place for this meeting, since he insisted on stepping in so late.” Bergstrom seemed unimpressed with her answer but accepted the explanation.

Wade laughed inside, knowing Lucy had planned to go from the beginning when she learned John was asked for. That way, she could request a second ticket, and the company would pick up the tab. She and John could enjoy another screw-fest on Bergstrom’s dime again.

“From what you’ve told me, I’m sure Wade has all our ducks in a row, Ms. Greene.”

Turning his head away from her, his smile instantly disappeared. He nodded to Mr. Long, who escorted Lucy out of the room. As she exited the office, Wade noticed a look on her face he’d seen only one other time; rejection.

Chapter 13

Off by a Country Mile

Mr. Bergstrom leaned forward in his chair and made a quick phone call. Minutes later, seven men and two women arrived at his office door, each escorted by Lana. All were seated around a large, oval table on the left side of the room.

When everyone was in place, one of the older men stood and called the meeting to order. Bergstrom welcomed the members as a whole and introduced Wade to them, explaining Carlson's absence. Their expressions varied. Some remained indifferent to the news, while others became anxious and notably alarmed.

Wade wondered how many of them had known his father, considering their ages. Most looked to be in their seventies, with two or three appearing to be a decade or so younger.

All were dressed in classic and expensive apparel. Wade's suit looked almost tawdry in comparison. He felt no less than out of his league as he looked around the table.

Mr. Bergstrom finished speaking and quietly nodded to the board member who had stood and addressed the room.

“I believe we all know why we’re here,” Mr. Baker began, “In respect to time I’d like to dispense with pleasantries and just ask Mr. Richards where we are with our *situation*.”

Wade stood to address the group.

“Thank you, sir. The extension was no problem,” Wade began. “John had taken care of that just before his... ‘departure’. As for the consulting fees in question and certain unverified expenditures, they were a little tricky, considering two of the firms listed in your declaration haven’t technically done business in over two years. I’ve already contacted and received signed documentation from one declaring his services rendered. The other is still in the works, but I have a verbal commitment to the effect and expect no problems. If there are any issues, I’m sure I can reach out to Mr. Carlson for guidance. He’s a team player... I highly doubt we’ll have to subpoena any information from him.”

Wade was attempting humor with his remark, but when he looked around the room, he instantly regretted it.

After an uncomfortable silence, he continued. “The bottom line is that the \$287,520 in question *will* be accounted for very soon and resubmitted in our report before the audit hearing on the tenth.”

The room was left quiet except for the sound of rustling suits and whispering. Wade began to get nervous. It wasn’t the reaction he expected, considering all his work on the account. One of the older members stood and pointed to Wade.

“Young man, we didn’t fly here to talk about any \$287,000 deficit!” He turned to Bergstrom who also appeared less than enthusiastic about Wade’s presentation. “What the hell is going *on* here, Alan? Why isn’t Carlson here?”

“Please calm down, Larry.” Bergstrom instructed.

He paused until the board member reluctantly took his seat. He turned to Wade,

“Young man, is this really *everything* you came prepared to talk about today? It was my clear understanding from Ms. Greene that you worked closely with Mr. Carlson on *all* of the issues concerning this meeting.”

“Yes sir... and no sir,” Wade conceded. “As for working closely with Mr. Carlson, in the last few weeks I’ve reviewed and co-signed several items he needed confirmation for on our end, as per our policy. After he... well, after he was no longer employed here, I was assigned to pick up where he left off. I was

tasked with completing his remaining work on the account. That included reaching out to our contact people from the consulting firms I mentioned, and tying up loose ends. I made sure to take advantage of any changes made concerning this year's tax laws, as well. All of that pertained to the final deficit I spoke of. That was all that I had access to and knew about, I'm afraid. I understand now that I obviously wasn't privy to *everything* he was handling for you. I'm truly sorry for the misunderstanding."

"Sorry? This entire meeting is a loss!" another member shouted, after slapping the top of the table with his hand.

Bergstrom stood and raised both of his hands as if to say, 'Stop!' The room quickly became quiet.

"Wade, please indulge us for a moment," Bergstrom said, picking up his phone.

Lana entered the room and escorted Wade into the hall. He sat down, trying to process what had just happened, along with what he was going to tell Lucy. That is, if he still had a job by the time he'd tell her.

The next five minutes seemed like an hour spent in the colossal hallway. Finally, the door opened and out came the board members, one by one. None looked in Wade's direction as they passed except one, Mr. Miller. He stared a hole into Wade with every step. Wade sat nervously, wondering what would happen next. Lana stepped into the hallway and asked him to come back into the room.

Wade found Mr. Bergstrom seated behind his desk now, lighting a cigar.

"Sit down, Wade," he said, without making any eye contact.

Wade sat across the desk, still rattled from the meeting.

"Sir, I want to apologize. I went through *everything* that was in John's file. I had no idea there were any other concerns related to the audit *or* the meeting. The board members—"

"Oh, don't worry about them," Bergstrom interrupted. "If this is the worst thing that happens to them today, they have very little to complain about. I informed them where the ball was dropped. This is nothing that can't be remedied, son."

Wade relaxed with the man's answer, though he felt a bead of sweat trickling down his forehead. He quickly wiped it away.

"Sir, I'd be happy to contact John immediately and come back with—"

“It’s not necessary, Wade.” The old man waved him off. “I’ll have my people contact Mr. Carlson. I’m sure we’ll have no problem retaining his services until our issues are resolved. I’ll have Lana escort you back to Ms. Greene in a moment. Don’t worry yourself about today’s meeting. This will not reflect on you, or affect your future with the company. You’ve made no mistakes here today, son. You worked on what you were given and performed well, based on what you knew. The ball was dropped by Ms. Greene, your department manager. She should have conferred fully with Mr. Carlson about the meeting before firing him, regardless of the circumstances. In fact, by the time you touch down in Chicago, you may find some changes have been made to your department.”

“Yes sir,” Wade replied, no less uncomfortable. “Thank you for your understanding, sir. And thanks again for the kind words about my father.”

“He was a great man, Wade,” the old man said, leaning forward, “and a better friend. You remind me of him, son, and that’s a real compliment. Have a good flight home and tell your mother we spoke. I’m sure we’ll talk again soon.” The two shook hands.

Bergstrom motioned Lana over and asked for Wade to be escorted to the conference room. With each step taken, Wade fought with himself over how much he’d reveal to Lucy about their conversation.

Chapter 14

Red Heads Roll Better

“Holy shit, that was fast!” Lucy said as Wade entered the conference room. The space was empty now except for the two of them and a cleaning crew.

“How’d it go? That Bergstrom is a certified hard ass, huh?” She stood now, excited to hear the scoop. “Oh... and what the hell, Wade? You never told me your father was a bigshot here!”

Wade ignored her last comment, but decided to be upfront about the meeting.

“Well, Lucy, it didn’t go well... at all. I laid out everything we’ve done on the account and how we were going to tie up their loose ends concerning consultants and contracted work—”

“What’s the problem, then? They couldn’t ask for more than that!” Her demeanor had quickly changed.

“Well, they *did* ask for more than that, Lucy. In fact, they couldn’t have cared *less* about the \$287,000. They were there to discuss something *else* John was working on for them, and they were pissed off that I wasn’t prepared to talk about it. They didn’t tell me what it was, but they were seriously pissed.

“Oh, shit!” she said, tense now. “How the hell were we supposed to know that? I went through that file, myself. There was nothing in there that didn’t pertain to

the audit. That fucking Carlson! He didn't say a word about working on anything *else* for Whitman. He did that on purpose! He was probably getting paid on the side for something we didn't even know about." She sat down for a second then suddenly popped up again. "So we're coming back, then. We'll find out what else we needed from Carlson, then come back here and fix it!"

"I offered to do just that, but Bergstrom said not to pursue it... that they'd contact and retain John themselves to finish up whatever they needed."

"Shit! They're gonna hang someone for this and it's gonna be *me*! I told him you were on *top* of it, that you could answer anything they needed to know!" Lucy sat down and threw her coffee cup across the room, causing a mess. The cleaning crew immediately began to clean up after her.

"This is about their spooky-ass practices! That's what the hell this is about! Like *I'm* supposed to even *know* about that shit? How the hell am I supposed to know to ask John about something I've only heard rumors about?"

"I'm sorry, Lucy," Wade said. "I had no idea John was working on anything else, either." He braced for her response, expecting to be handed the blame.

"It's not your fault," she said, waving him off.

Wade was truly shocked.

Wow! She's really going to own this one herself?

"It's John Carlson's fucking fault!" she shouted. "That son-of-a-bitch screwed me over! He *knew* my head would roll for this. That ungrateful piece of shit! After all I've done for his limp-dick ass!" Her face was contorted with rage now. "I'm not going down for this, Wade. He fucking quit! I never even *had* a chance to ask about anything special we might need for the meeting. They can't fire me for *him* quitting! He faxed his resignation to me for Christ's sake! I have the printout for proof!"

"Yes, but you told Bergstrom you *fired* him three days ago. As far as they know, John never quit... you fired him."

She plopped down in her chair again, all the blood had drained from her face. She realized she had completely screwed herself. She mumbled something to herself, then glared at Wade.

"And your father! Don't you think that's something I should have known about? You made me look stupid in there, Wade!"

“I didn’t think it would come up, Lucy. Yes, my father worked for Bergstrom-Levy... but as a geneticist, over twenty years ago. He died when I was a child. I didn’t know anyone would even *remember* him, much less mention him. I guess I was wrong.”

“Ya think? You know, when we hired you...” she paused, “so *that’s* why HR told me not to interview you... you were already hired! I bet old man Bergstrom pulled the strings himself. So, all this time I was working with company royalty and had no fucking clue!” Her angry words dripped with sarcasm.

“Like I said, Lucy, I had no idea it would come up. I was just as surprised with Bergstrom’s greeting as you were. Hell, I didn’t even know he was still alive until Mr. Long mentioned him. But it doesn’t matter now. The meeting’s over and they’ll get what they need from John. There’s nothing more we can do about it.”

A new look of terror appeared on Lucy’s face.

“Oh, shit! I told Bergstrom he was stealing!” She thought for a second then added, “But John can’t do anything about that when he talks to them... it’s his word against mine. There’s no way he can prove he *wasn’t* stealing.” She was breathing easier now.

Wade couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He knew then that Lucy would say or do *anything* to save her own ass. She’d probably even feed her own mother to the lions!

“Shit! I’m probably fired anyway. Fuck Carlson! When I get back, I’m trashing his resignation and officially firing him for stealing! If I can back-date it, I will!”

Hearing that, Wade wanted nothing more than to mention Bergstrom’s comment about changes coming to the department. But since he’d have to listen to Lucy rail about it the whole flight back, he kept his mouth shut. Besides, Monday was just around the corner and she deserved whatever she had coming!

Lucy sulked in her chair for a few more minutes, brooding over everything she’d just learned. The room had become so quiet, only the air conditioner was making any sound.

Suddenly, Lucy stood up and kicked her chair out from under her. She grabbed her briefcase and marched across the room in a sordid fury.

“Fuck it all! C’mon Wade... our plane doesn’t take off for three hours and I need a drink! Find me a place where I can process this shit!”

Wade didn't object. He knew from Bergstrom's words she had a good reason to be drinking. He hailed a cab and they headed uptown. The ride was quiet except for the road noise and some occasional humming from the driver. Lucy spotted a lounge that was open and asked the driver to pull in.

The next two hours were a nightmare. Lucy ordered Long Island Iced Teas until the bartender refused to make them anymore. The conversation in the lounge was all hers. She would rant about John and Bergstrom for a while, then begin to cry, telling everyone there she was losing her job. Then she'd remind Wade he was losing his job as well.

When she was finished, the cycle would soon start over with a barrage of four-letter words about John. All Wade could do was sit and listen until the time came for them to leave for the airport. By that time, Lucy might well have been another piece of Wade's luggage. When another cab arrived, Lucy couldn't walk by herself. Wade had to help her, holding her up until he got her in the car. When they arrived at the airport, Wade found out how far away their gate was. He knew Lucy wouldn't make it that far. He saw a maintenance man driving a cart through the terminal and flagged him down. He told the man Lucy was feeling dizzy and asked if he'd taxi them to their gate. The man initially said no, but agreed when he noticed the strong smell of liquor on her.

"I've been there," the man told Wade, "My mom was an alcoholic, too. I'll get y'all to your gate."

"Mom?" Lucy squawked, "I'm too young to be his damn mother! I'm his sister, dickhead!"

The man ignored her and helped Wade get her into the cart.

After they were dropped off at the gate, Wade brought her a coffee, hoping it would help. Lucy drank it slowly, putting her hand on his shoulder, as if to say, 'thank you'. She looked unusually humble at that moment, almost human. Wade was surprised to see her like that and even began to feel a measure of sympathy for her. That is, until he thought about John.

The plane ride home was smooth and uneventful. As they exited the airport, Wade flagged down a taxi and escorted Lucy home. After he got her inside, he climbed back into the taxi and exhaled fully. The stress and tension from the trip had taken a hard toll on him. He pulled out his phone and texted Janet,

I'll be home in 10 minutes, babe, and I'm counting each one.' She read it and replied, 'Yay! I'm waiting!'

Janet met Him at the door. After a hug and kiss, they retreated to the kitchen where she poured them both some tea. Wade drank it quickly. She brought him another glass and sat down across from him.

"Honey, don't take this wrong, but you look like total dog shit right now. What happened down there? Did she get out of line with you again?"

Wade explained how the meeting went, including everything Bergstrom had told him. Seeing that Janet was becoming worried, he quickly assured her Bergstrom promised him he wouldn't be held responsible. The blame, he was told, was Lucy's alone for not knowing what the meeting was actually for.

"Do you really think they'll fire her?" she asked.

"Well, they're going to do *something*. Either fire her, or move her somewhere else, I'd guess.

Mr. Bergstrom said to expect some changes to the department Monday. My guess is someone else will be sitting behind her desk before the end of day. He doesn't seem the type to procrastinate. He probably has someone on a flight right now."

"So, she knows, then? How'd she take it?"

"Well, no... not exactly. Bergstrom told me that in private. Lucy didn't ask if he mentioned any repercussions, so I didn't tell her. She was freaking out enough with what she *was* told. Besides, you should have heard the way she lied about John. It was horrible. She told Bergstrom she fired him for stealing! She really dug her grave with that one, though, because Bergstrom intends to contact John about whatever it is they still need. Lucy almost passed out when I told her. But strangely, as much as she's been such an asshole to work for, I still felt a little sorry for her. She didn't have a clue what John was working on... no more than I did. But it must have been something big... *really* big. The board members were totally pissed that I wasn't prepared to talk about it. The meeting was an epic disaster."

"Well, at least *you're* going to be okay, as far as Bergstrom told you, anyway. For a second there, I thought I'd need to pack you a sandwich or two for the unemployment line Monday morning."

“Who knows? I’d like to think Bergstrom was being honest with me, but he may have just been trying to get me out of his office. Hell, I may be unemployed already.”

“Better not be. But I’m sure I could put you to work around here until you found something else. Though I’m not sure what kind of house-husband you’d make. You can’t even pick up your socks from the floor, dude.”

“Hey, I help with the dishes,” he informed her, “and I take out the trash!”

“Oh, *yes*, honey... you certainly do. And you do *such* a goooood job of it!” she said as if she were praising a child.

“Babe, I’m too tired to even *try* having a sarcasm-battle with you tonight. Besides, I’ve got some serious monkey-mind going on. Too much Lucy and Bergstrom-Levy bullshit floating around in my head. The shit’s giving me a headache.”

She pointed to the clock. “Well, honey, it’s a little late for a good sarcasm-battle anyway. Why don’t you take a hot bath, relax and sleep in tomorrow? It’s the weekend, and you don’t have to deal with Lucy or work for two more days.”

“You know, a long, hot shower sounds good right now, but this is one of those days I really wished we had a jacuzzi tub,” he said. She kissed him on his forehead as he left for the bathroom.

The hot water pelting his face felt as good as he hoped it would. He only wished it could wash the entire trip from his mind.

After draining the water heater, he dried off and went back into the kitchen. He opened the cabinet above the stove and reached for his pills. He’d need one to fall asleep tonight. The last thing he wanted was to be up all night thinking about what was coming Monday.

Chapter 15

Ding! Dong! The Witch is Dead!

The elevator doors opened with no sign of Josh anywhere. Wade stopped in the break room for a cup of coffee. He'd need it before dealing with Lucy, or whoever was sitting behind her desk now.

He left his coat in his cubicle and made his way toward the office. On the way, Wade noticed he was the center of attention. Several co-workers were eyeballing him as he passed by their workstations.

Great! Here we go... it's already gone down, He thought.

As he neared the office, he saw Lucy stomping around inside, and throwing items from her desk into a large cardboard box.

Holy shit... she's actually being fired! he thought, as he purposely slowed his walk. The old security guard from downstairs was standing in her office, along with a man Wade didn't recognize. They waited patiently while Lucy continued to fill the box.

Damn! They're going to escort her out of the building! This guy must be her replacement.

Wade almost turned around and walked back to his cubicle, but decided he owed it to her to at least be a witness. Besides, he was probably next, he figured.

Wade had almost reached her door when Lucy noticed his approach. She frantically waved for him to come in.

“This is how they treat you after twelve years of loyalty!” she exclaimed as he walked through the door. “Oh, and don’t get too comfortable, Wade. They asked me where you were, too!”

Wade’s heart skipped a beat. *I knew it. Bergstrom was full of shit!*

Lucy threw the last of her personal belongings into the box and stood next to Wade with her arms folded. Seconds ticked by. She didn’t move. The two men eventually looked at each other, confused about the delay. Lucy remained exactly where she was, staring holes in them.

The old guard finally broke the ice. “Ms. Greene, if you’re finished, we need you to exit the building now.”

“I’m not carrying all this shit by myself, asshole. It’s too heavy!” she snapped back. “Either get me a cart or carry it out your damn selves! But I’m not leaving this office without my belongings. You can bet your ass on that! Call the damn cops if you want to. I don’t give a rat’s ass!”

The security guard looked perturbed as he switched on his radio and called the lobby. The four stood there several minutes longer while Lucy continued to complain of her treatment. Wade’s tension grew as he waited for his turn to come.

He heard the elevator ding and watched a thin man push a cart through its doors. The security guard waved him over and had the man put Lucy’s box onto it. Before he could begin to say anything, she motioned him to the elevator and walked behind him in a commanding fashion. The men followed her, but Wade remained where he was.

As the doors closed, he heard a co-worker say, “Bye, bitch!” The room erupted in laughter and excited conversation. Wade quietly walked to his cubicle and sat down. He took a mental assessment of the personal items in it, preparing to be next out the door. Trey knocked on his wall.

“Holy shit, dude! They walked her ass out! What the hell happened in Atlanta?”

“It didn’t go well,” Wade answered.

“Damn! Well, no shit, man. What’d she do to get fired, though? Screw the wrong boss?” he laughed. Some eavesdroppers heard it and laughed as well. Wade

didn't answer him. He wasn't willing to have this conversation, especially when he knew he was next to be walked out.

"Come on, man, let's have it. Must have been something really bad, right?"

"Yeah, Trey... obviously it *was* something really bad or they wouldn't have fired her, *right?*" Wade looked around the room. All eyes were still on him.

"Look, I know all of you want details, but I'm not getting into it right now," he said, loud enough for the others to hear.

"Alright man... sorry!" Trey answered, "Don't get so pissed about it. We saw the guard and that other dude go into her office a few minutes ago, and hand her a letter. Lucy read it and went the hell off on them. She made a phone call, then slammed her phone down. They gave her a cardboard box and she started throwing her shit into it. We figured it out pretty fast, but nobody knows what actually happened. We figured *you* did, though, so I just thought I'd ask you, that's all."

Wade scanned the room again. He saw a look of concern on everyone's faces. He stood up, feeling an obligation to say something.

"It's fine... look, I know everyone's shocked," Wade said. "There was some miscommunication about the purpose of the meeting, and it was serious enough that it ruffled some feathers up the chain. They weren't happy... at all, and you're seeing the repercussions from it. That's all I'm going to say."

"Wow... uh... fair enough, man," Trey said, suddenly distracted. Wade turned to see what had garnered his attention. The two men were back on their floor and walking towards Wade. The guard was talking on his radio, and had an empty box in his hand.

"Oh, shit, dude... I'm really sorry man!" Trey said, backing up. Wade took a deep breath and prepared for what was coming.

"We need you to come with us please, Mr. Richards. Would you kindly place your personals in the box?" the security guard asked without any hesitation or emotion.

"No problem, guys. It'll take me a few minutes to clear out my work area."

"We'll wait," the other man said, scanning the room.

When Wade had finished filling the box, the man spoke again.

“Please follow us to the department office for a moment, Mr. Richards. We need to talk with you privately.” Wade followed the men to Lucy’s office, hoping they’d just get it over with so he could leave work with some level of dignity.

Once inside, the guard closed the door and the other man introduced himself.

“I’m Peter Johanson. Mr. Bergstrom sent a letter with me to give to you.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. The two men waited as Wade opened it and read the letter to himself.

Good morning, Wade,

At this point, you may be struggling to make sense of this morning’s developments. I apologize for that. Our company has a structured way of doing things, that’s all. The board has agreed with me that changes were necessary to be made in the accounting department. By the time you read this, Ms. Greene will have been relieved of her duties. At my urging, you have been chosen to assume her role as department head. I have assured the board of your capabilities and hope you accept the offer. The position includes full company benefits and a substantial raise in pay. If you have any concerns about the position, please don’t hesitate to confer with Mr. Johanson. He can answer any questions you may have. Please take today off to consider it. You can let human resources know your decision in the morning. It was good to see you again, Wade. You’ve grown into a fine young man and are a great asset to this company. Your father would be very proud!

My best to you and your wife, Janet!
Alan Bergstrom

Thoughts flooded Wade’s mind after he finished reading the letter. He’d always hoped to advance in the company one day, but he never expected it to happen this way. He would need to talk to Janet, but he already knew what her answer

would be. Mr. Johanson waited patiently as Wade put the letter in his pocket. Before he spoke, a realization came to mind.

I never told Bergstrom Janet's name... or even that I was married.

"Mr. Johanson, I'm going to need to think about this." Wade said.

"That's understandable, Mr. Richards. If you have questions, don't hesitate to call. I'll be in town until tomorrow." He handed his card to Wade and shook his hand.

The security guard opened the door and followed the man to the elevator. Wade stood there for a moment longer, allowing it all to sink in. He looked out the office doors and saw his co-workers were still watching. He straightened his collar and walked to the elevator, leaving his belongings in Lucy's vacant office.

The early train ride home was a blur for Wade. He pondered Bergstrom's offer. Thoughts of being able to afford a bigger home and take Janet on a vacation made his decision an easy one, but he owed it to her to talk about it before deciding anything. For once, he'd be home before she'd even left for work.

Chapter 16

A Warning Letter

“Janet!” he called out as he hurried through the door, “babe... you home?”

He was almost to the kitchen when he saw her sitting on the couch. She looked upset, holding her cell phone in one hand and a piece of paper in the other.

“Babe, what’s wrong?” he asked.

“Why are you home so early? Did you get a letter, too?” she asked.

“What? I got a letter from Mr. Bergstrom... how did you know?” He sat down next to her on the couch.

She put her phone down and handed him the paper.

To Mrs. Richards,

You saw my husband at your mailbox last week. You may have read in your local paper about a recent male suicide at a motel in Chicago. That was my husband and it was no suicide! He would never have killed himself. He’d found out the truth about himself, your husband and the company! They killed him, I’m sure of it! Your husband is in danger, too. I’ve been trying to get the police to investigate my husband’s death as a murder.

They're treating me like I'm crazy! I took a big risk sending this to you, but I did it for my husband's sake. He would have wanted me to. Your husband deserves to know the truth and so do you!

Wade could not believe what he'd just read. He immediately remembered his dream of waking up in a strange room and being attacked. It *did* look a lot like a motel room. He looked at Janet. She was waiting for an explanation.

"Where'd you get this?" he asked.

"From our mailbox, twenty minutes ago. It was addressed to *me*, Wade! I was just about to call you. What the hell does it mean? Is someone playing a prank on us or something? If so, it's horrible!" She paced the room.

"Babe, I don't know," he said, reading the letter again. "It sounds too crazy to be true, but if someone is playing a prank, they've taken some risk, considering they've come to our home twice now."

"Wade, this one was delivered! It has a return address." She handed him the envelope.

*1000 State Street
New Haven, Colorado 80000*

"But no name?" Wade asked as he looked at the envelope. "We can search the address online, but it looks bogus... 1000... 80000."

"I already looked before you got home. There is no city of New Haven in Colorado, Wade."

"Well, then somebody is screwing with us," he said. "Some asshole with nothing better to do. I'm really sorry honey."

"But the list, Wade... the one dropped in our yard... that's a pretty elaborate prank, going to this extreme just to scare somebody. If it's real, she probably just used a bogus address to protect herself."

"Babe, I know... you're probably right. Look, I really don't know *what* it's about." Wade tried to console her. "Look, no one I know would do something like this."

“Exactly! Same here! But why would a complete stranger go to all this trouble just for a prank?”

“Babe... I said I don’t know. Look, if we get another letter, or if *anything* weird happens, we’ll call the police, okay? I don’t know how else to handle it if we don’t know who’s behind it or what it’s about.”

Wade hoped his answer would be enough but Janet looked at him again, not satisfied at all. Wade sat down next to her and nudged her with his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, “I’m really sorry this happened, but it’s probably just a cruel joke. Some people get off on that shit. We’ll figure it out soon, though.”

“Okay, fine. Look, I’m trying not to freak out,” she said. “And I get it... if it’s just a prank, why give them the satisfaction? But if anything else happens, Wade... *anything!*”

“We’ll go to the police... I promise,” Wade said. “But at this point, they’d just say the same thing... that it’s probably just a prank.”

She nodded and leaned back into the sofa before remembering what he’s said about getting a letter of his own.

“You said Bergstrom gave you a letter? What’s it about? It doesn’t have anything to do with the one I got, does it?” Her concern grew.

“No, not at all. Well, they fired Lucy, like I texted you. I thought I’d be happy about it, but really, I wasn’t. Even with all the shit she’s done since she’s been here, I actually felt sorry for her. They walked her out the minute I came in this morning. It was bad, Janet. She threw a hell of a fit before leaving.”

“Oh, wow! I can’t say I hate that for her, but *you’re* okay, right? You said you still had your job, so no worries, right?”

“Well, for about a half hour, I thought I was next. Lucy basically told me so when she first saw me. After they walked her out, they wanted to talk to me next. They even brought me an empty box, just like Lucy’s. So I got busy packing up everything from my cubicle into it. When I was done, they asked to talk privately in Lucy’s office, since everyone was eavesdropping, I suppose. Just when I thought I was going to get a termination speech, they handed me an envelope with my name on it. It was the same type of envelope they gave to Lucy. Only mine didn’t contain a termination letter.” He waited to see if she’d guess, but she prodded him to continue.

“The letter was from Bergstrom, himself, babe. He asked me to take over Lucy’s position.” Janet’s eyes got noticeably wider.

Wade couldn’t tell if she was excited or scared. She could have passed for either in that moment.

“Well, babe... right now you look like one of those TV ghost hunters when something flies off a shelf. You okay?”

“I don’t know... yes?” she answered, “I mean... did you tell them yes? Is that something you’d like to take on? You don’t have to do it for me, honey... really. Only do it if *you* want to. I would never tell you what to do about something like that.”

“They said I had a day to think about it, so I wanted to talk to you first.”

“I’m happy for you if you take it, and happy if you don’t, babe... either way. I’m excited, but it’s just hard switching gears between ‘your husband is in danger’ to ‘hey babe, I’m getting a promotion’, that’s all... though the letter I got definitely sounds crazy. But yes... this one’s up to *you*, babe. I want you to do what *you* want to do,” she said. “I’m perfectly happy being married to an accountant, and I’d be just as happy being married to an accounting department manager. As long as you still come home to me each night, I mean.”

“I’ve been thinking about this all afternoon,” he confessed. “I can’t find any reason *not* to take it, Janet. Hell, I thought I was being fired until I read the letter. The extra money would be great, but more than that, I think I’d really enjoy doing it. I know the other employees, how things are supposed to get done and how they *really* get done. I think I could manage things in a way where everyone wins. Run it in a way where we’re more efficient, but without having to terrorize the crew to get there. So, if you’re okay with it then...”

“Okay with it? I think it’s freaking *awesome*, honey. You deserve this!” she squealed, hugging his neck tightly. He was shocked to see her so excited about it.

“Damn, babe!” he laughed. “You played this one pretty close to the chest. I didn’t think you were too happy about it, especially after the nuttiness you received in the mail today.” She squeezed his neck tightly.

“Careful, dear,” she said, “are you trying to break my neck before my first day as a manager?” She let go quickly but planted her lips onto his. It was a warm and soft kiss.

After the kiss, Wade leaned back on the couch.

“Wow, so *this* is how department managers get treated... I never knew!”

She tugged at his belt... then again.

“Oh,” he said, “are we actually playing baseball tonight?” She tugged harder.

“With extra innings,” she said, leading him down the hall, “if you’ll shut up long enough!”

He followed her to the bedroom, his mouth voluntarily closed for the next two hours.

Chapter 17

Marital Bliss with a Badge

Jim Turly watched as Crystal stuffed her gym bag with an extra set of clothes. She was getting ready to leave for her daily workout and tan-fest.

Must be nice. No job... just doin' whatever you want every freaking day while I work my ass off!

He noticed Crystal putting her makeup case inside the bag. He picked at his cereal until he couldn't keep his mouth shut any longer.

"Whatcha need your makeup bag for Crystal? Aren't you going to the gym just to get sweaty anyway?"

"Because I'm meeting Debbie after I work out, Jim. Is that *okay* with you? Or maybe you'd rather I look like dog shit while I'm sitting with her in the coffee shop!"

"No reason to take an attitude. I was just wondering, that's all. Didn't know you were gonna meet Debbie. Kinda early for a workout, though," he said, shifting his attention back to his cereal.

He now *really* wished he'd kept his mouth shut. Crystal wasn't going to let him off the hook so easily.

“Yeah, I *know* how you think, Jim. Always looking for clues... trying to make a case outta whatever you can. Outta whatever the hell I happen to be doin’! I’m sick of it, Jim!”

“All I fucking asked is why you needed your damn makeup case! Shit, Crystal! No need to get so pissed off about it! It was a valid question.”

“Well, now you fucking know, don’t ya... Detective Dickhead! I’m going to the coffee shop with Debbie after we work out, not to meet another man! But if you’re so damn worried about it, why don’t you just have one of your cop buddies spy on me again!”

Before he could respond, she was already out the front door. She slammed it hard enough that the walls shook. Jim smacked the top of the kitchen table, flipping over his cereal bowl.

“Dammit!” he yelled as milk drizzled down his shirt.

He took his bowl to the sink and rinsed it out. He could feel his blood pressure rising as he stood over the wet mess. He grimaced at the old wallpaper hanging on the wall in front of him and looked down at the sink faucet. It wouldn’t stop dripping, no matter how hard he twisted it. Jim threw his towel in the sink, exasperated with everything he saw around him.

The house had remained in a state of neglect since the episode with Crystal two years before. It didn’t look like a home anymore. It resembled more of a prison now. Just a cold set of cells, shared with an overly hostile inmate.

All she’s doing is waiting for me to retire so she can take half of my pension, then she’s gone! Or maybe she’s hoping I’ll just die first... then she’d get the whole fuckin’ thing!”

Jim tried to clear his head of the destructive thoughts, but he knew the reality of the situation. He’d seen divorces happen with many friends on the force. Someone would get caught cheating and it was only a matter of time before lawyers were hired. But sometimes, just the stress of being a cop or being married to one, was enough to ruin a marriage.

As far as he and Crystal were concerned, it was both. Except for a few nights of needed hate-sex, they barely got within three feet of each other anymore. He’d hoped things would get better with time, but they were worse.

He couldn't get over her cheating and she couldn't get over the fact that he wouldn't let go of it. A vicious circle is what their counselor called it; one that wouldn't be broken until the day Jim could forgive her.

He made an honest effort for the first following months, participating in the therapy activities their counselor had suggested. They were meant to help rebuild trust, but Jim couldn't escape the memory of that rainy afternoon. It might as well have been yesterday when he saw Crystal's mouth wrapped so tightly around her lover. The thought of it made him sick to his stomach, but he couldn't purge the image from his head. It was like he'd witnessed a train wreck. He'd never be able to un-see it or forget it.

Jim grabbed his towel and cleaned up the milk from the table and floor. He didn't want Crystal to see it. Knowing his temper, she'd figure out pretty quickly what had happened. He didn't want her having the satisfaction of knowing how pissed off she'd made him. After rinsing out the dish towel, he took one last look around the kitchen and turned off the light. He was late for work now, and welcomed getting out of the house.

The station had become the only place he could escape his shitty home-life. He learned to block out thoughts of his marriage with his work. It was the only thing that kept him from slipping over the edge. As he neared the station, a familiar site came into view. It was the liquor store where he used to buy his bourbon.

Not today, Crystal! He gripped his steering wheel tightly. *You're not pushing me down that road again. Not anymore, bitch!*

Jim walked into the station and tossed a fresh newspaper onto his desk. He spotted a note on his computer keyboard.

My office, asap - M.M.

Great! Hell of a way to start work! He took the note and walked to Chief Martin's office.

"Morning Chief. You needed me for somethin'?" he asked, trying not to look as aggravated as he felt.

"Yeah... morning, Jim," Chief Martin said without looking up. "Got another call from the Ashby widow... Julie, I think. She's still ranting about the company her husband worked for. Says she's sure they had him killed... that they were

committing crimes that he'd recently found out about. She wanted to know if we'd caught the killer yet."

"Geez... sorry Mike, I'm working on this one every day," Turly said, looking for a chair. He spotted one, but it had a large stack of folders stacked on it. He remained standing.

"Well, where exactly *are* we, Jim? Anything from forensics?" The chief raised his eyes to meet Jim's now.

"Not so much. Got some confirmation on a few things. No prints other than the victims were found on the doorknobs, motel phone or personal items. The hairs discovered in the gun's cylinder were from the victim. No skin under his fingernails, but there were some dark fibers present under the right index nail. Artie said they were polyester and very coarse, probably from a jacket or coat. Nothing from his clothing matched."

"Not much, then," Martin said, "just some unknown fibers, with nothing to tie them to." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Not yet, but we're still interviewing patrons of the motel. We'll find out what they know, if anything. But the place does almost no business these days, so there aren't many people to ask. Most don't use their real names there, anyway. You know what kinda place it is, Mike. So, not much on that end yet."

Chief Martin sat back and cradled his head in his hands. Jim knew he was about to hear a speech.

"Listen, Jim, we go *way* back, you and me... so I'm not going to sit here and bust your balls. But you convinced me this death should be treated as a homicide, so we're doing it. And I *agree* there's good reasons to support that, but we need to find something that's going to legitimately point us to someone! This Michigan lady is straight up my ass, Jim! She's calling me every fuckin' day or two about the company her old man worked for. 'They're responsible!' she keeps tellin' me. Says they're experimenting on people against their will. Like we're going to swoop in there like SWAT and take 'em out based on her accusations! Now she says her life's in danger. Jim, I don't know if she's out of her head or *not* with this conspiracy shit of hers, but if we don't catch a break soon, we're going to have to dig into her allegations, as nutty as they sound. I don't want to waste *our* time and *my* manpower chasin' cartoon rabbits! The woman's lookin' for any reason other than suicide for her husband's death. So, if we don't come up with

something confirming foulplay soon, I want this one ruled a suicide. Check into the company he worked for, though... at least online. Make some inquiries so I can get this lady off my back. But be careful if she contacts you, Jim. Don't say anything to fuel her fantasies. She's already feet first down a rabbit hole... you get what I'm saying?"

"I get it, Mike. You're right. I'll look into the company. I'll find out if there's anything to what she said or wrap this up so we can move on. Today I'm checking on a name we found in the victim's car. It was written on the corner of a piece of paper. Could be something, could be nothing... but I'll find out and keep you posted."

"Fair enough. Try to get it finished by Friday if you can. She calls me after that, and I'm giving her your cell number, I promise you!" The chief exhaled and took a second to assume a friendlier posture.

"On another note... and I don't want to stir up any personal stuff for you, but I gotta ask, friend to friend... how are things going at home?"

"Well, hell... you just *had* to ask me that, huh? Look, Mike, I could bullshit you, but I know you'd just call me out on it. So I'll just tell ya. I'm living in the pit of freakin' hell right now. Every day is a nightmare with Crystal. I don't think we're going to make it much longer."

"Damn. I'm really sorry to hear that, Jim," Martin said, shaking his head. "I've been there, believe me. Hell, *most* of us here have." He looked around the station and lowered his voice. "Look, a couple of the guys heard you going at it with her on the phone the other day, that's all. They're worried about you, Jim... your mental state and all. An anxious cop can affect everyone, whether you're on the beat or workin' a case. You just need to hold it together and not get into it with her while you're here, that's all. Keep it low-key. And look, everyone knows our manpower's tight right now, but if you find yourself needing a few days off, just let me know. Hell, I'll cover for you myself if I have to."

"I appreciate that, Mike. But really, this place is the only thing keeping me going these days. I'd rather be here than home, fighting with *her* ass."

After a sympathetic nod from Martin, Jim left the office and returned to his desk. After glancing at the paper's headlines, he got out his notes from the Ashby file. He sorted through the photos he'd taken and found what he was looking for.

It was the torn off piece of paper they found on the floor of the victim's car. On it was written the following:

Wade Richards, Accounting Chicago

Chapter 18

First Day, Take Two

Wade took a cab and went to work an hour and a half early. He felt the transition would go smoother if, by the time the others arrived, they saw him working from the office. He'd send an office memo announcing an afternoon meeting with the crew, and get them up to speed.

When he finished setting up his new office, he opened the blinds. Lucy kept them closed most of the time to make her space seem off limits to anyone wanting to pop in. No one ever knew if she was in a private meeting or not. Looking down at his desk, it felt surreal to see his things sitting on it. They didn't look like they belonged there. He almost expected Lucy to burst in and fling them off her desk. He'd need some time to get used to his new position.

Get a grip and relax! It's my office now. Lucy's gone!

He drank two cups of coffee while waiting for his accountants to arrive, but at least he was set up and working. That would answer their immediate question without him having to say a word. He didn't want to be plagued with a hundred questions before his first meeting. His plan seemed to be working.

People emerged from the elevator, curious to see who, if anyone, was in the office. He could only imagine the gossip being passed around the first few hours. At 9:15, he sent out his inter-office memo telling everyone to meet at the break

area, after lunch, for a meeting. At that point, he would officially announce the transition, lay out his plan going forward and encourage them to see his vision for the future.

Wade was amazed not even Trey breached the office door before the memo went out. Also, to Wade's surprise, everyone was back from lunch on time, which had *never* happened before. He watched through the office's glass walls and saw everyone moving to the break room.

Just before 1 p.m., Wade joined them in the break area. The chatter ceased when he approached.

"Listen everyone, I'm going to keep this short and sweet," Wade began, "It's already warm in the break room and I don't want anyone passing out on my first day as manager." A few laughs were heard.

"As you know, Ms. Greene is no longer here. To save some confusion about *why* she's gone and *why* I'm replacing her, let me just say this: There were aspects of the Whitman account that only John had knowledge of. When we arrived in Atlanta, neither Lucy nor I knew the full intent of what we were expected to talk about. Things did not go well... at all. Their board members were *not* happy with us. They held Lucy responsible for not knowing the full aspect of the meeting. They felt the buck stopped with her. Now, the buck stops with me. Maybe they considered me second in command since I stood in for John at the meeting. I'm not sure, but I certainly did not suggest it. Regardless, I was offered the position and accepted." Wade noticed the tension and continued. "I want everyone to do something with me." A puzzled look covered everyone's faces. "Relax for a moment," Wade told them. "Just relax... and breathe. Things are going to be much different around here from now on. There's going to be a better work atmosphere. We all need that. Life continues on, and so do our responsibilities. We're all adults. I intend to operate the department in a way that demands respect. Respect for our performance and respect for us all as individuals. So, continue with your work; same deadlines, same expectations. If you need anything from me, don't hesitate to ask." He pointed toward the office. "No more knocking on that door incessantly to beg entrance. Unless there's already a meeting in progress, the door stays open... always. If you need something, just come in. Anyone have any questions?" No one said a word.

Trey leaned forward and shook Wade's hand. "Congratulations, Mr. Richards," he said warmly. The others quickly joined in.

"Last thing," he said, "It's Wade. Mr. Richards was my father. First names only here. No one in this room is more important than anyone else. So that's it, everyone. Thanks!"

His speech was over. Wade said everything he wanted to. Now the future of Bergstrom-Levy's accounting department could officially begin. People walked back to their desks with a new sense of dignity and personal ownership. Wade tried his best not to show any emotion as they left the meeting, but he found it difficult to suppress a smile. He was happy. He was excited at the thought of the department running in the way he'd always hoped it would.

Things are going to be different around here... and it's about damn time.

In the days following his meeting, Wade noticed something that he hadn't expected. Account work, reports and updates were landing on his desk on time, sometimes early.

What do you know? Treat your people right and they'll perform. Too bad Lucy never learned that... things could have been a lot different.

Another thing he noticed was that no one called in sick or was late during his first week in charge. The mood of the whole department had changed. People acted happier to be there, and it showed.

Wade picked up his desk phone to call Janet, ready to share his excitement. Things at work had finally turned around.

First time in eight years that she'll get a call from me that's not just venting about Lucy or this place.

He picked up his desk phone and dialed her number. Instead of her voice, he heard a man on the other end.

"Hello, Mr. Richards?" His voice was low and gritty.

"Oh, sorry. Yes, it is. Hello," Wade answered, "you must have dialed in as I was dialing out. Can I help you?"

"There's a gentleman here to see you. A detective from the police department."

Wade suddenly recognized the voice on the other end. It belonged to the old security guard downstairs. He immediately thought of Janet. His pulse quickened.

"Is everything okay?" Wade asked, standing now.

"I wasn't informed about the nature of the visit, Mr. Richards."

"Okay, I can be down there in less than a minute."

"The gentleman wants to speak to you in your office, sir."

"Okay... sure. We can talk here."

After a pause, the guard spoke again. "He's on his way up now."

The moment the guard hung up, Wade dialed Janet to check on her. There was no answer. His anxiety surged. He called her again; still no answer. Just then, he noticed the elevator door opening. A tall burly man wearing grey slacks and a charcoal blazer emerged. He had an old, leather satchel in his hand. As the man neared his office, Wade motioned him over.

"Wade Richards?" the detective asked before entering the office.

"Yes," Wade responded quickly. "Is everything okay with my wife? She didn't answer her phone just now---"

"Sir, this isn't about your wife. Sorry if you thought so. I need to talk to you about a local death I'm investigating. My name's Jim Turly. I'm a detective for the department."

Wade immediately exhaled, putting one hand on his desk to support himself as he gathered his bearings.

Turly followed up, "Sir, if we could close your door... it's better if we talk in private. Can I..." he pointed to the door.

"Of course," Wade said.

"I'm not sure I understand how I could assist with any *police* matter, detective, but obviously there's a *reason* you're here... so how can I help you?"

"Thank you... just a few questions." Turly pulled out a pen and notebook. "We've had a recent death in one of our downtown motels about two weeks ago. You may have read about it in the paper... adult male, possible suicide."

A shiver went down Wade's spine as he remembered the letter Janet received in the mail. The woman phrased part of her letter similarly to the detective, 'You may have read in your local paper about a recent male suicide at a motel in Chicago...'.

"No, sir... I didn't see that. Was it someone I knew?" Wade tried not to look as nervous as he felt.

"We're not sure, Mr. Richards. That's why I'm here. You haven't visited any Chicago motels lately, have you?" Turly asked. "The manager there sent us

camera footage that shows a man that looks a lot like you walking around the property the night of the event.”

“No sir, I’ve never been to any motels in Chicago. Whoever that was isn’t me.” Turly wrote in his notebook and continued.

“We found a small piece of paper on the floorboard of the car belonging to the deceased. It has your name on it, Mr. Richards.” Turly watched Wade for his reaction.

“My name? Like on a business card?”

“No, it was written on a small scrap of paper we found. It looked as if it had been taped to the car’s dashboard and fell off.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say, detective. I have no idea why my name would be on anything, in *anyone’s* car.”

“How long have you worked here, Mr. Richards, and what’s your title?”

“I’ve worked here over eight years as an accountant.” Wade answered, but saw that the detective was waiting for more. “Most of our accounting work is internal, for our company, Bergstrom-Levy... and several smaller companies under their umbrella. There’s some outside accounts we handle at their request as well.”

“Do you do any accounting on the side, Mr. Richards?”

“No, I’ve never worked as a private accountant... for anyone. I don’t even do anyone’s taxes but my own. If you can tell me who the man is... I mean *was*, then maybe I can help you better.”

Turly eyeballed Wade, then reached into his briefcase. He shuffled through a stack of papers and soon found what he was looking for; a printout of the deceased’s driver’s license. He handed it to Wade.

“That’s him... Charles M. Ashby. His wife said he went by the nickname *Chip*. Did you know him?” The detective watched Wade’s face closely.

After looking at the printout for a few seconds, Wade handed it back to the detective.

“No sir, I’ve never seen him before. I don’t know him at all. Did he work for Bergstrom-Levy, or any of our accounts?”

“He was employed by Engleton Research,” Turly answered, watching again for a response.

“That’s owned by Bergstrom-Levy,” Wade said, startled. “They’re in Michigan. They do medical research... stem cells, I think. We handle their account.”

“That’s right, he worked there for seven years. Right up until his death. That’s why I thought you might know him. Yes, your department handles their accounting. You *sure* you didn’t know him?”

“I’m sure, detective. I didn’t know him, and I didn’t handle that account. That was one of John’s... John Carlson, I mean.” Wade explained.

“But you’re the head of the department, right? That’s what the guard downstairs told me. But you don’t know *anything* about Mr. Ashby or his company?”

“I just recently became a manager. Our last one was fired a week ago, so I never oversaw the account... and I’ve never dealt with Mr. Ashby *or* Engleton. Look, I’m sorry detective. It sounds like you really want me to know this guy, but I don’t. John quit a couple weeks ago. I’m sure he’d answer any questions you have. I have his phone number if you want it.”

The detective nodded. Wade fumbled through his phone, his mind returning to the letter he received, as well as the dream he had about the bedroom attack.

Turly noticed Wade’s nervousness.

“Why would someone want to kill Mr. Ashby?” Turly asked, taking a step toward Wade.

“What are you asking me for? I don’t know, detective. Look, I told you I didn’t *know* the man. The paper said it was suicide. Do *you* think he was murdered, Detective Turly?”

“I thought you didn’t *see* it in the paper,” Turly shot back. Wade was momentarily stunned but remembered the detective’s words.

“I didn’t... *you* said it was in the paper... reported as a possible suicide!”

“Yeah, I guess I *did* mention that,” Turly conceded. “Calm down, Mr. Richards. I’m just asking questions. That’s my job.”

“Well, you asked me who would want to kill him. So, can I ask why you think it might be murder?” Wade noticed his coworkers were watching them talk.

“I’m not saying I *do*, but I couldn’t speak to that anyway. It’s an ongoing investigation. But I *can* tell you we’re checking out all possibilities. And yes, I’d like the number for Mr. Carlson if you please. And your old boss as well,” Turly said, pulling out his notebook again.

“Yeah, no problem detective. I’ve got both their numbers.” Wade scrolled through his phone for Lucy’s number. “I’m curious though. Was it a gun that caused his death? Or are you allowed to tell me?”

“A gunshot was heard at the scene and reported in the paper. Yeah, it was death by a gun. Why do you want to know?”

“That’s terrible.” Wade replied, “Just morbid curiosity, that’s all. Must be horrible for his wife and kid---”

Turly suddenly straightened up. “How’d you know he had a kid, Richards? I never said anything about that, the *paper* never said anything about that, and *you* said you didn’t know the man!”

Wade’s heart felt like it was going to explode as he realized what he’d just said. He was recalling the attack in his dream and the intruder’s mention of a wife and daughter. He had to think of something fast. He couldn’t tell the detective he may have witnessed the murder in a dream!

“You cut me off, detective. I was going to add, ‘if he had any’. *You* said he was married and worked for Engleton for seven years... so I assumed they might have had a kid by now.”

“I never said he was married, Richards.” Turly fired back.

“You said his wife called him Chip, right?”

“Hmmm... yeah, I did say that... *and* he worked there seven years... fair enough, Richards. You’re pretty good at putting things together. Or are you just a good guesser?” He eyed Wade as he pulled out his pen again. “And those phone numbers?”

“What? Oh, yeah... right here,” Wade said, relieved it was almost over. He held his phone up and watched as the detective wrote down the numbers.

“And yours, as well.” Turly added, pen still in hand. Wade recited his number and put his phone down on the desk.

“So, is that all you need, detective?”

“That’s it for now,” Turly said, putting his notebook away. “If I need to ask you anything else, I’ll contact you. Got any trips or vacations planned anytime soon? I’d like to be able to find you, if necessary.”

“No, nothing planned.” Wade said.

Turly took out his wallet and handed Wade his business card. "Here's my number at the station, and my cell, too... if you think of anything you shoulda told me."

Wade took his card and shook the detective's hand. He was mentally exhausted now. He stood at his desk until the elevator door closed. Once again, he noticed that all eyes were on him. He wished he had remembered to close the office blinds. As soon as he sat down, his cellphone rang. It was Janet.

"Hey babe, I missed your call. Sorry, I was working with a client," she said.

"No worries. I figured you'd call me back. How's your day going?"

"How's *my* day? The usual... but the real question is, how's your first week as the boss going, Mr. Manager?"

"It's going. Different than I thought, but it's going."

You sound like you just finished wrestling a bear. You okay?" she asked.

"I think I just did. No, I'm good. Just a few surprises here, that's all."

"Okay... I guess you'll talk about it later if you need to."

"You know me well, honey. See you tonight, babe. Love you."

"Love you, too, Mr. Manager."

Wade felt like he *had* fought a bear. A bear with a badge. He tried to focus on his work, but his conversation with the detective still swarmed his head.

He suspects me... thinks I'm involved in a freakin' murder! Maybe John knows something about it. Shit... is that why he really quit? Is the company that dirty, and capable of murder?

Wade tried to put his talk with Turly out of his mind, but couldn't think of much else the rest of the afternoon. The dream of the attack, the man on the train; it all proved all too coincidental.

Eventually, the clock pegged 5pm. Minutes later, all twenty-two accountants had left for the day.

Wade grabbed his briefcase and took the elevator downstairs. He wrestled with whether or not to tell Janet about the detective's visit. To this point in their marriage, they'd kept honesty a priority. But the anxiety she'd experienced from the letters had kept her up from sleeping. He didn't want to tip the scales any worse. He'd see how the evening went and then decide on when to tell her.

Chapter 19

The Game Plan

Wade's emotions on the ride home bore a stark contrast to his morning commute. The timing of the detective's inquisition couldn't have been worse.

Wade felt the train slowing and prepared for his walk home.

For the first time since he'd started working at Bergstrom-Levy, Wade wished there were more train stops between Chicago and his neighborhood. He'd have to tell Janet about Turly's visit when he got home, and he wasn't looking forward to it. Add to that the dreams he hadn't shared with her yet, and he knew he'd be causing her more stress than she was already under.

The driver's door of Janet's car was wide open when Wade approached the house. Their front door was also open. Wade ran to the house and almost over Janet when he reached the entrance. His momentum carried them both into the living room.

"Wade! You scared the hell out of me! What's the matter? Why are you running?"

"Babe, you're alright. Honey, I'm sorry! I got close to the house and saw your car door was open... and the front door, too. I panicked, thinking someone had chased you into the house!"

“Well, you caught me just before I broke my neck, so, you’re forgiven.” She got her bearings and moved the hair out of her eyes. “I was bringing in groceries, babe. That’s why the car door was still open. I was coming out for the last load.” She started to laugh, but saw how distraught he seemed. “You okay, dear?”

“I will be... just let me get my breath. I don’t think I’ve run like that since I was a kid!”

“You must have been a pretty fast kid, then,” she laughed. “You almost scared my soul right out of me! Listen, I’ll be back in a second. You sit down for a minute.”

She went outside to her car while Wade sat down on the couch. A minute later, she took a spot beside him.

“Listen honey,” he said, “there’s some things I need to tell you. Things that could be tied to the letters we got.”

Her smile disappeared as he continued. “I got a visit from a police detective today.”

“I thought we weren’t telling the police about the letters yet. Did something else happen?”

“No, we weren’t... I mean, no, I haven’t reported the letters to the police. But yes, something else *has* happened. Not to us, but something else.

A guy was found dead at a motel a couple weeks ago, in downtown Chicago. Supposedly, it was a suicide by gun.”

“Okay... so *that’s* why a detective talked to you? Why? Did you know the man?”

“That’s what he thought, and probably *still* thinks. But I don’t... at all. The guy worked for Engleton Research, though, one of the companies Bergstrom-Levy owns. It’s in Michigan. I don’t know the guy, and don’t know anything about him.”

“Okay... I’m confused now. If it was a suicide, why would he be questioning random people who worked for the parent company and not just his family and friends? But... you did say *supposedly* suicide though, right?”

“Exactly. The cops think there might have been foul play. He wouldn’t say for sure, and he wouldn’t give me any reasons why, but they *are* investigating that possibility. Our office is handling Engleton’s accounting; John Carlson, specifically. So, the detective was here asking questions. He talked to me first

because I'm the accounting manager. That, and they found a scrap piece of paper in the guy's car with my name on it. Turly showed me a picture of the guy's driver's license. Like I said, I didn't know him. But, listen to this! They have camera footage from the motel that shows a guy that looks like *me* walking around outside."

"Well, *that's* not good. But you don't know him, right? Maybe he thought the guy had your name because you're the accounting manager now."

"But that's just it... I wasn't a manager before he died, babe. And if I was, then it was in the works and he wouldn't have known yet. I have no idea why my name was in his car, but there's more." He paused to gather his thoughts. "The dream I had... remember? The one about being attacked and beaten up in our bed?"

"Yes, you said a man told you to write something down on a piece of paper or he was going to kill you, me and our non-existent daughter. How could I forget that?"

"Yeah... *that* one. Well, there's a couple things I didn't tell you. In the dream, at first, I thought it was happening in our bedroom. Well, it wasn't. It looked more like a motel room, Janet. All the furniture was different. Old stuff, probably from the 70's or 80's. And the guy who threatened me with the gun? He said he'd put the barrel in my mouth and pull the trigger if I didn't write down what he told me!"

"Okay. So you used the word 'kill' when you told me about his threat, but you didn't say how. And now this? So, you're thinking you actually dreamed about this man's death? Maybe even before it happened?"

"I don't know, babe... but, yeah, to be honest, I'm thinking I did. It's just too coincidental. I mean, really... my name found in the man's car? And the way the detective questioned me. He treated me like a freaking suspect! The detective's name is Turly, and he was relentless. I was careful how I answered, but he talked to me like a suspect roasting under an interrogation lamp. He was knit-picking every damn thing I told him."

"Babe, I understand that the dream freaked you out. It freaks me out, too. But it could still just be a terrible coincidence, right?" It's possible you dreamed about it, yes. I do think those things can happen sometimes. But it was *one* dream, babe. It's not healthy to put so much emphasis on it."

“Okay, I could go with your reasoning, but that’s just it. I had *another* dream, *after* the man’s death. Now, keep in mind, I didn’t know anything about the man or his death yet. This one was even more terrifying than the other.”

“You never *told* me about another dream, honey,” she said with a look of disappointment. “So, what was *this* one about?”

“No, I didn’t.. sorry. It happened during the flight, on my trip with Lucy. There really wasn’t any reason to mention it at the time. I just thought it was another crazy dream.”

“But it wasn’t, I’m guessing,” she said.

“Well, not anymore. In that dream, I was on my commute home from work. I saw a guy standing in my train car. Blood was dripping from his mouth. He pointed at me and said he couldn’t go home anymore... like it was my fault! Then he walked away from me, exposing a huge hole in the back of his head.

There was a gun involved in the motel guy’s death, remember? And with suicides, don’t they sometimes shoot themselves in the mouth, blowing out the back of their skull? So yeah, I don’t know what, but something weird is happening. These dreams *have* to be about the man in the motel. But why the hell am *I* getting them? I’m just not that *guy*, babe. I don’t get into other-worldly, supernatural crap! That’s just *not* who I am! So... why me?”

A moment or two later, Janet suddenly stood up from the sofa.

“Wade... what did the guy *look* like in your dream? Did he look like the picture in the driver’s license?” Janet asked.

“Well... I really don’t know,” he said, thinking about it. “The printout was black and white, from a copy machine. If I had to guess, the guy had dark hair. Other than that, you couldn’t see a lot of facial details from the printout.”

“Did he have a beard?”

“Yeah, I think so. I don’t know for sure... the printout was pretty shitty, babe.”

“Okay, well...what’s the guy’s name? We can look him up online. Do you remember? There has to be a picture of him somewhere.”

“Charles Ashby was his name,” he said, “I think the middle initial was ‘N’ or ‘M’. He worked at Engleton, so it’s probably safe to assume he lived in or near Lansing, Michigan. Look, I’ll be right back. I need something to drink.”

Wade went to the kitchen while Janet searched the man’s name. Seconds later, Wade heard her gasp.

“Oh, shit, Wade! This is the guy! This is *him*! The guy who dropped the envelope in our yard!” He looked at her phone.

“Are you sure? You said you didn’t get a good look at him.” She nodded yes.

“Damn, babe, this is bad, Janet... really bad!” He sat down again. “That guy drove hours to get us that list. So, it’s obviously no prank.”

“Wade, you need to call the police right now and tell them everything! Whether he committed suicide or was murdered, you need to tell them about the letters!”

“Really? Am I supposed to tell them about my dreams, too? The detective already suspects me, Janet. He’s going to think I’m inventing stuff to cover myself, or that I’m just crazy. And he’ll want to know why I didn’t tell him about the letters when he first questioned me.”

“Because we thought they were pranks, Wade... remember? He’ll understand. You have to go tell them everything you know!”

“Everything I know... and what’s that really? Babe, he thinks I’m lying about not knowing the guy. He suspects I know more than I was telling him, so he already thinks I’m involved.”

“You *are* involved, Wade! *We’re* involved! Just not in the way he thinks! Look, your name was in his *car* for God’s sake. We got the letters. You got an email of the same, from a guy who’s dead now... so we’re involved.” Janet said, thoroughly agitated.

Wade paced the room for a solid minute, then sat on the couch again, shaking his head.

“Babe, I know what you’re saying, okay? I know you’re right. But look what happened to the guy in the motel... likely for trying to warn us about whatever the hell is going on with the company. He’s dead! So, whatever this is, it’s big, and there are bad people involved. Looks to me he was whistle-blowing on Engleton. But whatever he was doing, it got him killed and caused his wife to risk warning us about it, too! At least now we know for sure who sent the letters and it wasn’t a prank. Look, why don’t we search their phone number and try to call her? Maybe she’ll talk to us... tell us more about what the hell is going on, if she knows. I can talk to John, too. I’ll ask him to meet me somewhere. If it really involves Engleton, he might know what’s happening. Then *maybe*, we’ll have something substantial to take to the police. But babe... I can’t just go in there talking about

my crazy dreams and a couple of letters both of us thought were pranks!” Janet wasn’t happy with his answer.

“Fine. We’ll try to call the wife. But don’t talk to John yet. Let’s wait and see if she’ll even talk to us. If she does, we’ll find out everything we can from her and go straight to the police. The less people involved the better.”

Wade was surprised by her answer.

“Damn, babe... that’s not the answer I expected from you, but I like it. Okay, we’ll call her tomorrow night. That gives us time to figure out exactly what to say. But remember, she wrote that she’d already gone to the police. If she calls them about us before we talk to them, I’ll look even worse! We’ll have to ask her not to mention us yet... to give us time to talk to them ourselves.”

Janet nodded her agreement. Wade checked his phone for the time. He was exhausted, but hungry.

“Babe, I’m starving. I’m hitting a drive-thru. Do you want something, and if so, from where?”

“Are you kidding me? I won’t be able to eat *anything* tonight, she said.

He figured that would be her answer. She never ate when she was upset. Wade was the opposite. Anxiety made him want to eat even more. He grabbed his keys and kissed her forehead.

“I’ll get you a shake.” She managed another nod. He could tell she was barely holding it together now.

Wade left the driveway feeling like he and Janet had suddenly been tossed into another world... a new and dangerous one. As he continued to the restaurant, he kept wondering what his part could be in all of it.

Chapter 20

Not a Coincidence

Wade woke up earlier than he wanted. He had spent the night tossing and turning. The stress of the detective's questioning and his conversation with Janet stayed with him all night, making it hard to sleep. As he stumbled down the hall, he noticed the light was on in the kitchen. He found Janet sitting at the table, nursing a cup of coffee. She looked as tired as he felt.

"Wow, dear, I didn't look to see if you were still in bed," he said. "You had about the same night as I did, huh?"

"Oh, worse than you. The few times I *could* fall asleep were interrupted by your snoring! It was either get up and make myself some coffee or just sleep on the couch. It was already 5am, so... here I am."

"I'm sorry, babe. I didn't know I slept long enough to snore. This whole thing has really messed with me. My mind was racing all damn night. I think I was in and out of sleep about ten times. If I wasn't thinking about the detective, I was thinking about Mr. Ashby, or his wife. A few more nights like this, and we'll both be in the hospital, begging for sedatives!"

She yawned and nodded her agreement. "We need to talk to her tonight, then go to the police, Wade. We're in over our heads, and this is something the police should be dealing with, not us. I want this behind us asap, Wade, whatever it is."

"I agree. The last person I want to talk to is that detective, but I'm sure *whoever* I talk to is just going to send me to him, anyway. So, after we call her, I'll call him. I'll tell him everything I think is relevant."

"What do you mean, relevant? It's all relevant. I guess that means you're not planning on telling him about your dreams, huh?"

"Well, shit, Janet! What do you want me to say? If it turns out I don't *need* to tell him, then why would I? I'd just come off as a nut-job, like half the people they deal with on a daily basis. No thanks. But look, if it comes down to *having* to, yes... I'll tell him. But I'd like to try to avoid it if at all possible."

"Fine, babe. I'm too tired to argue with you. As long as we get this off our backs and hand it to the police, I'm okay with that." She put her cup in the sink. "Babe, I'm going to lie down for a while. My ass has practically molded to this chair."

Wade looked at the coffee pot and felt his stomach turn. Toast sounded a much safer option.

Wade passed by the old guard and noticed the same stare he used to get as a child.

What the hell is wrong with that guy? He shook it off and made his way to the elevator.

When he reached his floor, the steel doors opened, and he found Josh standing on the other side. That hadn't happened since Lucy was running things. The look on Josh's face told him something was wrong.

"Wade! John's dead! Judy got a call from his wife last night. Someone found his body between two cars at a shopping mall yesterday!"

"What? John? What happened? Wade's hands began to shake. He realized it and quickly steadied them.

"No one knows, really... only that he was beaten badly. Wade, his neck was broken! That's what his wife told Judy, anyway."

“Oh, no... where’s Judy?” Wade asked, seeing her cubicle was empty.

“She went home. She and her husband were pretty close to John and Debbie. They played cards together every Friday, I think.”

“Wow, okay...” Wade walked toward the break room. “Are the police here?”

“Here?” Josh looked confused as he followed Wade. “Why would they be *here*?”

“Right... you’re right. Listen, Josh, I didn’t sleep well last night and don’t feel too sharp at the moment. I’m going to get some coffee. Thanks for telling me, though. It’s horrible news. If you hear anything else from Judy, please let me know.”

Josh left Wade at the coffee machine. Wade knew a visit from Turly would happen soon. An hour later, his office phone rang.

“Mr. Richards, this is security.”

“Okay, send him up, please,” Wade said.

“Excuse me? I hadn’t—”

“The detective... Turly. Yes, please send him up. I’m in my office, waiting.”

The guard hung up his phone as Wade prepared himself for another round with the detective. The moment Josh had mentioned John's death, Wade knew Turly would be showing up with a new list of questions.

A minute or two later, there was a knock on his door. This time, Wade had the blinds shut.

“Yes, detective, how can I help you?” he asked.

“Like I said before, Mr. Richards, you sure are a *good* guesser! You knew it was me before the guard even had a chance to tell you.”

“One of my team members told me John was found dead last night, detective,” Wade explained. “I knew you’d be paying us a visit at some point. And since the last time you visited was the *only* time security had ever called my office since I became manager—”

“Okay... I get it,” the detective waved him off. “Still, good guess.”

“Before you ask, detective, let me tell you what I heard when I got here. Josh, one of my senior accountants, met me at the elevator with the news of John’s death. He’d heard it from Judy, another accountant of ours. She was too upset to work today and went home early. Judy and her husband were close to John and his wife, Debbie. I think they played cards together every week or two. John was a

friend of mine, too, so the news was shocking to all of us. Judy said they found John dead, lying between some parked cars at a shopping mall last night. He had been beaten up badly and his neck was broken, according to her.”

“Well, hell, Richards, you know as much as I do, then. There *are* a few questions I gotta ask you, though. Just procedure.”

“Fire away,” Wade said. The detective appeared a little stunned.

“You seem a little different from the last time we spoke, Mr. Richards. There’s a little pepper in your voice today,” Turly said.

“Well, detective... after the grilling you gave me last time, I guess my opening day jitters are gone now. And to be honest, I’m not feeling very well today.”

“Sorry to hear that, Richards. I’ll make it brief, then. When was the last time you spoke to Mr. Carlson... and where?”

“About two weeks ago... he was telling me about some personal issues shortly before the end of the day... maybe on a Wednesday? It was here, at work.”

“Personal issues? About one of his accounts, maybe?”

“No sir, something between him and his wife. I’d rather not say.”

“Oh, his affair with your old boss, Ms. Greene, then?”

The detective’s words took Wade by surprise. Truly continued.

“Mrs. Carlson was kind enough to tell me that, Richards. We had quite the discussion. Carlson was a player, then?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. It wasn’t one of John’s shining moments. But he wasn’t a bad guy. Lucy, I mean, Ms. Greene, well... she was kind of a—”

“You don’t have to finish that, Richards. Mrs. Carlson supplied me with a sizable list of titles for her; none of ‘em good. But, back to Carlson. Had he said anything to you, or given you any reason to think he had any enemies that would want him dead? It’s a little coincidental that he winds up deceased within days of Mr. Ashby, being that he handled an account for Ashby’s company, don’t you think?”

“I don’t have a clue why *anyone* would want to hurt John. He had his flaws but was a decent and gentle guy, really. Detective, just so we’re clear, I don’t know anything about his death. I was never in that parking lot. But yes, it is too coincidental. Have you looked into Engleton yet? Maybe there’s a connection.”

“We’re checking into *everything*, Mr. Richards. And we already know you weren’t at the scene. We have security footage of two men walking across the lot

before Carlson got to his car. One was a tall, rough looking man, and the other was a shorter, thin guy. They looked like the kind of guys someone might hire to rough somebody up. You know anyone like that?”

“I know what you’re getting at, detective. I’ve told you the truth. I had nothing to do with John’s death and I don’t know anything about who might have caused it or why. If you really think I did, wouldn’t I be in handcuffs?”

“If you haven’t guessed by now, and we both *know* what a good guesser you are, Richards, I do things a little differently than what you’re used to seeing on TV or in the movies. I like to ask around first... get to know people and their stories before I go any further. Unless, of course, they give me cause to bring them in sooner. But I can assure you, we’re asking the right questions to the right folks.”

The detective pulled out a business card. “In case you lost the first one I gave you, here’s another. Let me know if you hear something, or remember anything you maybe should have told me. Til then, I’ll be in touch. You have a good day, Mr. Richards.”

With that, the detective handed Wade his card and left. Wade was shocked that the conversation was shorter than expected. Something didn’t feel right about it. It seemed far too easy. Wade figured the detective was up to something.

Chapter 21

A Lead Suspect

Turly pulled into the station after picking up a breakfast sandwich. He'd eat it at his desk, as was his custom for the last two years, when cereal didn't hold him. He tried to remember the last time Crystal had made him breakfast. He couldn't. Life had gone to hell for both of them, and cooking wasn't on her itinerary any longer. Jim sat down at his desk and unwrapped his sandwich.

"Chief wants to see ya, Jim," someone to his right said. "You gonna eat that?"

"Keep your paws off, Denny," Turly commanded, "It better be here when I get back!"

The detective wrapped up his sandwich and put it in his desk drawer. A minute later, he was knocking on the chief's door.

"Come in," Chief Martin said. Turly noticed some spilled coffee dripping off the chief's desk.

"Jim, the Michigan widow called me again about that list she mailed us. Asked me if I'd looked into it yet. I'm telling you, she's driving me nuts! She's completely up my ass every day! And I mean completely. I have to ask her to move over when I'm takin' a shit! When are you bringing Richards in? We've found his name and email in Ashby's car, he works for people that own Ashby's company, his

co-worker, Carlson, was found dead in a parking lot two days ago. Hell, he even got a big promotion right in the middle of everything. He's in it, Jim... he's dirty!"

"I agree," Turly said. "I paid him a visit earlier this morning. Just wanted to see how he reacted to his coworker's death. He had a different demeanor from the last time I talked to him, like he was a different person. Said he and Carlson were friends at work, so you'd think he'd ask me all kinds of questions about his death... but no. Turns out, he knew as much as I did! Hell, he didn't even ask if we had any leads on who *killed* Carlson yet. Kinda strange he didn't ask that, right? Especially being a friend and all."

"Yeah, sure is. Well, you're making my case for me now, Jim. Bring him in and see where it leads. Maybe he'll crack or even squeal on someone.

There was a knock at the door. Martin motioned the officer to come inside.

"Sorry to bother you, chief, but I thought you and Jim would want to see this." The officer handed Turly a printout.

"What is this?" Jim asked, showing it to Martin.

"Look closer, Jim. It's a picture from a missing person's report filed in Ohio," the officer said. "I thought it looked like your man from the motel... well, like his I.D., anyway."

"It sure does," Martin said, "thanks." The officer left the room.

"What do you think, Jim? Looks a lot like Ashby's driver's license, huh?"

"Yeah, it does, Mike. Looks even *more* like Richards, though. By the way, we got a call from the motel manager concerning Ashby's death. He found a plastic cup with dried blood on it near the motel room. You know, those little cups they put in the bathrooms that ain't worth a shit? He thinks it's either from our guy's room or maybe blew out of the dumpster and settled in the grass. Sounds like whoever killed Ashby might have gotten a drink of water before he left. We might get a print off it."

"Good. Check it out and let me know, but get Richards down here soon, okay? Put the thumb screws to him... get him to talk to us. I want that widow off my ass! She's worse than a fly at a picnic. Said her husband was acting weird the week before he died, but he wouldn't tell her why. Told her it was better she didn't know. She thinks the list she found in her trash is the key to everything."

“Hell, Mike, that list could be anything,” Turly said, “Sure, it’s probably work-related, but that’s no surprise. The guy worked from home during the last pandemic, you know.”

“Yeah, I know, but Richard’s email and home address at the bottom is enough to raise my eyebrows, and should be enough to raise yours. Ashby most likely came to Chicago to meet Richards, then winds up dead. So... why?”

“Oh, it *does* raise my eyebrows, I promise ya. I called Engleton Research already. Got a hold of a receptionist, and she promised someone would call me back. Didn’t get a call, so I sent a copy of the list through their email. Maybe it’ll get to a person that can get an answer for us. Gave ‘em my number and asked if it was a list of their employees, and if so, what was the purpose of that particular list. I asked for street addresses and phone numbers of everyone on it, too. But hell, that’s assuming the people on the list are employees. It’s a big reach, Mike. Haven’t checked my email today, but if they sent something I’ll let you know.”

“Good enough. If you don’t get a reply then contact their top staff... hell, their CEO if necessary. Shake things up! One of their employees was found dead, for Christ’s sake... in *our* city! And by the way, keep me in the loop about Richards. I want to be here when you bring him in.”

Turly nodded and left the office, feeling the pressure he was under. He needed a break in the case soon. As he reached his desk, he noticed Denny grinning and making ass-slapping gestures. He prepared himself for a cold sandwich and a busy day.

Chapter 22

Security Breach

Wade fumbled with his computer cables after resetting the internet connection in his office. He heard knocking on his office wall and bumped his head on the underside of his desk trying to get back to his feet.

“Oh, sorry!” Calvin said, “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s okay, Cal... whatcha need?”

“Well, I was uploading documents for my report and the internet went down. And not just the router... all it. The Ethernet connections are dead, too.”

“Well, the internet’s gone out before. I’m sure it’ll be back on soon. I’m dealing with that myself in here. I thought it was just me.”

“But it’s not just that,” Calvin said, “a minute after the service went out, all the computers powered down, then rebooted... by themselves!”

“What? That’s weird. No, I didn’t know about that. I shut down and restarted mine right after the internet went out. I got under the desk to untangle Lucy’s mess of wires. I haven’t rebooted yet. I’ll get I.T. down here to check everything out. They all powered off at the same time?”

“Yeah all of ‘em... freaked everyone out.”

Wade turned his computer on. Everything booted up fine, but he still had no internet service. Then at once, the screen turned black and his computer powered off! Before Wade could switch it on again, it powered on by itself.

“Just like that!” Calvin said.

“Yeah, that’s not normal. If I.T was doing anything, they would have let us know. I’ll give them a call in a minute. Just tell everyone to save their work frequently and work offline when they can.”

Calvin spread the news while Wade finished reorganizing the wires under his desk.

“I.T.... this is Sam, I assume you’re calling about the internet issues.”

“Yes, this is Wade Richards from accounting. All of our computers—”

“Yeah, believe me, we know... we’re not sure what’s going on yet. It hit our computers here, too. Lost connection and then had an auto-reboot on everything at the same time. No data loss up here as far as we can tell, but we don’t have any idea what could have caused the automatic reboots... especially at the same time. Never seen that before.”

“Well, people here are giving me a thumbs-up right now, so I guess everything is okay as far as their files,” Wade said, canvassing the room.

Before he could say anything else, the man had already hung up. As Wade put his phone down, someone across the room called to him.

“Wade! Come look at this!”

Wade hurried to the other side of the room to find people gathered at John Carlson’s cubicle. The computer was on, and the screen was changing quickly from one screen to another. It looked like someone was working the keyboard, but no one was touching it.

“Someone’s using John’s computer remotely,” Trey said.

Before Wade could call I.T back, the computer shut off and rebooted back to a DOS screen. Wade tried to boot it up manually, but the computer showed no operating system.

“Who turned this on today?” Wade asked. “Anyone been using his computer?”

“No one,” Jennifer answered. “It was off when all that stuff with our computers happened, then it just turned on by itself. Peggy noticed it first. When we came over, it looked like someone was sitting there, scrolling through his accounts and even typing on the keyboard! Almost like a ghost was doing it!”

“It’s no ghost,” Wade said, “Probably I.T. Look, everyone relax, I’ll get them down here to check it out and tell us why they accessed it. In the meantime, is everyone else’s computer working okay now?”

Several people nodded yes. With that, Wade left to call the tech department again.

“Wasn’t us. But we’ll come down and take a look after lunch,” Sam offered. “We’re still trying to figure out what the hell happened up *here* a few minutes ago. It’s been a freakin’ nightmare.”

Three hours later, Sam arrived with another technician. They worked on John’s computer for not more than five minutes before they motioned Wade over.

“This one’s toast. It’s been completely wiped. And I mean completely. You said the screen looked like someone was in it? Using remote access?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, they said it was just like someone was sitting there, digging through John’s files,” Wade said.

“Well, it wasn’t us. We’ll try to figure out where it was accessed from, but don’t hold your breath. With all that’s happened today, we’re playing catch-up. But someone definitely got into our system... that’s obvious. I’m not supposed to say anything, but this was a serious hack, and not by some kid in a basement. This was the real deal... very high end.”

“What do you want me to do with this pc?” Wade asked.

“Throw it in the dumpster. It’s completely fried, like it was struck by lightning. Even the FBI couldn’t pull any data from it now. You can requisition one to replace it. Just send me an email and I’ll get it started. Might be a week or so before you get it, though.”

“That’s fine. No need for it right now. I’m leaving the cubicle empty.”

“Yeah, I heard about your guy. Sorry to hear that. I totally get it.”

Wade followed the guys to the elevator. After returning to his office, he couldn’t help but think how much his world had changed in the last two weeks.

Chapter 23

Trouble at the Top

Alan Bergstrom waited until the boardroom was fully seated and all doors were closed before speaking.

“I appreciate you all for making the necessary arrangements to be here on such short notice. I need to ask you to turn off your phones now.”

He paused while the board members complied.

“I’ll dispense with any pleasantries and get right to why I called this meeting. There’s been a very disturbing development at Engleton. They received an electronic message from a police detective in Chicago. He had found a certain list of names he’s concerned about. *Nine* names to be exact. He said it concerned an ongoing homicide investigation there.” The noise level in the room rose as several board members discussed his statement.

“The email we received inquired about the nature of the list and asked for contact numbers and home addresses for each person listed. We believe the list was generated by one of the nine, specifically Michigan,” he said, looking up. “It contained all the subjects’ names and the states where they presently reside.” The room became more restless as he continued. “I told them not to answer the inquiry for now. But the real concern is the fact that one of the nine was able to

access the list of subjects in the first place. Obviously, we have a leak at Engleton. It's presumptuous to assume it was Ashby. It may have been someone else. I have a man on this right now. He is reliable and should know something soon."

A man seated across from Bergstrom stood.

"Alan, we need to tie everything up now. If we delay any longer, we're finished!" Several other members echoed his words.

"It's under way, Thomas," Bergstrom said, "Iowa has succumbed to... what's the term these days? Turbo cancer. Nebraska had a car accident. Ohio's gone missing. He won't be discovered. So yes, our plans need to be expedited, but we have no reason to panic, I assure you. It's being handled so as not to raise suspicion."

"Yes, but we were *assured* there was no way any of the nine would ever come in contact or become aware of the other subjects, Alan." Larry Miller explained.

"You were assured there were no paper trails to link any of the subjects together, Larry. You were assured all subjects would be at least one or two states apart. How and when Michigan became aware of the program is unknown at the moment, but what is known is that he is no longer a threat to us or the program. That loop is closed now. The fact that a detective found the list could end up being a blessing to us, though. Now we're aware we had a leak, what was *in* the leak and who it was leaked to. Soon enough, we'll learn who betrayed us. We *will* contain the situation."

"Contain it or finish it?" Miller asked, rising from his chair.

"Whatever is required!" Bergstrom said loudly. "I will do what is necessary, but know this: none of you should weigh the fate of our subjects with any indifference. They have lives, and most of them, families. The fact that it has come to this should sadden all of us. These are *real* people, not lab experiments, regardless of their origin. They deserve more empathy and respect than what I'm hearing in this room." Miller took his seat as the room became quiet again. Bergstrom continued with a softer tone.

"Friends, let's not forget who we are and what we've achieved. We're on the brink of changing the world! We have come too far to panic now. We *all* knew the risks when we began this journey, and we *all* decided to commit ourselves to the finish. I understand your concern over the remaining subjects, but you can consider them handled."

“Does that go for Richards, too? You just told us Michigan was ‘handled’ in Chicago,” Miller stated. “It’s obvious to anyone here that he went there to make contact with Richards! How do we know Richards doesn’t know about the project now? We can’t afford to take any chances, Alan.”

“Richards is the sole reason our research has progressed as far as it *has*, Larry. He’s the key... eight consecutive successes stem from him! Not to mention my promise to his mother. Richards will *not* be touched unless there’s a valid reason to do so... and that will come from me. No one else!”

Larry smacked the top of the table, but refrained from saying anything else. Bergstrom dropped his head for a moment before returning his attention to the room.

“Friends, we’ve been here once before, remember? The situation then was no less dire. I assured you then I would do what was necessary, and today I make the same pledge to you. There should be no question as to my resolve for protecting our mission *and* our livelihood. I asked you here today to give you the information I had received. Now, let’s go back to doing what we do best. Put this out of your mind today and understand I have everything under control.” With that, he motioned to Lana, who opened the doors to the hallway.

One by one, the board members shuffled out, Larry being the first to leave. After the meeting, Lana followed Bergstrom to his desk.

“Lana, arrange a flight to Chicago for Tuesday morning. I want to arrive at O’Hare before lunch.”

Wade dwelled on the computer debacle the entire ride home. There'd been too many weird things happening lately for him to consider them to be coincidence.

He felt an elbow bump his right arm. Looking up, he saw the person next to him pointing at the flashing sign. It was his stop. He thanked the woman and hurried off of the train.

When he got home, the house was quiet. No music was playing. The TV was off. Suddenly, he remembered Janet had an office dinner to attend after work. It wasn’t often he’d come home to an empty house. He didn’t like it.

Wade took a shower and watched some TV while waiting for Janet to get home. Eventually, he relaxed enough to drift off to sleep.

When he opened his eyes again he was standing somewhere unknown, in a dense fog. It seemed to be nightfall. Wade felt a cold sensation on his arm, though there was no wind blowing. He had no clue where he was, but somehow, it felt familiar. He began to walk. It was too foggy to see more than a few feet ahead, but something caught his ears' attention. He heard footsteps, and not his own. He couldn't see anyone, but the steps seemed to be getting closer. He stopped walking.

"Hello! Anyone there?" he called out. "Hello!" He heard nothing in return except the continued footsteps. "Who's out here?" he shouted. Wade suddenly realized he could be dreaming.

Great! What am I going to see this time?

The footsteps grew louder then suddenly stopped. Wade felt a presence around him, but saw no one. Soon, he felt another cold chill. As he strained his eyes to see what was in front of him, the mist began to dissipate.

"Wade." His name was spoken softly, yet didn't seem to come from any particular direction. He saw the outline of a man standing in front of him.

"Who are you?" He backed up and balled up his fists.

"There's no need for violence here, Wade."

"Who the hell *are* you?" Wade asked.

The mist continued to clear, revealing a rather tall man wearing a coat. As Wade studied the man's face, it became clear who he was.

"What the hell? Now I'm dreaming about my dead father? Why am I dreaming of *you*? I haven't seen your face, even in my dreams, since we buried you, and not much before that, either. What... do you have a hole in the back of your head, too?"

"There's no hole in my head, Wade. My wounds are *here*." The man pointed to his chest.

Wade saw three small holes appear in his coat then quickly disappear.

"That doesn't answer my question. Why am I seeing you in my dream?" he asked, wishing he'd just wake up.

“You’re not dreaming, son. You never *have* been dreaming. Your body is lying on your sofa at the moment, yes... but your conscience is *here*, with me,” the figure explained.

“Well, *that* makes a lot of sense. My dead father tells me in a dream that I’m not actually lying on my couch dreaming. Janet’s going to love this one!”

“I told you, Wade... you’re not dreaming. You never were. But you *are* in danger, son. That’s why I came to you.”

“Really? What kind of danger, exactly? Falling off my couch onto the floor kind of danger?”

“Listen to me, son. You’re in trouble. There are people I need to warn you about. There’s much you don’t know... and I would have preferred it had remained that way. But it’s unavoidable now.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Wade studied his father’s face, noticing all the familiar wrinkles and features he remembered as a child. He seemed much too real to be a figure in a dream.

“So... I’m not dreaming. Then, what is this? Where the hell am I?”

“This is possible because of the medications you received as a child. It wasn’t an expected outcome, but nevertheless, it *is* real. Your consciousness has separated from your body. It is not in your world now, but in ours. The easiest way for you to understand is that right now you are in the lowest vibration of our plane. It is what the living often refer to as the Ether. One of the medications we gave you as a child affected your pineal gland... the gateway between planes. It altered your pinealocyte cells. Whenever you’ve had any out-of-body experiences, you’ve always traveled here, to the Ether. I’ve seen you here before, but have remained unseen, so as not to upset you.”

“So as not to *upset* me?” Wade was beginning to understand. “You’re telling me, in all my dreams... all the times I felt I was in a different place... that I really *was*?”

The truth of his father’s words suddenly anchored deeply in Wade’s consciousness. Everything began to make sense now.

“So, I wasn’t going crazy? I really experienced those things?” He remembered the Saturday morning visits with nurse Becky; the shots, the drinks.

“What the hell kind of drugs did you give me?” Wade asked.

“What you needed... in order to save your life,” his father replied. “Your body still retained the genetic markers from Wolman’s Disease. We fought to nullify those... to give you a chance for a normal life.”

“A normal life? My life absolutely *sucked* until I met Janet, Father! I can count on one hand the number of hugs and ‘*I love you*’s I got as a child. You took me to the park *once* and threw the baseball with me *once*... that’s it. I never saw you other than short glimpses of you during lunch, and sitting quietly across from you at dinner! I never really *knew* you, father! And *now* you come to me like this? It’s a little too late.”

“I’m sorry, son. I have many regrets in my life. But still, there are things you need to know about my work—”

“Your work? Again, with your work? It was always more important than anything else... I remember. So save it. I learned that on my own. And no excuses, *dad*... I won’t hear them. So, let’s just focus on *now*. You’re here to warn me... to help me. After all these years, you show up out of nowhere to help me... right. So, *who* exactly am I in danger from?”

“The company... Alan Bergstrom, chiefly,” he answered. Wade was startled by his answer. “He’s not who he seems to be, Wade. He’s misguided and willing to do whatever is necessary to protect his interests. He’s obsessed, like I was, and he will not relent. You need to separate yourself from him and the company. Do not wait.”

“Wait... so, all of this... everything that’s been happening... is because of *you* and your *work*? The company, the deaths... even my headaches? All of it? Because of the drugs you gave me?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. It began with me, yes... and my research. But I never intended it to be used in the way they chose. I refused to move forward in the direction they wanted, and began to look for another company to work for. I promised your mother I’d spend more time with you both, and I wanted to. A gunman ended that promise. Future loss *can* be avoided, though, if you’ll separate yourself from the company, Wade. Do it now. Do not hesitate.”

Wade abruptly sat up, almost falling off the couch. Sweat poured off his forehead as he found himself in his living room now. He tried to write the experience off as another dream but his heart told him otherwise. He knew he could never have dreamed in such detail anyway. As he sat on the couch, still

reeling from the experience, he realized he'd just received the answers he'd been looking for his entire life. Wade held his head in his hands and wept for the first time since his father's funeral.

“My father...” he uttered to an empty house, “my Dad!”

Chapter 24

Men in Brown

Wade rode the elevator to his floor, determined to get through the day in as normal a fashion as possible. The effects of last night's experience left him drained, but he didn't want it to spill over into his work. Everyone in accounting was already upset about John's death. They didn't need an anxious or distraught captain at the helm. He would need to put his new revelations out of his mind, the way he did when Janet got home from her dinner party. He needed to bury it... deep. The elevator doors slowly opened.

"Wade, we've been robbed!" Josh blurted it out so fast, Wade had to ask him to repeat what he'd said.

"Robbed! *Your* office and *John's* cubicle... both have been ransacked!"

"What? What did they take?" Wade looked across the room, toward his office.

"Your computer's gone. There's papers scattered everywhere. And John's computer... it's been gutted! His computer's casing is lying on the floor next to what's left!"

"How the hell did *we* get robbed?" Wade asked. "This is a secure building. They'd have to have gotten by security. So how'd they get up here?"

"I don't know, but I already called security, and they're sending someone up any minute."

Wade went directly to his office. Josh hadn't exaggerated. It was a disaster. His computer was gone, the outer casing left completely empty. Wade's desk drawers were left open and empty, as well as most of what was in his filing cabinet.

Wade had started picking up the mess when the old guard from the lobby appeared at his door.

"Two men in brown uniforms," the guard told Wade. "They had the right credentials, posed as I.T. and told the night guard they were here to add new hard lines to your department's intranet before you started work today. Our man said they had the proper work order, so he let them up. We had them on camera until the elevator doors closed behind them in the lobby. From that point on, our surveillance system went in and out, some cameras going offline completely."

"How'd they get out of here with my computer's insides?" Wade asked, "Didn't the guard see them leave with all that stuff?"

"They had cases with them when they came in... looked like toolboxes. Our guy assumed they were full of cables and tools. We think now they may have been empty when they arrived. I've got to get back downstairs. We reported this to the police. They should be here soon."

Great! If they send Turly over here, I'll lose my damn mind!

The police arrived, but Turly wasn't with them. A report was made, and soon Wade was left sitting in a disheveled office without a computer. It was then his office phone rang.

"Mr. Richards, this is Lana from Mr. Bergstrom's office. He wants to have lunch with you in Chicago, Tuesday afternoon at The Walnut Room, inside Macy's. The reservation was made for 1pm. I sent you an email yesterday afternoon with the details but hadn't heard back from you. Will you be able to attend?"

"Lunch? In Chicago... with Mr. Bergstrom?"

"Yes, he's in Chicago Tuesday visiting another division. and asked to dine with you while he's in the city. Can I tell him you'll attend?"

"Yes... yes, I'll be there. I hadn't seen your email. We've had computer issues. Thanks for the call, Lana." He put down the phone.

What the hell is going on? My office gets ransacked, and the head of the company asks me to lunch on the same day? What else am I in store for?

Wade had I.T. bring him a replacement computer and began the all-day task of reloading reports and programs. He figured whatever the men in brown took had to do with covering up something big.

Maybe his father was right. Maybe he *was* in danger. The same kind of danger that'd found John Carlson and Charles Ashby. But what, exactly was going on? His father gave him no specifics, only vague warnings. Would he ever hear from him again? What about his out-of-body experiences? Would they continue? It was just too much to process. Wade needed an ear, but he'd have to wait until he got home to talk to Janet.

Wade quietly picked at his dinner. For the first time in his life, anxiety wasn't making him hungry. He was nauseous, in fact.

"You haven't said ten words since you got home, babe," she said. "What's wrong?"

"We need to talk," he said, clearing his throat. "It's about everything going on. More's happened since yesterday."

"I *knew* something was wrong. You were too quiet last night. But I figured I'd wait for you to talk to me."

"Janet, I don't even know where to begin..."

"Begin with yesterday. I figured it was just stress from your new position. But damn, honey, you looked like a death row inmate taking his last walk last night. So, what happened?"

"I fell asleep watching a movie. I had another dream... well, not a dream. I went somewhere." He paused, trying to find the right words. "Dammit! This is going to sound stupid-crazy, babe. I had an out-of-body experience last night."

"You? *You* had an out-of-body experience? Like astral projection? Babe, you don't even *believe* in that sort of thing. How do you know that's what it really was? Couldn't it have just been another powerful dream?"

"Because my dead father was there, and he *told* me that's what it was. Yeah, it's that freaking crazy, babe. I told you it would be." Janet was momentarily speechless. "So... these experiences," he continued, "I've described them to you

before. The weird, unearthly location... the sea of people surrounding me... *wanting* something from me... all of it. It was like I was in another dimension."

"Babe, you're scaring me. Why do you think it was more than just a dream? Because your father was there, explaining it? I don't understand. I know you've been under a lot of stress lately, and there's been a lot of changes in our---"

"It's not because of the stress, babe! I wish it were. I'd just take a pill and handle it that way. No, it happened. These events haven't *ever* just been dreams. They never were. Believe me... I'd *love* for them to just be dreams. Nothing would make me *happier* if they were just freakin' dreams!" He threw his hands in the air while turning away. "I guess I was wrong to say anything. You think I'm crazy."

"Okay, calm down, honey. I don't think you're crazy. If you *say* you had an experience, then I believe you. But this is nothing *like* you, babe. You won't even *watch* movies with that kind of stuff in them! Don't be mad, but hear me out. Do you think your sleep meds are---"

"You just said you believed me. Now you're asking about my medications. I've had these experiences off and on my whole life. I never knew how 'not normal' they were... until now!"

"I know, I know... okay, I'm sorry." She took a measured breath. "I'm just trying to take in everything you've said. Okay... tell me exactly what happened."

"I fell asleep on the couch. Next thing I know, I awoke, standing in the same type of place I always find myself in these episodes. It was a huge expanse of nothingness. That's the best way I can describe it. There's a floor, or ground underneath my feet. I could feel it. But no sky above. Just an endless sea of nothingness. It didn't even have color. I know, it sounds unbelievable. Usually, there are multitudes of people there, all lost and wandering around aimlessly. Eventually, they'll spot me, panic and claw for my attention. You've heard all this before. But, this time I was alone, at least in the beginning. There was a thick fog, worse than anytime before. I couldn't see anything ahead of me. It eventually began to dissipate, and soon my father emerged. He spoke to me. It was *him*, Janet! And believe me... I wasn't happy to see him. The first half of our conversation was me venting about what a shitty dad he was. He apologized. But anyway, he told me I was in danger from the people he used to work for, namely Bergstrom. Evidently, they used his research for something bad... probably illegal. He told me he was planning to leave the company, but was killed by the

man who robbed that smoke shop. He repeated two or three times that I was in danger and needed to separate myself from the company immediately.”

“Wow... that’s a deep thing to dream about, babe. But still, couldn’t it still just be a dream?” she asked.

“It was just too real, Janet... too much detail. And I remember every word of it, too. In regular dreams, it’s just not that way. Plus, he told me the medications he gave me as a child were *causing* these episodes. He said it affected my pineal gland... the pinealocyte cells. I looked it up at work. I had never even *heard* the word *pinealocyte* before. Anyway, he called the pineal gland the ‘gateway to the planes’ or something. Basically, a way to send your conscience to another plane or dimension, like... *after* this life. Oh, yeah... and he called where we were the ‘Ether’. So, the medications must have altered my mind in a way that provides me access to that plane when I’m sleeping. I know it sounds unbelievably nuts, but it all makes so much sense now! The people that always claw at me must somehow know I don’t belong there! Like I still had my connection to the living, and they knew it!”

Wade’s explanation left Janet dumbfounded. She’d never heard him talk like that before. Wade watched her closely, waiting for her response. She leaned forward and took his hand.

“Honey, I believe you... I really *believe* you! This really happened, just like you said. And actually, it explains quite a bit. I need a second, though. It’s just so much, babe. Let me make us some coffee. I’ll be back in a couple minutes. I really need a cup, and I think you could use one, too.”

Wade sat down and took a minute to get his head together while Janet made their coffee. When she returned, he spoke first.

“Shit... I’m so sorry babe,” he said. “I didn’t mean to dump all this on you so abruptly. It’s just... my dad. I still have so much resentment toward him. My shitty childhood... the lack of quality time... and love.”

“Don’t apologize. Look what you went through. I’ve heard you talk about him before. He may have been a good man, but it wasn’t a warm upbringing, babe.” He laughed at how she described it.

““Warm upbringing”... that was good, babe. Understatement of the *century*, maybe! But you’re right. It wasn’t a very warm relationship.”

“Just drink your coffee,” she said. “We both need some right now.”

When they'd finished their cups, they moved to the family room, both feeling calmer now. She spoke first this time.

"Babe, can we talk a little more about what your father told you?"

"Fire away, babe. But I think I know where you're going."

"I think you should follow your father's advice, Wade. Separate yourself... *us*, from that company. Screw the promotion. Hell, Mr. Bergstrom may have arranged it just to keep you there... so he could keep a close eye on you. I'm not saying you didn't deserve it... I'm just throwing out some possibilities."

"No, it's fine, babe. I thought about that today, too. Especially when I learned he wants to have lunch with me tomorrow. Like, he was just conveniently going to be in town to visit a nearby division? I kinda doubt that. But babe, if I leave the company, we'll be in a worse financial condition than we were before. We have like \$6,000 in savings right now... that's it. Your car's paid off, but we're going to need a new one eventually. Maybe two, if there's no city commute where we move to. Utility costs have gone up—"

"Quit it, babe, just quit it. Quit the job and quit worrying about the money. We'll be all right. Make a new resume. Now you can add 'department manager' to it! You'll find work soon enough," she said.

"Sure, less than one month as department manager and I quit the company... how do I explain *that* on a job interview timeline?"

"We'll move. Tell them we moved to be closer to a suddenly ill parent... whatever! It's believable, Wade. People do it all the time." He saw how determined she was. He began to feel the same way.

"You know what? You're right. I'm in!" he said. "Hell, ever since I took this job, I've wished I was doing something else for a living, anyway. Now's my chance! It took two deaths and a warning from my dead father to get me to this point, but what the hell. Let's do it!" he laughed.

"That's the spirit, babe. I hadn't really thought about it in those terms, but yeah, let's do it! But, I want to move south. I want a suntan! I'm sick of being so damn pale. I want to rock a bikini again before I turn thirty."

"No objections, white bread. We'll get you some vitamin D," he joked. "Okay then... it's settled," she said. "Turn in your resignation and let's follow this through before we both chicken out!"

“Done... I’ll need a week, though. I don’t want to hamstring my coworkers. Everything’s been running great since Lucy left. I don’t want to suddenly ditch my people and leave them hanging, babe. I feel a responsibility to them.”

“Fine, but be smart about it. Don’t give your employees or Bergstrom the idea you’re leaving, or that anything’s wrong, okay?”

“I won’t... promise. But scratch the sick parent thing. We’ll just use your allergies as our reason to move south. Tell ‘em we put an offer on a house and it was accepted. Sounds better, I think.”

“I’m fine with that. But just be careful Tuesday, Wade. If Bergstrom’s behind any of this, he’s eating lunch with you to feel you out... to see if you’re aware of anything, or could be a threat to him. Just act like everything’s normal.”

“No problem. I’ll eat an expensive steak and talk about how well the department is doing. Easy-peasy! You know, babe? Tonight might be the best sleep I’ve had in three weeks. So, how about we have a hot date? You know, the kind where we binge-watch something and eat snacks ‘til we both fall into a food coma!”

“Sounds good,” she laughed. I’ll make the popcorn... you go take a nice, hot shower.”

“Babe, I don’t really need a hot shower— oh, a “nice, *hot* shower”? So... you have some pent up energy you need to burn when I get out?”

“Don’t ruin it by talking, dude. Take too long in there and you’ll find me asleep when you come out.”

“I’m not making *that* mistake again,” he said.

Chapter 25

Medium Rare, Please

Tuesday came faster than Wade wanted, but he was confident he could hold his own with Bergstrom.

Still, he was nervous about the lunch. He had never been to Macy's, let alone to eat there. It really wasn't his thing. As the elevator approached the seventh floor, Wade did his best to prepare himself for Bergstrom. His mind was set to engage in a perfectly normal conversation about life and work. That was everything Bergstrom would expect to hear from someone who had no clue how much danger they were in.

As Wade entered the restaurant, the history of the eatery told its story through its vivid décor. He had looked up the Walnut Room online. It seemed nice, but he marveled at how the photos hadn't done it justice. The place was warmly beautiful and elegant; somewhere a guy would want to take his girl to propose. Wade felt even more confident now that lunch would go well.

"Wade! Good to see you. Come on over here!" Bergstrom called from across the room.

He was seated in a small booth, away from most of the other tables. He wore a dark gray suit, finely tailored, and a tie that looked to cost a week's wages. Wade

felt under-dressed in his old suit. It was gray as well, but definitely not from the same class of tailors.

“Thank you, sir!” Wade greeted him with a friendly and firm handshake. After sitting, he was immediately offered a glass of red wine and an ornate dinner bib.

“So glad you could do lunch today, Wade,” Bergstrom smiled. “It made my visit to Chicago all the better! We have some things we need to talk about, son... good things!”

“Yes, sir. I really appreciate the lunch invite and have some good news for you. The department is running smoother than ever since Ms. Greene’s departure. Productivity is high, and the overall atmosphere in the department has taken a very positive turn.”

“Excellent! Exactly what I wanted to hear, Wade. Reliable accounting is the key to any company’s success, you know. I knew you’d do fine. You have your father’s drive. I recognized that in Atlanta.”

Wade felt an uncomfortable twinge at the mention of his father. After being warned about Bergstrom, the compliment fell on barren soil. Still, he managed to keep an honest smile on his face.

“So,” Bergstrom continued, “tell me more. How has your short time as manager been *personally*, thus far? Is there anything you need over there? Anything I can do to help you continue your new success?”

Wade felt his guard raise with that question.

“No sir, I think we have everything we need. I do need to tell you something, though. We had a recent break-in with a possible data breach. We’re still trying to put the pieces together as to what actually happened.”

“Really? That’s not good. Strange... information of a break-in or data breach never reached my ears. But that’s not too unusual these days. My staff strives to protect me from any news that might cause me to worry. They think I’m getting too old to handle the stress, I think,” he laughed. “Tell me what happened. Maybe I can help.”

“It was an odd situation,” Wade said. “Two men approached our building’s security guard with work orders concerning our intranet lines. It was in the evening, around 7pm... just a few days ago. The guard let them up to our floor. From there, they stole two hard drives and made a real mess of the place. Mine was one of the hard drives that were stolen. Well, I should say Ms. Greene’s old

hard drive. I hadn't been a manager long enough to have anything of mine on it, so any data they got was hers for the most part. But still, it was very strange. They only took a few items."

"That is troubling news. Computer equipment is costly. I'll have my team install a new surveillance system for your work area and have the security team re-trained. I'm sure they have cameras for the hallways and other areas in the building, but who would think they'd be necessary *inside* an accounting office? Not much of value to steal except for electronics and account data, of course. Do the police have any leads on the thieves?" Bergstrom asked.

"Not a thing," Wade answered. "The hall cameras you mentioned were on the blink, so not much video was captured. No one has a clue as to what they were after, or if they even got it. I.T. tried to track the attack, but came up empty as well. They're adding more protection to the computer systems to protect against future attacks."

"Attacks... I.T.?" Bergstrom looked confused now.

"Oh, yes. I hadn't mentioned... a day before the break-in, all the office computers started acting very strange. They powered down on their own, then back on while we were working. Our I.T. department thinks one computer may have been remote accessed. Not mine... one from one of the cubicles on the floor. They think it could be related to the subsequent break-in, but that's all they have... a theory."

"Well, obviously someone was after something," Bergstrom said. Not very surprising in this day and age. No one wants to work for their money anymore. They'd rather steal it by hacking their way into riches. Very unsettling news. I'll ask my staff to keep their ears to the ground. We don't want to be caught up in any data blackmail situations... very costly!"

"Yes sir, I agree. And I'll be sure to inform you directly if I hear anything else about it."

"Good man! And call me 'Alan'. That's what your father called me, and that's what I want *you* to call me from now on, young man."

"I can do that, sir," Wade assured. "But I don't want to leave things on that note, sir... about the department, I mean. We're doing *very* well in spite of the recent events. Our performance is up, as I said, but more importantly, we're a very solid group now."

“Good to hear.” Bergstrom patted Wade’s left shoulder, causing Wade to feel suddenly uncomfortable. “If you have any problems getting your replacement equipment, let me know.”

“Everything’s being replaced soon, sir. But we’re up and running as-is. I borrowed a computer from I.T. and may just keep using that one. It works fine. I can cancel the replacement.”

“Borrowed? Oh, no. If your new one isn’t there by tomorrow afternoon, call me directly. I’ll have I.T. install a new one immediately! And you pick out a nice, new laptop computer for yourself, Wade. It will be yours... not company equipment. That way, you can back up anything you deem important and use it at home for personal things, too. Just send the bill to my office. Now, let’s eat. I see our man heading this way with the best steak you’re going to eat this year!”

The rest of the hour went smoothly. Bergstrom told some stories about Wade’s father, and the new accounting manager talked about the department’s bright future. Wade never mentioned John’s death, Turly’s questioning, the letters or just how much the data breach and break-in really affected him.

Bergstrom never asked any probing questions, either. Wade wanted him to leave the lunch feeling he was just an eager, success-oriented company man, oblivious to any possible wrongdoings or danger he may be in. To Wade’s knowledge, he had fully succeeded.

The cab ride back to his office was stress-free and pleasant. Wade was confident he could now focus on the rest of his plan. Today, he’d officially appoint Josh as assistant manager. He had already sent out a memo for any issues to be addressed to him while he was meeting with Bergstrom. When he resigned in a few days, he figured the company would promote Josh to take his position.

He settled in at his desk and called Janet to tell her he was back from the restaurant. She was relieved to hear how everything went. Now they could begin phase two of their plan, or ‘Operation Vitamin D’ as they called it, and decide on a place in Florida to settle. Something close enough to drive to the beach would be nice, they agreed.

As Wade finished entering the last report into his computer, a large shadow loomed over his desk. He looked up to see Turly standing there, along with a uniformed officer.

I freaking knew it! No way I could have a decent day without this guy screwing it up!

"Mr. Richards," Turly announced, identifying Wade to the other officer.

"Detective," Wade said, in a disappointed tone, "how can I help you *this* time? Are you here about the break-in?"

"Among other things," the detective replied.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions, Richards... just to see if I'm straight on everything you've told me."

"I gave a statement about the break-in on the day it happened. Is there anything more you need to know?"

"There is, Mr. Richards... down at the station."

"At the station?" Wade asked, becoming anxious. "Why at the station? I have a lot of work to do here, detective. Can't we just---"

"I'd rather we talk at the station, Richards," Turly insisted.

"Am I being arrested, detective?"

"No," Turly responded, "Do you *need* to be arrested, Mr. Richards?"

"No, detective, I don't *need* to be arrested. I just need to know what's going on!"

"Well, that's what we're going to find out, Mr. Richards... down at the station. I'm asking you nicely to come with us. You can refuse, but you've said before that you wanted to help. So, this is helping."

"Well, detective, I'm not trying to be a jerk here, but I have a lot on my plate right now. So, if I can refuse, I need to refuse."

"Not a problem Richards. This is America. Technically, you're not obligated to go to a police station unless you're under arrest. That's why I'm asking nicely. Now, I *could* visit you again at your home this evening, but I just hate bothering the judge that late. He gets real grumpy being asked to sign warrants after dinner. So, like I said... I figured I'd just ask you nicely. Of course, if I *did* come back with a warrant, I'd have to use the cuffs... it's procedure, you know. But hey... you took the train here, right? So instead of you payin' for a taxi, why not just ride with us to the station as my guest? I'll even let you play with the siren if you want." The other officer snickered at Turly's humor.

They had Wade backed into a corner now. He reluctantly accompanied the men to the elevator, trying not to look nervous. He called out to Josh as they waited for the doors to open.

“Josh, take care of things until I get back. The officers need my assistance this afternoon.”

‘The officers need my assistance’? That was lame. Except for the missing handcuffs, it’s obvious to everyone I’m in some kind of trouble!

Chapter 26

The Gray Room

The back of the old police cruiser smelled like a prostitute's washcloth. Wade had never been in the back of a police car before, but knew Turly picked this one just to be a dick.

Wade walked into the station first, Turly following. The uniformed officer walked closely behind them. Wade had the feeling if he made one misstep, he'd be immediately taken to the ground. They made their way across the lobby and down a hall. Turly had him stop in front of a steel door. He opened the door and motioned Wade inside.

The room was cold, the walls and floor were painted light gray. Wade knew it was intentional. There was a metal table and chair at one end of the room with some stools sitting across from it. There weren't any mirrors disguising two-way glass, just a small camera in the top corner of the room.

Turly closed the door and stood by the desk, silent. A moment later, the door opened again. A female officer entered, holding a voice recorder and a small notebook.

"This is officer Pinetti," Turly announced, "she's going to be assisting me... making sure we get everything down right."

“Get everything down right? There *is* no everything, detective. You have my full report of the break-in *and* the data breach. I don’t know why all the theatrics in bringing me down here just to answer questions I could have answered from my office. Is this where people come to file a complaint or give information on a case? Looks more like an interrogation room to me. All this is just silly!”

“The city’s grown faster than our station has, Richards. We don’t have beautiful waiting rooms with sofas and plants down here, where we could sip tea and make conversation! And two men dead ain’t silly, Richards... at least not to us.”

“What? *That’s* why I’m here? I *told* you I didn’t know Mr. Ashby! I never met him, never talked to him, never had any dealings with him and didn’t kill him!”

“Well, he sure seemed to know *you*, Richards,” Turly answered. “Knew you well enough to write your email address down on a piece of paper he left in his car! Knew you well enough to drive to *your* city of residence... and why? Just to blow his brains out? And your friend, John Carlson. Don’t forget about him. He knew you well enough to end up dead between two cars, beaten to death! And what do you know? Just before *that* happened, *you* flew to Atlanta, only to come back with a big promotion and a nice pay raise! Care to explain any of that?”

Wade felt time slowing to a grind. The walls echoed with Turly’s words as Wade searched for a response. His heart was racing, but he knew he was innocent. And getting pissed.

“I can’t tell you what I don’t *know*, detective! I’ve answered those questions already! You’ve been suspicious of me ever since you laid eyes on me, Turly. You intentionally scared the shit out of me the first time you came to my office. Harassment and scare tactics were used in every question you asked! Eyeballing me, stepping toward me... making me feel worried about something I had nothing to do with. I’ve told you the truth since the beginning of all this and answered everything you’ve asked. It’s obvious to me now I’m your lead suspect in the case, detective. You’ve made it very clear. So I want a lawyer... now!”

“You don’t *get* a lawyer, Richards!” Turly answered. “You’re here to answer what I ask you, and I suggest you do that! Too many leads keep pointing back to you, and I want to know the hell why!”

“You *have* to allow me a lawyer, it’s my right!” Wade pulled out his phone.

“You’re not under arrest, Richards... so, you don’t *need* a lawyer! Now, if you want to go down that road I can help ya! Hell, I could have arrested your ass at work in front of all your people! I could arrest you right now! I’ve got opportunity *and* motive! But you said you wanted to help us, so here we are!”

“What motive? That’s bullshit!”

“Money!” Turly said, slamming his fist onto the table. “Two people die and you get a promotion and pay raise! That’s at *least* a good motive for killing Carlson! I checked you out, Richards. Your dad was a big-wig here around twenty-somethin’ years ago. Real tight with the founders, too. But *you* ain’t! Maybe you were sick of crunchin’ numbers and figured out a way to get ahead! I also found out Carlson was the only one in your department with more time than you. Seems to me, he’d be next in line when they fired your horny boss. But just like that, you fly off to Atlanta, Greene gets fired, you get promoted and John Carlson ends up dead! Oh, and you got a sweet-ass raise, I bet! Hell, did *you* force Carlson to quit in the first place? Maybe *you* told his wife he was screwin’ your old boss. Two birds with one stone, right? Hell, Three birds! Oh, and don’t forget the fact you knew things about the case you couldn’t have, unless you were involved. Being a good guesser won’t hold up in our courts, Richards!”

Wade was speechless now. Turly had him so twisted up with his questions and accusations that he nearly agreed to the murders! He took a deep breath and tried to slow his brain down before trying to speak.

“Listen detective,” Wade implored, “I’m *not* the guy you think I am. I didn’t lie, cheat, steal... or *murder* to get any promotion. Yes, I’m sure it helped that my dad was important to the company’s founders, but that’s all! I didn’t *kill* anyone... I didn’t *do* anything! You’re not even looking in the right direction!”

“Oh, really? Then what direction *should* I be looking, Richards?” Turly leaned forward, putting his face just inches away from Wade’s.

“Not at *me*, that’s for sure!” Wade shouted.

“Then *where*, Richards? Right now, you’re who I’m lookin’ at! You! You’re the one without a solid alibi when Ashby was killed. And someone lookin’ a lot like you was caught on camera outside the hotel the night he was killed. You’re the one who had the opportunity *and* motive to kill Carlson! Who else should I be looking at, Richards?”

Turly's nose was nearly touching Wade's face now. Wade felt his hot breath and leaned away. He replied with the only answer he could think of.

"Engleton!" He blurted out.

"We've *checked* into Engleton! They're a freakin' medical research facility! Why would I look at them again, Richards?" the detective prodded.

"Because they went after Ashby! Or at least Bergstrom-Levy did! They had him killed!" Wade shouted.

"And why would you think that, Richards? Considerin' you said you didn't know Ashby or anything about him!"

"Because his wife told me!"

The detective was shocked at the possibility Wade had talked to Ashby's wife, but gathered his senses and continued his questioning.

"So, you didn't know Ashby, but you knew his wife? C'mon, Richards... tell me the damn truth!"

"No! I don't know *either* of them. But they knew of *me* somehow. I... well... my *wife* got a letter from his widow. The lady didn't *say* it was her, but she said it was her husband we saw at our mailbox. That he was killed in a motel room here in Chicago. She told me it wasn't suicide, that his company had him killed. She warned me because she knew he was trying to meet me and warn me about them when he was killed!"

"Oh... this is *really* turning into somethin' now, Richards! What kind of a tale are you spinnin'? So... now you're not a *suspect* anymore, huh? You're a victim?"

"I'm telling you the truth, detective! My wife caught him trying to put a letter in our mailbox a few weeks ago. It was a list of names... nine, I think."

"I thought you got the letter from *her*, Richards! Now you're saying her husband put it in your mailbox! Which is it?" Turly pressed him.

"Both! The mailbox event happened a week before. That was him, with the list of names. He scared the shit out of my wife! He also sent me four emails that were an exact scan of the list he threw in our yard. He missed our mailbox."

"All I know right now is it seems you're throwin' around a lot of white rabbits to confuse me!" Turly said, stepping back from Wade.

Wade was almost in a panic now. How was he going to explain this to Janet? Would Turly bring *her* down to the station now?

“Seems like you would have known to tell me that before now, Richards! You certainly have a way of knowing more than we do, don’t ya? You *knew* Ashby had a wife and daughter. You asked me if a gun was used, but sounded like you knew that already, too. So, how’d you know all those things, Richards? Did his wife tell you that too? I guess we’ll find out when I see that letter!”

“It’s not in the letter,” Wade said.

“Then how’d ya know that stuff, Richards? Too damn coincidental to me! And don’t try any of that ‘good guesser’ bullshit on me, Richards! We’re *way* past that!”

“I dreamed it!”

His words rang out as loudly as Turly’s. Wade dropped his head, knowing the road he just sent himself down.

“I’ve been having these episodes... well, I’ll just call them dreams. As crazy as it sounds, I had one about Ashby’s death *before* I heard about it, and another one afterwards.” He waited for Turly’s reaction, fearing the worst.

“Oh, hell... if *this* ain’t some bullshit *here*!” Turly said, spinning around to look at the other officer, who was shaking her head in disbelief. “Look, Pinetti... we have a bonafide *psychic* in the house! Quick, let’s call in a movie producer! Maybe we can all get famous!”

“It’s true.” Wade said, fully humiliated now. “I know it sounds crazy. It seems crazy to me, too... but it’s true. I saw it all in a dream. I didn’t want to tell you. It’s not very believable.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what *is* believable, Richards. Ashby’s widow’s been in contact with us, so we’re going to question her about your claim. And I’m going to *see* those letters, if they exist. Then, and only then, will I tell you what I believe, you can bet your ass on that! Until then you’re under arrest for the suspicion of murder. You’re going to sit in a cell while I have a chance to check out your story... before anyone else you know gets conveniently killed! Officer Pinetti, read him his rights and get his ass booked. Oh, and Richards... *now* you get a phone call. I’d highly suggest you call your lawyer. Charges will be coming very soon!”

Pinetti handcuffed Wade and read him his rights before taking him out of the room for booking. When it came time for his phone call, Wade dialed his wife.

“Janet,” he said, knowing his call was being monitored.

“Hey, babe! I almost didn’t answer. New desk phone number?”

“No, not actually. Listen, I’ve been arrested. They think I had something to do with Ashby’s and Carlson’s murders.”

“Oh, my God! No, Wade! Didn’t you tell them everything that’s been going on?”

“Yes, I did. I told them everything, just like you suggested, and it got me arrested. I need you to call a lawyer for me. I don’t know any. If you don’t either, call some friends and ask for someone they trust.”

“Maggie’s husband uses a lawyer. I don’t know his name, but she said he’s the best in Chicago,” she said. Noticing he didn’t immediately respond, she followed up. “Don’t worry about the cost, babe. My parents will help us. Just stay safe!”

“Okay... babe, I’m sorry for all this. Please make the call asap.”

“I’m calling Maggie now, and I’m coming down there!”

“Okay... love you,” he said, choking up.

“Love you, too!”

Janet hung up the phone, her hands shaking. She grabbed her purse and ran to her car. Wade was led to a cell that three other men occupied. After being ushered inside, he turned around just in time to see the door slam in his face. The violent vibration of the steel door solidified the seriousness of his situation.

Chapter 27

For Better or For... Maybe Even Better?

Janet arrived at the station, demanding to see Wade. She was informed he was in a holding cell; no visitors. She demanded to speak to Detective Turly. An officer told her to wait in the lobby until he was available.

Turly stood in the hallway, talking to Chief Martin.

“What did I tell ya, Jim? Put the thumb screws to him and he’d crack!”

“Yeah, I know... but something ain’t right, Mike. I’ve never heard *anyone* come up with the kind of story Richards just delivered.”

“Oh, you don’t *believe* any of that bullshit, do ya?” Martin asked. “The guy was just talkin’ out of his ass! Saying anything to make you doubt his guilt. Listen, he’s in the holding cell right now, shittin’ his pants, thinking about what to say next. He panicked, Jim... simple as that. I bet he regrets every crazy word he said. In fact, I’ll bet you \$20 he’ll ask to talk to us again and change his story!”

“I ain’t gonna bet you, Mike, but Richards sure had a lot of details for a tale spun that fast. Maybe he already had worked it out in his head, but yeah, I guess we’ll know soon enough.

Pinetti said he asked to call his wife. We recorded the call. He didn’t say anything about his story... only that he told us everything *she suggested*, and it

got ‘em arrested. Told her to find him a lawyer. Oh, the wife’s on the way down here, just so you know.”

“Maybe you can convince her to talk to us before their lawyer gets here. Sounds like she may be involved. In the meantime, Jim, I’m going to do what *I’ve* been avoiding all day and call Ashby’s widow back. Gonna ask her if she sent Richards any letter. And when she denies it, you’ll know he’s full of shit.”

“That’s just it, Mike... I never *told* Richards about the list she sent us, but he just sat in there and told *me* all about it! Someone’s offing people, trying to cover something up. I don’t know if it’s Richards doing it, or if it’s someone he’s working with, but the break-in they had is tied to it somehow. By the way, Richards’ old boss had her apartment ransacked a day ago. I’m still waiting for some security video on that. Lucky she’s a bar fly, or she would have been home at the time. Someone’s trying real hard to cover something up, Mike. It just smells that way. This thing may be way bigger than we think... bigger than Richards.”

“Hell, Jim, he’s doing that shit himself. Probably knows about the list because he *wrote* the damn thing! Look... you’ve done some really good police work here. Don’t let some lyin’ piece of shit make you question yourself, just because he’s such a good storyteller. You got your man! The bastard wanted more money and a promotion, that’s all. And if you’re right about it being bigger than him, well... fine. But he’s still involved, and has been running around our city helping someone with their dirty work! He ain’t gonna be able to do that from a holding cell, though, so go home and sleep well tonight. Hell, you’re probably wrapping up two cases in one, Jim.” Martin slapped Turly’s shoulder. “Keep this shit up and you’ll be taking over my job soon!”

Janet waited impatiently for Turly, knowing her husband was most likely sitting on a filthy jailhouse bench or concrete floor with a bunch of repeat offenders. As she sat in the lobby, clenching her purse, Turly approached her.

“I was told you wanted to see me, ma’am. I’m detective Turly.”

“Where is my husband?” Janet asked directly.

“He’s been arrested, sorry to tell you. He’s in a holding cell downstairs.”

“Arrested on what charge? He’s done nothing wrong!”

“Well, that’s *just* what he keeps telling me, Mrs. Richards. Suspicion of murder,” Turly answered.

“Wade’s no murderer!” Janet exclaimed, “He’s a good, decent man! You have all of this wrong, detective. You have from the beginning. He is mixed up in something, yes, but even *he* is trying to figure out how. But I’m telling you, he’s innocent!” She paused to get her breath. “Is he okay? I want to see him.”

“He’s fine, Mrs. Richards. We’re not that kind of station down here. But as far as seeing him, you can’t tonight. You’ll be able to talk to him in the morning, though. But since you’re here now, he’s said a few things under questioning that I’d like to ask you about if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll need to call a lawyer first,” Janet said. “I’m not sure I should say *anything* to you!”

“Again, with the lawyers,” Turly muttered. “Ma’am, you’re free to call anyone you want, including a lawyer. Your husband’s under arrest, yes... but he hasn’t been officially charged with anything. He came down here with us voluntarily to answer some questions. Now, some of the answers he gave us... well, let’s just say they were a little too interesting to believe. The end result was an arrest. Look, you could call a lawyer right now and not say another word to me. I wouldn’t hold it against you, either. But... if he *is* innocent, you might consider talking to me, to help clarify some of the things he told us. I can tell you this. I’ve no interest in putting an innocent man behind bars. We want the people behind all this, no one else. But, it’s completely up to you, ma’am. It’s your decision.”

“Fine... ask me whatever you want. You’re going to find out neither one of us has anything to hide. I’ll tell you whatever I know.”

Turly nodded and led her to the interrogation room. She sat in the same chair as Wade had, two hours earlier.

“I know this room is a little intimidating, but we’re crowded in this building, and I don’t have a private office. Now, if the chief’s still here, I could ask if we could use his.”

“I don’t care about the room, detective. I just want to get this over with,” Janet said.

Turly sat down across from her and pulled out his notebook and a tape recorder.

“I have some questions Mrs. Richards, but in the interest of clarifying what he told us, I’d like you to start with telling me what *you* know first. Just tell me whatever you know about what’s going on... anything you can think of.”

“And let me clarify something with you, too, detective. I’m not stupid. You’re hoping our stories don’t match. But like I told you, we’ve got nothing to hide. The only reason Wade hadn’t reported some of what I’m about to tell you is because it sounds so crazy... even to him! And Wade told me what a bully you are! But, I’m not scared of you. I believe in the truth, and so does Wade. And my husband is *no* liar... so keep your little notebook out.” Truly was surprised by her sudden show of backbone.

Janet recounted everything she’d seen or heard in the last three weeks about the case, down to the last detail. From the letters they’d received to the out-of-body experiences, and everything in between. She held nothing back, leaving the seasoned detective thinking Wade’s story might actually have some amount of truth to it.

“Thank you, Mrs. Richards. Now, before I ask you *my* questions, I’d like to ask my chief and another detective to sit in with us if they’re still here. Is that okay with you?”

“That’s fine, detective. They’ll hear the same thing I’ve been telling you.”

Turly left the room for Chief Martin’s office.

Chief Martin’s office door was open when Turly arrived. He was just getting ready to leave for the day.

“Nice work, again, Jim. Need anything else?” Martin said after noticing him.

“If you have a few minutes, Mike... I’ve got Richard’s wife here. She agreed to talk to us.”

“You serious? She came clean about Richards then?”

“Not exactly. I just spent an hour with her. Everything she said lines up with Richard’s story. I mean down to the last crossed ‘t’ and dotted ‘i’.”

“Then she’s properly rehearsed all that shit. So what? You don’t believe her, do you?”

“Chief, like you, I’ve been doing this for a lot of years. I can spot a liar a mile away. I think she’s telling me the truth, or at least the truth as she knows it. I’m

not finished with her yet... she's in room two. Care to join me for the rest? I'd like to get Bodey in there, too, if we can."

"Shit, Jim... I've got a plate of lasagna waitin' on me. Yeah, I'll sit in. Bodey's still around here somewhere, too. You round him up. If she's lying, he'll know. That's what we pay him for."

A few minutes later, Truly walked back into the interrogation room with Martin and forensic psychologist Matthew Bodey.

"Mrs. Richards, this is our police chief, Mike Martin. He's familiar with the case and is going to listen in. I also asked Mr. Bodey here to sit in."

"That's fine, detective. Please don't tell me I have to repeat everything I've already told you for a second time."

"My apologies, Mrs. Richards, but it would really help if you could."

"Help my husband or help *you*?" she asked, clearly frustrated.

"Ma'am, if everything you've told me is true, then it's going to help *all* of us... *especially* your husband. We're interested in the truth here. We want the person or people responsible in this case, no one else."

Janet pulled her chair closer to the table. "Fine, then. All this started about three weeks ago, at our mailbox..."

Janet recounted everything she'd already told Turly, word for word. When she'd finished, Turly began with his questioning. Though his tone and demeanor were softer with her than Wade, he tried his best to expose any holes in her story. Janet was clear and upfront, answering everything asked, concisely and honestly.

At the end of it, Turly and the two other men were left looking at each other, unsure where else to go with the conversation.

"Detective, I've told you everything I know, twice now. I've answered everything you've asked," Janet said. "So, please tell me... are you charging my husband or not?"

"Can you give us a few minutes?" Martin said, motioning Turly and Bodey outside.

The men took their conversation to Martin's office.

"Dammit, Jim," Martin said, "I think she's telling the truth... at least as she knows it. Everything she said lines up with our guy's story. What's your take, Bodey? Out-of-body experiences... ghosts? You don't believe in that shit, do you?"

“No, not at all... but *she* does. In fact, the only tells I saw were how uncomfortable she was when discussing the out-of-body experiences. But I saw nothing disingenuous there, just fear of the subject. Now, we can discount any of the hocus pocus stuff as verifiable facts, of course, but her telling of the mailbox incident and the letter they got in the mail are completely true in my assessment. Those weren’t accounts she heard from the husband. She received the mail herself as well as encountered the man outside. Jim, can we verify the letter and the author?”

“She said she’d bring in the letter for us to check out. Mike, did you get a hold of Ashby’s widow yet?” Truly asked.

“No... went straight to voicemail. If I know her, though, she’ll call back. She hasn’t missed a chance yet. On her last call, she asked me if she needed to come down here and do our damn jobs for us!”

Bodey looked at his watch. “Well, you asked for my opinion and I gave it. The lady’s telling the truth as she knows it. See you two tomorrow.”

Turly and Martin knew they had a decision to make.

“Shit, Mike... so she’s telling the truth. Forget about the hocus-pocus shit. But the letters? This whole thing just keeps getting stranger! There’s more to it, for sure. As far as Richards goes, I still think he’s deeper in this than he says. He might not have killed anyone, but he’s part of it, somehow. We could let him sit here a couple of days, but you and I both know we don’t have enough to charge him. We have no prints, no witnesses, no evidence! Anything we have is purely circumstantial. We’d just end up pissing the judge off.”

Martin slapped the wall. “I thought we had this thing wrapped up, Jim!”

“Well, let’s let him sit tight ‘til morning, Mike. We still have to verify the wife’s story and those letters. By then, the widow will have called back and we’ll know. I have a feeling the letters are going to pan out, but I don’t want Richards thinking we’ve swallowed every word that came out of his mouth. We can always pick him up again if we need to. I don’t think this guy’s a runner. I can put a man on his street if I need to.”

“Good enough. Ask the wife to bring in that letter, and tell her to get it here early tomorrow.” He slapped the wall again. “Son-of-a-bitch! I thought we had this shit finished! Listen, I’m going home and choke down my fuckin’ lasagna. Just handle her, okay?”

Turly nodded, and walked downstairs to the interrogation room.

“Mrs. Richards, we appreciate you being so willing to talk to us—”

“Does that mean I can take Wade home now?”

“That’s not going to be possible tonight, Mrs. Richards. We’re still waitin’ on a couple things, like that letter of yours. But you’ve been very helpful. You can talk to him in the morning, after 7am, when you bring me that letter. I need to see it before I do anything else, plus we’re checking out something else you told us in the morning. Just come to the front desk and tell them who you are. They’ll find me. If you feel the need to call a lawyer, don’t let me stop you. But if the letter checks out, you may not need to. I ain’t lyin’ to you, lady. I think you’ve been pretty straight with me, so I’m bein’ straight with you.”

Janet suddenly looked as if she was going to break down. Turly noticed, and for the first time in many years, he felt a measure of compassion.

“Just go home, Mrs. Richards. Get some rest and come back in the morning. He’s going to be fine, I promise. You did good tonight, really good. Come back tomorrow and we’ll go from there. No one here is your enemy. Like I said, we’re interested in the truth... nothing more.”

Janet left the room and started across the floor toward the exit. When she got outside, she burst into tears. She could only imagine if she felt this way, what Wade was feeling while sitting in that cell? Before she drove home, she instinctively checked her phone to see if Wade had texted, then threw it down onto the passenger seat.

Of course he didn’t, stupid. He’s stuck in a cold cell with a bunch of criminals!

About a mile away from the station, Janet’s rearview mirror was suddenly filled with an intense light. Hardly able to see, she leaned forward and adjusted her mirror. Seconds later, something rammed into her car from behind! Janet was thrown back into her seat as her vehicle was sent surging forward! She looked in the mirror and saw the lights closing in on her again. This time, the force of the collision sent her car spinning! She was helpless to do anything but hold on to the wheel as her body was thrown against the driver’s door.

An on-coming car barely avoided hitting her while the vehicle that had struck her sped away. She spiraled toward the side of the road, heading for a steep drop over the side. Janet closed her eyes, expecting to soar over the embankment, but her car came to a stop just inches away from the edge.

Wade kept to his corner of the cell, not wanting any interaction with the other men. One was leaning against the wall. He was asleep, his jacket covering his head. He reeked of alcohol and piss. The other two sat across the cell together. It was obvious they knew each other. Both of them looked like they'd been on the losing end of a fight. That left Wade with a bench all to himself. He thought about lying down, but considering his new roommates, decided against it. He'd sleep sitting up.

He worried how Janet was taking everything. He was sure she'd been there by now, and assumed they refused her visitation, sending her back home. He also assumed she wasn't able to contact a lawyer yet. Wade hadn't thought to tell her not to call his mother. They hadn't talked very much in the last few years. She stayed busy in her social circles and he in his marriage. Though her home was just a few miles away, they might as well have lived on opposite coasts.

The last time they talked, it ended in a hurtful argument. She had mentioned his father, and the conversation took a turn for the worse.

What would his mother think of him being arrested for suspicion of murder? He knew the answer. The best thing he could do was try to get it all cleared up before she heard about it.

As the night lingered on, he closed his eyes and tried to rest. With his head leaning against the cold, concrete wall, he drifted in and out of sleep, finding it hard to get comfortable. An hour or so later, he conceded to lie down on the bench and sleep like everyone else.

Just minutes into his slumber, he opened his eyes to find himself standing in a large, empty space. He knew at once this must be another one of his experiences. A voice behind him spoke. Wade turned to see an image of himself staring back at him.

"It's a lot like looking in a mirror, isn't it?" The figure asked.

"What is this? Are you me from the future?" Wade asked.

"Yes, I'm you, in a sense, but not from the future," the man answered. "It all started with you, Wade... but they'll get to you, too, if you're not careful."

"Who'll get to me? You're not making any sense!" Wade said.

“None of it makes a lot of sense,” the man said, “but here we are, you and I. Only *you* still have a chance.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re still *alive*, aren’t you? Take your family and hide. They’re erasing the clones, all of us! That’s why I’m here. They got to me, and they’ll get to you, too. It doesn’t matter if you were the source. Take your family and leave, Wade. Just disappear!”

Wade suddenly woke up, finding himself lying face-down, on the cell’s floor. He quickly sat up on the bench again, his heart pounding.

“You on meth, man? Looked like you were having withdrawals, right there on the damn floor!” an inmate laughed.

Wade ignored him and leaned back against the concrete wall.

Clones? The word was shocking to consider. It all started with me? What started with me? Then at once the answer came to him.

My father... his research! They used it to create clones... from me! I’m the source! Oh, my God! The man at the mailbox... the guy on the motel camera... no wonder they looked like me. The list of people are all clones, and I’m the source! That’s why there was an ‘s’ after my name. The company’s killing them off, trying to cover everything up!

His heart was beating even faster now, almost out of his chest! Now he had the answer to the whole thing! But who, other than Janet, would believe him? Wade stayed awake the rest of the night trying to figure out what to do. When morning came, he couldn’t wait to see Janet.

Chapter 28

Straight up Saved

“Damn... you’re here early!” an officer laughed.

“I got reason to be!” Turly snapped back, finding his desk. He looked down to see a note taped to his computer’s monitor. *Mrs. Richards here to see you - 6:15am.*

“Figures. Probably slept in the damn parking lot!” he mumbled.

After swallowing the rest of his coffee, Jim made his way to the chief’s office before realizing he wouldn’t be in yet. Spinning around, he motioned to a uniformed officer to follow him. He found Janet waiting for him in the lobby. When she saw him approaching, she immediately stood and held out an envelope.

“Here’s the letter. Can I see Wade now?” The look on his face gave her his answer. “How long then? You told me I could see him this morning!”

“I know, I know... listen, let me check out this letter of yours and we’ll go from there,” he said.

As she handed him the envelope, he noticed a bruise on her cheek.

“You have a nice, little bruise there, Mrs. Richards. You okay?” he asked.

“I had an accident driving home last night, detective. Actually, I was ran off the road. I made a report about it a few minutes ago.”

“Ran off the road? By who? Did you get a plate number?”

“I have no idea. I was hoping *you* could tell *me*. It obviously wasn’t my husband, as you’d *like* to think. You’ve had him locked up all night, remember?”

“Calm down, Mrs. Richards. Look, I’m sorry you had an accident, but I’m glad you weren’t injured. I’ll look into the report myself. Just have a seat. It won’t be very long, I promise.”

Janet sat with her purse on her lap while he and the officer left for the holding cell. Turly’s cell phone rang on the way down. Chief Martin was on the other end.

“Jim, she told the truth about that letter. Ashby’s widow just confirmed it. Told me we weren’t doing anything to protect anyone, so she took it upon herself to warn them! Can you believe that shit? Anyway, it looks like their story checks out.”

“Thanks, Mike. I’m on the way to pull Richards out and question him one more time before letting him go. I’m just hoping he knows something that could point us in the right direction.”

“Good luck. Who knows? Maybe a night in the drunk tank joggled his memory,” Martin said before hanging up.

“I see you’re up, Richards. I’d ask you how you liked our facilities, but I think I know your answer. I’m gonna need you in the interrogation room again.”

He motioned to the guard, who opened the jail door. Wade stood with his arms out as handcuffs were placed on his wrists. The uniformed officer led him to the interrogation room. The detective followed.

“Have a seat, Richards,” Turly instructed. “Now that you’ve had a pleasant stay in our little hotel, anything *new* you want to tell me?” The other officer laughed at Turly’s words.

“Only that one of the guys in your cell back there shit his pants during the night,” Richards said.

“Hmmm... woke up on the wrong side of the bench, huh, Richards? Well, I’m here earlier than I wanna be, so—”

“Woke up?” Wade interrupted. “Like I slept? No, I stayed up thinking what a wonderful justice system we have when law-abiding citizens can be detained with nothing more than circumstantial evidence and some bad hunches!”

“Circumstantial evidence?” Turly looked at the other officer.

“Jenkins, are you guys letting the prisoners watch Law and Order again? Looks like Mr. Richards here picked up on some legal terms last night!” Wade shook his head and turned his gaze to the wall.

“Listen Richards, let’s just cut all the bullshit. I’m too tired and you have too much to lose. Now is there *anything* more you maybe forgot to mention to me yesterday? Think carefully before you decide to answer.”

“Yes, I can’t believe I’m telling someone like you this, but I had another... well, *experience* last night.”

Turly shook his head. “Geez, here we go again with the dreamin’ prophet!”

“Look, I never asked for this and I didn’t have to bring it up! So, if you’d rather me just shut up—”

“No, by all means, go ahead. It can’t be any weirder than what you told me last night!” Turly sat down across from Wade.

“In my... *experience*, a man appeared and gave me a warning. The man looked just like me. It was like I was looking in a mirror. He said he was a clone of me, along with the eight others on that list I told you about. Apparently, Bergstrom-Levy’s research company used the work my father did in Chicago to experiment with human cloning. News of it got leaked, and since it’s illegal, the company’s been trying to cover everything up by killing off all the clones... the list of people I told you about. He said I was in danger, too. That they would come for me.”

Turly shook his head. “I have to hand it to ya, Richards. Just when I thought things couldn’t get any weirder, you surprise me again.”

“This is why I should have just kept my mouth shut, detective. Look, I didn’t ask for any of this. I had a perfectly good, boring life as an accountant. I was doing just fine before all this shit started!”

“So, I guess you’re telling me Carlson was a clone, too?” Turly laughed.

“No, of course not, but I’m sure Ashby was. My wife said he looked like me except for the beard. And you thought the guy walking around the motel was me, remember. It was obviously Ashby, but you already figured that out, right? So it

all makes sense now... at least to me. The company is killing off the evidence. Maybe someone's blackmailing them and they're trying to cover everything up!"

"Yeah, we figured out it was Ashby... he'd shaved off his beard that night for some reason. Listen Richards, I don't go in for this cloning business, but I'll tell you this; your wife was more convincing to us than *you* are. She straight up saved your ass last night, to tell you the truth. We're not sure of much right now, but your stories check out... including the letter you got from Ashby's widow. Your wife brought it in this morning. So as crazy as your story sounds, you're free to go. But that doesn't mean you're off the hook! I'm going to dig into Engleton Research, you can bet on that. But you'd better not be sending me on a wild goose chase. I got too much shit to do around here for that!"

"I'm not, detective, I promise you. Look, now you know Ashby came to town with that list to warn me. Obviously, he never told his wife he was a clone, or she would have said so in her letter, but she knew enough to think his company had him killed! As far as John Carlson goes, it seems to me that whoever killed Ashby killed him. I don't think John was mixed up in anything illegal, but he must have discovered something while doing their books, and it got him killed. There's something I didn't mention the first time I told you about my dreams, or whatever it is you want to call them. My father told me Alan Bergstrom is behind it all. He's the oldest founder of the company. He runs everything. Now you know everything I know, detective, crazy or not."

"Well, I appreciate it, Richards, but let's not get too ahead of ourselves. Leave the detective work to me. And don't get too comfortable, either. Maybe you're a victim in this thing, maybe not. This clone business of yours fills in a lot of blanks... and yeah, I'll check it out. But hell, Richards, they can't even do stuff like that yet!" He pointed his finger at him. "And let me tell you something *else* before those cuffs come off! Yes, everything you and your wife told me checked out... but if I find out you're jerkin' my chain on *any* part of it, I'm coming right back to you for obstructing an investigation! And I won't be so damn nice next time. So, I'll save my apologies and leave it at that. I hope we understand each other."

"We do. I've told you the truth, detective, as crazy as it is. I didn't *have* to tell you any of it, but I meant it when I told you I wanted to help. So yes, we understand each other. You said I was free to go now. Can you get these cuffs off of me and have someone get my phone? So I can call my wife?"

“She’s in the lobby waiting for you, Richards. Officer Jenkins will take you upstairs and get your stuff for ya, then you’re free to walk out our doors.”

Jenkins removed Wade’s handcuffs and pointed to the staircase. Wade was stressed to his breaking point by now. He walked to the stairs, hoping to never see Turly or the inside of a jail cell again.

Chapter 29

An unlikely Ally

The office doors opened with Lana walking at a hurried pace. She apologized as she approached Bergstrom's desk. Two men followed after her, drowning out her words with their own.

"What on earth is the matter, Lana?" Bergstrom asked, rising from his chair.

"Mr. Bergstrom, I'm so sor—"

"Alan, we have a problem! We need to talk, and now. It's an emergency!" One of the men exclaimed.

He pushed Lana aside as he neared Bergstrom's desk.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Larry?" Bergstrom demanded to know.

"We need to talk to you now, Alan... in private! It's important!"

Bergstrom waved Lana off. She retreated from the room and closed the doors behind her.

"What has you so upset *now*, Larry?" Bergstrom asked.

"Your miracle child, that's what. He's gone to the police, Alan! Our man said he walked out of the accounting building yesterday with two cops and got into a police car, no handcuffs! He *knows*, Alan, and he's telling our story to the cops! We're finished!"

“What are your men still doing in Chicago, Larry? I gave implicit instructions that Richards was not to be touched unless I authorized it!” Bergstrom said, his voice uncharacteristically loud.

“No one’s touched him, Alan, but I wanted him watched! And it’s a good thing, too!”

Bergstrom sat down and folded his hands before speaking again.

“Larry, did you know his office building had just suffered a break-in? That his and John Carlson’s computers were stolen? That every computer in their office was scanned for any information that might pertain to our project?”

Larry looked at the other board member, who was just as confused now as he was.

“No, of course, you didn’t. It wasn’t your *place* to know that, Larry. I told you I would contain this and I am! And before you decide to interrupt me, nothing was found on their computers. So there’s no need to worry. The police probably asked him for more information on the robbery, that’s all. He’s the department manager! Who else would they confer with about it?”

“He’s still too risky to ignore, Alan. There’s a possibility he knows something. He must be dealt with, for all our sakes!” Miller implored.

“That’s enough!” Bergstrom said, standing up. “Wade Richards knows nothing of our work. If he did, he wouldn’t have taken the promotion I offered him. I personally sat down with the man on Tuesday over lunch, for God’s sake! What I saw was a young man excited about his new position, and the progress his department has made. He gave absolutely no indication whatsoever that he knew *anything* about our project. It became obvious to me that we got to Ashby before he could contact him. Now... I’ve *told* you he’s not to be touched, and I won’t tell you again! I have this under control. Do you think you’re the only one who has something to lose, Larry? I sacrificed my best friend to protect our work! Don’t ever question *my* ability to see things through. You two are panicking needlessly. But I choose *not* to panic. You *do* realize most of Richard’s research disappeared with his death, don’t you? It’s taken almost twenty years for us to get back to the place where he left off! Wade Richards is the living culmination of his work, and he’s worth much more to our efforts *alive* than dead! The answers we lack are in the man’s chemistry! Now... listen to me very carefully, Larry. I appreciate your

input, I really do... but this conversation ends now, with or without your blessing or approval!”

With that, Bergstrom called for Lana, who quickly reopened the doors to the office. Bergstrom stood resolute as the men left, his eyes locked on Miller until the doors closed behind them.

Turly spent the rest of the day researching Engleton Research and Bergstrom-Levy online. He found some old articles about Wade’s father and his discoveries in stem cell research, but not much else. There were a few links to some of Engleton Research’s published articles, but the links went nowhere. Any content of theirs looked to have been scrubbed off the net.

Turly did find an old magazine article listing all of Bergstrom-Levy’s companies at the time, though, and as he read through it he saw Engleton Research listed as once operating in Chicago. That backed up Wade’s claim that his dad performed his research locally.

At the end of the day, Turly grabbed his keys and left for home with a pounding headache. He hoped to get through the rest of the evening without having an argument with Crystal.

After pulling in the driveway, he opened the front door to his house and took off his coat. As he swung his arm around to hang it on the coat rack, he thought he’d missed the hook. Turning around, he saw that the coat rack was missing. He turned to his left and discovered a mostly empty living room!

“Son of a bitch!” He shouted. His voice echoed freely around the room, as most of the furniture and wall-hangings weren’t there to dampen it. He threw his coat in the vacant corner and stormed into the kitchen.

“Crystal!” There was no response. “Crystal, dammit!” He dialed her number and waited for her to pick up. Her voicemail message started playing. Jim hurried through the rest of the house to find it the same as the living room. The kitchen was left with no table or chairs and most of the cabinet doors were hanging open. His bedroom was empty, too, except for a mattress and box spring leaned up against the wall.

“You took my fucking bed?” He yelled into an empty room. “You stinkin’ bitch!”

He returned to the living room and sat down in one of the two remaining recliners; the one that didn’t work very well. After trying to reach Crystal two more times, he checked out the refrigerator.

“Thanks for at least leavin’ the beer, you evil bitch!”

On the counter, where the microwave used to sit, he found a note.

I’m sorry, but I had to do this while you were at work. This is never what I wanted, Jim. All I ever wanted was a husband who’d share his life with me. What I got was a man who was married to his badge. I never signed up for this! You blame me for everything, Jim. Yes, I cheated, but I didn’t love him, I loved you! But you cheated, too! With your damn career! You loved it more than you ever loved me. So, you can share your bed with it now! Don’t try to track me down or show up at my job. I’ll call your own fucking cops down on you! It’s done, it’s over. I filed over a week ago. You’ll get the papers in the mail. And don’t be a jackass about it, either. Sign them!

‘Crystal

Chapter 30

Sand Between the Toe-Tags

The next two days found Wade home alone with his wife. Both had taken time off from work to recover from their ordeal with the police. Janet told Wade everything about her car accident, and Wade told her everything that happened at the police station, including his latest out-of-body experience.

“Oh, my God, Wade!” She exclaimed. “Human clones? I can’t believe he’d use his own son to do such a horrible thing! It’s completely monstrous! I’m so sorry, honey. But why... why would he agree to something like that?”

“I don’t think he intended his work to be used in that way, babe. Apparently, they were trying to save the world and get rich while doing so. I just hope Turly took me seriously enough to check into it. If they know he’s snooping around, maybe they’ll quit coming after the remaining clones. Hell, they *could* go after them harder, though... shit! It may turn out I shouldn’t have said anything! But they can use the list. It has names and states. Hell, they can use my freaking mugshot to narrow the search. I just hope Turly follows up with your accident report. But you and I both know it wasn’t an accident. Those same men that killed Ashby and John tried to kill you, Janet. What better way to derail me from exposing the company than to take out my wife?”

“Wade, I’ve never been so scared in my life! I was literally half a foot from going over that steep embankment. And remember... it was twice they rammed me, so it was no accident. Someone actually tried to kill me!”

“I just thank God you’re okay, babe. I don’t know what I’d do without you. Just another reason we need to get out of this state immediately! Whether the cops take down the company or not, at least leaving the state sends the message that we don’t want any part of whatever the hell they’re up to. It makes me wonder if my father’s death was no fluke. Maybe Bergstrom had him killed when he objected to the cloning program,” he said.

“Oh, Wade...” she began but then covered her mouth momentarily. “Your mother! Do you think she knew anything about the cloning? If she did, she could help verify your story to the police! She could help us!”

“You’re right, if she *did* know... but knowing my father, he kept it from her. I’m sure he lied about the real reason for our Saturday trips to the office. I don’t know what to think, really. But I’m not getting her involved unless Turly comes after me again. I don’t want her in this shit. But, babe... listen. When I look back at all those years that I felt my father was cold to me... now I know why. He must have thought of me as a lab rat! He used me in illegal experiments, like a damn guinea pig! I’ll never be able to get past that.”

Janet had no words for what he’d just said, but tried her best to redirect him. She made him some soup and they sat down to discuss what they could do next.

Wade video-called Josh from their house to check on how the department was doing while he was out. Wade figured at least Josh would see that he called from home and wasn’t sitting in jail, somewhere. After Wade finished the call, Janet sat him down again.

“Honey, I’m resigning in the morning. I haven’t had a chance to tell you yet. Friday will be my last day. I already called Valerie and told her,” she said.

“Babe, I’m so sorry. I know how much you love your job... the people there; everything. Will they be okay with you giving such short notice? I guess, in the big picture, it doesn’t really matter, since we have to get out of Illinois so fast. I just don’t want anyone pissed off at you because of me and all my bullshit.”

“First of all, it’s *our* bullshit. What happens to you happens to me, and vice-versa. I told her it was personal, but that I was willing to work a few more days if it would help. She could hear in my voice how serious our situation was,

but she didn't ask for any details. She reminded me we have two interns working under Cindy, and that I've only taken eleven days off in eight years, by the way. She told me I have almost fourteen weeks of vacation time left. I'll be getting paid for all of it on Friday."

"They're gonna pay you for all of it?"

"Every single dime. She told me I was like family to them and deserved it. They're even giving me a bonus, and a party Friday."

"That's amazing, babe! I hate that you have to quit, but I'm glad it's working out the way it is with your vacation time. The money will really help us start over."

"Wade, I'm going to get online and start looking for apartments in Florida. I'm also going to start packing stuff we don't use every day. I'm not waiting for anything else to happen to us. I'm scared every day you walk out that door now. I'm even scared to go to my own damn mailbox. I don't want to live like this anymore! I'm getting an early start. All I want from you is for you to quit that damn company as soon as possible. I want to leave all this behind and start over together... somewhere warm and safe!"

Wade leaned forward and kissed her forehead. He could feel her trembling. The more he thought about it, the sicker he was that she was being put through this on his account.

"It's done, babe," Wade assured her, "Friday will be my last day, too. That gives me a few days to get Josh up to speed. Hell, he's probably doing fine already, but I owe it to him to help out where I can. I hope they'll allow him to keep running things when I'm gone, instead of pulling someone from corporate. I'll call Bergstrom tomorrow. He's going to hear about it anyway. It might as well come from me. It will look less suspicious that way. When he learns we're leaving town, maybe he'll realize I'm not a threat to him anymore."

Janet's expression showed that she wasn't so sure about his idea. He looked at the boxes on the floor and exhaled fully.

"On another note... babe, I can't eat another piece of pizza. We've had it for two days now, back to back. I'm going out to pick up some Italian. What do you want?"

"What do I *want*? Get this one wrong and I'm going to have to reevaluate our entire relationship," she said.

“Chicken Fettuccini with extra Parmesan,” he said, watching her nod. He grabbed his keys and left the house.

As Wade was about to make a right at the end of his street, he noticed a pair of headlights turn on behind him. A car slowly pulled out and made the same turn he did. He automatically thought of Turly’s description of the men they’d caught on camera, in the parking lot, just before John’s death.

He slowed down enough so the car behind him would catch up. As it got closer, Wade looked in the mirror, hoping he could see what the driver looked like. He couldn’t make anything out. He made his next turn and noticed the car was still following. He sped up, keeping an eye on his rear-view mirror. The car behind lagged further and further behind before making a turn of its own. Wade felt a rush of relief and continued to the restaurant, realizing how right Janet had been about moving. As much as he loved Illinois, it wasn’t worth the stress or danger. He never wanted out of the state more than now.

He picked up their food and started home again. He decided to keep what happened on the drive to himself. There was no sense worrying Janet about something that turned out to be nothing.

Morning came quickly. Wade got off the elevator and headed toward his desk. He noticed someone in his office.

“Oh, sorry Wade!” Josh said. “I was putting the reports I’d collected on your desk. I figured you’d want them when you came in. Glad to have you back!”

Thanks, Josh. Did anything happen while I was gone?”

“Not a thing except the usual. Jenny and Lyle are out with vacation days. Everything else is just how you left it.”

“That’s good, really good. Listen Josh, have a seat for a minute. I need to talk to you.” Wade sat down behind his desk. “Josh, I’m leaving the company.”

Josh was visibly shocked, but before he could say anything, Wade continued. “I’m accepting an opportunity in another state, and I’ll need some time to relocate. Friday’s going to be my last day. I’m letting corporate know today, and setting you up to take over my duties. The monthly reports for Corporate are due the first Monday of each month. I have a working copy I can email to you today.

Just ‘save-as’ a newer copy and replace the old numbers with the new ones. You’ll present the report in a video-meeting. I believe when they see how well you do, they’ll make the right choice and make your position permanent. I’m going to suggest they do so when I call them later today.”

“I’m sorry you’re leaving, Wade... regardless of any chance of promotion. I’m certainly going to miss you. We all will. I haven’t said anything to you about this, but everyone talks about how glad they are that you took over for Lucy. It’s been a much different place since you have. Things are a lot better, for sure.”

“And it’s going to *stay* that way because you’re going to *keep* it that way, Josh. I picked the right person to do this. It’ll be your floor. Run it how you feel is right. You’ll do great.”

“So Friday? That’s pretty quick, Wade.”

“For both of us. But you’ll be fine. Don’t second guess yourself.”

Josh shook his hand. “So, when do we tell the group?”

“I’ll hold a group meeting after lunch Friday.” Wade shook his hand.

After Josh left the office, Wade settled into his chair, relieved he was one step closer to leaving Bergstrom-Levy forever.

Three more days to enjoy my promotion. Then a quick move down to Florida, only to be stuck in a cubicle there? No, not this time. It’s time to do something different for a change.

Wade picked up the phone and dialed Alan Bergstrom’s office. He was nervous, but determined to get it over with. No one answered. He tried again, a few minutes later. Again, no answer. He waited an hour before trying again. This time, Lana answered on the first ring.

“Mr.... Bergstrom’s office...” she said. Wade noticed she sounded upset.

“Hi, Lana, this is Wade Richards.” She didn’t reply. “Are you still there? Ms. Lana?”

“I’m here... sorry. Who is this, again?” she asked.

“It’s Wade Richards Ma’am. I was hoping to talk to Mr. Bergstrom.”

There was another long pause. Wade figured she was transferring his call. Finally, she spoke again.

“I’m sorry Mr. Richards, he won’t be... I mean, that won’t be—” she stopped talking.

“Is everything alright, Lana? I can call back later if—”

“Mr. Bergstrom... is no longer with us,” she managed to get out, her voice more resolute now. He was killed in a car accident last night.”

Wade was shocked. “I’m sorry, Lana. I had no idea. What happened?”

“He was run off the road by a drunk driver. What can I help you with, Mr. Richards?” She spoke quickly, obviously upset and eager to end the call.

“I’m afraid I’m leaving the company, Lana. I have someone in place here to assume my duties and really apologize about the short notice, but—”

“You go, Mr. Richards!” she whispered into the phone. “You get as far away from here as you can!” She abruptly ended the call, leaving him stunned.

Wade knew from her words that Bergstrom’s accident was *no* accident. Now he knew there were worse people to worry about than Bergstrom. If they’d kill the founder of the company, why would they hesitate to kill him or go after Janet again? He knew they had to get out of town immediately!

Chapter 31

Letter from a Dead Man

Wade left the office in Josh's hands, noting a family emergency. He wasted no time getting to the train station for an early ride home. His nerves had gotten the best of him now, as thoughts of Bergstrom's death kept him scanning the car for anyone who may look suspicious. When his stop arrived, he hurried off the train and practically jogged to his house, looking over his shoulder more than once. Any love he had for his promotion, home or neighborhood was gone now. He wanted nothing more than to leave it all in his rearview mirror.

When he got home, he told Janet of Bergstrom's death.

"Thank God you had the sense to come home right away! How many more people have to die before you understand you need to stay the hell *away* from that company, Wade?"

"Okay... yes babe, you're right. I agree one hundred percent! I'm not waiting until Friday. I'll call Josh after dinner tonight... tell him things got moved up and I'm sorry, but he needs to take over immediately. Oh, shit babe! I left my phone at work. And my new laptop!"

"Well, have Josh bring them here, then! You're not going back there today, Wade!"

“Josh lives thirty minutes in the opposite direction, Janet. And besides, his partner drops him off and picks him up. What do you want me to do... have them mailed?” His frustration was noticeable. Janet sat down at the table as Wade paced the kitchen.

“Take my car tomorrow morning then... but go early, before anyone else comes in. Get your stuff and get back here. I don’t need my car until work. I’ll do the same thing. I’ll go in, have them pay me for my vacation time and make my apologies. They’ll understand. Just get your shit and be done with that place, please? I can’t take much more of this!”

“Fine. I’ll go in at dawn and get back here long before they open. I want this over with, too.”

“Thank you!” She put her arms around him. “I don’t want to get a phone call about something happening to you. I couldn’t handle that! So get in there, and get out fast, please.”

Wade wasn’t able to sleep more than a few minutes at a time throughout the night. He basically watched the clock until 5:30am arrived, then grabbed Janet’s keys to leave for the office. She was already up.

“Make sure you call me when you’re on your way back, and be careful!”

“I’m on it, babe. I’ll get in and get out. When I get back, we’re listing this damn place and taking what we can get. After that, it’s a new life!”

Wade drove to the end of their road, checking his rear view mirror along the way. No one was behind him. Considering how early it was, there were very few cars even *on* the road.

By 6am he’d made it to Bergstrom-Levy and parked in a side lot, not far from the entrance. The old guard had just clocked in and was confused to see him there so early. Wade said a quick ‘hello’ and started his walk to the elevator, relieved it would be his last day riding it.

“Hold it right there, Mr. Richards!” the old guard’s words reverberated throughout the empty lobby. Wade froze in his tracks. “I got a package for you... sent overnight. I was going to have it sent up later with the mail, but since you’re already here...”

He handed Wade a large, puffy envelope. It had a return heading, *Shultz and Harding Law Office*, written above an Atlanta address.

“Thanks, I appreciate it,” Wade said, taking the envelope. He continued to the elevator, thinking back to the time the guard yanked him up by the shirt for running in the halls. Wade grinned to himself, remembering how terrified he was of the stern-faced guard, now an old man. The elevator dinged, stopping on the third floor. Wade walked into his department for the very last time.

The office was dark and ominous with the lights off. There was an eerie atmosphere to the place, one that Wade wouldn’t miss. He found the switch in the break room and turned it on. That gave him just enough light to get to his office without knocking anything over along the way.

He grabbed an empty box and began putting a few things from his desk inside, including his laptop. With his cell phone in his pocket now, he turned to leave, but stopped short of the door. His curiosity peaked. He sat back down to see what was in the package. He pulled out a small picture frame and an envelope. In the frame was a photo of his father and Alan Bergstrom. They stood side by side, with their arms around each other’s shoulders. Both were smiling broadly, displaying an obvious friendship. Wade noticed how young his father looked. He stared at Bergstrom’s image, wondering again if he had anything to do with his father’s murder. From the picture, no one would ever suspect it. Wade opened the envelope and pulled out a letter. There was a cover page.

Mr. Richards,

My name is Jonathan Harding. I’m Alan Bergstrom’s private attorney. Mr. Bergstrom instructed me to send you the contents of this package immediately in the case of his death. Sadly, he was killed in an automobile accident earlier today.

*My sincere condolences,
Jonathan Harding*

Wade put the picture frame in the box with his other belongings and read the letter.

Hello, Wade,

I hope this letter finds you safe and well. Up until the last few days I never would have thought I'd have to write this letter so soon. If you are reading this, I am no longer alive. I made two promises to your father before his unfortunate end. One I am fulfilling with this letter.

Young man, I have so much to tell you, I hardly know where to begin. Good intentions. That's where I'll begin. Your father and I were more than like-minded business partners, Wade. We were friends. We shared the same vision: to improve upon the world we knew. Our goal was pure; to enable people to experience a life free of genetic illness and disease. We came to agree his stem cell research was the key to achieving that future.

Your father's ground-breaking research led to incredible medical advances, decades ahead of modern medicine. Though promising, our work was contested by a group of short-sided lobbyists. The world wasn't ready for the solutions we offered. Your father and I knew in time our work would be banned by the weak-minded politicians running our country. We decided to shield our research from the public eye before that could happen.

Our work continued, and your father made many astounding discoveries! He succeeded in creating the world's first cloned human embryo. That embryo was you, son! You were born free of the genetic defects of your naturally-born brother, your parents' first child; may he rest in peace. They mourned his passing terribly. But through your father's genius, we were able to give their son back to them in you, Wade. You, my boy, are a walking miracle! Your healthy birth would change the world one day!

Following your amazing success, we engineered additional children to be raised in separate areas throughout the country. We chose eight deserving couples who were unable to have any children of their own, and through the miraculous process of implantation, they enjoyed the blessing of birthing a child they could raise as their own, directly from each mother's womb.

The world has yet to catch up to our progress. We've changed many people's lives for the better, and we're immensely proud of that.

Sadly, for us all, just a few years into our success, your father changed his opinion about moving forward with our program. Our team had been approached by a certain facet of our government who wanted our research for their own, and for less than honorable intentions. When we refused, they threatened to shut us down. The board and I agreed to give them some of our research in exchange for permission to continue our work through protected patents. Your father objected thoroughly. He threatened to cease his work and go to the newspapers with our activities. I am ashamed to say there were several board members that conspired concerning your father's threat. They persuaded others to take steps to silence my dear friend, your father. It has become the greatest regret of my life that I couldn't intervene in time. Wade, I sincerely apologize for the pain it has caused you and your mother.

Recently, details of our work were leaked to one of the subjects I mentioned. To protect the company and our work, unsavory actions became necessary once again. Wade, you need to know I've done my very best to ensure you would not be counted among those affected. Yet, despite my effort, there were a few board members I could not deter from their evil intentions.

How confused and shocked you must be! This was never the outcome your father and I wanted. I understand this must be painful to read, but I promised your father you'd know the truth before I died.

As I mentioned before, if you're reading this, I am no longer alive and have no means to protect you. That will be solely up to you now. Wade, do not underestimate the length certain members of the company will go to eliminate any threat to their reputations and livelihoods. Young man, I apologize for the pain I have caused you with this letter, my past deeds and my failures to protect your father. My only hope is that this letter has reached you in time to avoid any more loss of life.

*Sincerely,
Alan Bergstrom*

Chapter 32

Truth and Consequences

Wade's hands shook as he fought to get the letter back into the envelope. His first instinct was to shred it, as the words he read were devastating to know.

Wade collapsed onto his desk while he absorbed the awful truth... *his* truth. The shock of thinking his father used him to produce clones was horrible enough. But now he questioned his *own* humanity, having just read he is a clone *himself*... the first of many... a clone of his parents' *real* son!

I'm just a copy... a replacement! The cold and shitty relationship with my parents? No wonder! I was never even supposed to be here. All of those years of thinking it was because of me that my life sucked... and, ironically, I was right. I never really was their son and I didn't beat any damn disease. The real Wade died from it. I'm no fucking miracle... I'm just a fake! A cheap copy with a borrowed name!

Distraught over Bergstrom's letter, he read it again, then a third time. Out of the silence, his cell phone rang. It was loud enough to shock him from his daze. It was Janet. Wade did his best to answer in a way that wouldn't raise any concern.

He didn't know how to talk to her about the letter yet, and didn't want to have the conversation on the phone.

"Hey babe," he said, "I'm... still at the office. Something came up here, I'm sorry I didn't call."

"Something came up?' Seriously, Wade? I've been worried since the moment you left! And that was over an hour ago!"

"I know... I'm sorry."

"You sound strange. Is anyone else there? Are you in danger?"

"No, I just lost track of the time. But yes, I'd better go, babe. Let me call you when I'm on the road."

"Okay, just hurry up and get your butt home!"

Wade folded the envelope and put it in his pocket. He grabbed the cardboard box and rushed to the elevator. When the doors finally opened, it was empty. Relieved, he rode the elevator down to the lobby and hurried toward the main doors. The guard saw him approaching.

"Hey!" he shouted, "I thought we had a discussion a long time ago about running in my halls!"

"Sorry sir, this will be the last time," Wade said, slowing his walk. He focused on the door.

The old man replied with an unusual measure of friendliness. "Not a problem, Mr. Richards. Listen, you be safe out there. Take care of yourself."

Wade was stunned. That was the most the guard had said to him since he was a kid. Did he know something? Wade shook it off and hurried past him to get out the door.

He fast-walked to the car and sat the box on the roof while fumbling for his keys. He unlocked the door and reached up to grab the box. As he did, he noticed a car parked a few spots over from him. The window was cracked, and thick cigarette smoke was drifting out from it. Someone inside the car noticed him and lowered their window to see him better.

"Son of a bitch!" Wade heard a man say, "I told ya that was his car!"

Wade immediately recognized the voice of the large man from his out-of-body experience! He shoved the box in his car and jumped in. He heard the other car's engine starting. Instead of driving ahead to the main entrance, Wade spun his car around and headed for the back of the building.

The sun was up now, and glared brightly off his windshield, so much that he barely avoided hitting a company truck that was parked near the side of the building! He looked in his rear view to see the other car turning around to follow him. Wade took a hard right out of the parking lot, quickly losing sight of the car.

“That’s it, fuckers! C’mon! I’ll lead your asses straight to the police station!”

He got to his next turn, only to slam on his brakes to avoid hitting the other car! He realized they must have gone out the front entrance and made a quick left, hoping to cut him off. Wade put his car in reverse again, spun around and drove back the way he came, passing his building as he sped down the road.

The men followed and were closing in fast. Wade came to an intersection full of traffic. There was a truck at the light, beginning to make a right turn. Wade punched the gas and squeezed between the truck and the curb, breaking off his side mirror in the process! The truck stopped, causing the other men’s car to slide into the back of it! Wade watched his mirror as they backed up and hopped the curb in order to get around the truck. They were quickly closing in on him again.

“Shit!” he yelled. He sped up, trying to determine which road he needed to take to get to the police station. He took each turn faster than he should, barely keeping his car on the road!

“Calm down, dammit!” He shouted to himself. “Not trying to die today!”

He looked in his rearview again. The car was nowhere to be seen now. He slowed down, not wanting to lose them completely.

“Shit! Where are you?” Just then the car reappeared behind him, careening around a corner. Wade continued across the older part of town towards the station.

“C’mon assholes! Stick with me just a couple more miles!”

Wade took a left and saw a school bus ahead. He slammed his brakes and made a hard right, his front tires sliding into a yard as he struggled to stay on the road. He looked in his rear view again only to find the other car was right on his bumper. He hit the accelerator, but it was too late. The men’s car slammed into Wade’s bumper, causing his car to slide across the road! It rolled into a drainage ditch and shot out the other side! He tried to steer but the grass was too wet. He slid several yards before slamming into a tree!

Momentarily stunned, he tried getting out of the car, but his door was wedged against the tree. Wade moved to the passenger door, but it wouldn’t open. He

kicked hard at the window, trying to break it. He kicked again, this time with both feet. The door suddenly flew open! He crawled out, rolling to the ground. As he got to his feet, he saw the men were already out of their car. He ran as fast as he could across the grassy field, putting some distance between him and the men. The field ended at a parking lot. Wade kept running. There were several large buildings surrounding the lot, but no people or cars. Wade realized it was an abandoned business park.

“Shit!” he yelled, knowing he was right where the men would love to catch him. He ran to the closest building and tried the door. It was locked! He ran to the next building. The door was chained, but loosely.

Wade squeezed as hard as he could to get through the opening, but got stuck. He tried harder to push through, nearly cracking his ribs! He could hear the men approaching! He emptied his lungs and gave it one last try. He pushed hard against the ground with his left leg and managed to squeeze through the gap! He was in the building now! The large man slammed against the door, just missing getting his hands on him. Wade fell backwards into the building and saw the barrel of a gun pointed at him through the door’s opening. The gun fired and a bullet flew by Wade’s head! He scrambled to his feet and took off down a hall, fumbling for his phone as two more shots rang out. A bullet ricocheted off the wall, right next to him. Pieces of concrete peppered the side of his face!

As Wade kept running, he noticed the building getting darker the further he ran from the entrance. He turned on his phone’s flashlight and kept running. Suddenly, it dawned on him to call for help. He tapped the last number on his call list.

“Janet!” he shouted into the phone, “Janet!”

“Wade! What’s wrong?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

“No!” he said, breathing heavily. “I’m on foot, being chased! Probably by the same guys that ran you off the road! Definitely the big guy I dreamed about!”

“Where are you? I’ll call for help!”

“I don’t know! Only about a mile or so from the police station, though! I came out of the office and found them waiting on me in the parking lot! They’d been following me. I was trying to get to the station, but they pushed me off the road! I hit a tree, but I’m okay. I’m in some abandoned office building, south of the police station.”

Just then, he heard another gunshot, but it wasn't close. He figured they were still trying to shoot the lock off the chain. He heard two more shots.

"Wade! Are those gunshots?"

"Yes, they're trying to kill me, Janet! I need the police here... now!"

"Is your location on? The GPS... on your phone? I can give them your number and they can track you!"

"I think so... hell, I don't know, babe!" he said, running out of breath. "If not, tell them to look for our car! It's wrecked in a field outside an old office park. About two miles south of the station. If they circle the park, they'll see it against the tree. The building I'm in had a chain on the door. It's probably lying on the ground outside now."

Wade spun around the corner of the next hallway and collided with some boxes stacked against the wall. His phone flew out of his hand as he crashed into them. He managed to get to his feet quick enough but couldn't find his phone! He heard footsteps in the distance and started running again.

After rounding another corner, he ducked into a room on his right, hoping the men wouldn't notice. He quietly closed the door and listened for them.

The room was dimly lit and cluttered with old office equipment. Wade stood perfectly still until he heard the men run past.

Thank God! If I can just hide out until the police get here!

He wedged himself in a corner, between a storage cabinet and the wall. He did his best to quiet his breathing in case they came back his way. Seconds later, he heard the heavy man's footsteps. They came closer then stopped. Wade didn't know if the man was about to burst in or had just stopped to get his breath. He heard some light shuffling outside the door before everything became quiet again. A few more seconds went by with no indication anyone was there.

Wade relaxed and took deeper breaths now, noticing some pain from his rib cage. He twisted a little, trying to relieve it. His arm that had been pressed so firmly against the side of the cabinet moved just enough to allow the metal siding to pop loudly as it regained its form! Wade hoped the men were too far away by now to hear it. He stood very still, listening for any sign of the men. A few seconds passed before Wade heard the room's door opening!

Oh, shit... shit! Wade knew he was discovered. He balled up his fists and prepared for the worst. He listened for movement, but everything was quiet.

Maybe it opened by itself!

He leaned his head around the edge of the cabinet, only to see the two men standing there!

“Gotcha, you sneaky bastard!” The large man loomed over him.

Wade looked around, desperate for an exit, but found none. He was cornered. The brute walked forward slowly, careful to close off any lanes of escape. Just before he could get his hands on him, Wade lunged forward and kicked the right knee out from under him. The thug’s leg buckled, sending him to the floor with a crash!

Wade jumped over him, determined to run the smaller man over on his way out. Suddenly, he felt his right foot being lifted into the air. The large man swung his arm upward, just in time to send him tumbling. The smaller man blocked the door as Wade landed on the floor between the two. The big one got to his feet before Wade and grabbed a board he saw lying on the floor. He swung it hard, trying to take his victim’s head off! Wade’s instincts sent him backwards, barely avoiding the two-by-four. The smaller man leaped forward and shoved Wade back toward his attacker. The large one swung again, this time catching Wade in the ribs. Pain shot through his body as he felt his chest give way to the force of the blow. In the corner of his eye, he saw the man raising the board again.

“Kick my knee out, huh? Ya little bastard! You ain’t gonna *have* any knees when I’m done with ya!”

Wade’s eyes shut in anticipation of another blow as the beast swung his weapon a third time. He tried to move out of the way, but it was too late. Just as the board hit its mark, an ear-piercing sound filled the room.

“Watch out! You coulda got me!” the large one shouted, “Quit firin’ that damn thing!”

Wade had doubled over in agony, clutching his ribs. He remained that way for a moment, frozen in pain, until both legs collapsed beneath him. Blackness swept over his eyes as he fell to the ground near the feet of the big man. Wade’s head met the floor with a resounding thud. The air in his lungs burst through his lips as the echoes of gunshot played tag on the office walls. Swirling balls of dust and filth rose from its tattered floor, illuminated by a single beam of sunlight that had wrestled its way through the boarded windows.

Wade's body lay motionless on the floor as the stirred debris began to settle across his broken frame. A once-white Oxford told the story of his vicious beating.

The large man panted heavily now. His shadow loomed over Wade's broken body. He wiped a deluge of sweat from his face and staggered forward. With an exhausted grunt, he tossed the broken two-by-four onto the floor, still struggling to catch his breath. The shooter stood over Wade as well, his pistol hanging loosely in his palm now, a deadly extension of his murderous hand. He grinned proudly like a hunter who'd just killed his first buck.

"Not as fast as you *thought* you were... huh, asshole?" he taunted, kicking Wade's leg.

There was no reaction, just a momentary rocking of his victim's leg. The large man laughed at his partner's words, slinging fresh sweat from his reddened face.

"Shoot him again... just to be sure," he told the gunman.

"I'm sure enough. I got him in the heart. He's not getting up from that. My ammo's worth more than his shoes and I wasted enough on that lock and chain!"

"Well, then, if yer done with yer braggin', let's get the hell outta here and get paid. He's done fer... and I'm hungry!"

The smaller man picked up his bullet casing and the two men exited the room, leaving Wade to become the latest addition to the abandoned building.

Eventually, the remaining dust settled, and everything in the room became still once more.

Chapter 33

From Moth to Butterfly

Suddenly, a feral, high-pitched noise broke the silence. The sound pierced Wade's ears, shocking him into consciousness again. Its volume increased, becoming unbearable.

As Wade reeled from the noise, he began to feel tingles of electricity darting across his brain. He winced as they increased in speed and power. Soon they became as intense as the deafening tone. Wade wanted to cover his ears but couldn't move his arms. Then, as if someone flipped a switch, the terrifying sound and sensations ceased, leaving Wade shaken to his core.

The blackness that had ushered him into unconsciousness was gone, and his sight returned. Clarity began its return as well, but slower.

After a minute or two, Wade's mental fog lifted. He tried to reassemble his thoughts as to what happened but could only remember the last blow from the two-by-four. Still, the idea he could remember *anything* from the attack meant one important thing; he was alive!

I'm still here! he realized.

He thought of the men. His instincts told him they were gone now. The room was quiet, and he was alone... but again, alive!

But for how long? He feared the answer, remembering the beating he took.

Wade could move his arms now, so he felt his chest, expecting some ribs to be cracked or broken. But as he nervously explored his midsection, he found no injuries or broken skin. He felt no pain either; only faint, tingling sensations. He moved his legs to see if they worked. They didn't.

Am I going to have to crawl out of there?

He waited a few seconds and tried his legs again. He sensed some movement but couldn't feel or track it.

I must be in shock, he reasoned. Just calm down... give it more time.

Regardless of the lack of sensation in his legs, he was relieved just to be alive.

At least Janet won't be a widow... yet!

He tried again to survey his injuries.

Split skin, broken ribs?

He looked down at his shirt. Surprisingly, it was unblemished, despite the beating he'd just taken.

This isn't right... it can't be.

He shook his head, hoping to jar loose any cobwebs that could be confusing his mind. He knew he couldn't be seeing things correctly.

Not even a mark? He questioned his sanity. *There's no way this is right. I know I felt my ribs break before I passed out... I know it!*

Wade looked down at his legs, not feeling the floor underneath his body. They were dangling in the air! He looked again. The floor was five or six below, and the ceiling was just inches above him now! He was floating in the air like a day-old balloon! Wade flailed his arms and legs around in a fury, but there was no traction to be gained.

He looked around the room in a daze, trying to make sense of something... *anything* that could help end his nightmare! He recognized his surroundings well enough. They were the same as before the attack. He saw the same, dilapidated office where the men had trapped and beaten him. Busted computer monitors and broken furniture were lying around. Paper and trash littered the floor. The building looked to have been deserted for years.

Wade noted again the two men's absence.

They figured me dead and left me here to rot!

He continued surveying the room, spotting something odd on the floor. A man was lying there, among the trash and debris. He was motionless, curled up in a fetal position. His body was a bloody mess. It only took a few seconds for Wade to realize who he was actually looking at.

Oh, my God... that's me!

He looked closer. His entire body was covered in blood and debris.

Bastards! They killed me!

Wade saw a glimmer of light from his wedding band. His heart sank as he imagined Janet opening the door to the police, only to be told he was dead... murdered! His mind rushed back to the attack. The two-by-four... the deafening noise as he was struck—

That was a gunshot! The little one shot me! I'm dead... I'm... really dead!

There was no echo to his words, only silence. He watched himself on the floor until the finality of it had anchored firmly in his mind. He thought of Janet again. What would become of her? Who would be there for her now? His thoughts took his mind to a dark and hopeless place. He felt, in his death, he'd abandoned her.

Now she'll be left in this evil and twisted world alone, completely helpless against the same two thugs that killed me!

He wished he could go back in time and take Janet away from the danger as fast as he could. They'd leave everything behind without wasting a second!

But, what can I do now? I can't warn her, can't protect her... I can't intervene. I'm helpless to do anything! I'm just a disembodied spirit! A ghostly spectator! And Turly... will he finally believe me now? Now that it's too late? Will he be the one to tell Janet I'm dead?

He looked around the room in despair.

So, is this my prison now? Am I stuck here forever? Or do I move on to the Ether, like my father did?

His thoughts became unbearable. He looked at his body again. As far as he was concerned, it didn't even look like him anymore. What he saw on the floor was just a corpse now, an empty shell that no longer held his essence. It wasn't him anymore. Whatever he had become now was his new reality. But what was he, exactly? When he could look no longer, a new thought emerged.

I've got to get out of here... and now!

He struggled wildly, but couldn't get more than a few feet away from his body in any direction. It seemed like he was still connected to it. He looked around the room, wondering how he'd ever escape.

Suddenly, he noticed everything becoming darker. His body on the floor began to lose its shape, along with the walls and the furniture. Soon, everything in the room was gone, including light and sound! Wade was left in total silence... in a huge expanse that was cold and dark! All he felt now was increasing panic!

Seconds later, Wade noticed a flicker of light appearing through the darkness. It was faint, but grew brighter as he watched. The light was truly beautiful. Wade felt a deep desire to be in it. Moving his arms and legs around again, he tried desperately to move toward the light, but got nowhere. After several attempts he stopped trying.

Wade continued to watch the light and began to feel a gentle pull at the center of his body. The pull became stronger, and he soon realized he was moving toward the light. He realized now that everything would be okay. That there really *was* a Heaven, or at least some higher plane of existence, and he was going to it.

As he came closer to the light, he noticed a pleasant warmth encompassing him. In that warmth he felt acceptance, love and understanding.

All worries and thoughts of his life faded away the closer he traveled to the light. Wade closed his eyes and surrendered to the incredible sensation. His whole essence seemed to drink in the light.

As his moments of bliss continued, he realized he was slowing down. Soon, he stopped moving altogether and noticed a man standing in the center of the light. The man shone so brightly that Wade instinctively knew he was the source of the light. Wade felt a kinship to him, feeling he knew him once before, though he couldn't remember when. What he did know was that everything good he was feeling originated from that man.

Wade was one with the light now, the warmth and love filling every part of his spiritual form. The man began to speak, his words carried by beams of light that permeated Wade's understanding. He received the words through each cell of his body, not only his ears.

"What you have seen here is what awaits you, but you must return until a later time. Go and fulfill your purpose."

At that, the man turned and walked away from him until he was barely visible. Wade desperately wanted to go with him. He cried out, pleading for the man to stop, but he would not.

Wade began to feel pressure on his chest, then his entire body. He was being pulled backward, away from the light! He fought to stay where he was, but soon everything around him became black again!

Immediately, he experienced the sensation of falling. Wade felt the cold and the panic returning when, all at once, he landed with a crash into something very cold and dense! Gradually, he felt his sense of physicality returning. He could feel his own weight now; his density...and pain. He felt his chest rise and fall, then heard sounds of people talking. As the noise grew louder in his ears, he heard a woman's voice rising above the others.

"We've got him! I have a rhythm now! His blood pressure's rising!"

The chaotic chatter grew louder. Wade opened his eyes only to be blinded by a new light. Shadows began to move in all directions. As his sight returned, he saw strange people moving around him, all wearing masks. He soon realized he was in the hospital! He tried to sit up, but was resisted gently by several pairs of hands. He quickly collapsed back onto the gurney. His eyes closed again.

Chapter 34

Near Miss, New Chance

“Wade,” a familiar voice said softly to him. “Wade, it’s me... can you hear me, honey?”

Her words permeated his otherwise quiet mind.

“Wade,” she said again. He opened his eyes for a moment and saw the outline of her face.

“Everything’s going to be okay, babe. Just rest until you’re better.”

He drifted into sleep again. Sometime later he heard the same voice.

“Honey, can you hear me? Your mother visited you earlier. She brought you flowers and we had the loveliest talk. She said she’d be back tonight to check on you again. She was very sweet, Wade. I just thought you’d want to know. Honey?” Her words trailed off again.

Wade felt some pain in his throat. He tried to swallow but couldn’t. He felt something pressing against his cheek and tried to move it away.

“Nurse!” He heard the voice say, “Yes, in here! He’s trying to remove his tube!”

He felt a warm hand cover his own as he wrestled with the tube.

“Stop, please! Mr. Richards!” a strange voice said, “Let me do that for you before you injure yourself!”

Someone pulled a small table over and put a tiny hose in Wade’s mouth. He could feel it sucking fluid from around his tongue.

“I need you to relax, Mr. Richards. When you’re ready, take a deep breath and cough for me.”

Wade did as he was told. When he coughed, the nurse pulled at the tube. Wade thought his throat was being torn out from the inside! He winced in pain. Janet quickly grabbed his hand.

“There you go... all better?” She motioned to another nurse to get the doctor.

Wade opened his eyes to see a nurse standing over him. Next to her was Janet, still holding his hand. Wade felt something between them and looked down.

“That’s your I.V. babe. It has to stay in for now,” Janet said.

“Don’t lean forward, Mr. Richards. You need to lie with your head on that pillow until the doctor tells you otherwise,” the nurse instructed.

He pointed to his mouth. The nurse asked him if he wanted a sip of water. He nodded his head yes. She left for a minute and returned with a small cup and a straw. When she leaned over the bed, she jarred it just enough to cause it to shake. Wade felt pain in his chest when the bed moved. She gave him a sip and told Janet he needed to rest. Janet kissed his forehead and squeezed his hand.

“Go back to sleep, babe. You have to get some rest. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Sometime later. Wade opened his eyes again. His throat was still hurting. Janet must have noticed him waking and brought over a small cup of water. She put the straw in his mouth. He sipped it several times.

“That’s enough, babe!” She pulled it away gently. “They said only a little each time.”

Wade looked at her and managed a smile, happy to see her face. She saw it and broke down gently, smiling through her tears. He shook his head as if to say *stop*. She wiped her cheek and squeezed his hand gently.

“How long have I been here?” His voice was weak.

“Three days. You’ve had two surgeries, babe.”

“Who found me?” he asked.

“Detective Turly,” she said. “I called 911 and told them everything I knew about where you were, but then decided to call him, too. He got there just after the other officers. He saved your life, Wade.”

“Oh, God... did his lips touch mine?” He grimaced at the thought, causing her to laugh.

“Just be thankful they did, babe! You were in bad shape. He said you weren’t breathing when he found you. He couldn’t find a pulse either. The surgeon said a bullet went between two ribs and just missed your heart. You’re lucky to be alive, honey. We were that close to losing you!

“I saw it, babe. The light everyone talks about. I saw it. It’s really there... I was there. Everything was so different, though... my body, everything.” She nodded and held his hand tighter. “And I saw myself on the floor, dead. It was so strange. I thought I’d never see you again.”

She leaned over and whispered, “I’m here, babe... and I’m not going anywhere. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d lost you.”

The nurse put her hand on Janet’s shoulder. Janet nodded and kissed Wade’s cheek.

“Babe, you have to rest now. I’ll be sitting right over there. I love you.”

He closed his eyes again.

When Wade opened his eyes next, Janet was sitting near his bed, like she’d promised.

“Janet... we have to stop... meeting like this,” he whispered, pointing to the cup of water.

“We’re going to keep meeting like this until they let me drag you home with me, mister.” She smiled then turned her head to the door. “Someone’s here to see you, babe.” Janet stepped back to allow a woman to approach.

Wade looked to his left. A familiar face stood over him. A face he hadn’t seen in almost a decade. She looked the same as he remembered her; just a little more gray in her hair.

“Wade, dear... I’m so glad you’re okay.” She stood close to his bed and squeezed his hand. “Your beautiful wife called me. She’s wonderful, Wade. She

hasn't aged a day since you married, son." Wade's mind suddenly remembered Bergstrom's letter.

"Son?" His expression changed. "Mom, Mr. Bergstrom told me everything. Dad's research... your *real* son's death... replacing him with me, a clone... everything."

He heard Janet gasp from across the room. She quickly walked to his bedside.

"Babe, what are you talking about? That's not what you told me." Janet said, confused.

"I didn't know everything until I read it in a letter. Bergstrom arranged for his lawyer to send it to me posthumously. That's why I was at the office so long. I opened it there. I didn't know how to tell you." Janet looked at Wade's mother for an explanation. Dorothy asked the nurse to step out of the room, then turned to Wade.

"Yes, our first child died, as expected from his disease." His mother explained. "But then, through your father's genius, we were blessed with *you*, Wade. But we never thought of you as his replacement. We thought of you as another son. Other than sharing the same name, we knew you were your own, unique personality. You are family, Wade, just like your brother was. It didn't matter to us how we got you. We loved you. Your father loved you, and I love you. You need to know that."

"Brother? You want me to think of him as a brother? How can I? All those years... I never felt like I belonged. And the way you two would look at me sometimes? Dad was always locked away in his den. And let's face it, you and I weren't very close either, Mother. My childhood memories are not the warm and fuzzy kind... they're cold and painful. And now I find out it's because I was just a lab experiment... not your real son!" His words sounded labored. Janet gave him a sip of water.

"Don't speak about yourself that way. I gave birth to you, Wade! You were never less of a son to me. And we never meant to make you feel unloved. Yes, your father was busy nearly every moment with his research. He worked tirelessly to keep you healthy! There were complications you don't know about. Your immune system was very frail. Your father's last five years of work were spent keeping you healthy and alive! He used every waking moment to work... working to give you a chance at a long life. I spent years going to bed alone most nights,

just so he could do that, and I did it gladly. I did it for you, son! You weren't the only one who suffered. And as for your father and I, we were raised in a different time. My parents were very strict... not the warmest to raise my sister and I. Looking back now, I can see I parented much the same way they had. It was easier that way, I guess. I tried hard to be strong, not to show the mental stress I endured every day. What we did wasn't legal, Wade. I worried every moment someone would come through our front door and take you away! I had to be firm, and I'm sure it left me seeming rather cold. For that, I'm sorry. It wasn't the best of circumstances, but I lived and loved you how I was taught by my own mother. It was all I knew."

Wade was left without words. He took in everything she said, but it wasn't at all what he expected to hear. A few moments later, he remembered Bergstrom's other admission.

"Mother, Bergstrom told me the company had dad killed because he threatened to leave and expose them. Is that true? And did you know?"

"I had my suspicions, but it was easier to believe the police report, son. There was no evidence to the contrary. And yes, your father had a change of heart and mind over his research and the plans he'd discovered Bergstrom-Levy held for it. It caused a rip between him and the company. But did Bergstrom tell you why, exactly? Son, your father worked to benefit people like us... parents who'd lost a child due to genetic disease. There are thousands each year, Wade. People who suffer loss and are left too scared to try again. Your father learned how to alter those genetic markers to insure they could start over and birth a child free of defects. Bergstrom-Levy adopted different plans for his research, motivated chiefly by greed and self-preservation. When your father learned this, he objected vigorously and destroyed much of his research. He threatened to go to the police if the company tried to continue his work using other geneticists. Alan tried his best to convince your father to back down, promising together they might be able to control the direction of the company, but your father knew Alan was in agreement with the members of their board. He told Alan it was too risky... that others would someday catch up to his research and use it in a harmful way. He told Alan they had no option but to abandon it altogether."

"And it cost him his life," Wade said, "his life... your husband and my father."

“Your father knew the risks from the beginning, son. In the early years, he pushed those concerns aside, driven by his ideas and achievements... and by protecting you. But after enough time had passed, he realized what he had to do. He knew he was putting a target on his back, but never wavered, son. He never wavered.”

Wade didn't say anything else. Her words were too hard to process. Janet was silent as well. Neither knew what to say next.

“I understand this was difficult to hear, Wade. I miss your father every day. I understand your childhood was not ideal. If your father could have changed things, he would have. He planned to devote more time to both of us after he'd left the company. He promised me. A man with a gun broke that promise, Wade, not your father.”

“That's exactly what he said,” Wade told her.

“What? What do you mean, ‘what he said’?” she asked.

“Nothing. Not sure why I said that. My head's still a little groggy. I do understand things better now, though. Thank you for telling me about dad. I wish we'd gotten the chance for a normal life, too.”

Wade feigned his eyes closing. “I appreciate you coming, but I'd better rest now. Can we talk more tomorrow?” he asked.

She nodded yes, placing her hand over the two of theirs momentarily before exiting the room.

“Wow,” Janet said. “That was intense, babe! Are you alright?”

“I'm fine... just didn't want to say anything to her about my OBEs. Not sure she'd understand or even believe any of it. But as far as what Bergstrom wrote, I don't even know how to feel about myself anymore. I'm even more worried how you're going to feel about me now.”

“Do you really need to ask me that? I love you Wade. I don't care how you got here, I'm just glad I have you in my life. In that respect, I can kind of understand what your mom meant. You're still fully her son, just like you're fully my husband. But as far as your experiences, I believe they're extraordinary, Wade. You have a real gift, regardless of how you got it. The question is, are you going to do anything with it?”

“What *could* I do with it, babe? Pitch a show to a TV executive? I told you... and you said so yourself, I’m just *not* that guy. My focus is finding a good job that has nothing to do with numbers... and starting over with *you*.”

She smiled and nodded, saying, “Duly noted. Hey, before you say anything too romantic, I think someone *else* wants to see you now.” She motioned to the door.

Wade expected to see another nurse but instead saw Turly standing in the doorway. He was holding flowers.”

“Detective Turly, wow... you didn’t have to.”

“Don’t go all mushy on me,” Turly said, “these aren’t for you... they’re for your exceptional wife. And don’t get up. I just wanted to see how your progress was coming.”

“Like I *could* get up. Pretty good, I guess. I hear I’ve got *you* to thank for me even being here.”

“No thanks needed. I wish you had eaten a breath mint before I had to give you mouth to mouth, though. What the hell had you eaten for breakfast?”

“Milk and cereal, I think.”

“Tasted like it,” the detective laughed.

“You and me, both,” Wade said. “I’m just glad I wasn’t conscious for any of that. It’s not how I wanna remember you, detective.”

“Well, you can thank your pretty wife for saving your ass, really. The unit that responded wasn’t even looking in the right building. I got lucky and saw the chain on the ground, by the door. If she hadn’t told me about that, you’d be toast!”

“Do you think those men will find out I’m still alive?” Wade asked.

“I hope they do, Richards!” Wade was confused by his answer. “They got picked up at a restaurant near the state line. We caught ‘em by using your wife’s description from those *dreams* of yours... visions, or whatever the hell you call ‘em. One rough-looking big guy and one little one with black hair. Not the usual-looking pair to be traveling together. We booked ‘em and told the big guy we had a fingerprint match to a plastic bathroom cup we found at the motel. He started squealin’ on everyone... his own partner and the people who hired ‘em! They weren’t in jail a day before his partner started giving us all kinds of information, too. He ratted on anyone who had anything to do with it, including some Bergstrom-Levy big-wig... a guy named Miller. Said he was the top dog in the whole thing.”

“That’s great news!” Janet said. “So we’re okay now... no danger?”

“No danger. After we brought in Miller, the FBI got called in. Looks like that company’s going down fast! Into some real dirty business, those people... including payin’ for several hits. They’re all playing the blame game now. They’re goin’ down like a house of cards.”

“Wow, babe,” Wade said to Janet. “Looks like we don’t have to move out of town after all.”

The look on her face said otherwise, causing Turly to laugh out loud.

“You’ve put this wife of yours through enough, Richards! If the little lady wants to move, then you help her with the packin’! You’re lucky she’s even letting you go with her.”

“True enough, detective. And thank you,” Wade said, lifting his arm to shake his hand. “By the way, did they say anything about the big guy limping?”

“Matter of fact, they did. Been askin’ the guards for a doctor since they found him. Said someone kicked his knee out from under him. Did you have a little something to do with that, or are you just a good guesser, Richards?”

“All part of my training, detective.” Wade said, looking at Janet. “See babe, I told you. Ninja skills.”

“Alright, you’re starting to talk silly, Richards... so I’m getting out of here. If you ever need me, have your wife call. I’d much rather talk to her than you.”

The detective tossed his business card onto Wade’s chest and winked as he was leaving.

“Did you catch that?” Janet asked after he was out of sight. “He winked at you. Just like Lucy!”

“Don’t remind me, babe. I’ve seen enough cringe-worthy winks to last me a lifetime. I do wonder what happened to ‘ol Lucy, though.”

“Oh, I’m sure she’s fine. She’s like a cat... nine lives and all. But if she was thrown in the air, I doubt she’d land on all fours. She’d just end up on her back, with her legs spread. Now, get some rest and quit thinking about her, please?”

“About who?” he asked. “I’m leaving the past where it belongs, babe... starting right now.”

Chapter 35

Finding Purpose

Three months after his recovery, Wade began to think his out-of-body experiences had become a thing of the past. Florida seemed to welcome the couple fondly, as both found the weather much more enjoyable.

Janet found a job in her field, continuing her work with the elderly, and Wade decided to work from home as a private tax accountant. No more sitting in a cubicle, living the 9-5 life. Now he could sit on the patio and do his work from his laptop.

“Hey, babe, does Chinese sound good tonight?” Janet asked on her way out the door.

“Perfect, actually. I’m feeling like chicken fried rice. Been craving it all week. It’s Friday... you off at four?”

“Yeah, I’m ready for this weekend, too. Been a hell of a week,” she said.

“Same here,” he said. “Grueling.”

“Don’t even start with me, Wade. Keep bragging about working from home and I’m sending you out for a normal job. How many times are you going to facetime me from the patio today? I’m working on cognitive-memory therapies

all day and you call me wearing a t-shirt and shorts! Worse, sipping sweet tea in *my* lounge chair!”

“Marital property, babe. I own half of it, remember?” he laughed.

“Yeah, well... you’ll be buried in that thing if you keep it up.”

“Not really worried about the afterlife these days, honey. You forget... I’ve been there already,” he said.

“Okay, Mr. Smartass... so, chicken fried rice for you tonight. It’ll be shrimp in mine.”

“Sounds good. I think I’m gonna take a hot bath in the jacuzzi tub now, so don’t work too hard!”

“Last warning, hotshot! Love you.” She closed the door on her way out.

Wade shut down his laptop and filled the tub. Ten minutes into his bath he drifted off. When he awoke, he quickly dried off and grabbed a piece of paper. Hours later, when Janet got home, Wade was waiting for her at the kitchen table.

“Chicken Fried Rice for Mr. Smartass! Is there a Mr. Smartass here?” she asked, walking in.

Wade’s expression told her something was wrong.

“What’s going on, babe? You look upset.”

Wade held up his paper. Janet sat the food down and read it quietly.

“Is this what I think it is?”

“Yes. That’s what I get for bragging about taking a bath in the middle of the day.” he said.

She studied the paper some more. “This is pretty odd, Wade. I’m guessing this wasn’t from your dad?”

“No, it was a man I’d never seen before. He was waiting on me when I got there. It was like he knew I was coming.”

“I mean... Wade, this is really specific. Be there at exactly 2:14pm? A home address, a name and everything?” She seemed suspicious of what she had read.

“Yeah, I know. And if you read between the lines like I did, you know what I’d be going there to stop from happening.”

“Exactly. You’re not thinking of doing this, are you? I don’t like the look on your face. Wade, it’s too risky!”

“I know... it really is. But something inside me is telling me I’m supposed to do it...that I’d be safe. I don’t know how to explain it, but I think I *have* to do this. Janet. If I don’t, what kind of person does it make me?”

“*Alive*, that’s what it makes you! I don’t know about this, Wade. I almost lost you once, already.”

“I know, babe. But this is different. I feel like I’m destined to do this. He knew exactly what to tell me. Time, place... and who. Maybe the past, present and future aren’t linear in the Ether. I know I sound crazy, but I think I have to do this!”

Janet pulled a chair over and sat down next to him. “I need assurances. You call me on the way, when you’re done and on the way back. Get there, get done and come home! Don’t hang around like you did at that office... remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. No more hesitation. Okay. I’d better leave after breakfast on Sunday, in case of traffic. I guess I’d be back around dinner. Maybe five or six?”

She passed him his carton of rice. “Okay, but I want to know where you are every minute.”

“Deal.”

When Sunday noon came, Wade packed a lunch and drove 170 miles to a city he’d never been to before. A woman answered the door wearing an oversized football jersey. She looked upset and annoyed to have a visitor.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Is your name Cynthia?”

“Cindy. What do you want, mister? No one calls me Cynthia anymore, and that tells me I don’t fucking know you.” Her speech was slurred. Wade smelled alcohol.

“Well, the man who sent me calls you Cynthia. He said he was the only one you’d let call you that.”

The woman’s face looked shocked at first, but then became angry.

“Who the hell *are* you, mister? What do you want from me?” She folded her arms defensively.

“My name’s Wade, and I’m not here to sell you anything. This is going to sound crazy, but your stepfather sent me to talk to you.”

“The fuck he did. Now get the hell out of here and don’t come back, asshole!” She slammed the door in Wade’s face. He heard it lock as well.

“He said you’d probably do that,” Wade said loudly. “He told me to offer you a pack of Now-and-Laters if you shut the door in my face. The grape kind.”

Wade held up a pack of the candy to the door’s peephole. Seconds later he heard the door unlock. She opened it a few inches and narrowed her stare at Wade.

“Only my stepdad knew I liked that candy, mister. But unless he told you that three years ago, you ain’t talked to him. So, like I asked you before. What the hell do you want from me?”

“This is going to sound strange, and it is strange, Cynthia. But I have these... experiences. They’re kind of like dreams. And when I have them, I go... well... I go to where your stepdad is. You can call it heaven, or the other side... it really doesn’t matter. My father calls it the Ether. Your stepdad found me there, or brought me there. I’m not sure which. Regardless, he gave me a message to give you. He said it had to be today. He wouldn’t leave me alone until I promised to find you.”

“Oh, really? Look, you crazy fuck, I don’t know you or what you’re trying to do, but it’s not funny! Today, huh? Okay... I’ll bite. Why today, exactly? If you talked to him, you’d know exactly why,” she said, clutching the door. Wade pulled paper and read it to her.

“He said... and I quote, “Tell her not to do it. Tell her I’m okay, and happy. I’m not in pain anymore. Tell her one day she’ll see me again, but not this soon... and not this way. Tell her she can’t do it... not on our day. It would break my heart! Just tell her.” That’s most of it. I wrote it down word for word. You can believe me or choose not to... your choice.”

The woman’s knees gave way and she fell to the floor. She looked like she might pass out. Wade tried to help her up, but she pushed him away.

She was crying now and pointed inside the house. Wade saw a pistol lying on the couch. She sat in her front doorway with her head in her hands now. Wade didn’t know what to do but just let her cry. A minute later, she got to her feet and wiped her face with her sleeve.

"I was going to do it... today. My stepdad was all I had after my mom died. He took care of me, loved me... better that *she* ever did, until he died, three years ago. Cancer got him. I watched him waste away. *Our day*... what he said to you, is today. We share the same birthday. I was going to kill myself today. I started drinking two hours ago and was about ready to do it before you knocked on my door. I almost didn't answer."

Wade took her hand, "Well, I'm glad you did. He said you'd be wearing his shirt."

She hugged herself in the oversized hoodie.

"It's his favorite jersey. He wore this almost every Sunday. We watched football together. Is he here with us right now?"

"Oh, I don't know, really... but he must be watching out for you. He told me everything I needed to know to tell you, right down to the address and the exact time."

She hugged him tightly. "Sorry about the stuff I said to you. My head's been in a bad place for awhile. Thank you for coming here like you did. You took a big risk coming here."

He nodded and walked her to the couch.

"Can I take this with me?" he asked, pointing to the pistol. She nodded yes.

"You said that was *most* of it. What else did he say?" she asked.

"He said someone is coming into your life soon. He said he liked him... that you'd be good together. He told me not to tell you unless you asked."

She smiled, wiping her eyes again. "Yeah, that sounds like him."

Wade left the house with the pistol. The woman watched from the doorway as he pulled out of the driveway. He unloaded the gun and put it in the glovebox before calling Janet.

"Are you okay? I was starting to worry!" she said.

"Yeah, all good here... on my way back."

"I have to tell you, Wade... from the moment you pulled out of the driveway I was having second thoughts. I almost called and told you to turn around!"

"I'm good. We're both good. You won't believe what happened, babe. It was so weird, but so great, too. My adrenaline is pumping hard. It was such an experience! Babe, if I hadn't showed up, she would have done it. But she's good now. She's going to be okay."

“I’m glad, dear... I really am. So, is this going to be your new job?”

“No way. You think I’d give up my cush gig at home? But... after what just happened, I think it might become a part of our lives. If you’re okay with that, I mean.”

“You already know the answer, honey. I’m so proud of you! And I think your father would be, too.”

Wade didn’t hesitate with his answer. “He is, babe... he told me so last night.”

The End