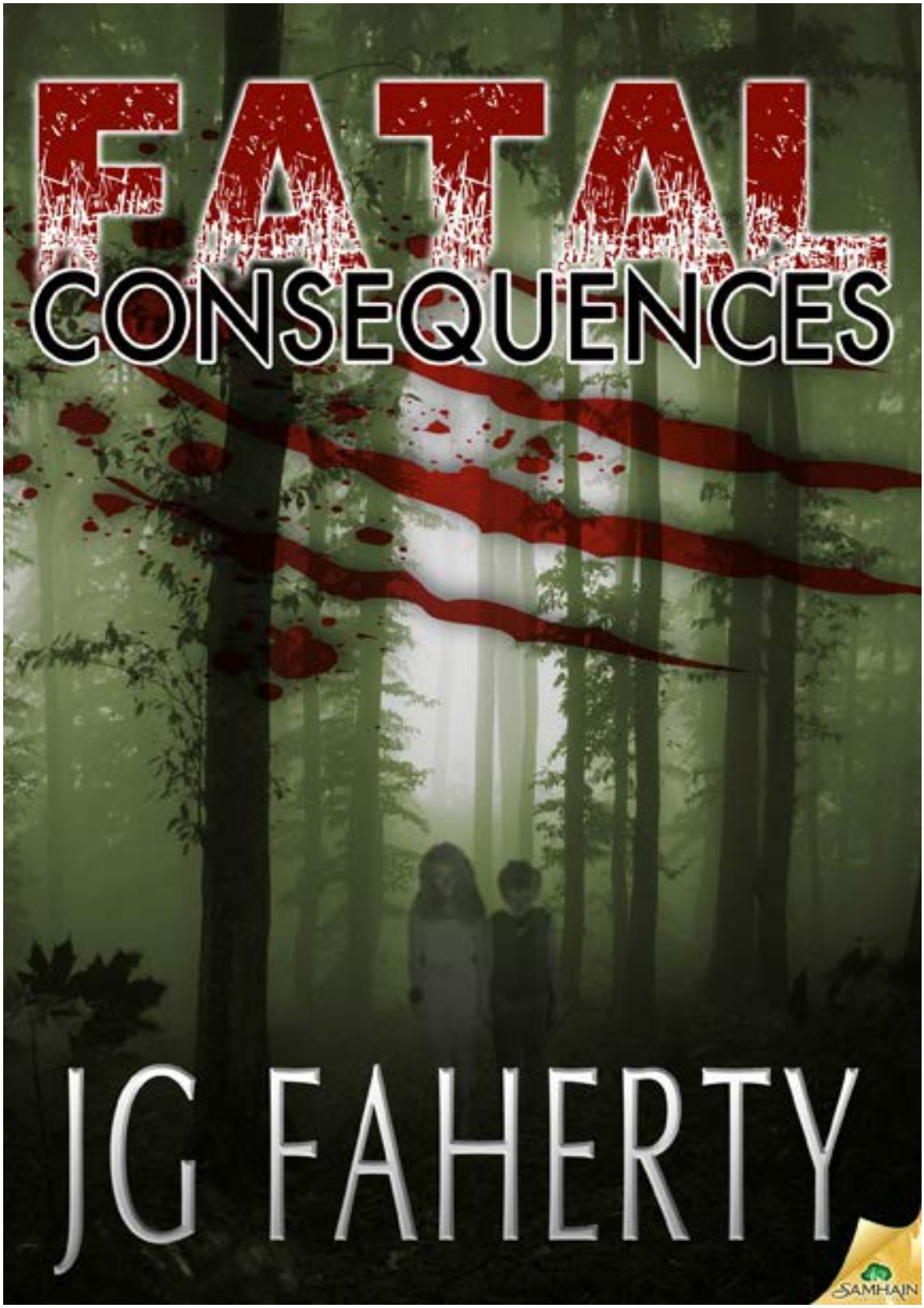

FATAL
CONSEQUENCES
JG FAHERTY
SAMHAIN

Table of Contents

Dedication	6
Fatal Consequences	7
About the Author	45
Look for these titles by JG Faherty	46

Every decision carries a price.

Alec Winter is a man haunted by his own cowardice. When a bear attacked his family during a camping trip, he ran and hid. When he returned, his children were dead and his wife badly injured. But everyone believes he's a hero because he led rescuers back in time to save her. Ever since then, his children's deaths have haunted him. Now, on the anniversary of the attack, strange things begin happening. The people who helped Alec are dying in very violent ways, leaving him to wonder if guilt has finally driven him crazy...or if something far worse is coming for him.

eBooks are *not* transferable.
They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
11821 Mason Montgomery Road Suite 4B
Cincinnati OH 45249

Fatal Consequences
Copyright © 2014 by JG Faherty
ISBN: 978-1-61922-513-8
Edited by Don D'Auria
Cover by Scott Carpenter

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: July 2014
www.samhainpublishing.com

Fatal Consequences

JG Faherty

Dedication

To Andrea, my long-suffering wife, who gives me the time to write. To my parents, whose passion for reading stoked my own at a very young age. To my college mentor, Richard Bothner, who passed away before my writing career took off, but who would have been very happy to celebrate it with a beer or a scotch over a roaring campfire. To my many friends who cheer me on. To Harley, who helps me relax. And to the people who buy and read my books.

Thank you, one and all. You are the ones who make it possible for writers to do what they do.

Fatal Consequences

If a man screams in the woods and no one hears him, is he really screaming?

Alec Winter stumbled over a fallen branch and wondered if he was going crazy. His aching throat was evidence that he'd screamed—screamed a lot over the past few hours, in fact—but the fact that no one had come to his aid seemed to prove the hypothesis that an action which causes no reaction isn't an action at all.

He wrapped his arms around a tall, aged elm and tried to catch his breath. The act of not moving set his mind racing. Casey—was she still alive? What if she woke up and he wasn't there? It seemed unlikely, but who knew? If she did, would she be able to walk? He hoped not. If she wandered off, how would he lead a rescue team back to her? And what if she found Nick and Sue? Seeing their ravaged bodies would probably kill her, especially in her condition.

I can't let that happen.

Alec pushed himself away from the tree and continued walking, each movement wringing fresh pain from over-used muscles and bruised limbs. Something jabbed and poked inside his chest. A broken rib? A damaged organ? It didn't matter. All that mattered was finding help. He tried shouting again but it hurt too much to draw a deep breath; all that came out was a raspy croak that couldn't even compete with the sound of his own passage through the bone-dry dead leaves and sticks covering the forest floor.

The *snap-crack-crunch* of his footsteps was a constant reminder he was in deep trouble. They'd set up their campsite only a few hundred yards from one of the smaller paths paralleling the main trail. And although things had gotten pretty confusing during his escape, when he'd finally hidden Casey's body and taken off for help he'd been pretty sure he was heading in the right direction to hit the trail again.

Except he'd been walking for what seemed like hours and there'd been no sign of any man-made paths at all, let alone the wide expanse of the Appalachian Trail.

For what seemed like the hundredth time, he looked up at the sun through summer-thick foliage. Based on its movement, and the direction of the shadows from the trees, he was still heading south. That should have put him back on the main trail in less than an hour. Had he missed it? Walked right across it in a daze?

Alec stopped again. Should he turn around? Choose a different direction? He tried to

picture the map of the area in his head but all he kept seeing was the campsite, the tent torn to pieces, blood and bits of clothing everywhere…

Stop it! Focus. You have a job to do. Remember, Casey is counting on you.

Nick and Sue had counted on you. Look where that got them.

He shook his head. No time for regrets. Not now. That would come later, after they were home and safe. He took a stained, filthy rag from his pocket and wiped sweat from his forehead. A stray breeze wove its way through the trees, lending a cooling touch to his overheated body. He was about to start walking again—*keep going south*—when he heard it.

Something crashing through the woods.

Something large.

Oh, God, no! Not again!

Had it followed him? Been behind him all this time, playing with him like a cat stalking a bird?

Alec started to run but only managed three steps before his left leg cramped up, sending him to his knees. The pain was so intense he cried out. He beat at the traitorous muscles with his fists, desperately trying to pound the spasms out of his disobedient thigh. The crashing noises grew louder and he looked around for a stick or rock he could use as a weapon, knowing that nothing short of a gun would save him. All he came up with were leaves and twigs and dirt.

A dark figure emerged from a thicket of bushes. Alec screamed and threw his arms over his eyes, afraid to face the ravenous beast that was about to end his life.

This time there would be no running away.

For a moment there was dead silence. Then a voice spoke.

"Jesus, dude. What the hell happened to you?"

The news of David Gregg's death reached Alec while he sipped his morning coffee and read the sports pages. Casey was already up and out of the house, dropping Jennifer off at daycare on the way to work. Alec cherished what he called his quiet time, that half hour between Casey's departure and his own. With a two-year-old demanding attention all the time, any moments of silence were like a gift from God.

So he wasn't particularly happy when the phone interrupted his morning ritual.

"Alec Winter?" A woman's voice, one he didn't recognize. He answered in the affirmative, prepared to give her a piece of his mind for bothering him with a marketing call so early in the morning.

His anger crumbled away when he heard her next words.

"This is Sarah Gregg. David Gregg's wife? I…I just wanted to let you know that he…he passed away last week. I'm only calling because I think he would have wanted you to know. He always said that saving you was the best thing he ever did in his whole life, something he could be proud of. Anyhow, I didn't call sooner because we didn't have much of a service. He was…well, it wouldn't have been right."

Alec mumbled his condolences, his mind whirling as he said goodbye.

David Gregg was dead? It seemed like a bad joke. He made a note in his BlackBerry to have one of the girls at work send flowers and a card, even though the body was already buried.

Coffee and paper forgotten, he grabbed his briefcase and headed for his car.

It wasn't until hours later, after he'd fought his way through the morning emails and attended two product launch meetings, that Sarah's actual words came back to him.

"…we didn't have much of a service. He was…well, it wouldn't have been right."

Although he hadn't noticed it at the time, it was an odd way to phrase a sentence. Almost as if she'd switched thoughts in mid-stream. And she'd never said how David had died.

His curiosity aroused, Alec did a quick Google search for David Gregg's obituary.

What he found sent a shiver down his back.

Local Hero Found Dead in Woods.

The headline screamed at him from the front page of the *Daily Mail*. The article below it was short but concise.

The body of David Gregg, 52, of Greene, New York was found at the bottom of a ravine in Catskill Park. Gregg, who a year ago saved the lives of two campers in the same park, was an experienced hiker who frequently spent weekends in the park, photographing wildlife and posting his observations on nature in an Internet blog. Police do not suspect foul play, and they estimate Gregg died twenty-four to forty-eight hours earlier, but are awaiting results of the autopsy to be sure.

"Any time a body is in the woods that long, there are extenuating circumstances that make it difficult to establish a firm time of death without an autopsy," said Chief of Police Gerald Moonachie.

After rescuing Alec Winter and his wife, Casey, last July, Gregg enjoyed an upsurge in the popularity of his blog, "Observations on a Wild Life". He said at the time that helping them

after the bear attacked…

Alec closed the page, unable to read any further. *He didn't just die. He died in that goddamned park. Almost a year to the day… No wonder Sarah didn't want to tell us.*

A sudden thought hit Alec with the intensity of a punch to the stomach. The date on the article had been July 12, just six days ago. The police statement said that Gregg could have died on either the 10th or 11th. If it was the 10th, that would make it…

Exactly one year.

The guy who saved us dies one year later to the day—the goddamned day!—in the same park?

It couldn't be coincidence.

Could it?

Calm down, Alec, he told himself. *Think it through.*

David Gregg was an avid hiker who spent a lot of time in Catskill Park, especially in the area near where they'd gone camping. That's why he was there that day. He'd probably been hiking and camping around that same area dozens of times since then. It was no different than if he'd been driving to work and come across an accident. He'd be driving that same route again the day after, and the day after that. So if he got into an accident himself, the odds were good it would be in the same general area.

Alec felt his heart rate slowing down. When you thought about things logically, they made more sense. It wasn't fate, it was simple coincidence. Favorable odds.

Still, it was damn freaky. But then, weren't all coincidences?

I have to tell Casey.

She'd be devastated. Not only because Gregg had died, but because it would be adding one more shitty memory to the anniversary of the worst day of her life.

I have to tell her, though. He had no choice. It was bad enough he was already keeping one secret about that day. One that constantly threatened to come out when he least expected it, rising to the surface on a wave of guilt and self-loathing so vile it made him want to puke. Adding another secret to the mix might just be the final straw, the last little bit of pressure needed to send everything tumbling free.

Yes, he had to tell her, but he didn't have to tell her now. It could wait until after work, after they'd had dinner and put Jennifer to bed. He'd pour them a glass of wine and break the news to her. Let her cry herself to sleep again and wake up in the morning purged.

Casey took the news much like Alec had expected. First there was shocked disbelief, then sorrow over his death, and finally sadness and guilt and anger over the loss of their children. Survivor's guilt, the shrinks called it. The same doctors who believed Alec suffered from it as well. Except with Casey they were right. She hated that she'd been the first one attacked, rendered unconscious through everything that followed. Because of that, she'd never even had the chance to try and save her children. To her, it was no different than if she'd done nothing, just sat there and watched while the bear turned Nick and Sue into lifeless piles of flesh. The fact that she'd been seriously—almost mortally—wounded herself meant nothing. In her mind, her injuries, and the weeks of pain and physical therapy that had followed, were her penance.

And yet she hadn't once blamed Alec. Just the opposite. To her, he was as much a hero as David Gregg. After all, he'd risked his own life in a desperate attempt to find help.

Sometimes he just wanted to shoot himself and put an end to the lie.

Like she had so many other nights, Casey burst into tears and pressed herself against him when they got in bed, sobbing about how could God be so cruel as to let them live while taking good, innocent people like Sue and Nick and now David.

As always, he held her and told her it wasn't her fault, they'd been spared because Jennifer needed them, and that maybe God's plan was for them to make sure Jen grew up and made a difference in the world. All the while, the lie festered deep inside him, a pocket of poisonous gas bubbling and growing in a swamp of guilt.

After she drifted off he needed two antacids and a Valium to follow her into sleep.

Following Gregg's death, things actually got a little better for Alec. There was no longer a reason for Casey to follow Gregg's blog, so that last reminder of their loss was finally gone. Casey started sleeping better at night. And although their sex life didn't improve in terms of frequency, on the one night every week or two they actually did make love she seemed to really enjoy herself rather than just going through the motions for him.

After a few weeks of relative bliss, he began to think that maybe things were turning around, that their lives could be normal again. Even the demons living inside him seemed to have gone into hiding.

For the first time in a year, Alec found himself smiling when he came home from work.

Had he known what the future held for them, a smile would have been the last thing on his mind.

"All actions have consequences, people. Good or bad or just plain insignificant, there is always a reaction to each action in our lives. The scientists call it physics; the Buddhists call it karma."

Father Hayden paused and looked at the congregation. Everyone stared back in anticipation, awaiting his next words. Alec stirred in his seat, suddenly uncomfortable with where the priest's sermon was heading. He wished Jennifer would cry or fidget or whisper that she had to go to the bathroom, so he'd have an excuse to take her outside.

His face lighting up with holy glee, as if he'd just discovered the tablets of Moses, Hayden broke the heavy silence.

"I like to say, 'What goes around, comes around.' If you do good, good comes back to you. And if you do bad…well, all we have to do is look at the gossip columns in the newspapers to see what happens." He paused for breath, then continued.

"All actions have consequences. You might not see them, might not even realize they've occurred. The things you do, each and every one of you, can change not only your own life but the lives of people you don't even know. Let's take the example of a drunk driver who kills a pedestrian. That action produces an obvious consequence, one that anybody can see. Someone dies. But what if that driver calls a taxi or lets a friend drive him home? He'll never know the consequence of that action—that he saved someone's life—and we'll never see it, but it happened just the same."

Alec's guts clenched. Even though Father Hayden's gaze traveled around the room, Alec felt the man had singled him out and was pointing the finger of God's guilt his way like a second-rate oracle.

I can't take it anymore.

He whispered a quick apology to Casey and slid out of his seat, thankful they always sat at the end of the pew in case Jennifer got too loud. Doing his best to ignore the curious looks of his fellow parishioners, he hurried to the doors and escaped the suffocating confines of the church. Once outside, he leaned against the railing and took a deep breath of the sultry, heavy summer air.

He wasn't talking to you. He doesn't know.

Alec repeated it like a mantra until his heart calmed down and he no longer felt as if he might puke.

Have to remember to thank Father Hayden for that chest-wrenching episode. In two minutes the priest had managed to rouse the old guilt monster from a slumber I was very comfortable with.

Which meant he had to be careful. If his guilt was still that close to the surface, still that raw, then anything might set it off. And if it happened in front of Casey…

No. He couldn't let that happen. Not when their marriage, their life, was finally getting back on track again.

Get your shit together, asshole. The past is the past and it needs to stay that way. Bury all those feelings, just like you buried your children.

Not the most pleasant of images, but it did the trick.

And by the time church let out, he had his lie all prepared when Casey asked what had happened.

"A little stomach problem." He gave her his best embarrassed smile. "Guess I shouldn't have had those extra sausages with breakfast."

She shook her head and laughed, never knowing the person she trusted most in life was lying to her.

Again.

That evening, two hours north of Rocky Point, where Alec and Casey were busy putting Jennifer to bed and cleaning up the dinner mess, Dr. Eddie Trano was sitting down to watch the first night of the summer Olympics. He didn't particularly care about any of the events; at the age of sixty-eight, it was his firm belief the integrity of the games was long gone, another victim of corporate greed. Too many events held at night, interrupting regular programs, and too many "spotlight" pieces on athletes, as far as he was concerned. All of it only for TV ratings. But it was still better than game shows or reality TV, and the ballgame was already over, so he'd fixed a beer and a ham sandwich and resigned himself to sitting through endless commentary from monotone announcers until he fell asleep.

Things were going just as he'd planned until something hit him in the chest, waking him from a doze during one of the swimming events.

"What the…?" Trano looked down at the object sitting in his lap. It was a figurine Marge had bought on their first trip to Germany, back in 1956. A figurine that had sat on the fireplace mantle since the day they'd brought it home.

The mantle that was all the way across the room.

Trano stood up, the figurine clutched in his hand.

Someone's in the house!

His wife was dead and his children all lived out of state, which meant there could only be one explanation: an intruder.

He ran through the possibilities as he hurried over to his gun cabinet. Since Marge's passing, he'd taken to keeping it unlocked—just in case.

Was it teenagers playing a prank? Or a thief with the mistaken idea that an old man would be easy prey?

Trano smiled as he slid a double-barreled shotgun out and loaded in two rounds of rock salt. It wouldn't kill, but it would hurt like a bastard. He'd used the gun not two weeks earlier; blasted away a couple of squirrels who'd started raiding the bird feeders he kept in the backyard. So he knew his aim was still spot on.

Flicking the safety off, he headed across the room toward the kitchen, wondering how long the intruder had been watching him. Fifteen minutes? Twenty?

Jesus. He could have killed me and stolen everything. The fact that the mysterious person had chosen to play a prank instead led him to believe it was just teenagers. Probably those idjit Olsen brothers from down the road, whacked out on dope as usual. It was for that reason he'd only chosen rock salt. Killing the neighbors wouldn't be the best idea, even though he'd be doing the world a favor by preventing them from breeding more idiots.

Maybe I can shoot them in the groin.

A quick glance at the kitchen showed it was empty. There were no places to hide in the small room. He was about to turn back when a slight movement caught his eye.

A large carving knife hovered in the air by the sink.

Trano had time to think *What the hell?* and then the knife turned into an arrow, shooting across the room and burying itself to the hilt in his chest. He opened his mouth to scream but the only sound that escaped him was the hissing of air leaking from his punctured lung. There was a moment of horribly intense pain, an agony so great his legs gave out and he collapsed to the floor. Then all feeling disappeared, leaving behind a gray fog that covered his vision and numbed both body and brain.

As the last seconds of his life ticked away, he thought he heard someone laughing.

"Guilt is a lot like rage, Alec. It can drive you crazy. Heck, it can kill you. It eats you up from the inside until there's nothing left but a shell. That's why I'm glad you're here."

Dr. Beth Tetler smiled at Alec, unaware that each word she spoke pierced his heart like a tiny blade coated in vinegar.

He nodded, hoping she couldn't see through him to the real cause of his guilt. He'd stopped seeing her while Casey was still in the hospital, convinced that nothing she said would ever lift the heavy tonnage of self-reproach off his back. But after Father Hayden's

sermon, and his own reaction to it, he'd decided it was time to let the poison out, tell the truth about what had happened that day, and who better to confess to than a person bound by law to keep it a secret? It probably wouldn't change things with him and Casey, but maybe, just *maybe*, Dr. Tetler might have some advice as to how he could manage his guilt better until he worked up the courage to confess to his wife.

Except now that he'd settled into the black leather recliner, facing his shrink eye to eye, he found his nerve was deserting him faster than a rat fleeing a sinking ship.

And I'm the rat. Of course, he couldn't say that out loud. Instead, he found himself telling his usual story of being haunted by feelings that he could have—should have—done more.

"What more could you have done?" Dr. Tetler asked, her deep green eyes filled with compassion behind her trendy cat's eye glasses. "That's the question you have to ask yourself. If the answer is nothing, then you have no reason to feel guilty."

"So why do I?" Alec felt the truth cringing deep inside him, curling into the fetal position inside that little box he kept triple-locked and hidden in the back of a mental closet. He wished he could join it.

Tetler gave him a half smile that blended in with the lines on her face and neck until it almost disappeared.

"If I knew the answer to that, I'd be a millionaire. Guilt is a funny thing, Alec. It has the ability to take the truth and twist it around, mold it into things that seem right but aren't. It defies logic. Think about it. A man decides to take a different plane than the one he was scheduled for. The first plane goes down and everyone dies. So why does this man suffer from survivor's guilt? He didn't cause the plane to go down. He didn't know anyone on the plane. He should be rejoicing that he lived, but instead he feels an irrational guilt for not dying."

Tetler pointed a pencil-thin finger at him.

"And that is you to a tee," she said. "What could you have done differently? Gone back in time and attacked the bear before it got to your camp? Or perhaps used your ability to see into the future and camped somewhere else? Or maybe just waited an hour to go get wood for the fire, waited until after dark so you could break a leg in the woods."

"I see your point." Alec made sure he sounded like he really believed her. "I need to think logically, rather than emotionally." He was parroting her own words from a previous session back to her, but she nodded emphatically.

"Yes! You must be like Mr. Spock from that space show. In this case, if you keep telling

yourself there was nothing else you could do, eventually your subconscious will begin to believe it as well, and then the guilt will no longer control you."

The tiny clock on the doctor's desk dinged softly, indicating their time was up. Alec wondered how she timed things so well. He sighed and stood. Although he took care not to show it, he wished he hadn't come. It had been a waste, thanks mainly to his own cowardice.

Always the coward. There. Here. At home.

"Thanks, Doc. I'll try to do that."

"Yes, good." She walked him to the door and said goodbye. As he walked down the hallway, she called out to him.

"Remember. Just ask yourself, what more could I have done?"

He waved, fighting back a scream of frustration.

What more could I have done? Fuck you, you old bat. I could have not run away! If you knew the truth, you'd be telling me what a piece of shit I am, not teaching me how to rid myself of guilt. Guilt that I deserve.

He continued berating himself all the way to his car, but then paused as he unlocked the door.

Teaching me how to rid myself of guilt.

Did it matter if the guilt was logical or illogical?

After all, could he have made a difference? He'd been twenty feet away from his wife and children when the bear attacked Casey. What chance would an unarmed man have had against a bear? Didn't everyone tell him he was lucky he hadn't been there, because he'd be dead too? Did the reason he wasn't there really matter?

Perhaps, in the end, it didn't matter what he'd done or not done—the end result would have been *worse* had he acted differently.

It wouldn't be just Nick and Sue who were dead. All four of them would have been killed, leaving Jennifer an orphan.

The question was, did he really believe that, and could he convince his subconscious of his new logic?

He had to try. For his sake, for his family's sake, he had to try.

There was nothing else I could do. There was nothing else I could do.

He slid behind the wheel, repeating his new mantra in his head as he started the car.

As he drove, he did his best to ignore his subconscious, which kept trying to have the last word.

You ran away and left them to die.

Had he known it was his last day on Earth, Police Chief Homer Watkins might have done things differently.

Then again, he might not have.

His favorite thing in all the world was fishing. He'd loved it since the first time his father had taken him, way back on his eighth birthday. He'd tried to instill that same love in his own two children, Abby and Ellie, and for a while it had seemed as if they'd take to it, too. But girls will be girls and all too soon they'd reached that age where they preferred to do girl things with their mother and their friends. Then, of course, they'd found men. Eventually both had gotten married and moved away, Abby to Las Vegas, where she and her good-for-nothing husband worked as blackjack dealers and lived in a crappy two-bedroom apartment, and Ellie to California, where she'd gotten divorced and moved in with her "friend" Serena, in a very nice one-bedroom apartment. Neither of them called home very often, partly because Homer objected to both their lifestyles, and partly because they'd both turned out to be rather selfish, concerned more with their own problems in life than the love of family.

So it was no real surprise Homer had chosen to go fishing on his day off. He could have visited his wife's grave, but lately he'd been finding excuses to avoid the cemetery. Not that he missed Helen any less, just that he'd begun thinking that after ten years in the grave perhaps she felt it would be good for him to not come every day.

In a way, he had Alec Winter to thank for that. Not long after that terrible accident in the woods, and the subsequent rescue of Casey Winter, he'd started contemplating his life and how he'd been in a funk, as the kids called it, ever since Helen had died. Looking back, those years seemed all gray and fuzzy, as if he'd been living in a fog, living in it so long that he'd forgotten it was there.

But the death of Winter's children, and the amazing tale of Alec's heroism and Casey's survival, had woken him from his daze. Made him realize in ways his wife's death never did that life is short, and you should try to be happy as much as possible.

So he'd made a conscious effort to stop thinking about how and where he'd gone wrong with his kids, and how lucky other families were, and how much it totally fucking sucked that his wife was dead, and instead focused on what was good in his life. The good times he'd had with Helen. The fact that neither of his children were in jail, or dead, or druggies. The simple pleasures he could still enjoy despite getting on in years.

Like fishing.

Which was why when his day off came around, there'd been no thought of calling his

kids, spending extra time at the station catching up on paperwork, or crying at his wife's grave.

The sun was shining, it wasn't that hot for August, and there was a nice section of river running right through the back end of his property where he could fish without worrying about anyone interrupting him.

So he'd gathered his pole and creel, packed a couple sandwiches and a thermos of coffee, and set off through the woods for a day of relaxation.

It was the silence that gave Homer his first clue that something wasn't right.

Stream and river fishing is serene sport, with real enthusiasts choosing their spots carefully to maximize the tranquility factor. Homer's regular place was a wide stretch of river with a short strip of sandy beach separating the water from the scrub forest that made up the back acreage of his property. No matter what the season, it was peaceful. But in summer it was also especially beautiful. Sunlight filtered through the leaves, creating a green dome through which zebra stripes of shadow and light patterned the sand where he faithfully placed his chair, so that he never got too hot or cold. It was the perfect spot as far as he was concerned, open enough so that the breezes off the river could reach him, secluded enough so that he could achieve his own state of personal nirvana.

However, it was never completely silent.

Once a person isn't talking, isn't listening to a radio, isn't bustling about, it's impossible not to notice that the woods are filled with sounds. Insects buzzing and chirping. Birds singing single and multi-tone melodies. Leaves rustling as a breeze weaves its way through them. The tinkling notes of the water as it ripples around rocks. The occasional burping of a frog or the splashing of a jumping fish.

Small sounds, the kinds of sounds that quickly blend into the background, unnoticed as the sun warms the body and the mind drifts away in thought, or lack of it.

Unnoticed until they're gone.

Homer grew aware of the unnatural quiet when he opened his eyes to reach for a beer. His hand was halfway to the cooler when he stopped, trying to figure out what it was that didn't seem right.

In a silence broken only by the melodic sounds of the river, the only other thing he could hear was the ringing of his ears, that buzzing, cricket-y noise you normally only hear when you wake up late at night in an empty house.

Somethin' ain't right.

His instinctive reaction was to jump up from his chair and turn around, his eyes

scanning the woods and his hand automatically dropping down to the pistol holstered at his waist. Ever since that bear attacked the Winter family, he'd never gone into the woods unarmed.

Nothing moved at the tree line, or as far back into the woods as he could see.

Homer stood perfectly still, decades of hunting and law enforcement training coming together, his body doing exactly what it was supposed to without any conscious thought on his part. He strained his ears, trying to catch any sounds that might indicate something was out there. A branch snapping. Brush rustling. A grunt or growl.

Nothing.

In his mind, he ran through the checklist of dangerous animals in the area. Black bear were pretty common, although they rarely bothered people.

Tell that to the Winters' children. But then that had been an aberration. The bear had been half-starved and in pain, thanks to an infected wound from a gunshot. No, more often than not bears preferred to go out of their way to avoid humans.

There were still some bobcats left, but they weren't large enough to send the whole forest into hiding. A mountain lion might do it, but it'd been decades since one had been seen in the area.

That left only one other possibility: a person.

Although anyone in the woods would've had to cut through Homer's property to get there, it wasn't unheard of. A few of the local fellows, trying to get a fat buck before hunting season started, wouldn't give a damn about No Trespassing signs. And they could be more dangerous than bear, with itchy trigger fingers and brains that had to work overtime just to form a sentence.

On the other hand, he knew how to take care of a few half-wit poachers. Unless they were completely drunk, they'd head for their trucks as soon as they knew he was there.

"Hey!" He let the echo of his shout die away before continuing. "This is Chief Watkins! If there's someone out there, you're on private property. Private property owned by a cop. You hear me? Either show yourselves or get the hell out of here!"

His words faded away, leaving only that strange silence. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that someone was watching him. You couldn't be a good cop without having a sort of sixth sense for danger, and for knowing when someone had their eyes on you. He felt their gaze, the impression of being stared at heavy in the atmosphere.

"Hey! You hear me? I know you're there!"

This time there was a noise in the aftermath of his shout. A giggle of laughter, so light

and quiet it blended into the watery chime of the eddies in the river.

Tinkle-tee-hee-tinkle.

Homer frowned. It wasn't the sound he'd expect an adult to make, even if that person was playing games with him. It was too silly and self-indulgent.

Childlike.

The laughter came again, closer this time, and it sent shivers up his back. The innocence of it was oddly menacing, as if it was somehow too pure, too sweet. It brought a long-lost image to Homer's mind. He'd been eight years old and one of his classmates, a boy named Mark Sperry, had shoved a pin right into the big bubble in the throat of a frog he'd caught. Just to see what happened.

Mark's laughter had been full of innocence too, while he watched the frog's eyes pop clear out of its head.

Last I heard, Mark was doing hard time for rape.

His hand, which had strayed from his gun when he thought it might just be small children in the woods, returned to the comforting grip of the pistol.

Homer kept his eyes to the woods, the sensation of being watched growing stronger, the silence growing more intimidating. He waited for more laughter, hoping to get an idea of where the little bastards were hiding, but either they'd gotten control of themselves or they were trying to convince him they were gone.

He didn't believe it for a second.

Something splashed loudly in the river behind him, too loud to be a fish. *A stone thrown from the woods, most likely.* He prepared himself for what was probably coming next. The little fuckers planned on tossing rocks at him? Well, let them try. He pointed the gun at the sky and fired a single shot, the report echoing off the water and rocks before the forest swallowed it. A few birds took off from their hidden roosts, circled several times and then alighted again.

Then nothing.

Homer waited, a tiny smile curving the ends of his lips. Had he scared them off? Were they even now slinking back down a trail to the road? Or were they cowering behind a tree, afraid the big bad man with the gun was going to come looking for them? Either way, it didn't matter. He'd accomplished his goal of letting them know who was boss. Maybe they'd think twice next time before starting—

Sudden pain flared in the back of his leg and he almost fell onto the sand. He turned and saw a golf ball-sized rock rolling away.

"Son of a bitch."

The little bastards were on the other side of the river, too. They'd set him up. He waved the gun in the air.

"You want some of this? I'm a cop, dammit! Git your asses home before you get in real trouble!"

Frustration replaced his previous fear and the self-satisfaction that had followed it. He was pushing sixty-three. No way could he chase kids through the woods and hope to catch them. And he certainly couldn't shoot them. That'd be a PR nightmare. He'd lose his job, his pension, everything. Even if it was justified because he felt his life was in danger. Hell, he couldn't even call the station and have a few men sent out, since he never brought his cell phone with him when he fished.

Which left only one option.

Admit defeat and go home.

"What the hell. Day's ruined anyhow." He knew he'd never recapture the serenity of the morning. Might as well head back, fix a snack and wait for the ballgame to start.

He packed up his folding chair, rod and cooler and headed back down the trail toward his house. Something thumped on the beach just as he entered the woods but he ignored it. Let the little shits have their fun. Odds were good he'd catch them at something else sooner or later; kids like that usually ended up in the back of his car at some point.

He'd only been walking a minute or two when another stone crashed into the dead leaves off to one side of the trail. Homer felt his anger returning.

Damn punks are going to follow me all the way home? Who the hell do they think they are?

He slowed down a bit and stepped carefully, doing his best not to make any noise. His thought was to draw them closer so he could get a glimpse of their faces. Or maybe even catch one of them. It would probably mean taking a direct hit or two from a rock, but then he could add assaulting a police officer to the other charges he planned to drop on the bastards.

Sure enough, he'd only taken another step when a stone struck him right between the shoulder blades. He winced, not only from the pain but the dreaded anticipation of where the next one would hit. Back? Ass? Or maybe his head. That last one made him cringe a little more, because a head shot from even a small child could do some real damage.

Pain blossomed in his right thigh, and then again in his lower back as two stony missiles hit in rapid sequence.

"Screw this." Homer dropped his gear and ducked behind an old pine, then peeked around to see where the miniature snipers were.

Except there was nothing to see but trees.

The back of his head exploded in agony and he fell to his knees. He put a hand to the already sizeable lump and it came away bloody.

"Mother-*fuckers*!" Homer's voice rose to a shout as he stood up. A terrible rage filled him, red as the blood trickling down his neck, powerful enough to force any considerations of public opinion out of his head.

He pulled his gun, stepped onto the trail and fired four quick shots, two down each direction of the path.

"You wanna play, you fucks? C'mon and play! I'll blow your asses to kingdom come!"

More of the creepy giggling drifted through the still air. Homer went to one knee, gun held in both hands, as if he were facing off against an armed felon. His anger was still burning bright but some of the earlier fear was returning. There was something decidedly not right about the situation and it had him reconsidering whether it really was just some jerk-off kids stalking him.

A bug-shit crazy maniac could just as easily laugh like that. Just because we're a small town and there's never been any murders don't mean there can't be a first time.

He thought about high school and college kids shooting up their classrooms. That could happen anywhere, too. When you really considered it, the odds were greater that he was dealing with a lunatic than some kids.

More giggling. It seemed to come from his left and right at the same time.

Maybe a whole group of psychos. Hopped up on drugs. Or one of them cults, out to kill a cop and get some publicity.

The fear grew worse, growing over and around his anger like a vine strangling a tree.

Shit. I'm a fucking sitting duck out here.

Forgetting his fishing gear, Homer stood and slowly made his way down the trail toward his property, alternating between facing forward and walking backward. Sweat dripped down his neck in tiny rivulets, mixing with the blood from his scalp wound. His hand trembled in time with the rapid beating of his heart. He tried to take slow, easy breaths but his adrenaline was pumping too hard.

Ten minutes of careful walking brought him to the end of the woods and the beginning of his wide backyard. A sense of relief filled him, so strong his knees almost buckled from it. His house, only fifty yards away now, was a beacon, a safe haven where he could finally

take control of the situation again.

Homer increased his pace, power-walking through the yellow, sun-roasted grass, glancing back occasionally to make sure his hidden enemies weren't racing toward him.

He was thirty feet from his house and already picturing calling in the entire police force when a sudden barrage of stones came out of nowhere, tiny meteors that struck him all over. He fell to the ground with a cry, covering his head with his arms while rocks hit him with enough force to bruise skin and draw blood even through his clothing.

Something heavy pounded against his ankle and the crack of breaking bone reached his ears, accompanied by a burst of stomach-turning agony. This time his shout was more of a scream. He risked a glance and saw a rock the size of a softball near his leg.

Terrified for his life, Homer scurried on his hands and knees toward the house, ignoring the hard ground tearing through his clothes and the continued onslaught of deadly rocks raining down on him. All his thoughts centered on getting inside.

He made it to his back porch without any other serious injuries, and said a quick prayer of thanks as he grasped the wrought-iron railing and pulled himself up. Balancing on his one good foot and gritting his teeth against the pain, he reached for the door knob.

And then screamed again as a fist-sized rock smashed against his other hand, the one still on the railing.

This time the sound of bone being crushed was lost in the metallic ring of stone against metal. Cradling his mangled hand, he fell right through the screen door into the kitchen.

Several stones banged against the door and on the stairs, but Homer paid them no mind. Unaware of the tears running down his cheeks, he pulled himself across the linoleum to the tiny decorative phone stand in one corner. With his one functioning hand he dialed the station house, leaving bloody smears on the keypad in the process.

"Greene Police. How can I help you?" At that moment, the nasally voice of Mary Dennis, the day shift phone operator, was the most beautiful sound Homer had ever heard.

"Mary, it's Homer. I've got an emergency situation at my house. A bunch of teenagers bombing the place with rocks. Send every car, and an ambulance. They broke my goddamn foot and my hand!"

"Jesus, Chief! Right away. Hang in there."

Homer hung up the phone and levered himself to a standing position. With only one foot and one hand there wasn't much he could do, but by God he could at least watch the yard and try to get a positive ID on any of the little cocksuckers.

He had time for one moment of confusion when it seemed there was an eclipse going

on outside, a perfect circle of black blotting out the sun.

Then the ten-pound rock came through the window, shattering glass and the bones of his face with equal ease. So painful were his injuries that he never even felt the shards that sank deep into his throat, cutting through flesh and blood vessels.

Homer's last thoughts weren't of his wife, or his kids, or his job. They were about the pain.

Then he died with a long, wet gasp.

Childish giggling filled the silence that followed, until the first police cars arrived.

For the second time in a week, a voice from his past ruined Alec's breakfast. This time it was Terrance Bell, a person whose very name set Alec's stomach churning.

"Is there a problem?" Alec asked, as soon as the insurance investigator identified himself.

A host of emotions sprang to life inside Alec, with rage, sorrow, disgust and fear all fighting each other for dominance. A sickening case of déjà vu struck Alec as he relived his previous encounters with Bell, none of which had been pleasant. He considered the man a prissy, egotistical jerkoff who had about as much compassion as the average scorpion.

Rationally, he knew Bell wasn't actually to blame; it wouldn't have mattered who the insurance company sent to investigate Sue and Nick's deaths, Alec would have hated that person just as much. Bell had only done his job. But to Alec, and Casey as well, that job had been an insult. As if they'd somehow planned to have a bear attack their campsite and kill their children just so they could collect the meager life insurance policies they'd had on them. Policies Alec's parents had purchased, as gifts, something they'd done for all their grandchildren, the idea being that in twenty years the policies could be cashed in and used to pay off college loans or put toward a wedding.

Instead, they'd paid for two funerals.

It hadn't helped that the investigation only added fuel to the fire of Alec's guilt, causing him to react to every one of Bell's required questions as if they were overt accusations.

"I believe so, although not the kind you're probably thinking of," the nasally voice on the other end of the phone replied. "This has nothing to do with your children's case, and I'm not acting in an official capacity. But it does have something to do with the events of that day. Would it be possible for us to meet?"

Alec's stomach lurched and he fought down the urge to vomit. Something to do with the events of that day? Had Bell figured out the truth? What did he mean by he wasn't acting

in an official capacity? Did he have some kind of blackmail planned?

Forcing a calmness he didn't feel into his voice, he asked, "Where are you? Did you want to meet for lunch?"

"Yes, lunch is fine," Bell said, sounding relieved. "I only live twenty minutes from you. Just tell me when and where."

After arranging to meet at a diner on the edge of town, Alec played back the call in his mind. Something odd was going on, something that had Bell… Well, it almost seemed the diminutive investigator had been frightened of something.

But what?

Alec tossed his half-eaten breakfast into the trash and grabbed a handful of antacids from the cabinet. He grimaced as he washed them down with the last of his coffee.

It looked like it was going to be one of *those* days.

After grabbing his briefcase and jacket, he headed off to the first of his two morning appointments.

Alec stared at Terrance Bell and wondered how quickly he could get away from him.

Bell's obvious insanity had made itself known within minutes of their sitting down at the table, but as he spoke, the depth of his delusions had grown to the point where Alec was beginning to fear for his own safety.

The insurance investigator paused to take a breath and Alec took the opportunity to speak.

"Um, seriously? You're trying to tell me that all three of those people were killed because they were somehow involved in the deaths of my children?"

"Yes." Bell nodded, his head bouncing up and down on his lollipop-stick neck. "On the surface it doesn't seem possible, I know. But in my business we're trained to look at facts objectively. Without emotion. And then to take those facts and create an explanation or hypothesis where they all fit together. In this case, we have three deaths. What do they have in common? They all occurred in the same town. They were all people who were involved with saving the lives of you and your wife. They all occurred either on or soon after the one-year anniversary of your rescue. Therefore, it is logical to assume they have to be related to the events of that day in some manner."

"When you say it like that, it sounds like Casey or I should be a suspect in the murders," Alec said, hoping his facetious answer would drive some sense into Bell's insane theory.

Instead, Bell gave him a ghastly smile and nodded, his pale face bobbing on his pencil

neck like a grotesque mushroom grown too heavy for its stalk.

"That's quite right. In fact, I'd imagine you *would* be a suspect if the people had wronged you instead of saving you. It would take a true crazy person to murder the people he owed his life to. I would also guess you have a pretty good alibi for yourself regarding the times of the murders. However, the fact that you are likely innocent doesn't mean someone else didn't want those people dead."

Alec had reached the end of his patience.

"Mr. Bell, I think it's you who's the crazy one." He got up to leave, his hand dipping into his pocket for some dollar bills to pay for his coffee.

"Wait!" Bell caught Alec's hand in his own spider-like fingers. "I'm not through. There's also the map."

"Map?" Alec retrieved his hand from Bell's weak grasp but didn't move away from the table.

"Look." Bell dug frantically into his briefcase and drew out a piece of paper that he placed on the table. From what Alec could tell, it was a printout from a Mapquest search. A series of red dots had been drawn on it, with red lines connecting the first four and then black dotted lines joining the first group to another group of two dots much farther down on the paper.

"All I see are green squares and red dots," Alec said. But inside he went a little cold. Something about the map was familiar…

"This point represents the approximate location of your campsite." Bell tapped the first red dot, then moved his finger along the red line, tapping each of the closely spaced points of red. "Here is where David Gregg's body was found. Here is Dr. Eddie Trano's house, in Greene. And here is Chief Watkins' house. Notice anything about the pattern?"

Despite his desire to leave, Alec sat down and took a closer look at the paper. Once he oriented the map so that north was at the top, he immediately saw what Bell was referring to.

"The line goes from north to south."

"Actually, it heads southeast from Catskill Park," Bell corrected. "And this point? Do you recognize it?" He tapped the final red dot.

"That's my house, isn't it?" Alec said, recognizing the shape of Rockland County near the bottom of the page.

"Yes. And the one just above it is mine. Whatever killed Gregg, Trano and Watkins is moving in a straight line towards us."

"Whatever". Not "whoever". The distinction wasn't lost on Alec. *More proof that this guy is nuttier than a peanut bar.*

Not that the whole thing wasn't more than a little spooky. Alec was willing to consider there was some kind of link between the three deaths. After all, they'd been in the same town. A crazy person, perhaps. Someone with a grudge against rescue personnel.

Maybe even Bell himself.

That idea sent a major shiver up Alec's back. After all, it was Bell who had decided to draw the line between the deaths upstate in Greene and his and Alec's houses. It would have been just as easy to extend the line north instead of south. Or west, if you considered the town of Greene as one big point and Catskill Park as another.

Alec decided it was time to make his exit.

"Well, you've given me a lot to think about, Mr. Bell," he said, getting up again and dropping his money on the table. "But I have to get back to work. Have a nice day."

"You don't believe me." Bell stood also, blocking Alec's departure. "Don't you get it? Our lives are in danger! Yours, mine, our families. Something's out there and it's coming for us. You can't ignore the evidence."

"Actually, I can and I will." Alec slid past the cadaverous-thin insurance inspector. "If you're so sure about this, take it to the police. But don't bother me again."

Alec headed for the exit, Bell's protests diminishing in volume behind him until the closing door cut them off for good.

Jesus, what a kook.

Still, the uneasy feeling in his stomach stayed with him while he drove to his next appointment. It wasn't until he got involved in negotiating his best sale of the month at a large medical practice that he finally forgot about his trepidations.

By the time five o'clock rolled around, Alec was more than ready to go home, fix a drink and celebrate the big bonus check he was going to get.

Ten days after the death of Homer Watkins, Alec made a last minute executive decision as he and Casey were getting ready for work.

"Call in sick today. We're taking Jennifer to the zoo."

"The what?" Casey's sleep-crusted eyes opened in shock.

"The zoo. You know, that big park filled with animals?"

"Very funny. Now stop being a jerk and tell me what's going on." Casey went to her closet and began laying out her clothes for the day, a pair of black slacks that matched her

panties and bra.

"What's going on is that we haven't done anything fun as a family in ages, and they're saying today is one of the top ten days of the summer—clear, sunny and only eighty. What do you say? It's the middle of the week, so the place won't be crowded. Then we can grab lunch somewhere afterwards."

Halfway to the bathroom, Casey paused and Alec knew he almost had her convinced. He'd been worried his comment about family time might have the wrong effect, but she hadn't even flinched.

Not waiting for her answer, and hoping to force her hand, he stepped past her and pulled a pair of jeans and a T-shirt out of his dresser.

"I'm going, and I'm taking Jennifer with me. Are you in, or are you gonna be a corporate drone today?"

Alec really hoped she'd say yes. He'd tried to remember if she'd said anything about being especially busy this week. She was the office manager at a company that manufactured hand tools and construction supplies, and her workload went up and down based on the time of year and whether or not the company was running any specials. If she was slow, her boss, Abe Fishburn, wouldn't have a problem with her calling in at the last minute.

For Alec, taking off simply meant logging into his corporate portal and clicking "paperwork" on his daily log. As a pharmaceutical sales rep, he basically set his own hours and days, since he only had to spend four days a month in the actual office, except for special meetings.

Casey chewed her lower lip, something she always did when she was having trouble making a decision. Alec already had his jeans and shirt on and was reaching for his sneakers when she relaxed into a smile.

"Oh, what the hell. Let's do it!"

For Alec, their first few hours at the zoo were better than he'd hoped they would be. Nothing they did was exceptional, but just being together, holding hands, laughing—there was a quality to it that he knew had been missing from their lives for too long.

For him, it was as if they'd travelled back in time, back to when Nick was still their only child. In those days, they'd had the whole world ahead of them and every day seemed better than the one before it. Sure, money was tighter then, but doing simple things together—like going to the zoo—had given them more joy than fancy dinners or Broadway shows or expensive vacations. Even after Sue came along, family had stayed the most important thing

in their lives. Alec became a Little League coach and a Cub Scouts troop master just to have quality time with Nick. And when Sue got old enough to join the Brownies, Casey added assistant troop leader to her already long list of motherly duties.

And Cub Scouts and Brownies had led to camping, which led to…

Stop it. Don't go down that line of thinking. This is the beginning of a new life for everyone.

He turned to Casey, who was pushing Jennifer in the stroller.

"Hey, how about ice cream? It comes in plastic cups with animal faces on them."

By then the sun was baking them pretty well, and Casey gave him a grateful look.

"That sounds great. We'll wait over there." She pointed to a bench that was nicely shaded by a large tree.

"Be right back."

While he waited in line at the snack bar, Alec took out his phone and scrolled through his emails, highlighting work-related messages to read when they got home, and deleting the junk. In the process, he came across a couple of messages from one of his college buddies, who loved sending politically incorrect jokes and photos.

Chuckling at a picture of a midget trapped between the naked breasts of a six-hundred pound woman (*"I* thought *I dropped something at lunch!"* was the caption), it took him a second to notice there was a commotion going on around him.

Looking up, he saw people pointing, all of them with alarmed expressions. Several were commenting in loud voices.

"Look at that!"

"Oh, my God."

"Somebody help her!"

Turning, he saw a woman chasing a baby stroller down a path. For a moment he felt a surge of anger. What kind of parent let their kid's stroller roll away like that?

Then he recognized the pink T-shirt the woman was wearing.

Casey!

For the rest of his days, Alec never knew if he shouted her name out loud or if it was just in his head. All he remembered later was taking off after his wife and child and the world shrinking into a tunnel around him, where the only thing he could see was Casey chasing after Jennifer. How the stroller had gotten to such a speed on flat ground, how it was able to take the turns and stay on the path—hell, how it could roll away on its own at all!—none of that entered his mind at first. The only thing he focused on was trying to save them.

In the normal world, the worst that could happen would be the stroller tipping over or

Casey falling down. Scrapes, cuts, maybe a broken bone or two. But something in his brain told him there was more going on than just a runaway stroller. It was still picking up speed, actually increasing the distance between it and Casey's outstretched arms.

Alec ran past a wooden sign and a sick feeling erupted in his stomach.

The stroller was headed for the black bear enclosure.

Impossible! his mind screamed. There was no way it could happen. The path took too many turns. But even as he thought it, the stroller banked hard to the left, rising up on its right wheels to take the sharp curve.

"No!" Casey's scream came back to him as if from miles away, stretched out and distorted like a train's horn speeding past.

Alec forced his legs to move faster, suddenly sure the stroller was going to make the remaining turns and take flight, sail right over the safety wall of the bear enclosure. He slammed into onlookers and bounced off without feeling the impact, startled shouts and harsh words nothing but white noise to his ears. He felt as if he were running a race that someone had fixed. He could see himself getting closer to Casey, but Jennifer's stroller continued to put more distance between them.

The stroller wheeled around the next turn like an Indy racer and Alec swore he heard Jennifer laughing at the top of her lungs. She'd never had any fear; she loved being tossed in the air, ran into water without a care for going under and approached all dogs with a smile. *"Doggie! Doggie!"* she'd say, ignoring all warnings to be careful around animals she didn't know.

And more than anything else, she loved to go fast, whether it was in her stroller, a shopping cart or a ride at the amusement park.

Her laughter now in the face of death didn't surprise Alec one bit.

Someone grabbed his arm and he was startled to see it was Casey. With all his attention focused on Jennifer he hadn't noticed he'd caught up to his wife.

"Get…get…her!" she gasped, her face flushed and sweaty from running. Then he was past her, not even bothering to answer, saving all his oxygen for his already aching muscles. He thought he heard her shout *"Save my baby!"* but he couldn't be sure.

Jennifer's stroller completed the last curve in the path and somehow accelerated into the straightaway that led to the black bear enclosure. Alec put everything he had into moving his legs faster and through watering eyes he saw that he'd actually gained a few feet on his daughter's out of control cart. Laughter floated back to him and the hairs on his neck stood up as he realized it wasn't Jennifer's.

Yet he recognized it all the same.

No! It can't be! It sounds like—

"Look! That stroller's gonna hit the wall!"

A stranger's voice brought Alec's attention back to the danger at hand. Jennifer's stroller was headed straight for the waist-high cement wall that surrounded the sunken enclosure housing the black bears. The wall was topped by a three-foot high iron fence that curved inward so that even if one of the bears managed the incredible feat of climbing a ten-foot smooth wall it still wouldn't be able to escape its pen.

That same wall represented both danger and rescue for Jennifer. If her stroller hit at full speed, it was bound to flip or break or crush in on itself like an accordion. And Jennifer, made of only flesh and bone, would suffer as a result. Alec pictured her arms or legs snapping, her head smashing onto the blacktop or into the wall, pieces of metal from the canopy or handles piercing her like spears.

However, the wall would also make it impossible for her to roll into the pen.

Alec saw with frightening clarity that the stroller wouldn't slow and he wouldn't reach it in time. There were only a few feet left before the inevitable collision and his only hope was that he could scoop her up fast and rush her to the nearest first aid station.

Time slowed to half speed as he sprinted the last few steps. Ahead of him, the carriage crashed into the wall at exactly the point he'd predicted. The back end rose up and Jennifer's body sailed out, her arms and legs waving in giddy fashion, an ecstatic smile on her face.

Alec came to a stop, although he didn't know it at the time, his body and thoughts immobilized by shock as he tried to comprehend the scene before him.

Never mind that Jennifer shouldn't have been ejected at all, that her seatbelt should have kept her in the stroller.

She was still rising upward like a leaf caught in a breeze.

Onlookers cried out and gasped as Jennifer floated up and up and up, following a flight vector that defied gravity. And although he never said a word to anyone later—not the police, not the press—it wasn't until she was over the top of the iron fence that she began to move forward and downward in a gradual arc. He saw it clear as day, his eyes following her descent into the jaws of death.

"*No!*" Something hard shoved him to one side. Casey sprinted past, practically a blur as she raced for the wall. People screamed at her to stop but she never paused, just leaped up onto the cement barrier and then jumped again, somehow managing to land on the curved bars.

And then she was gone.

Time froze for Alec. His body refused to move. He stared at the spot where Casey and Jennifer had disappeared, waiting for them to pop right back up, safe and laughing and not a scratch on them.

"Holy shit! That lady jumped into the bear den!"

That first exclamation started a cacophony of shouts and cries for help. It also broke Alec's paralysis. He sprinted to the wall and climbed up, kicking away the hands of people who tried to grab him. Unlike Casey he didn't jump onto the bars; instead, he seized hold of them and pulled himself up until he reached the curved summit.

Holding on as tight as he could, he tried to peer between the bars to catch sight of Casey, but the inward curve of the cement wall blocked his view. All he saw was the back end of a bear lumbering out of sight. Noises echoed up from below him, horrible gnashing sounds his brain refused to process. Then a different sound reached him.

The sound of a baby crying.

Alec looked to his left and nearly lost his grip.

Jennifer was hanging from a bar just three feet away, her pink jumper snagged on a bar that at some point in time had been bent so that it no longer curved down but stuck out at an angle. Her eyes were closed and her face was red from crying and wet with tears, but she looked safe and unhurt.

"Jen! Jennifer! It's Daddy!" Alec called to her as loud as he could but she didn't open her eyes, just kept bawling. Turning back to the crowd that had gathered, he cried out.

"Someone get help! My baby is caught on the fence! Hurry before she falls in!"

"I'm coming, sweetheart," he told Jennifer, although he couldn't tell if she heard him. It was something easier said than done. He had to back down the bars without falling between them, scuttle to his left and then climb back up. By the time he reached her and stuck his arm through the bars to grasp her by her jumper, two men in security uniforms had already shown up and were clambering up beside him with some kind of safety hook attached to a rope.

"Move back," one of them said, but Alec refused to let go and retreat down to the wall until he was sure they had Jennifer firmly attached to the rope. Even then he felt like a helpless fool as he watched two strangers slide his daughter off her perch and pull her up to safety.

Only when he had a shrieking Jennifer clutched in his arms did he let his thoughts turn to Casey.

"My wife," he said over Jennifer's shoulder, aiming his words at the security guards. In the distance, the despondent wail of sirens became audible. "Please, tell me…"

The two men exchanged glances and Alec knew right then she was dead. He'd seen those looks on peoples' faces before, back when he led the rescue team to the campsite.

But they'd been wrong about Casey then. Maybe…

"She could still be alive. You have to go check."

The taller of the two guards, whose name tag read "Larson", pursed his lips before answering.

"I'm sorry, but…between the fall and…" He turned away, looked toward the enclosure. For the first time, Alec heard people shouting and banging things.

They're chasing the bears away from your dead wife's body.

"I don't understand," he said, even though he did. It was as if someone else was speaking through his body.

"They're usually pretty calm," the second guard said. "We keep them overfed, and they're lazy to begin with. But a fall like that, there was blood, and—"

"Shut yer mouth," Larson told his partner in a harsh whisper. The man did as he was told, but by then it was too late. The image had already formed in Alec's mind, his brain using the memories of the campsite to create a picture so awful it actually hurt to see.

Then everything mercifully disappeared, painted over in solid black.

Alec spent the next four days in the hospital, alternating between bouts of weeping and falling into a dreamless sleep that was almost coma-like. When he was awake, he refused to eat and only gave in and drank something when the pain in his throat prevented him from sleeping.

He ate something on the third day, but only after his doctors threatened to have him transferred to the psychiatric unit if he continued his hunger strike.

Returning home was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do; back when they'd lost Nick and Sue, he and Casey had been able to lean on each other, provide support and comfort. Now he had no one, and on top of that he had to pick Jennifer up from her friend's house and explain that Mommy wasn't coming home, she'd gone to live with Nick and Sue in Heaven.

It took every ounce of will he had not to break down in front of her.

Only when he'd gotten Jen to sleep did he allow himself more tears, and even then it was downstairs so she wouldn't hear. He sat on the couch in the family room, a glass of scotch

in one hand and Casey's picture in the other, quietly raging at the incredible absurdity that fate had made of his life.

Bears. Goddamned fucking bears! First my children and now Casey. It's like something out of the National fucking Enquirer, or a sick fucking joke.

He hadn't read any newspapers or watched television since waking up, but he could imagine the headlines in the Post and the other rags. *Real-Life Goldilocks Doesn't Survive Second Bear Attack. Zoo Bears Finish What Their Cousin Started.*

And then there'd be the jokes on late night TV and Howard Stern. *Why'd the bear cross the road? To eat one of the Winter kids! Say, when does a bear not hibernate in Winter? When it's too busy eating one of them!*

All of that was bad enough, but there would be worse to come. The looks from people when he went out in public. The solemn condolences while eyes expressed different thoughts altogether, thoughts they most assuredly voiced when he was out of earshot.

"Jesus, the guy's whole family was eaten by bears. How's that for weird?" "I heard his wife actually jumped in with the bears to save her kid. I don't know if I could do that."

And the final kicker: *"He must be feeling like shit. First he couldn't save his kids, and then he couldn't save his wife."*

Feeling like shit. That was putting it mildly. Nobody would ever know how goddamned awful he felt. He couldn't even put it into words, not out loud, not in his own head. There *were* no words. They'd all been crushed under the thousand-ton weight of guilt and then beaten to pieces by the iron fists of remorse and self-reproach.

Because when it came down to it, everything was his fault.

He'd been the one to suggest the camping trip. *He'd* been the one to insist they go to the zoo.

And he'd been the one on both occasions who wasn't there when it mattered.

He'd run away the first time, leaving behind a wife who was badly injured and two children who were screaming for help. Sure, he'd overcome his fear and gone back, but by then it had been too late. Nick and Sue were dead, the bear gone, and the only witness to his shame was whatever God had sent the bear in the first place.

Then a year later he hadn't run fast enough. In fact, he'd just stood there while Casey gave up her life for her child. He could have stopped her. Could have pulled her down. Then they'd all still be together. But instead he'd simply watched like a statue while his wife threw her life away. And for what?

Nothing.

Alec's rage boiled over and he reared back to throw the picture across the room. At the last second he remembered Jennifer sleeping upstairs and he tried to stop his arm, but it was too late. The best he could do was change his aim, and the picture ended up bouncing harmlessly off the loveseat across from him.

Frustrated by the inability to release his pent-up anger and grief, he downed his scotch and reached for the bottle. Forgoing the glass, he tilted the bottle up and let the contents pour into his mouth. The alcohol carved a bittersweet track down his throat and merged painfully with the acids already percolating in his stomach. He swallowed six or seven times before he couldn't keep up and he coughed liquid fire into his nose.

His wrath temporarily bumped aside by the scotch-flavored lava in his nasal passages, he leaned back, intending to catch his breath before repeating the process.

Instead, he fell asleep.

And dreamed.

In his dreams, he was back at the zoo, where he and Jennifer's stroller were the only things moving. He raced past bystanders who were frozen in place, turned to living stone in the middle of whatever they'd been doing. Only their eyes followed his progress as he chased the stroller toward its inevitable crash site.

Just as it had in real life, the stroller hit the wall while he watched, helpless to stop it. Only this time he knew it was going to happen so he kept his eyes on Jen as she was ejected. Sure enough, she flew up into the air in the same impossible fashion as before. Only now it happened in slow motion, allowing Alec to see each detail.

Jen didn't fly out of the stroller as much as she rose up into the air, almost as if she were tied to invisible strings. Her mouth was open with laughter and her arms held out at her sides while she did her out-of-this-world trick. Then, at a height of almost ten feet off the ground, her body suddenly tilted forward and her trajectory changed, taking on an arc that should have landed her well into the bear enclosure.

Forcing his will on the dream, Alec froze her there and ran forward, climbed onto the wall and then up the bars to the spot where he'd first seen his daughter snagged on the errant iron bar.

Then he watched as Jen's descent started.

He gasped as once again she defied the laws of physics and gravity and her path brought her inward, back toward the bars.

One of which slowly bent upward to catch her.

Dream-Alec turned toward the immobile onlookers.

"Did you see that? Did anyone see that? The bar wasn't bent before! I remember! I remember!"

The crowd remained still, their eyes all facing him, their mouths unmoving.

So why did he hear people giggling with joy?

That laughter. I heard it before. When I was chasing the stroller.

But that wasn't the first time he'd heard it. It was familiar, as familiar as his own.

It was—

The transition from dream state to awake happened so smoothly Alec didn't even realize it at first. The childish laughter was still everywhere and nowhere, coming at him from all directions.

"Nicky? Sue?" Hearing his own voice alerted him to the fact he was no longer asleep.

Was he that far gone that he was hearing the laughter of his dead children? And if so, why did it sound mean? Evil? Nick and Sue had possessed the sweetest laughter in the world.

"Something's not right." His words brought more titters from the specters haunting his mind.

The bar on the fence.

In his dream, he'd seen it bending upward as Jennifer fell toward it. Before that, it had been shaped in a downward curve like its neighbors.

Before that.

"Jesus Christ on a popsicle stick."

He remembered now. He'd taken pictures of the bears earlier, before… And while he'd been doing that, he'd aimed the camera to the side to capture some birds perched on the bars.

And none of the bars had been curved.

No. I must be remembering wrong. Or that fucked up dream has made me crazy.

Alec stood up and then had to catch himself on the arm of the couch as he swayed dangerously to one side, the alcohol in his blood still messing with his equilibrium. Once he steadied himself, he made his way into the kitchen, where he remembered seeing the camera earlier. He had no recollection of putting it in his pocket at the zoo or taking it out when he got home from the hospital. But it was still there.

He turned it on and quickly scrolled through the stored pictures, his hands shaking from more than just the scotch.

There!

The same as he remembered it. The sideways shot had captured the curved bars in a long row, stretching off into infinity, the way he'd intended it when he took the picture.

Not a single bar was out of place.

Is that what my dream was telling me? That between the time when I took that picture and when Jennifer's carriage hit the wall, somehow a solid iron bar had gotten bent into just the right shape to catch my daughter, who just happened to be floating on an invisible magic carpet at the time?

Alec dropped the camera onto the counter. He had to be going insane. Those things didn't happen, not in the real world.

And little girls don't change direction in midair, either.

But he'd seen that happen, hadn't he? He didn't need a dream to remind him.

"What the fuck is going on?"

Someone giggled behind him.

Turning so fast the room continued to spin after he stopped, Alec looked around. That definitely hadn't been his imagination. Someone was in the house with them.

Bell.

The name popped into Alec's head and instantly he knew what was going on. The goddamned crazy insurance investigator was behind it. He'd read about Casey's death and decided to torment Alec into believing ghosts were real.

He had four days to come here and set up his toys. Hide things throughout the house. And not just sound effects. He's probably watching me right now, getting his fucking jollies.

The more he thought about it, the more he wondered just how far Bell would take his sick plan—had he even doctored the photo in the camera? Whispered subliminal messages to a sleeping victim?

"*Mother—*" Alec caught himself and finished the rest in a soft voice so he wouldn't wake Jen. "—fucker!" He started toward the living room, intending to tear it apart looking for bugs or transmitters or whatever, and then he stopped as a new thought came to him.

Why give Bell the satisfaction of seeing him upset? It would drive the bastard crazy if Alec did nothing but relax and act as if everything were fine.

So instead of searching for concealed devices, he poured another drink and flicked on the TV. Casey's death still weighed heavily on him, a grief compounded by his own guilt and loneliness. His intention was to drink himself into a stupor and let the TV's drone push him back into the land of sleep. Tomorrow he'd have the added torment of a hangover to go

with his appointment at the funeral home, but he'd get through it, take care of everything, comfort Jen some more.

And then tomorrow night he would drown his sorrows all over again.

The TV automatically came on to the regional news station, and Alec was ready to change the channel, afraid he'd see a story about his own family, when a scrolling headline caught his attention.

Coming up next—investigations continue into the death of a man with ties to the recent victim of the bear mauling at the…

"What the fuck?" Alec put down his scotch and the remote.

Ties to Casey? Who—?

A nasty feeling came to life in his stomach, churning up the scotch and the frozen pizza he'd had for dinner.

"Whatever killed Gregg, Trano and Watkins is moving in a straight line towards us."

Bell's words, spoken at the diner. He'd believed something was killing everyone who'd been involved in the events following the bear attack at the campsite.

But it had to be nonsense. There couldn't—

"Yesterday afternoon, the body of Terrance Bell, a claims investigator with—"

The news story continued, but Alec missed most of it. He just stared at Bell's face plastered on the screen. Scattered words reached him, enough of them getting through his shock for him to figure out what happened.

Knives…

Thirty times…

Casey Winter…

Files found…

Bell is dead. Murdered. Stabbed to death in his own kitchen. They found his files on my family. The other deaths.

"No. It's not possible. He was…"

What? Crazy? So why couldn't someone else be crazy? Someone who wanted everyone involved with the Winter family dead?

The churning in Alec's stomach grew worse and he had to run for the kitchen sink, made it there just before the scotch and pizza came bursting up and out in a burning, vile explosion. Vomit splattered the insides of the sink and peppered Alec's cheeks. He dry heaved a few more times and then wiped his mouth. After washing the stinking mess down the drain, he poured himself a glass of water and leaned against the counter to drink it,

purposely not thinking of anything, not looking at anything.

Gradually his brain started working again, and he realized his blank gaze was focused on the pile of mail sitting on the kitchen table. It had been on the porch when he came home, and he'd dumped it on the table out of habit. It was Casey who'd always sorted it…

Mixed in with the white envelopes and penny-saver flyers was something that didn't belong. A brown manila envelope, large and fat.

Seeing it brought the whirlpool in Alec's stomach back to life. That envelope was *wrong*; he could feel it from across the room.

His body was moving toward it before he comprehended what he was doing. He felt as if someone were controlling his body as he put his water down and picked the envelope up.

It was addressed to him.

The return label said *T. Bell*.

Oh, God.

His fingers shook as he tore it open and dumped the contents on the table. Pictures clipped from newspapers. Printouts of autopsy reports. A copy of the map he'd shown Alec, with dates next to each of the murder points.

And a note.

It landed atop all the other items. Alec was able to read it even as his hand reached for it.

Dear Alec,

Please call me. Things have been happening lately. I've heard voices. Laughter. But there is no one here except me. I sent my family away. I know what it is that's after us. It's your children, Alec. Nickolas and Susan. My research into brutal deaths shows many instances of angry, vengeful spirits who

A sudden wind whipped the papers up and away from his hand. They flew across the room and swirled around in a circle, moving faster and faster until a miniature tornado of paper hovered in the arch between the kitchen and dining room. A crackling, whining sound filled the air. Occasionally a piece of paper would dart out and then return to the supernatural cyclone. After one such emergence, Alec felt a stinging sensation on his arm and looked down to find a thin red line running from his shoulder to his wrist. Tiny droplets of blood were already beading up.

The sight of the long paper cut made him step back several paces, fear overcoming astonishment.

"Something's out there and it's coming for us."

Bell's words returned, only this time they didn't seem so crazy. In fact, they made perfect sense. The murders. The laughter. The strange—no, *impossible*—occurrences.

Alec's stomach clenched and his bowels threatened to let loose as it all became crystal clear to him. Bell was right.

Nick and Sue. They've come back and they want me dead for what I did. And along the way they killed everyone who unwittingly helped me keep my dirty secret.

It was almost too ghastly to think about but once the thought was in his head it took on the heavy weight of certainty. It was dreadful, appalling, horrific—but there was no other explanation.

"Nicky! Susan! I know you can hear me. Show yourselves."

He didn't feel the least bit foolish shouting at the empty room, especially when the miniature tornado died in an explosion of papers and all-too-familiar giggling echoed through the room.

All of Alec's pent-up guilt and self-hatred burst up from the dark places inside him where he'd kept it locked away. His children had come back from the dead for revenge all because he hadn't tried to save them, had gone on to live his life while the true memory of their deaths stayed a secret.

All those people dead because of me. If I hadn't run away, or maybe even if I'd just told the truth…

"I'm sorry!" Alec held out his hands. "Do you hear me? I'm sorry! I should have done something but I ran away. I was scared. I didn't tell anyone because I was afraid your mother would leave me."

The room stayed silent, and Alec wondered if his children were contemplating his death or letting him live. It had felt good to finally admit what he'd done, to burst the infected boil on his conscience and let the poisonous truth out.

He wished he'd done it months ago, a year ago.

A salt shaker rose up from the table and launched itself at him. It struck him in the chest before he could even try to block it. The pepper shaker followed. Other objects on the table—a napkin holder, a plastic bottle of vitamins, a pencil—levitated and then aimed themselves at him. Alec covered his eyes and so didn't see them take flight, but he felt their attack. The bottle and napkin holder bounced off his arms. A sharp pain blossomed in his right forearm and he cried out. Lowering his arms, he saw the pencil lodged an inch deep in the flesh just below his elbow. He pulled it out and then had to duck when a vase sailed

across the room and shattered against the wall next to him.

This is how the others died. Stabbed and beaten by the objects in their own houses. So why had they killed Casey—their own mother!—*differently?*

The answer came to him right away.

The bears. It was a message for me.

But why kill Casey? She hadn't done anything—she'd already been unconscious when the bear went after Nick and Sue, had no idea her husband had been a lying coward.

It didn't matter anymore. Alec watched as a drawer opened and a large barbeque fork emerged. He was ready to die. It was what he deserved. He spread his arms wide and closed his eyes.

"Go ahead. Kill me. I should have died—"

Upstairs, Jennifer started crying.

Jen! Who will take care of her if I'm dead?

"Save my baby!"

Those had been the last words Casey ever said to him. Not "I love you", not "Goodbye". Even though she'd known leaping into the bear enclosure was pretty much a death sentence. There'd been no thoughts in her head other than saving her baby.

How can I do less?

Alec dove to the floor and rolled to one side. A second later there was a loud *thunk* as the fork struck the cabinet where he'd been standing, the impact followed by a metallic diving board sound as the metal arm vibrated in place.

The manic laughter cut off as Alec crawled toward the hall. He imagined the ghosts of his children weren't pleased their prey had escaped.

He had no plan in mind, just a frantic desire to save himself and Jen. The one thing he knew was he couldn't take time to sort through ideas or create an escape strategy. The ghosts could see everything he did, follow effortlessly. His only chance lay in keeping them off-balance, surprising them over and over again like he'd done in the kitchen.

Getting to his feet, he ran for the stairs, dodging from side to side so that he was harder to target. Objects collided with the steps and banister and walls all around him, forks, knives, cups and even a book. More than a few struck him glancing blows but he took no direct hits until he reached the top of the staircase and turned toward Jen's room.

In that moment where he had to pause or fall down, fire blossomed in his ankle and he had to grab the banister to keep from tumbling back down the stairs. Without looking, he reached down and pulled a steak knife free. Hot, sticky liquid was already plastering his

sock to his skin as he limped-ran down the hall. Inside Jen's room he slammed the door shut, knowing it wouldn't offer any protection but the habit was too ingrained. Jen was still screaming but he figured there'd be time to comfort her later, when they were safe. He reached down to pick her up and her cries intensified.

In the soft glow from her nightlight, he saw why.

Someone had carved a stick figure bear in her chest. The symbol was clearly recognizable despite the blood smeared all over.

"You goddamn bastards!" Alec shouted. "She's just an innocent baby! She wasn't even there!"

He took Jen's blankets and wrapped them around her, hoping they would offer some protection against whatever the insane spirits of her siblings had in mind for her. He stood up and then had to duck and pull her close to his body as the contents of her shelves flew at him from all directions. Toys, hair brushes, combs, plastic mirrors, books and plastic jewelry struck him with enough force to leave purple and red welts on his arms, back and neck. Hunched over Jen to protect her, he crossed the small room and yanked the door open.

Something struck his arms and chest with the force of a freight train, knocking him back into Jennifer's room where he crashed into a dresser. Reality disappeared as his head cracked against hard wood and he fell to the floor. For a moment there was nothing except whirling, colored lights and a sound like water flowing over stones. Then his senses returned and he saw Jen lying motionless and silent a few feet away.

"No." The one word was all that squeezed out before his throat closed up. He reached out and pulled her toward him.

Twin lines of blood ran from her nose over her upper lip. A similar rivulet cascaded from inside her ear, flowing out and over the edge like a miniature stream emerging from a cave. When he lifted her up, her head flopped back until it touched between her shoulder blades and her chin pointed at the ceiling.

Alec lowered her still form to his lap, his own body cold and empty. It was over. They'd taken everything from him, left him with only a worthless life and some remaining shreds of sanity, both of which he was ready to give up.

He rose and placed Jen's lifeless body in her bed. He had no tears, placed no final kiss on her forehead. There was no point. He'd failed her like he'd failed the rest of his family. Failed to protect them from the bear. Failed to protect them from Nick's and Sue's ghosts. He imagined they were all watching and hating him, cheering Nick and Sue on.

He went into his bedroom. Laughter followed him but he ignored it. Everything was exactly as he and Casey had left it when they'd gone to the zoo. The scent of her perfume still lingered in the air. Her work clothes were still crumpled on the bed where she'd tossed them.

Alec paused. Something was scrawled on the mirror, the letters written in red lipstick.

Come join us, my love. We're all here waiting for you.

It was Casey's handwriting.

All at once hope surged to life in Alec's chest.

His family was waiting for him.

Was that what all this had been about? Nick and Sue simply wanting to bring their family to the other side so they could all be together again? Two lonely children, half-mad with grief, doing the only thing in their power to put an end to their isolation? Acting not out of anger, but love?

A smile—the first one since the zoo—stretched Alec's lips. He was going to see his family again. It didn't matter if he had to die to do it. There was nothing left on Earth for him anyhow.

He went to the bed and lay down, his hands holding Casey's shirt and his eyes facing the ceiling, where a double handful of gleaming knives hovered in the air.

Still smiling, he closed his eyes.

"Take me."

The pain was more horrendous than anything he'd ever felt.

And then it was gone, taking with it all light and sound.

Alec opened his eyes to a gray world. There was no up or down, no ground or skies. Only an endless gray. He knew at once he'd passed on from his old life to whatever comes after, and he felt no fear, only joy.

His family was waiting!

"Casey? Where are you? Nicky? Sue? Jen?"

The words echoed in his consciousness but he had no way of knowing if they went any farther. He had no form that he could see, no mouth, no ears. He just *was*.

Am I a ghost?

"No, Father, not in this place."

Alec turned his non-existent body at the sound of Nick's voice, unsurprised that his thoughts were audible. Why not? He was in Heaven, or at least his version of it. A shape appeared, formless lumps and bumps that rapidly transformed into the outlines of Nick's face. Alec's heart surged at the thought of spending eternity in the arms of his loved ones.

"Nicky! You're here! Where is everyone else?"

The head moved back and forth and Nick's lips curled up in a weird grin that sent a twinge of cold fear through Alec.

"I'm here. Susie's here. Everybody else is just plain old dead."

As Nick spoke, his face transformed again. Alec recognized the new shape before it finished.

A bear.

He spun himself around with the intention of getting as far away from his son as possible.

Another bear stood before him, a gray shape that somehow he recognized as Susan.

"Hello, Father."

Pain exploded in his back as razor-sharp claws carved through his incorporeal form. He cried out and raised invisible arms to defend himself. More claws raked his flesh and something that felt like a spike-filled vise clamped on to his leg with excruciating force before ripping away. He shouted Casey's name over the sounds of insane laughter.

Claws and teeth attacked his arms, his legs, his chest and his neck, each assault as agonizing as the last. Alec found himself praying for death, and then a terrible thought came to him through the pain.

He was already dead.

And his eternity was just beginning.

About the Author

JG Faherty is a Bram Stoker Award® and ITW Thriller Award nominee and the author of five novels, seven novellas, and more than fifty short stories. He writes adult and YA horror/sci-fi/fantasy, and his works range from quiet, dark suspense to over-the-top comic gruesomeness. He enjoys urban exploring, photography, classic B-movies, good wine, and pumpkin beer. As a child, his favorite playground was a 17th-century cemetery, which many people feel explains a lot. His personal motto is "Photobombing people since 1979!"

You can follow him at www.twitter.com/jgfaherty, www.facebook.com/jgfaherty, about.me/jgfaherty, and www.jgfaherty.com.

Look for these titles by JG Faherty

Now Available:

Castle by the Sea
Thief of Souls

Coming Soon:

Legacy

How did they get here? Will they ever get out?

Castle by the Sea

© 2014 JG Faherty

Jason and Erika are having a wonderful time at the Halloween carnival...until their swan boat in the Tunnel of Love capsizes amid heavy waves and blaring, maniacal laughter. When they come to they are no longer in a carnival in Ohio, but standing at the edge of a sea in a raging storm. In the distance, atop a high, barren hill, looms an enormous castle.

Instead of answers, Jason and Erika find only more impossibilities within the stone walls. The lavish rooms are lit only by torches and fireplaces, the decorations and furniture are a century out of date, and the mysterious host claims to not own one of those newfangled telephone inventions. Outside, in the storm and the dense mist, lurk strange, threatening figures. Inside, another couple seeking refuge think it must all be a nightmare. Perhaps it is. Or perhaps it's something much, much worse.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Castle by the Sea:

The carnival appeared without warning, as it has always done and always will. This time it was the residents of Cannonsville, Oklahoma, who woke up on October 30 to find a Halloween carnival set up just outside town. Signs proclaiming *Carnival of Fear—One Night Only!* covered telephone poles, windshields and fence posts everywhere, as if magic elves had spent the entire night doing PR work.

By noon, there wasn't a man, woman or child in Cannonsville who hadn't made plans to attend the festivities that evening.

After all, how often did a Halloween carnival come to town?

The setting sun was no more than a crescent of fiery orange atop the horizon when a tall, skeletally thin man in a multicolored suit entered the Tunnel of Love through a back door. A black stovepipe hat with a sunflower tucked into the band perched jauntily atop the bald dome of his head. Worm-pale lips stretched from one side of his moon-white face to the other in a hideous smile as he stroked a bony hand across the animal-shaped boats waiting for riders.

He stopped at one, a graceful white swan with two seats. "Perfect," he whispered, and the swan nodded in agreement, its eyes glowing red for just a moment.

The Proprietor's impossible smile grew even wider, the ends of it rising past the bottoms

of his ears.

"Ah, what fun Jason and Erika shall have tonight. What fun, what fun indeed."

Flashes of white arced across the night sky, leaving red afterimages in Jason Phillips's vision. In the lightning's wake, thunder crashed with bone-jarring intensity, as if the world were floating inside a celestial kettledrum. Jason gripped Erika's hand and helped her struggle up the steep slope. Each step was an adventure; the freezing, drenching rain had turned the narrow path into a deadly torrent of mud and water that threatened to wash them away at the first careless moment.

Jason tried to keep his mind on finding the right footholds and handholds in the brief bursts of light provided by the aerial pyrotechnics, but his thoughts kept returning to the reality—*or unreality*, he thought—of their situation. The suddenness of their displacement from the carnival, and the ferocity of the storm they'd found themselves in, had prevented them from discussing what had happened, but he knew they'd have to face the facts sooner or later.

The evening had started so innocently. A romantic night at the carnival—they'd intended to see the sights, go on a few rides, maybe grab a candy apple or a corn dog and then head back to Jason's apartment for a very different—but much more enjoyable!—kind of ride. Erika hadn't stopped smiling and Jason, loath to ruin what was turning out to be an amazing time, had gone on ride after ride with her, each one more exhilarating than the last, despite the hour getting later.

Then they'd decided to try the Tunnel of Love. Ordinarily, Jason would have objected—after all, it cost three bucks a ticket and all you did was float in some smelly water for five minutes. However, he recognized it as a chance to make a romantic gesture, something he probably didn't do enough of. So he'd paid the six dollars and they'd let the rough-looking carny with the ragged scar on his face help them into their swan-shaped boat.

Hidden speakers delivered the soft strains of "Muskrat Love"—the perfect corny love song for a corny ride—as the boat slipped away from the dock, taking its place in line behind the other swans. Jason pictured the other riders, some, like him, demonstrating they did have a romantic soft spot. Others trying to recapture their youth. Teenagers looking to perhaps get a little further than usual, cop a feel of a soft, young breast or experience the thrill of that first kiss.

Smiling to himself, he wished them all good luck and hoped that thirty years from now it would be he and Erika reliving their younger days, clasping wrinkled hands and saying

how much they still loved each other.

He put his arm around Erika. She snuggled up against him, and in that moment everything was perfect. The music was no longer trite, the water didn't smell like a mud puddle, and the cheap murals on the walls became as picturesque as a summer garden.

Perfect.

And then the entire world went to hell.

The moment their boat slid into the pitch-black tunnel, the previously calm waters turned rough. Erika had cried out and grabbed on to him as the boat dipped and rose with stomach-churning intensity. Foul water splashed over them, soaking their clothes. Insane laughter burst from the loudspeakers, drowning out the soft melodies with painful intensity. Jason shouted for someone to stop the ride, but the only response was more laughter. The waves grew stronger and stronger until they thought the boat might overturn.

And then it did.

The world tumbled around Jason for an instant before his face hit the water and he went under. He tried to push off from the bottom but his hands and feet touched nothing. Another wave hit, spinning him over and around at the same time until he was so disoriented he couldn't think. Water filled his nose and ran down his throat into his lungs, forcing him into uncontrollable coughs that quickly led to choking when he was unable to find the surface.

There was a moment where he felt pure terror, knowing he was about to drown in a stupid carnival ride.

Then, in the next instant, he found himself kneeling in waist-deep water, Erika on her hands and knees beside him, a horrific storm battering them with rain and wind. Flashes of lightning lit the sky like a giant lamp turning on and off, and he caught sight of land only a few yards away.

"C'mon!" he'd shouted, grabbing Erika's hand. Tumbling and falling in the pounding surf, Jason had led Erika to a beach made mostly of black stones and giant hunks of rock.

That was when they saw the lights at the top of a long hill. Confused and disoriented, Jason had instinctively headed for them.

Erika screamed, pulling Jason's attention back to the here and now. She'd fallen again, her hand slipping from his. He wiped water from his face in a futile attempt to see better; the heavy rain hid everything behind a curtain of gray.

Jason stumbled back down the path until he found Erika clinging to a rock with both hands as a miniature river swirled over her. He said a silent prayer of thanks that she was

still with him. More than once during their climb he'd seen strange shadowy shapes moving through the rain, their forms rendered indistinct by the storm. Each time, the dim figures had faded back into the wall of rain and mist that blanketed the unfamiliar landscape, disappearing before he could get a good look at them. Even when they weren't visible, the feeling of being watched remained.


SAMHAIN
PUBLISHING