

THE PAWN

THE BOWERS FILES

STEVEN JAMES



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Some of the events in this story are a matter of public record; many are products of the author's imagination and are not meant in any way to dishonor the victims or diminish the enormity of the tragedy that took place in Guyana.

PROLOGUE

March 5, 1985
La Cruxis, Mississippi
4:13 p.m.

It happened upstairs at her house after school on a Tuesday afternoon. Her parents were still at work, just like always. So Aaron Jeffrey Kincaid and Jessica Rembrandt had the house to themselves. Just like always. Most afternoons found them here, making out, fooling around in the basement.

But today was different. Today was the day.

Jessie smiled at her boyfriend as she unlocked the front door. “Aaron Jeffrey Kincaid,” she breathed, “I love you.” Her voice sounded so alluring, so alive. It said more than I love you; it said, I believe in you.

“I love you too, Jessie.” He stepped past her and swung the door open. “I’ll always love you.” He said the words smoothly, convincingly, but he wondered if he really meant them. He wondered if he did love her; if he’d ever loved anything at all.

He took her hand as they stepped into the living room. Then, with one smooth motion of his free hand, he shut the door behind them.

They’d been going out for almost three months. At first it’d been like any other relationship for him—after the initial thrill wore off, he’d started to get bored with her; started to wonder if maybe he’d be happier with someone else. But the more time he spent with her, the more he realized she did things to please him. Little things.

She went to the movies he liked. She wore the clothes he told her to wear. And she let him do things to her, sometimes whatever he wanted to. So, of course, one day he started wondering how far she would go to please him, how much she would actually do. Who wouldn't wonder those kinds of things?

They headed upstairs to her parents' bedroom. That's where the whirlpool was.

He led her by the hand, and she followed without even a trace of hesitation in her step. Amazing.

Earlier that year another couple had been found in a car. In the garage. Double suicide. So all these counselors had arrived at their high school to talk to the students about death and hope and reasons to live. One of the counselors, a delicate woman with sweet, caramel eyes, had met with him individually. "Aaron, have you ever thought about taking your own life?"

And Aaron had given her a look, wide-eyed and innocent. "Well, just like most kids, I guess." He was playing naïve, searching her eyes for understanding and compassion, toying with her. "I guess I've thought about it—suicide that is. But nothing serious. Nothing specific."

And she nodded and wrote something down in her notebook.

Then he leaned close. "Is there something wrong with me?"

She smiled. "No, of course not, Aaron. It's perfectly normal to think about ending your life sometimes. I'd be a little worried if the thought had never crossed your mind." Then she laughed as if that should have been funny or comforting or something. And she looked across the table at him reassuringly, and he smiled back at her in a boyish, trusting way.

"Thanks," he said. "You've been very helpful."

And after that, the counselors left their numbers on little cards and on posters on the walls of the school for kids who felt lonely or depressed or needed someone to talk to. "They'll be back in two months," the principal had told the students at an assembly

in the gym, “to follow up with anyone who needs to talk some more.”

Maybe he’d gotten the idea from that—the double suicide and the meetings and the counselor with the eyes of a doe. It was hard to say. Aaron had tried to trace the exact origin of the idea, but finally he’d realized that sometimes ideas just come to you fully formed, as this one had. And in the end it doesn’t really matter so much where they come from as it does where they lead you, what you do with them.

“It’ll all be over soon,” Jessie said as they entered the bedroom. Her voice was more agitated now, excited. Maybe fear had crept into it.

“No, soon it’ll all *begin*.” He walked over to the window and twisted the blinds shut to close out the warm afternoon sunshine. A few slivers of sunlight cut through the spaces between the blinds and landed on the lightly ruffled blankets on Jessie’s parents’ bed—streaks of light and darkness lying next to each other, side by side. He walked through the zebra-shadowed room to her arms. “Soon it’ll all begin,” he repeated. “And then we’ll be together forever, and nothing will ever be able to keep us apart.”

“I’m ready,” she whispered.

“It’s a cruel world,” said Aaron Jeffrey Kincaid.

“It’s a cruel world,” echoed Jessica Rembrandt.

“But our love will unite us forever.”

“Our love will unite us forever . . .”

Aaron pulled the polished stainless steel hunting knife out of his backpack and led Jessie to the whirlpool. The knife had a serrated edge on one side and a wickedly curved blade on the other. They’d picked it out together last week at a sporting goods store at the mall. The two of them had been planning this for weeks, to make sure everything was perfect. After they found the knife, Aaron had sent her in to pay for it with cash while he waited outside “to keep watch.” He’d made her think it was all her idea. He was good at that.

Jessie turned on the whirlpool.

The motor hummed, sending jets of warm water churning at their feet.

“I’ll go first,” she said, “because I love you.” Her voice was shaking. Her breathing, fast.

“No, I’ll go first. Just like we practiced.”

They stripped off their clothes and eased into the whirlpool. Only two heads and a pair of shoulders were visible now above the foaming, roiling water.

It was just like the couples had done in Roman times. Lovers sitting in the baths, letting the warm water help pump the blood from their wrists as they drifted off into the darkness of a sleep that never ends. He knew. He’d researched it. But this was even better. The jets from the whirlpool would help pump the blood out faster.

Steam began to rise from the water.

Aaron carefully placed the edge of the blade against his left wrist.

“It’s a cruel world,” he said, repeating the mantra they’d practiced together so many times.

“It’s a cruel world,” Jessie echoed.

“But our love will unite us forever.”

“Our love will unite us forever . . .”

People would be surprised if they saw him here. Her parents had never even seen them together. Even at school they were both loners, so no one really paid much attention to them. It was all so perfect. “Everyone will know about us now,” he said. “At last.”

Aaron drew the blade toward him, deep into the meat of his wrist, and a red spray shot across the pool. A sharp ache bristled up his arm, but he didn’t flinch. The cut was angled just so across his vein so it would be harder to stop the bleeding. They’d rehearsed it this way, the best way. The fastest way.

He quickly lowered his hand into the steamy water, and at once the water began to twirl with crazy red swirls. It reminded him of

watching his foster mother bake when he lived in California, seeing the food coloring swirl through a bowl of hot water. He thought of her, the smells in the kitchen, the sound of her laughter, until his wrist began to throb. Then, his eyes found their way back to the knife he was still holding.

“Should I do the other one right away?” he asked Jessica calmly. She was entranced, staring at the red water that was now encircling her legs and abdomen.

“No,” she whispered. “We need to leave at the same time. Hand me the knife.”

He held it to her, handle first, across the steamy, swirling water. “This life is so unpredictable, Jessie.” He spoke the words tenderly, evenly, smoothly, as the blood pumped out of his wrist and merged with the crimson water. “Who knows what the future holds? Your dad could get a new job and make you move away; your parents could get a divorce . . .” The blood continued to curl around him. “I could die in a car accident . . . It’s best this way. The only way. This way nothing can ever separate us. This way, we’re in control of what happens. All that matters is us. All that matters is this moment.”

“Our love will unite us forever,” she whispered.

“Our love will unite us forever,” said Aaron Jeffrey Kincaid.

He held up his hand and watched the blood spill from his wrist. Watched as the patterns trailed down his arm and into the water. Watched as little rivers of blood dripped from his elbow and then twirled into the current, across his legs, around his heart, toward his girlfriend.

She took the knife, placed the blade against her left wrist, looked up at him. “Forever,” she said.

“Forever.”

She pulled the knife sharply across her left wrist and let out a gasp. He’d shown her how to do it right. The cut was more than sufficient. They’d practiced together using a butter knife to get the angle right. They’d rehearsed it all, down to the last

detail. And this cut was not the tentative probing of someone who was unsure. Paramedics called those “hesitation marks.” But she wasn’t hesitant at all. No, she wasn’t just doing it for attention. She believed in everything he told her. He knew she did. She believed in Aaron Jeffrey Kincaid more than anything in the world.

“I’m doing this for you, Aaron,” she said. And the look in her eyes told him it was true. She would have done anything for him; had done everything for him. “I love you.”

“I know.”

Aaron watched her stare at the whirlpool for a moment. Blood was pumping out of her opened wrist now, pouring out. Swirling all around her in crimson currents as her body emptied itself of life. He wondered what she was thinking.

“I’m scared,” she whispered.

“Don’t be scared. We’re going to be together now. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Just do the other wrist like we practiced and hand me the knife.”

“Nothing can keep us apart,” she whispered, pressing the blade against her right wrist. “Nothing.”

“Nothing.”

She tried to make the cut, but the tendons had been damaged. Her hand trembled. “Help me,” she said feebly.

He eased over to her side of the whirlpool, took her hand in his, and held the knife firmly against her skin.

Then he pulled.

She grimaced, then twitched, then relaxed her arm. “Thank you,” she said.

He let go of her hand, and the knife dropped into the water—this second cut was even deeper than the first.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said. “I’ll get it.”

The water became darker and darker as the jets of the whirlpool chugged on. Curling and pumping. A deeper, sharper red. She had

dropped her arms into the water now and was slumping a bit to the side. Her voice was barely a whisper. "Hold me." She tried to reach out to hug him but could barely lift her arms above the water. Blood kept coursing from her wrists.

He leaned close to her. "There's nothing to be afraid of." He held her until her arms dropped into the water one last time.

Then, instead of reaching for the knife, he stepped out of the water and picked up a towel.

She'd done it. She'd done just what he asked. Yes, he'd had to slice his own wrist, that was true, and he'd had to help her, but she had agreed. She had listened. She'd been obedient to the very end.

No one had seen them together. He could easily hide the wound on his wrist until it healed. No one would ask any questions. It was even easier than he'd imagined it would be.

Father would be proud.

"Everything is going to be all right, Jessie," he said softly as he stared at her. He tried to imagine what it was like for her in that moment . . . darkness clouding into the sides of her vision . . . the image of her boyfriend leaving her alone in the whirlpool . . . water and blood dripping together onto the linoleum.

Water and blood. Water and blood.

"Where are you going?" Her words were soft, hardly audible. A whisper.

"Don't worry, Jessie." He was holding the towel up against his wrist to stop the bleeding. "Everything is going to be just fine." Her mouth formed a silent question for him, but the words never came. Her arms quivered slightly and then stopped moving forever as Aaron Jeffrey Kincaid sat down beside the gently humming water to watch his girlfriend bleed to death in her parents' whirlpool.

Oh yes. Father would be very proud.

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Thursday
October 23, 2008
Somewhere above the mountains of western North
Carolina
5:31 p.m.

I peered out the window of the Bell 206L-4 LongRanger IV, helicopter of choice for both the Georgia State Patrol and the Department of the Interior, as we roared over the mountainous border of Georgia and North Carolina. Clouds rose dark on the horizon.

The colors of autumn were still lingering on the rolling slopes of the southern Appalachians, although winter had started to creep into the higher elevations. Far below us, the hills rose and fell, rose and fell, zipping past. For a few minutes I watched the shadow of the helicopter gliding over the mountains and dipping down into the shadowy valleys like a giant insect skimming across the landscape, searching for a place to land.

Even though it was late fall, ribbons of churning water pounded down the mountains in the aftermath of a series of fierce storms. In the springtime these hills produce some of the most fantastic whitewater rafting in all of North America. I know. I used to paddle them years ago when I spent a year working near here as a wilderness guide for the North Carolina Outward Bound School. Now, it seemed like those days were in another life.

Before I became what I am. Before any of this.

But as I looked out the window, the waters weren't blue like I remembered them. Instead, they were brown and swollen from a

recent rain. Wriggling back and forth through the hills like thick, restless snakes.

I glanced at my watch: 5:34 p.m. We should be landing within the next ten minutes. Which was good, because with the clouds rolling in, it didn't look like we had a whole lot of sunlight ahead of us. Maybe an hour. Maybe less.

My good friend Special Agent Ralph Hawkins had called me in. Just a few hours ago I was in Atlanta presenting a seminar on strategic crime analysis for the National Law Enforcement Methodology Conference. Another conference. Another lecture series. It seemed like that was all I'd been doing for the last six months. Sure, I'd consulted on a couple dozen cases, but they weren't a big deal. Mostly I'd been teaching and researching criminology. Trying to forget.

I'd have to say that despite how disoriented my life had become, the biggest casualty had been my sixteen-year-old—wait, seventeen-year-old—stepdaughter Tessa. After the funeral, I tried to get close to her, but it didn't work. Nothing did. Eventually we just drifted into our separate routines, our separate lives. Case in point: here I was in the Southeast while she stayed with my parents back home in Denver.

Ralph wasn't the kind of man to waste time or words being cordial. He'd jumped right to the point when he called my cell earlier in the day. "Pat, I hear you're back in the game."

"Trying to be."

"Well, you heard about what's going on down here?"

"Yeah." I followed the postings of all the major cities' crime labs and FBI listings. Occupational hazard. I was a regular VICAP junkie—the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program is a way to track crimes across jurisdictions, so I'd read about the murders. Even the details they weren't releasing to the public. There'd been at least five so far, just since February.

"You found another one," I said.

“Yeah. Some hikers stumbled across her about an hour ago. We’re out at the site now, and, well, I could email you some stuff, but I gotta say, I could use your eyes over here. There’s got to be something we’re missing. The signature is the same. It’s the same guy, Pat. The press is calling him the Yellow Ribbon Strangler.”

Ralph knew that I hated when the press got involved. I’d looked at my watch: 4:02 p.m.

“I don’t know, Ralph . . .”

“I can have a chopper over there to pick you up in twenty minutes. You’ll be back at your hotel tonight. That’s why I could use your eyes right now. Supposed to be some more storms coming through, and I don’t want to miss anything here. What do you say?”

And I’d said yes.

Because I always say yes.

“Email me the photos your men took at the other crime scenes,” I said, “and video if you have it, and I’ll look them over on my way down.”

And now, less than two hours after giving the keynote address to 2,500 law enforcement professionals and intelligence agency personnel from around the world, I was on a chopper to meet Ralph and look at the body of another dead girl.

I scrolled through the crime scene pictures on my laptop. Even though I try to stay detached, the images still bother me. They always have. Probably always will.

I glanced out the window. The shadow of the helicopter skirted over a road and hovered for a moment above a parked car on a scenic overlook. A man and a woman who were standing beside the guardrail didn’t seem to notice the shadow. They just kept staring at the sprawling mountains folding back against the horizon, totally unaware that a shadow was crawling over them. Totally unaware.

The killer hadn’t made any attempt to hide the bodies. Whoever was killing these women wanted them found. After all, there were

plenty of places in the hills of western North Carolina to hide a body forever. Or a person. The serial bomber Eric Robert Rudolph had hidden here for five years during one of the biggest manhunts in history and was only caught when he wandered into town to scavenge food from a dumpster behind a grocery store. No, our guy wasn't into hiding; he was into flaunting. And there was something else. Something that hadn't been released to the public. Something very disturbing. Which was why Ralph had called me.

I leaned forward and yelled to the pilot, "How much longer?"

He didn't answer, just pointed at a nearby mountain and tipped the LongRanger toward a clearing.

I closed up my computer. It was time for Patrick Bowers to go to work.