

*What You Become* Excerpt

Book Two: Summer, 1993

“Why are you interested in Wahler? A serial killer of all things?” The librarian questioned when I asked for help with the microfilm machine. There were no books on Wahler, just magazine articles and newspapers. I’d expected to see Melinda’s dad’s book, but nothing existed.

“A research paper,” I said hoping my certainty would drop any suspicion. It just made it worse.

“For school? In summer?” she responded. Both great questions for which I didn’t have an immediate answer.

“Sort of,” I said. “I’m in an advanced class.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine,” she said, but then looked down at the newspapers on the table next to us, “Hopefully this will be one of the last papers about him.”

Wahler was on the front page, still alive but in critical condition. Nothing had changed from last night. Nothing had changed from last year.

“Yeah, hopefully this is the last one,” I repeated. I wanted hope to be enough.

There were hundreds of articles on Wahler, so many of them talking about his horrors. There were the initial stories, when he was captured, about how the last young man he lured into his home refused his drugged drink, broke free when Wahler tried to handcuff him to a wall heater – in fact the victim cuffed Wahler, and ran out, like Kanoa had done days before though completely unharmed, alert, safe – and flagged a police car down that happened to be passing by.

The nightmare unfolded when they went to Wahler's apartment and found two bodies in his bedroom. An officer would testify he thought one of the victims was asleep at first, his mouth slightly open. Only when the officer went to wake him, to shake his shoulder as Dad had done to wake me, did he realize the horror he was witnessing.

"He was so cold," the officer said five times during his testimony.

Then the details trickled as the days passed. The confession grew, from two victims in his room, to seventeen victims over decades and across states, from body mutilation to cannibalism, from necrophilia to necromancy. Wahler built an altar out of his victims. He wanted a place to view them in peace, a place of worship. He twisted a preserved body into a crab-walk so that the torso was his table. He then used that table to place the skulls of his other victims, like placing cups for a tea party.

Finally, the zombies. This led to Kanoa, though his name was misspelled over and over and over again. There had been two zombies. Kanoa who looked for help, knew things weren't right though how much he could speak, how coherent he was, how much of himself was inside him was unknown. I wanted to believe he was still Kanoa, by the way he held on tightly to the women who found him in the street. But that meant he was aware and suffering in those moments when Wahler took him back to the apartment suffocated him with a pillow.

The second one Wahler himself called "successful". He brimmed with pride. A nineteen-year-old he picked up at the bar. He drilled a hole in his forehead, miraculously performing a perfect lobotomy before pouring some chemicals inside. The boy listened to his commands. The boy was able to be aroused and have sex. The boy could use the bathroom and ate and drank. But Wahler killed him anyway. Now that he could do it, he wasn't as excited by it. He grew bored and went out looking for a new, final victim.

That was what I could find of Kanoa under Wahler's name. Just a prop for Wahler's horror movie. I searched for Kanoa by his last name, Phothisarath, but the name had been butchered so many times I wasn't sure how to spell it. When I searched the records by his first name, just one article appeared. It wasn't a news article but an obituary. It was written by one of Kanoa's older brothers. Kanoa was the youngest in his family, like me. He loved soccer, Ninja Turtles, swimming, and Saturday morning cartoons. He was always riding his bike, doing jumps off ramps, letting others ride on the back.

*He was just like any other American boy. He was a jokester, always making his family laugh. He was popular among his grade, and generous – generous to a fault. His brother wrote that Kanoa wanted to please people. He wasn't happy unless others around him were. When Kanoa went with Wahler for fifty dollars it was out of his desire to help him. Yes, he needed the money – Konnie had a paper route to help our parents with bills – but little Konnie was good-hearted. He didn't want anyone to go in need.*

Konnie. The nickname stuck with me. It was normally a girl's name, but when I looked at his photo and said the name to myself, he became familiar as if I'd just become closer to him. He was Konnie to me now, too.

I wanted the obituary to continue, I wanted to know the jokes he made, his favorite cartoon – that maybe he played with his Ninja Turtles even in eighth grade, maybe he had a friend who smoked and acted British, maybe he had a girlfriend he hated kissing, maybe he'd built a snow fort that winter. But it ended. There was nothing else about him. I had the article xeroxed, a meager one and half pages, but all of it was about Konnie not Wahler.