

DEMON EYES

THE FIRST CHAPTER

Nathan Wisecroft woke suddenly from a dream-filled sleep and stifled the scream that for the last five minutes had been working its way stealthily towards his lips. He took a moment to get his bearings, his eyes drinking in the details of the hotel room; the expensive furniture, the water-color pictures decorating the walls, the state of the art digital television that squatted in the corner of the room, shiny and new, waiting to trap the unwary and tempt them into spending their money on exclusive films, world-class sport and soft porn. His eyes finally settled on the woman in the bed next to him. She was still asleep; breathing deeply, snoring softly, her flame-red hair spread across the pillow and over her shoulders. He sighed deeply, disappointed with himself as usual.

The room smelled of stale cigarette smoke and sex. The floor was littered with empty beer bottles and clothes, stripped off in haste and left to lie where they fell. He slid his rangy body from the bed, went across to the window and pushed it open, breathing in the biting morning air and letting the sounds of traffic from the road below seep into the room. Slipping on his robe he walked softly through to the en suite, his reflection in the bathroom mirror confirming how he was feeling. He looked terrible; gaunt, almost skeletal features, capped with a covering of short, curly grey hair. The ebony skin seemed stretched across the bones of his skull and his eyes had sunken into their sockets. They remained bloodshot no matter how much sleep he got or how many times he bathed them. Stubble covered his chin, graying like the hair of his head. He looked like a very old man; despite the fact that he had yet to see his fiftieth birthday. 'You've let yourself go, man,' he muttered to his reflection, even though he knew the truth went deeper than that and was far more serious, far more deadly.

He closed the bathroom door and pulled open a drawer of the vanity unit. His fingers closed around the clippers. He plugged them in, then stood in front of the mirror again and ran them over his head, watching the hair fall and gather in a silver pile in the sink. When he'd finished shaving his head he turned his attention to his face, letting the teeth of the clippers chew through the stubble. Finally he set the clippers down and picked up a cup of shaving soap and a badger-hair brush. He worked the soap into a creamy lather with the brush then smoothed it over his chin and head. With a straight razor he took off the remaining bristles, then ran water into his cupped hands washing away the white traces of foam and working the water into his eyes with his fingertips, washing away the sleep.

The reflection that stared back at him when he'd finished was an improvement. Not perfect, not the Nathan Wisecroft of old, but he no longer looked so ancient, so wasted.

The woman was stirring when he walked back into the bedroom. She rolled onto her back and stared up at him through bleary, sleep-dulled eyes. 'Hi,' she said dreamily.

'Hi back,' Nathan said gruffly. 'Coffee?'

The woman propped herself up on one elbow, reached across for the packet of cigarettes on the table beside the bed and lit one, blowing smoke up at the ceiling. 'Yeah,' she said. 'Coffee's good. Then come back to bed and fuck me.'

Nathan looked at her steadily. He wanted her to leave. He should have never brought her back here in the first place, but he'd been drunk and it had been a few weeks since he'd enjoyed a woman.

'You've shaved your head,' she said, finally focusing on him. She was in her forties, running slightly to fat, her flaming red hair fading to a dirty grey at the roots. With her make

up slightly smeared, the pallor of sleep still coloring her face, she looked ten years older than she'd appeared the night before. Nathan wondered how he could have ever found her attractive. Then he remembered.

'Coffee, lover,' she said, jerking him out of his inertia. He picked up the kettle and went back to the bathroom to fill it.

The coffee burned its way down his throat, the caffeine surging through his bloodstream, giving him a shot of energy. The woman hadn't moved from the bed, but was sitting up, leaning back against the headboard, her pendulous breasts exposed. There were teeth marks around the nipples. His. He felt a surge of self-disgust. 'Get dressed,' he said, flopping down on a chair opposite the bed, cupping the coffee mug with both hands.

'Aren't you coming back to bed?'

He shook his head.

She threw back the covers, exposing her bush of pubic hair. 'It's juiced up and waiting for you,' she said, opening her legs slightly in a gesture she imagined was seductive, but the sight of her plump white thighs only succeeded in repulsing him further.

He leaned forward and scooped up her clothes from the floor and threw them onto the bed. 'I said get dressed.'

She gave him a little girl pout and reached for her bra.

When she left ten minutes later there was no kiss good-bye, no arrangements made to see each other again. They'd met, got what they wanted from each other and parted; an almost businesslike arrangement that they both tacitly acknowledged. He shut the door behind her and sighed with relief.

He took one step towards the sitting room then cried out and sank to his knees clutching his head. The pain was excruciating; red-hot wires threading through his brain, searing his thoughts. Tears sprang to his eyes and poured down his cheeks, running into his mouth, salty and bitter. 'Leave me alone,' he said through gritted teeth. 'Leave... me... alone!' But it was no use; the agony continued. In a few seconds the pain would recede and vanish as if it had never existed, and he would be left with a vision, a scene playing out in his mind. There had been many such visions recently, far too many to count; each one more vivid than the last; each one a part of a whole. He nearly had the full picture now, but the cost in pain was almost too much to bear. As each new vision increased in clarity, so the pain in his head intensified proportionately. He was not sure he could take much more of it.

As the pain ebbed away he closed his eyes, channelling his mind, straining his senses to see and hear the scenario playing out in his head.

Finally it was over and he fell back against the wall, pressing his fists to his eyes. It was worse than he could have imagined, and for the first time in many years he felt fear pressing at the perimeters of his mind, and the fear stirred memories of long ago.

A corrugated iron shack in a shantytown just outside Kingston, a woman shrieking in agony as a man, white, hard and muscular, rode the woman's body, forcing himself deeper and deeper into her. A small boy watching through a crack in the rusting iron wall, fist balled and stuffed into his mouth to stop himself screaming as he watched his mother being raped. But this was no ordinary rape; not the animal need for sex being relieved forcibly. This was something more.

When it was over the woman, his mother, would be dead.

The boy tore his gaze away from the horrific scene being enacted within the shack and ran to another hut several yards away. Inside an old woman sat, her bony fingers clutching an ancient, leather-covered bible tightly to her chest, whilst her withered lips

incanted a prayer of salvation. The boy ran to her, tugging at the hem of her dress, shouting at her to do something, anything to help his mother, her daughter. But the old woman remained resolutely immobile; her eyes tightly closed, shutting him out of her mind while she concentrated on her prayers.

Finally he gave up and ran back to the shack, pressing his face to the corrugated iron, finding the crack again. But the man had gone and his mother was dead, lying on her back on the cot, eyes wide open, staring blindly at the small cloud of flies that were already beginning to circle around her body.

Fat tears welled up in his eyes and ran down his face. He pulled himself away from the spy hole and walked on bare feet to the rough plywood door, pulling it open and stepped into the cool, shadowed interior. He crouched down beside his mother's body, stretched out a tentative hand and used his fingertips to gently close her eyes. But not before he'd stared into them and seen the look of horror there.

It was a look that he would never forget. It would live with him forever, pressing at his thoughts during the daylight hours, and inhabiting his dreams during the many long nights that stretched ahead of him. It would inform his life, giving him direction, and a sense of purpose. But more than that. It would feed the hatred that was beginning to burn inside him; stoking it into an unquenchable fire that would infuse his daily life and never let him forget the moment of his mother's death. One day, he knew, he would avenge her. He would find the man responsible for taking her life and he would kill him. A life for a life, the Bible said. That would be his mantra from that day on.

Nathan Wisecroft pushed himself to his feet and stumbled through to the bedroom, falling face down onto the bed. Within seconds he was asleep.

When he awoke it was dark and the noise from the street below was less frenetic, different. Commuter traffic had given way to those bringing their cars into the city for pleasure. Somewhere there was music playing, a thumping dance track, heavy on the bass. Seconds later it had gone as the car stereo producing it passed by.

He hauled himself from the bed and picked up the cup of cold coffee from earlier, swallowing the dark, bitter liquid as he walked to the wardrobe and took out a clean suit. He laid it on the bed then went to shower.

Thirty minutes later he was dressed and ready to go out. He picked up his credit cards from the small desk under the window and slid them into his wallet, then he pulled a drawer open in the dressing table and took out what he needed. A clean handkerchief, his reading glasses, a small but powerful spotlight, a leather pouch containing a handful of salt, and a small Bible that he slipped into the pocket of his suit jacket. He never went anywhere without it these days, though he doubted it offered much protection - his faith wasn't strong enough for that - but it was a minor comfort and, like the salt, there was always the chance that he was underestimating its power.

He made a final check around the room to see if he'd left anything vital behind, but there was nothing immediately apparent. Trusting that he had everything he needed, he walked from the room, closing and locking the door behind him, and carried down the short corridor to the elevator down to the basement car park.

'What have you got for me?'

The thin, rat-faced man shifted on the park bench. He was dressed in a suit, shiny at the elbows and knees, and stained at the lapels with the remnants of his lunch. He ran spindly fingers through his lank, greasy hair and licked his lips. 'Money first,' he said. 'I could lose my job over this.'

'Spare me the cliché.' Nathan reached into the pocket of his jacket and produced a small brown envelope stuffed with ten-pound notes. He handed it across. The thin man took it, lifted the flap and peered inside.

'Count it if you like, but it's all there,' Nathan said.

The thin man hesitated, fingers twitching. Finally he closed the flap and stowed the envelope away in the scuffed leather attaché case lying on the bench next to him. From the case he took another envelope, larger than the one he'd just been given, and handed it across to Nathan.

'Thank you,' Nathan said, stood and, without a backward glance, walked from the park and back to his car. He dropped the envelope onto the passenger seat and climbed in after it. With an impatience he'd concealed from the thin man he ripped the seal from the envelope and tipped the contents onto the seat.

There were a dozen or more ten by eight inch monochrome photographs, a list of names and dates, and two large piece of papers, folded into quarters that he opened out to reveal the floor plans of a house. On the second sheet were more plans, but of a much smaller property. With a grunt of satisfaction he flicked through the photographs. The photographs weren't brilliant - obviously passport-sized photos over-enlarged. They were grainy, but they would suffice. Finally his eyes ran down the list of names. He smiled to himself. All the usual suspects. He reached the bottom of the list and read the final name. He'd fully expected to see it there, but just reading it made his guts twist and squirm, and produced a hot flush of anger that threatened to engulf him. His fist closed around the paper and he crushed it into a tight ball, holding it tightly, waiting for the anger to subside.

Finally it faded, leaving him tired, more tired than he had ever been before. He slumped forward, head on the steering wheel. His head swam as the photographs he'd just looked at played like a slideshow in his mind.

It would soon be over. One way or another, the nightmare he had endured for the past forty years would come to an end. He lifted his head from the wheel, pulled his cell phone from his pocket and punched in a number. The phone on the other end of the line rang twice then a voice said, 'Hello?'

'It's begun. Be ready.'

He ended the call and slipped the phone back into his pocket, then slid the key into the ignition and started the engine. There was nothing to do now but to go home and wait for the call he knew eventually would come.

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