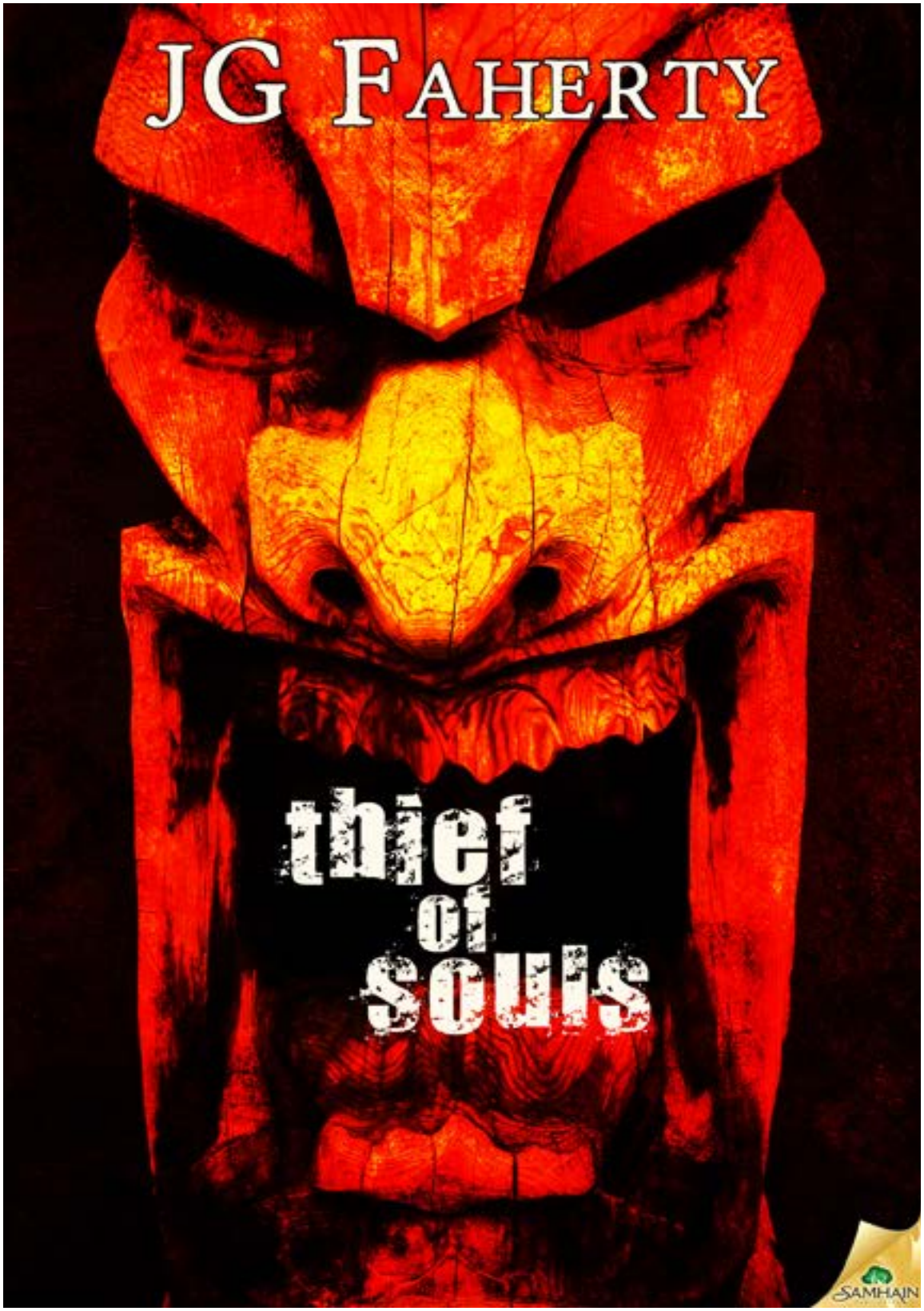

JG FAHERTY
thief of souls
SAMHAIN

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Demons don't forgive.

Perry didn't want to be a thief. He simply needed to make back the money he lost on a bad business investment. Just three houses, then he can stop. But someone must be running a scam on him, trying to frighten him into turning himself in. He hears noises at night, small fires start in his house, and his dreams are filled with terrible nightmares.

Soon Perry begins to fear it's no mere scam—something unholy and inhuman is playing a game of cat and mouse with him. Perry has stolen an ancient idol...and the demon who inhabits it. However, when he tries to return the idol, he finds out it's much too late. The demon intends to teach Perry a lesson, a lesson that will destroy everything and everyone that Perry loves.

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Thief of Souls

JG Faherty

Dedication

Any good book requires hard work, more than a bit of luck, and some much needed help for the author. With that in mind, I'd like to give hearty thanks to:

My wife, Andrea, and my parents, Terry & Jim, for their continued support.

My eagle-eyed beta readers, Rena Mason and Stephen Owen.

My editor, Don D'Auria, and his amazing team at Samhain.

My long-time canine companion, Harley, who celebrates her 15th birthday as I write these words.

And to all the people reading this, thank you, and I hope the book gives you as many chills as it gave me while I wrote it.

Thief of Souls

Perry Spellman stared at the wooden idol hanging on the wall and shivered as a cold hand tickled his spine.

That is the ugliest piece of shit I've ever seen.

For a moment, he considered leaving it right where it was. After all, he had more than enough merchandise packed into his two duffle bags. Then he paused.

Anything that ugly had to be worth something. Why else would someone hang it in plain sight?

So instead of following his instincts, he moved closer to take a better look.

In the flashlight's narrow circle of illumination, the grimacing face looked ready to bite his fingers off. He played the light up and down and noticed the idol was larger than he'd first thought, perhaps three feet tall. Carved from some type of dark wood—mahogany, perhaps, or something even more exotic—it glowered as if pissed at the whole world. Kind of the way Perry had felt since finding out his supposed best friend had decided to scam him out of almost forty grand.

He reached out to touch the shining wood and the evil mouth seemed to twitch. He pulled his hand back and then chastised himself for being such a wimp. Some thief he was, getting spooked by his own flashlight's motion.

Just bag it and keep going. Don't let the shadows get to you.

Although he'd never broken into a house before, he had a good idea of what to do and what not to do. A big no-no was nerves. You had to control your natural fear of getting caught or you'd screw things up somehow. And the way to combat nerves was to be prepared.

He'd done his homework on the house. Family on vacation, no dogs, no house sitters. No one stopping by during the day or night to water the plants. An alarm system just like the ones he'd been installing for the past ten years. Of course, it wasn't one of *his* customers. He might be desperate—thanks to Endy, that motherfucking asshole—but he wasn't foolish. Or stupid. In fact, he'd made sure to choose his target from Endy's client list, which he'd gotten by hacking into the double-crossing bastard's computer at work.

The plan was simple. Three houses in two weeks. He figured that would be all it took to get enough stuff to pawn so he could replace the money in the bank account. Then he'd just have to conveniently misplace a single bank statement and Linda would never know he'd

almost lost their entire life's savings.

After that, he'd find Endy, no matter how long it took, and…

The thought died there, as it always did. The temptation was to say he'd kill Endy Almogardo, but Perry didn't think he really had it in himself to do that.

Of course, he'd never thought himself capable of burglary, either.

Amazing what you can do when everything you hold dear is at stake.

Perry gave himself a mental nudge. *Stay focused. Distractions are another no-no.*

He opened one of the duffel bags and lifted the idol off its brackets. The wood was warm to the touch even though the house was almost chillingly cool. As he transferred the idol to his duffel, there was a moment when his blood pounded in his temples so hard he actually heard it—thud-thud-thud—like a rhythmic drumming.

Jesus, keep it the fuck together.

Perry dropped the idol into the bag and took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. The pounding subsided, and he zipped the bag closed and placed it by the door, next to its twin. Then he headed upstairs to check the bedrooms.

It would be two days before he thought about the idol again.

"I'll give you twelve grand for the whole lot of it."

Carlo Johnson, the overweight, perpetually-sweating proprietor of Carlo's Pawn & Jewelry, waved his hand at the table. "Everything except that," he added, pointing a sausage finger at the wooden idol.

Perry bit his lip. He'd hoped for a few thousand more. "Why? It's gotta be worth something, right?"

"Oh, hell yeah," Carlo said, pulling on the fat cigar that always seemed to be in his mouth. "Prob'ly a couple thou. But I can't touch it. Thing's one of a kind, a museum piece. I remember seein' something about it in the newspapers a while back."

Damn. Perry fought the urge to slam his hand on the table. He'd tried to be so careful. He'd only taken things he figured a fence could move quickly and easily. TVs. Laptops. Stereos. Jewelry and watches, as long as they weren't engraved. Cameras. Coins and stamps.

Christ. Who keeps a one-of-a-kind piece of art in their downstairs hallway?

Now he was stuck with the damn thing. No way he could tell Linda he'd bought it. He'd never been into art, and besides, the thing was so damn hideous she'd tell him to take it back, and then what? How could he explain he had no receipt because he'd stolen it?

Maybe I should just hang on to it. Use it to frame Endy for the break in.

That idea made him feel a little better.

"Okay," he told Carlo. "I'll take the twelve K. Can you handle more in a few days?"

Carlo laughed, a dark, nasty sound that didn't match his easy going, jolly demeanor. He and Perry went back many years, all the way to high school, when they used to get stoned together behind the building before shop class. It was Carlo he'd gone to for Linda's engagement ring, and again for several anniversary presents. Carlo was as dishonest as they came but Perry was pretty certain the man wouldn't rat out his old party buddy.

"For you, I can handle whatever you bring me. Just be careful. We both know this ain't your thing, if you get what I'm saying."

Perry nodded. Neither was having your best friend tell you he could double your money in one week, and then disappear.

He didn't say anything out loud, though. Endy had been in shop class with both of them, and who knew if he and Carlo were still friends—or business acquaintances. You couldn't be too careful.

Another one of his new rules.

Empty houses have a different feel to them. This was the first thing Perry had noticed earlier in the week when he came home from work on the first day after Linda had gone upstate to help get her sister's house ready for their father coming home from the hospital. It was the first time he and Linda had slept in separate places since they'd gotten married, and the house had a distinctly cold, barren feel to it without her presence.

People who live together generally develop habits and patterns to make life easier. Each person knows where things belong, what time everyone leaves for work or gets home, which foods in the refrigerator not to touch.

When Perry arrived home from depositing his money, he automatically checked the message light at the base of the house phone. It wasn't that he expected it to be blinking—she was more apt to call him on his cell phone—but part of his routine was to always look, just in case.

The red light was flashing.

Linda's message was typically short and sweet. It had always amazed Perry how a woman who was so effusive in person or on the phone could be so abrupt when leaving a message.

"Hey, honey, I tried you on your cell but you didn't answer. Did you forget it again?

Anyhow, they delayed Dad's release by a couple of days so I might be here a little longer than I thought. I'll try you again later. Love you!"

Perry ran his hands across his pants pockets. No cell phone. Then he remembered. He'd plugged it in to recharge it the previous night.

And that's probably where it still was.

He made a mental note to keep it with him at all times. He had a habit of leaving it at home—or at the office—at least once a week. Normally that wasn't a big deal. Linda would get on his case about it, asking what would he do if his car broke down and he couldn't call for help, and for a couple of days he'd remember to grab it on his way out the door. Then eventually he'd forget again. But with Linda out of town, he really should have it with him at all times.

After calling her back and apologizing, he brought the stolen idol upstairs to the small room they'd converted into a combination computer room and reading room. Something Carlo had said about seeing the idol in a newspaper had him curious. Exactly how valuable was it?

He stared at it again while waiting for the computer to boot up, oddly drawn to it despite his revulsion for it.

"Whoever carved you had talent, that's for sure," he said to the wicked face. "And quite an imagination."

It was hard not to stare at it. The narrow eyes slanted downwards towards the center of the face, like Asian features done in caricature. The hawkish nose perched over full, thick lips that were pulled back from a mouth filled with jagged, crooked teeth. A long, exaggerated lower jaw dropped down to a pointed chin with a sharp split that might have represented a cleft, or possibly a mandrake-style beard. Two tusk-like teeth protruded up from the jaw, almost touching the upper teeth.

Paint some red on the eyes and it'd make a perfect devil-face prop for a horror movie.

Tearing his gaze away from the thing, Perry opened a search page and paused. What was he supposed to type in as a search term? Devil statue? Ugly idol? Then inspiration hit. He knew the name of the homeowner he'd stolen it from. And Carlo had said it was a museum piece, right?

He typed "Jenson Kellogg+museum."

Sure enough, the very first listing was for an article in the local paper, an interview with Jenson Kellogg about the artifact. Turned out it wasn't an idol at all, but some sort of Polynesian religious mask portraying an *Akua*, or god, of death.

"To the Polynesians, they were gods. In Western society we would call them demons. The tribesmen used to hang them on their huts as protection against evil. The demon was charged with guarding the hut and all who lived inside, and was supposed to eat the soul—and sometimes the body, too—of whoever brought harm to the owner."

Perry looked over at the mask. "So you're like some kind of stone age watch dog. Good boy." He patted the mask on the head, and then drew his hand back quickly when he got a static shock.

The article went on to say that after spending six months on a remote South Seas island studying the culture, the local shaman—the last in his line, apparently—had honored Kellogg by presenting him with a mask carved more than two hundred years ago.

"According to the shaman," Kellogg was quoted as saying, "his great-grandfather, a powerful magician, carved it."

Kellogg had considered donating it to a museum, but in the end he felt obligated to keep it in his house. "It was a gift, and where I come from you don't give those away."

Perry leaned back and considered the idol again. *Demon mask,* he corrected himself. "Great. Guess I'm stuck with you, at least for a while."

So where could he store a three-foot relic where Linda wouldn't find it?

The spare closet. Linda had been after him for years to clean out the extra closet, which over time had slowly morphed into a storage area for all of Perry's junk. Old clothes, a bag of softball equipment from when he'd played first base for the company team, boxes of stuff dating all the way back to college. Nowadays Linda refused to even open the door.

"I'm afraid something will bite me," she liked to say. "Or I'll get buried in an avalanche."

I could probably leave it in there until the day I die and she'd never know. Just in case, though, he made sure to hide it behind a garbage bag of old suits and jackets he hadn't worn since getting married eight years before.

When he was done, he checked his watch. Just enough time to eat something and then hit the next house on his list.

As soon as he opened the door from his garage to the house, Perry knew something was wrong, even though he couldn't see a thing. The house was dark as a cave.

And that was the problem.

I know I left the kitchen lights on. He did it habitually, to discourage burglars. And on the off chance he'd somehow forgotten, the small night lights Linda kept in the hall and living

room—so if you had to get up at night for a glass of water or to pee—should have been on.

"Who's there? Linda?" Even as he called her name, he cursed his own stupidity. It couldn't be her. She hated the dark. Besides, she was currently several hours upstate.

Which meant either there'd been a power failure or someone else was in the house.

A quick glance outside showed lights on in several of his neighbor's homes. That left only one possibility, and thanks to his big mouth he'd alerted the thieves to his presence.

As if summoned by his thoughts, something thumped upstairs. Perry's heart responded by smashing against his ribs like an animal trying to break free from a cage.

There's an intruder and they most likely know I'm here. Between setting his car alarm and calling out for Linda, he'd basically announced himself just like every idiot in every scary movie did, right before the psycho killer took them out with an axe or chainsaw. He might as well have shined a spotlight on himself and shouted "Come and get me!"

More sounds came from above, a *thump-slide-bump* that his imagination rendered as a corpse dragging itself down the upstairs hall. Resisting the urge to call out for help, Perry instead dropped the bags he'd been carrying and retreated back the way he'd come, stepping as silently as he could, his hands outstretched. Lifting each leg in exaggerated slow motion, like a cartoon character, he stepped into the garage, his pulse pounding in his head so loudly he wasn't sure he'd be able to hear someone sneaking up on him.

Once inside the garage, two battery-powered stick-on lights provided just enough illumination for him to locate the shoebox marked "fishing lures." Inside it lay a six-shot revolver and a box of shells.

The moment Perry placed his hands on the cool, slightly oily metal a surge of adrenaline rushed through his veins, filling him with an almost primitive belief in himself, a confidence in his ability to defeat whoever waited upstairs.

"Gonna get you now, motherfuckers," he whispered, while he slid rounds into the cylinder and clicked it closed.

He went back into the house, his passage through the family room the complete opposite of his previous trip. No effort to be silent this time. No sneaking around. No hiding.

He had a gun.

And it didn't matter that he'd never shot anything except targets at the range. Like the first caveman to sharpen a spear or the first warrior to fire an arrow, he felt an atavistic sense of power, of dominance over any enemy that might be waiting for him.

Perry placed his foot on the first stair, never realizing his lips had pulled back in a toothy snarl that any of his ancestors many times over would have instantly recognized.

The look of a hunter.

Unfortunately, his new-found confidence didn't last long.

The upstairs hallway was even darker than the downstairs, causing Perry to pause for a moment so his eyes could adjust. Although moments earlier he'd have bet his life an intruder waited for him in one of the rooms, somewhere in the middle of climbing the stairs he'd lowered the gun to his side.

What if he was wrong?

What if Linda had come home early and hadn't heard him? Distracted over her father's illness, she might have switched the lights off and gone upstairs, might even be in the bathroom or bedroom right now, getting ready for bed.

The image of her coming into the hallway and him putting a bullet into her chest, splattering her guts all over the walls, had set his hand shaking so badly he'd been afraid of pulling the trigger before identifying what he was shooting at.

One wrong shot, one stupid case of misidentification, that's all it would take to lose his wife, get arrested for murder, and then be found in possession of stolen goods on top of it all.

That's when his hand had dropped to his side.

But he hadn't put the gun away. Not when there was just as much a chance that whoever was upstairs was armed and dangerous and ready to shoot without hesitation.

Perry stopped at the top of the stairs, his free hand flat against the wall to orient himself. From where he stood, the kitchen was directly in front of him, the living room and dining room to the left, and to the right were a master bedroom, guest bedroom, second bath and a smaller guest room he'd turned into a sort of office.

He held his breath, waiting for any sounds. Something that would let him know where the intruders were so he wouldn't be blindly walking around and making a target of himself. His only advantage was he knew the layout of the house better than any intruder could, a detail he hoped would make up for the fact that an intruder would have a flashlight.

His lungs were beginning to crave air when he heard it again. A definite *thump-bump.* He turned to his left. It sounded like it had come from the end of the hall.

The office.

Perry hesitated another moment. It had to be an intruder. No way Linda would be rummaging in the office in the dark. He took two deep breaths. This was it. No turning back. Time to defend his house.

Keeping as far from the center of the hall as he could, so as to minimize any squeaking

of floorboards, Perry crept down the hall with his gun extended forward and his back near but not against the wall. The last thing he needed was to accidentally knock over a picture or mirror. A window at the end of the hall let in just enough light so that he could discern the shapes of the door frames in the black and gray landscape of the hallway.

He paused again at the office door when he noticed it was shut. He distinctly remembered it being open earlier; seeing it shut alarmed him because he always left all the doors in the house open. He hated seeing the doors to rooms closed as much as he hated seeing closet or pantry doors left open.

So who closed it?

The intruder, you idiot, his mind supplied.

Perry's hand began to shake again. Should he fling the door open and burst in with gun raised? Open the door and then duck to the side like they did on TV? Crouch down low and hope the intruder aimed high?

Just then a red glow lit up the hallway. Perry looked down and saw it came from beneath the office door. Immediately, a single thought raced through his mind:

Fire!

Suddenly there was no time to hesitate. He couldn't let his house burn down. Forgetting caution, he grabbed the knob and pushed the door open. While it was still moving, he jumped into the room and dodged to his right.

Something hard smashed into his shoulder and head, knocking the gun from his arm and sending him to his knees. The room was awash in red, so bright he couldn't see anything. The dazzling light turned the room into a Martian landscape and he had to close his eyes against the vivid glare.

And then it was gone.

The sudden disappearance of the red brilliance left him just as blind as its appearance. Colored whorls spiraled across his eyes in the pitch black as he scrabbled his hands across the floor, desperate to find his gun. He felt absolutely certain someone was in the room with him. Someone who meant to do him hard. Meant to kill him, to gut him like pig, to carve out his organs and gorge on them while his life blood ran in rivers across the floor…

Jesus Christ, where the fuck is the gun?

He was slapping his hands against the wood now, no longer sliding them back and forth, his mind filled with images of his mutilated body serving as food for flies and maggots until Linda returned…

Goddammit, where is it?

The sense of impending death grew stronger, an almost physical presence creeping up on him, stalking him. A musky odor filled his nostrils and he felt the hot breath of a wild beast against the back of his neck.

"No!"

Perry whirled around, flailing his fists in all directions at the unseen enemy taunting him from within the dark. They struck nothing but air, which only increased his desperate attempts to fend off the thing waiting to tear his throat open. Each swing grew wilder until his balance deserted him and he toppled over, striking his elbows on the floor. Electric lines of pain shot up his arms and he cried out. Death drew closer, its presence an oppressive weight pressing down on him, squeezing him until his blood thundered in his eardrums with a sound not unlike the pounding of drums. His muscles froze and he lay helpless on his stomach, waiting for the claws of the beast to pierce his flesh.

And then the world disappeared in an explosion of white light.

The burst of light broke the paralysis fear had brought to Perry's limbs. He let out a scream and covered his head with his arms. His body twisted to one side and his legs curled up against his chest. Even squeezed shut, his eyes leaked tears as they rebelled against the sudden radiance.

Did I die?

Even as the thought appeared, he knew he hadn't. He could feel the wood beneath his body, smell the stink of his own fear-sweat. There was another smell, too.

Moth balls.

His heart still beating a rapid tempo inside his chest, Perry slowly opened his eyes.

And found himself staring at his old Club 17 jacket, a memento of the bar where he'd worked in college. His gaze moved past the jacket and traveled a mound of clothes, memorabilia, and other assorted junk to the black rectangle of the open closet.

"Holy Christ, you freakin' loser." He wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry. All at once his terror was gone, replaced by sheepish embarrassment.

With the lights on, it all seemed so obvious. The thumping he'd heard? Things falling in the closet, at least some of them with enough force to push the door open, which he'd run into. The darkness? A power failure after all; if he'd looked on the other side of the house no doubt he'd have seen some of his neighbors' houses just as dark.

The sense of danger? His own stupid imagination.

And what an imagination, he thought, standing up and running his hands through his mussed hair. Bad enough that he'd believed someone had broken into the house. At least that was possible, if not probable.

But somehow his fear had morphed into pure terror, his imagined intruder turning into a monstrous creature waiting to eat him alive.

Christ, nothing like that ever happened to me before. He wondered what had triggered the unreasonable and illogical dread he'd felt, while he picked up the pistol and laid it on his desk. *I'm goddamned lucky I didn't shoot myself.*

His heart rate tripled and he jumped back a step as he caught sight of a twisted, inhuman face staring at him from the desk.

Sonofa—the stupid demon mask!

He'd left the printout next to his computer. Turning, he saw that everything that had fallen out of the closet was the crap he'd piled in front of the stolen mask, which now peered out at him from beneath an old suit.

"I guess Linda was right. Sooner or later that closet wouldn't be able to hold anything else. And you, my friend," he said, pointing at the mask, "were the last straw." Although it hadn't seemed like he'd overloaded the closet when he put the mask in. The door had shut easily enough.

"Maybe you were just trying to escape?" he asked the scowling figure. He'd meant it as a joke, but instead a trace of his former panic danced through him, bringing about a momentary shiver and a ghostly whisper of drums.

God, I need a drink. Stress, that had to be it. The burglaries, the money he'd lost, his fear of Linda finding out…who wouldn't be going a little nuts?

Not that it would matter much longer. In a few days he'd have his bank account—and a normal life—back. He piled his junk and collectibles back into the closet, this time making sure to arrange things so that nothing would press against the door. Then he went downstairs to retrieve his stolen goods.

By the time he'd hidden the bags in the cellar and poured himself a whiskey, he was relaxed enough to sit in his favorite chair and catch the end of the Mets game before he went to bed.

And in the morning he didn't remember tossing and turning his way through crazy dreams about red-eyed monsters chasing him through a jungle.

The day of what was supposed to be Perry's final robbery was a roller coaster of good and bad, ending with a nose dive into a pit of pure awful.

He woke up tired and cranky, the same as he'd done every morning since Linda had gone to her sister's. Six days had turned into a week, and then two, as she and Tracy struggled to deal with their father's slower-than-expected recovery from his heart surgery. For Perry, the situation was both depressing and fortuitous. Depressing because he hated being away from Linda for such an extended period. Fortuitous because the timing couldn't have been better. For the first time in all their years of marriage Perry was glad Linda's father didn't like him. Hated him, in fact, ever since the night he'd found Perry sneaking out of Linda's bedroom window when they were just eighteen.

That loathing had led to many a strained holiday dinner—and an embarrassing argument during his and Linda's wedding reception—but now it meant him not having to accompany Linda to Tracy's house. Everyone agreed his presence would just make things harder. So it was the perfect opportunity for Perry, who didn't have to worry about his wife noticing his late night excursions. On the other hand, he'd always had trouble sleeping when she was away, and the past couple of weeks had been no exception.

It never occurred to him that there might be other reasons for him sleeping poorly.

Two cups of strong coffee wiped away most of his exhaustion, and by the time he got to work he was feeling almost like himself. A second visit to Carlo had upped his bank account to twenty-five thousand, so he only needed another twelve grand and all his losses would be covered. Almost as nice as the money was turning on his computer and seeing there were no installs or repairs on his schedule, which meant he could spend the day catching up on paperwork and going over the specs for his job that night. He'd previously printed the schematics—once again accessing Endy's folders via a remote terminal while thanking God his ex-friend was dumb enough to not change his password—and spent two nights watching the house and taking notes.

Like the other two houses he'd hit, he'd left nothing to chance. Arnold Weisman was divorced and worked nights. His wife and kids lived three towns over, so it was highly unlikely they'd show up unexpectedly. Best of all, he was at the end of a cul-de-sac, with no direct line of sight to any of his neighbors' windows.

If Weisman held true to his schedule from the previous two nights, he'd leave his house at approximately seven and not return until just after five in the morning. Perry's plan was to arrive around ten p.m. and be gone by midnight.

Then a final visit to Carlo and I get my freakin' life back.

After work, Perry grabbed a pizza and ate dinner in front of the TV, which he'd enjoyed doing the first few days Linda was gone, but now it only left him feeling empty and dejected. It was one thing to live the bachelor life short term; doing it for days on end was becoming a chore. A phone call from Linda saying she hoped to be home by the end of the week didn't help. The minute he hung up the phone, his depression set in worse than before.

"Snap out of it," he said to the empty room. Over the past week he'd found himself doing that more and more. "Focus. You've got a job to do."

With two hours to kill before he left, Perry decided to rest his eyes. A full stomach and the baseball game droning on TV were the perfect sleep aids, and in minutes he found himself drifting off.

Only to be awakened by the sound of beating drums.

Perry sat up, his senses alive as adrenaline surged through his body. The den was a dark cave, with the TV illuminating a narrow swath across the center of the room. The thumping of the drums was muffled rather than coming from the TV's speakers, and his first thought was some teenager had the stereo cranked up in his car out in the street. Except when he stepped over to the open window, the phantom beat grew dimmer instead of stronger.

Perry slowly walked across the room towards the stairs, the drumming growing more distinct with each step. At the same time he grew aware of a smell in the air, a barbeque pork odor at once tantalizing and revolting, as if someone had laid rotten meat on a hot grill and slathered it with a combination of bacon and blood.

At the bottom of the stairs, Perry gripped the railing but his feet suddenly refused to move forward. The tempo of the drums increased slightly and his heart beat in time with the *thump-thump-thump* of the elusive pounding. The grilled carcass odor wafted past again, this time accompanied by the smell of burning wood.

Jesus! Something's on fire!

Perry forced his feet onto the first step and then the next. He moved up the stairs, each foot a cement weight that took all his effort to lift. By the time he reached the landing to the front door he was gasping for air and holding on to the bannister for support. He turned the corner and faced the last six stairs, which seemed as insurmountable as Everest. From his vantage point he could see portions of the living room, kitchen, and hallway. Nothing seemed out of place and yet nothing seemed right. There were shadows within the shadows, things that moved and swayed, objects that were short and rotund and others that were thin and stretched beyond the ceiling. Sparks of red appeared and disappeared, never in the same place twice. He couldn't be sure if they were the eyes of strange jungle beasts or embers

from the fire he couldn't see.

The pace of the drumming picked up again, only now instead of *thump-thump-thump* a single word reached his ears, repeated over and over: *Ma-te, Ma-te, Ma-te.*

Perry shook his head. Drums couldn't speak! Where were the words coming from? As if in response, someone in the darkness spoke his name.

"Perry Spellman."

Somewhere in the living room something roared, a bellow of rage that shook the railing under Perry's hand. The drumming grew louder, all but drowning out the voice that came from everywhere and nowhere, so that he only caught a few words.

"…tapu…foul…sacred…"

A flash of red shattered the darkness of the hall, crimson lightning that lit everything bright as daylight for a split second, just long enough for Perry to see dozens of twisted, mutant faces leering down at him from the top of the stairs.

He cried out as the horrible mouths opened wide, exposing fangs as long as his fingers.

"*Perry…*"

In the den, Perry screamed and sprang up from the couch. Twisting around so violently his back barked in protest, he scanned the den for signs of supernatural attackers.

Nothing was there.

On the TV, the Mets were high-fiving each other and exiting the field while the announcers reminded everyone to stay tuned for the "happy recap." Blue light sprayed across the room, illuminating everything but the far corners. No shadows moved within the shadows. From upstairs, an ordinary yellow glow cascaded down from the kitchen, where as usual he'd left the lights on.

"Jesus motherfucking Christ." Perry took a deep breath, let it out slow, and then put a hand over his heart, which was slamming into his ribs like a crazed animal trying to escape a cage of bones.

A nightmare. Nothing but a goddamned nightmare.

Another deep breath and his heart started to slow. Not just a nightmare, possibly the worst one he'd ever had, and he'd had some doozies as a kid. In those days they'd been caused by the stress of his parents always fighting, separating, getting back together and fighting again. Once they'd finally divorced and he'd ended up in a reasonably stable environment living with his mother, the nightmares had stopped.

So what had brought this one on?

Foul…sacred…

Jesus, could it be that simple?

Guilt?

Were all his problems a result of feeling bad about his burglaries? The nightmare, the episode a few days back in the upstairs office? When he thought about it, the idea didn't seem too farfetched. The first time he'd freaked out was just as he returned from a robbery. And now he'd had a nightmare right before committing another crime.

The only thing that didn't make sense was the theme of the nightmare. A jungle, drums, the grotesque faces that were so much like the…

The mask in the closet.

Perry felt like slapping his own head, instead settled for just shaking it.

The mask. He'd fixated on the damn thing somehow. Either because it was the one stolen item still in his possession—a representation of his guilt—or because it was just so goddamn ugly it had made an indelible mark in his subconscious.

A small chuckle bubbled up, driving away the lingering effects of the dream.

All he had to do was get rid of the mask. With his clandestine illicit activities over, the mask gone, and his money back in the bank he'd be able to—hopefully—jettison his guilt as quickly as he'd pawned the stuff he'd stolen. Sure, maybe there'd be some residual guilt and fear left over. After all, he had stolen from innocent people and there was always the chance of getting caught after the fact. But he'd done his best to take only things that were valuable but easily replaceable. TVs, iPads, expensive but common jewelry. No engraved items. Nothing that looked like a family heirloom or a rare collectible piece. Things that homeowner's insurance would cover without a fuss.

Except for the damn mask.

What the hell had he been thinking when he took that stupid thing? He'd known it had to be a collectible. He should have just left it. Instead, he'd been lured by the chance for big money.

All of this would have been easier if he could have just broken into Endy's house and robbed his old friend blind. Made back his money and gotten his revenge all in one swoop. Too bad Endy had nothing of value except a giant collection of 1960s porn and an equally-old collection of vinyl record albums. Perry had considered all that, had checked on the possible price of selling it all, and it came up far short of thirty-seven grand.

Legal action had never been a consideration. While it might lead to a long incarceration for Endy, it wouldn't do shit for Perry's bank account. The money was either already spent

or stashed in some offshore account. Knowing Endy, it was the former. And if he was locked in jail, there'd be no way Endy could ever pay him back. Hell, even if Endy didn't go to jail, it would take a dozen years for him to repay what he'd stolen. By then Perry would be bankrupt and divorced.

Besides, he'd willingly given Endy all his money despite knowing Endy had planned on doubling it by selling drugs. Not that Endy was a dealer. But his brother-in-law was, and he'd asked Endy if he wanted in when his regular partner got arrested.

"A one-time thing, Perry-man," Endy had said when he'd asked if Perry wanted to go halves with him. "We give him the money and three days later we get twice as much back. That's a hundred and fifty grand for us to split."

The temptation had been too much for Perry. He could do so much with that money. Pay off bills. Get a new car. A real vacation for him and Linda.

So he'd done it.

Three days later there'd been no sign of his money.

Or Endy.

There'd be no way he could explain to the police what he'd done with his money without implicating himself in a major drug deal. No, his only chance for quick cash lay in robberies, and the only revenge he'd ever get would be seeing Endy get arrested for the thefts.

Unless I happen to see the sonofabitch in a dark street some day…

At that moment, the alarm on his iPhone went off, interrupting his lust for physical retribution and reminding him it was time to get ready.

This is it. One last hit and run and I'm done.

With a relieved smile and a happy heart, Perry dressed in his black sweats and headed for his car.

All of Perry's good feelings melted away within minutes of arriving at his target. To begin with, it had started to rain on his way to Arnold Weisman's house, which meant by the time he walked around the house, disarming the remote sensors and rewiring the keypad, he'd been soaked. That, in turn, meant he'd have to clean up all his footprints—inside and out—before he left. He wasn't worried about other forensic evidence—he wore latex gloves and had covered his head with a tight knit cap. The sweats he had on were originally Endy's—he'd found them stashed in Endy's locker at work and swiped them just for this purpose. If any hairs were recovered, they'd point another finger at Endy Almogardo. Just the way Perry

wanted it. He'd even pulled loose hairs from the hairbrush Endy had in his desk drawer and left a few at each of the first two robberies.

However, slogging through a house wrapped in wet clothes was not comfortable. Plus, it was dangerous. All it would take was a quick slip on a tile floor and he could end up with a broken leg, a sitting duck until Weisman came home.

The weather was only the first crimp in his carefully thought out plan. It turned out Weisman was either very mistrusting or he had a major case of OCD—or both. Unlike the other two homeowners, Arnold Weisman didn't keep any valuables out in the open. Or even in the usual storage spots. Cabinets, closets, dressers—Perry searched them all, growing more and more frustrated as each one turned up only junk. At the end of an hour all he had to show for his efforts was a decent Rolex and a pocket digital camera worth maybe two hundred bucks. The stereo system was built into the wall, the TVs too large for one person to carry, and it appeared he didn't collect anything.

This can't be all of it. The guy is freakin' loaded. He'd have to be to pay for an alarm system like the one Endy installed.

It wasn't until he went down into the basement that he finally hit the mother lode. There he'd discovered a back room with a door that had been secured with three different types of locks, and once Perry opened them he understood why.

The room was like something out of a geek-boy's wet dream.

Shelf after shelf of first edition comic books. Autographed baseball cards from the twenties all the way to the present day. Other signed sports memorabilia as well, from footballs to baseballs to jerseys. A Captain Kirk action figure in the box, with William Shatner's signature on the front. An entire bookshelf loaded with autographed first edition hardcovers.

"This is more like it," Perry whispered, and then he thought again.

What was he supposed to take? He only had limited space in his three duffel bags, and things like books and comics not only took up a lot of space, they were heavy as hell. Plus, he had no idea which ones were the most valuable. Did you go by what was the oldest? Or what was signed by the most famous person? And considering he didn't recognize half the names and titles, would he even be able to pick out the most famous ones?

And on top of it all, which ones were one of a kind and which ones would Carlo be able to fence?

Cursing his luck at having found a treasure trove and not having a damn idea of what to do with it, Perry decided to hedge his bet and go for middle-of-the-road items.

Baseball cards from the forties and fifties. Comic book titles he recognized: Spider-Man, The Avengers, Superman, The Fantastic Four. Books by Stephen King, Bill Clinton, George Bush, and Ray Bradbury.

At the end of his second hour in the house, Perry had filled two duffel bags and decided to call it quits due to their weight. No way he could carry a third, not without making two trips. And doing that would double his chances of being seen, not to mention getting wet in the rain again and having to—

Jesus Christ. I forgot about the rain.

He looked down at the duffels. They were canvas; heavy duty but not waterproof. And while it wasn't a far walk to the car, it was far enough that he might very well end up with water soaking through the bags and ruining the books he'd taken.

"Goddamnit!" It seemed like nothing was going to go right.

He hefted the bags upstairs and left them by the door, then made his way through the house to the mammoth kitchen. Once again his luck seemed to have deserted him, because Weisman apparently kept nothing where it was supposed to be. All he wanted was a couple of large plastic garbage bags to wrap around the duffels, but he couldn't find them in any of the usual places. Nothing under the sink. Plenty of canned goods and boxes of rice and pasta in the cabinets, but no bags. Even the hall closet, which contained an assortment of cleaning supplies, yielded no bags.

It took another twenty minutes of searching before he located them in the garage, of all places. By then, all he wanted to do was get the hell out of the house. He'd gotten a weird feeling in his gut, what his mother used to call butterflies, except they felt more like hyperactive weasels. He kept expecting Weisman—or the cops—to pull into the driveway, despite the fact that he was still pretty much on schedule. By the time he had two large black garbage bags wrapped over his duffels, he had an intense urge to run for the car and drive like hell back to his own house. It took a supreme effort of will not to sprint down the driveway, which would have looked suspicious. Instead, head bowed against the rain, he walked slowly and deliberately to the car, acting as if he belonged where he was.

Only when he was several blocks away, the heater going and his stolen goods safely hidden beneath a blanket in the trunk, did he start to relax, thinking maybe he'd even stop and grab a cup of coffee.

He was halfway home when red and blue lights came on behind him.

Perry's first instinct was to slam down on the gas pedal and make a desperate race for freedom. His foot actually twitched and pressed harder for a second before the logical part of his brain took control again and lifted it up. He flicked on his blinker and eased over to the curb, praying to God the cop just wanted to get past him and feeling the cold dread of certainty that he was getting pulled over. The wild animals in his stomach, which had just settled down, woke up and started their manic dance again.

The lights followed him to the side of the road and he knew a moment of blind terror.

This is it. You're caught. They've been following you since you left Weisman's and they're going to ask you to open your trunk.

Visions of being arrested, getting dragged into a police station and charged with multiple counts of burglary, filled his head. What the hell could he do? How did you talk your way out of—

Tap-Tap

Perry jumped in his seat. He'd been so frantic about the situation he hadn't noticed the cop approaching. His heart beating so fast it actually hurt, Perry rolled down the window.

"License and registration," the cop said, his monotone voice weighted down with boredom and more than a hint of annoyance. He wore a blue rain slicker over his uniform and had some sort of plastic bag wrapped around his hat. Rain water ran from the brim in miniature waterfalls.

The fact that he hadn't been asked to step out of the car, or had a gun pointed at him, eased Perry's anxiety enough so that he was able to pull his license out of his wallet and then ask the cop to hold on while he got his registration from the glove box. As he handed the cards over, he congratulated himself on keeping his voice steady.

"Is there something wrong, Officer?" he asked.

The cop ignored him and shined a flashlight on the license. Then he stared at Perry with eyes that were both tired and disinterested. For a moment, Perry wondered if the man was even a cop at all, if perhaps he was actually a serial killer roaming the streets and using a stolen cop car to pull his intended victims over.

After what seemed like an eternity, the cop handed back the two plastic squares.

"Your taillight is busted. Light's still on, but the plastic is broken. Better get it fixed." The cop turned and walked away, leaving a stunned Perry to stammer a belated thank you before rolling up his window.

Perry wasted no time putting his car into gear and pulling back onto the road, making sure he used his blinker. He watched to see if the cop followed, but the road stayed dark

behind him. Coffee forgotten, he took the shortest route home, making sure to keep to the speed limit and use his turn signals.

Once inside the safety of his garage, he shut the motor off and sat there, eyes closed, and focused on deep, calming breaths. Only when he had his pulse under control did he enter the house. Even then, he was too keyed up to sleep. Thanking his stars he'd escaped a trip to jail, he opened a beer and booted up his laptop to start checking prices on the memorabilia he'd swiped. The sooner he got rid of it the better, but he didn't want to get totally ripped off by Carlo, either. He needed some basic information so he could negotiate.

He stayed on the laptop for another hour and then decided to call it a night when he found himself staring at the screen with no idea of what he was reading.

After plugging his phone in to recharge, Perry made his way upstairs to get ready for bed. He had the late shift the next day, which meant he could sleep in and still have time to run some errands and visit Carlo before work.

Just as he was entering the bathroom, he paused. Something wasn't right. He couldn't say what, but there'd been something, right on the very edge of his peripheral vision. Something…different? Out of place? Frowning, he turned and looked down the hall towards the living room. Although there were no lights on in the kitchen or living room, the hall light provided enough illumination for him to see that everything was where it should be.

He shifted his gaze in the other direction. Nothing amiss there, either. He could see part of the main bedroom through the open door, and the office was…

Wait. There's a mark on the wall.

That's what had registered on his subconscious. A dark smudge—more than a smudge, really, more like a stain—on the wall right before the door to the office. So faint you could mistake it for a shadow, which is what his conscious eye had done, but something deep in his brain had recognized that nothing in the hallway ever cast a shadow on that particular wall.

Perry walked over to it, his worst fear that there might be a pipe leaking behind the sheetrock. Getting a plumber in the middle of the night was bound to be expensive, and if there was a leak he sure couldn't wait until the morning. Cursing his bad luck and hoping it was just a big dirt streak, he placed his hand on the spot to see if it was damp.

There was a moment when he felt a surge of joy because the wall was completely dry, and then it hit him that it wasn't just dry, it was warm.

Very warm.

Suddenly there was a prospect much worse than water damage.

Fire.

He'd seen plenty of houses that caught fire from faulty wiring to know it was a real possibility. There was no outlet in that area of the hall, so he ran into the office to see if anything on the other side of the wall was smoking. Or worse.

Except on the other side of the wall was the closet.

"Shit!" He didn't remember there being an outlet in the closet, but that didn't mean one wasn't present. It had been so long since he'd even seen the inside of that crammed space. And was that a red glow under the door?

Frantic, he threw open the door and began burrowing into the closet, tossing things over his shoulders with no regard for value or where they landed. Clothes, memorabilia, the Polynesian mask, it all got cast aside as he tried to find the source of the fire before it grew too large to contain.

It only took a minute to empty the lower half of the small space, but it was the longest minute of Perry's life. And then his hand struck sheetrock and he was staring at the back of the closet, where a darker smudge marred the wall.

Immediately, he knew it wasn't an outlet. Wires inside the wall were igniting something. Which meant there was no time to waste. Stumbling over the disarray on the floor, he raced back into the hall and slammed his foot into the center of the gray smudge, which had grown larger, almost as big around as a basketball.

The sheetrock dented and crumbled where he'd struck it. He kicked it again and again, opening a space between two beams until he could get his hands in and tear larger sections out. By then he could smell the acrid tang of overheated metal.

Another section came free and he jumped back as a puff of smoke rose up. Once he was certain no flames waited to burn his face, he leaned forward and peered into the hole.

Where he found a large field mouse, its fur smoldering and liquid oozing from the holes where its eyes had been, sandwiched between two electrical wires. Patches of shiny copper glinted where insulation had been chewed away, and the mouse's jaws were locked around the cable.

"Holy fuck." It seemed impossible, but there it was. His house had almost burned the fuck down because of a goddamned mouse in the wall.

"I should let you burn, motherfucker. Except you're already stinking up the place."

A spark shot into the air, and Perry remembered he still needed to deal with the problem quickly. A real fire could start at any second. He hurried back into the office, where he rummaged through the desk drawers until he found a plastic letter opener. Using the

pointed end, and careful to not let his fingers touch the mouse or the wires, he pried the charred corpse off the wire and dropped it onto the floor. Then he made a quick trip to the garage and shut off the power to the office and hallway. He'd have to call an electrician in the morning, but at least he wouldn't have to worry about the house going up in flames during the night.

An electrician and an exterminator, he amended. *If there's one mouse, there's probably a bunch.*

He added them to his list of things he planned to do the morning, one of which was get rid of the demon mask. During one of his breaks at work he'd Googled the local Salvation Army and veterans groups who took donations of clothes, furniture and artwork. Since he couldn't sell the stupid Polynesian mask, he figured he'd donate it, using Endy's name. That way he'd get rid of it and add to the evidence against Endy regarding the burglaries. He went back into the office and dragged the mask out. It was warm to the touch and he again thanked his lucky stars that it hadn't caught fire inside the closet. He put on a pair of rubber gloves, wiped the mask down with furniture polish, and then slid it into a garbage bag.

Only then did he finally finish getting ready for bed.

That night, Perry's dreams blazed with fire and evil laughter, and a voice that called out to him and told him to beware.

"You've got to be bullshitting me." Perry looked at Carlo and wished he had the nerve to tell his old school buddy what he really thought.

You're a goddamned low-life bastard! Don't you dare try to cheat me out of my money, you cheap fuck!

Except nothing good would come of that, and in truth something very bad might be the result. You could bitch to Carlo, but you couldn't insult him. Not if you wanted to keep your legs intact.

"Hey, I take offense to that," Carlo said, some of his usual good humor draining away. A clear warning that Perry was about to overstep the bounds of their so-called friendship. "I told you why I can't pay more."

He had, too, but Perry wasn't sure it was the truth. According to Carlo, trying to resell baseball cards and comics was a long process, both because the big-time collectors all knew each other and someone was bound to recognize stolen property, and because the market wasn't anywhere near its peak anymore. He'd told Perry that he'd probably have to hang on

to the boxes of stuff for months or even years before he sold it all, and that not only meant a long time to wait for his profits, but also an increased chance of getting nabbed by the cops.

So he'd offered Perry only one quarter what the stuff was worth on eBay, a grand total of four thousand dollars.

A number that meant Perry was still far short of returning his bank balance to where it needed to be. And *that* meant pulling yet another job before Linda came home.

All of which had Perry frustrated to the point where he was ready to scream. With his nerves already frayed from another restless night and the knowledge that he'd have to shell out money for the electrician and exterminator, it was all he could do to keep from pounding the table.

"Christ, Carlo. Can't you do a little better?"

"Take it or leave it, Perry." Carlo's voice held a note of finality in it, which Perry understood meant 'leave it' as in not only leave the four grand, but also any future deals. He had Perry by the balls and knew it.

Shit.

"Okay, I'll take it." Perry waited while Carlo counted out a handful of bills and passed them over.

"Take my advice," Carlo said, as he stashed the comics and cards under a counter. "You want quick cash, and lots of it, you gotta stick with the stuff that sells fast. Not this collectible shit, you get what I mean?"

"Yeah. I got it. I'll see you in a couple of days."

Perry walked out, the drumbeat back in his temples again, wondering what the hell he was going to do. He knew what Carlo wanted—more electronics, loose gemstones, anything untraceable. The problem was, now he was rushed for time and had no fourth prospect lined up.

Guess I gotta check Endy's list of clients again.

That meant a trip to the local library during his break, so he could access Endy's files remotely. After a ten-minute detour to drop off the stolen mask at the Salvation Army Outlet Store, he got himself a cubicle in the library and prepared to do his research.

Except when he tried to log in, he found that Endy's account had been closed.

Hell. Perry stared at the computer screen in frustration. *Management finally got around to deleting his access. Now what do I do?*

He tried thinking of possible solutions, but in the end he had to admit his only choice was to pull a name from his own client list. He'd wanted to tie all the robberies to Endy, but

it looked like the best he'd be able to do for this last one was pick a house he and Endy had worked on together. Something from way back when they'd first started with the company.

And cross my fingers they never upgraded to a better system.

He didn't want a search of his own files on any records, so he had to rely on his memory, which only provided three names. Two of them he knew for a fact were likely to be home on a weeknight because they had children. The third, the Driesens, were an elderly couple who lived on the other side of town, in a neighborhood of small high ranches and Cape Cods. He couldn't remember if there'd been anything of real value on display when he'd been there, but he did recall the Driesens being very afraid of getting robbed, which had to mean there was something in the house they wanted to protect. Plus, both husband and wife were pretty hard of hearing, so even if they were home he should still be able to move around without them waking, as long as he didn't venture upstairs.

When he arrived back at his desk, there was a message on his machine from Linda.

"Hi, it's me. I tried your cell but as usual you didn't answer. Good thing I'm not stuck in a ditch. Anyhow, I'll be home tomorrow night or the night after for sure. Miss you and can't wait for some major catching up! Love you. Bye."

Frowning, Perry reached for his phone and found only an empty pocket. He had forgotten the damned thing again; it was sitting home in the charger.

Once Linda's home I won't be able to sneak out at night. That means the only chance of hitting the Driesens is tonight.

He hated the thought of breaking into a house that he hadn't spent a couple of nights watching, but it looked like he didn't have a choice. His shift ended at ten. He could grab something to eat and then head to the Driesens' just before midnight. They were bound to be asleep by then. That would leave all the following day, Thursday, for the electricians to do their work and him to visit Carlo and the bank. He'd already taken the day off, so he typed a quick email to his boss saying he needed Friday as well, because of his wife coming home. Everyone knew what was happening with Linda and her family, so there'd be no problem getting the time.

Then he spent the rest of his shift finishing paperwork and counting the minutes until ten.

Perry stared at the Driesens' house and wondered what he'd done to deserve such a string of bad luck. Not only were they both home, but there was a light on in the back of the

house and the silhouette of someone moving around. All he could figure was that at least one of them had either gotten up for a glass of water or something to eat.

That left him with two options: find another house, or wait until the Driesens were upstairs and asleep. He decided to wait, figuring they had to go to bed sometime.

Sometime ended up being just after one in the morning. Then he forced himself to wait another hour as a precaution. By the time he snipped the alarm wires and eased in through an unlocked window, it was just after two a.m. and he was already exhausted.

The downstairs of the house was much like he remembered, considering he hadn't been inside in years. Carpet, wallpaper and furniture thirty years out of date. Pictures of children and grandchildren on the walls and mantle. A cabinet of curios, none of which looked very valuable.

A pervasive smell that he could only describe as "old person" enveloped him as he moved from room to room. It was a combination of lavender, dust, Ben-Gay, and a thousand home-cooked meals all tied together with musty cat piss. A smell that instantly told you the homeowners rarely opened the windows and occasionally forgot to let out the pets. Or at least he hoped they did; if they didn't own a cat then it meant one or the other of the Driesens had a problem with incontinence.

A quick look through the living room, kitchen and family room was all Perry needed in order to know he wouldn't be hitting a jackpot on the first floor. He moved to the stairs that led to the second floor, and then paused, remembering what he'd found in the last basement.

Why not check there first before taking a chance on waking someone up? Reversing his direction, he returned to the kitchen and headed downstairs.

With the door shut behind him, he allowed himself the small risk of turning on the lights. Dirty, bare ceiling bulbs did little to drive away the darkness, and he found it necessary to still keep his penlight on. At first glance it seemed like a dead end as far as valuables were concerned. Jars and cans occupied dusty shelves, far too many for one couple to eat. Another metal rack held nothing but cleaning supplies and soaps stacked in military-precise height and brand order. A third shelf unit was actually bowing under the weight of more canned goods.

Christ. They must be hoarders. Or maybe those nutty extreme coupon clippers.

Additional shelves held paper towels, toilet paper, napkins, boxes of rice and cereal and dog food.

And they don't even own a dog.

As he moved through the basement, his flashlight bouncing from one row of stockpiled

goods to the next, Perry forgot his mission, sidetracked by his amazement at the collection of goods that rivaled a small supermarket.

Until he walked past the last rack and found himself face-to-face with a hideous monster.

"Ahhh!" He couldn't stop the short scream from escaping as the twisted, grotesque countenance seemed to lunge towards him. The flashlight fell from his hand and he turned to run but instead smashed into the corner of a metal shelf rack, sending a dozen boxes of cereal to the floor and opening a gash on his cheek. His foot came down on a box, which shot out from underneath his sneaker, sending him to the cement floor. He hit hard, his teeth clacking painfully together and his elbow slamming down at just the right spot so that lightning bolts of red-hot agony raced up and down his arm.

Positive the horrendous creature was at that very moment reaching out to drive razor-sharp claws into him, Perry gritted his teeth against the pain and rolled over, one hand coming up to defend his face while the other groped futilely for anything that might serve as a weapon against the thing that was about to disembowel him.

Except nothing happened.

No claws gouged his arms. No teeth bit into his flesh. No sounds announced the presence of the creature, not a roar, not even a snort of hot breath.

He was alone.

Confused and wary of a trap, Perry slowly got to his feet and peered around the corner. His penlight lay on the floor, casting a tiny arc of yellow across the cement. He raised his gaze, searching the shadows and corners, looking further down the room…

There!

Perry gasped as he saw it. The monstrous face, still leering at him from the far side of the room. It hadn't moved, and he wondered if maybe it…

His thoughts stopped in mid-sentence as his brain registered something familiar about the thing. His confusion increased even as his fear lessened. Never taking his eyes off the thing, he bent and retrieved the flashlight, shined it on the object he already recognized but couldn't accept.

Brought into detail by the light, there was no denying it.

The mask? How could it…?

It didn't seem possible, but leaning against the concrete wall of the Driesen's' basement was the Polynesian demon mask in all its terrifying glory. The same angled eyes, the same evil sneer, the same jagged teeth…it wasn't a similar mask, it was identical.

The same one he'd left at the Salvation Army twelve hours earlier.

Dammit! Perry's heart thudded into overdrive as understanding burst to life in his brain. *Someone's on to me! There can't be two of them, and the Driesens sure as hell aren't buying primitive artwork at the Salvation Army. Someone followed me there, and then followed me here as well. Snuck into the basement while I was upstairs.*

But who? Not the police. They'd simply wait for him to break in and then arrest him. Carlo? That wouldn't make sense, either. He was making a nice profit off Perry's thefts.

Endy.

It had to be. His former friend must've found out what Perry was doing and decided to play a nasty prank on him before…

Before what? Before turning him in?

Before killing him?

Perry turned and hurried towards the stairs as fast he could in the dim light. The who and why weren't as important as getting the hell out. Whatever was going on, it wasn't anything that boded well for one Perry Spellman. His best bet was to get the hell back home and then figure things out.

He was almost to the stairs when he noticed a huge pile of paper towel packages on the floor obstructing his way. He automatically turned down between two shelf units, intending to go around and then cut back to the stairs when it hit him that the pile hadn't been there before.

"Perry Spellman."

The unexpected voice was low and angry and seemed to come from all around him.

A trap! his mind screamed, while at the same time he tried to slow his forward momentum. But it was too late. There was something blocking the space between the two shelf units, something oval-shaped and dark with two points of red in the middle. Another step brought it into view and Perry cried out in terror at the sight of it.

The mask!

He tried to twist around and squeeze past it but there wasn't room and instead he slammed into a set of shelves. Jars and cans tumbled everywhere as he headed for the floor again, this time striking his knees and elbows and what seemed like every other bone in his body as he careened off the metal poles and cement multiple times before his head finally hit something hard and the world disappeared into a blackness filled with the sound of drums.

And a guttural voice that spoke his name over and over.

Perry woke to the sounds of voices above him.

"…don't go down there, you old fool! Just call the police."

"And look like an idiot when it turns out a raccoon got into the cellar? Not on your life. I'll just take a quick look. Now gimme that flashlight!"

The arguing continued while Perry slowly regained his senses. The back of his head throbbed like someone was tapping on it with a hammer and there was a moment of dizziness as he pushed himself to his feet. It disappeared rapidly, though, as he remembered where he was and what had happened.

The Driesens. I can't have been out too long if that's them upstairs, getting ready to call the cops or come down here. Into the basement. I was…

The mask!

He looked all around but there was no sign of the freakish carving. Frowning, he moved to the bottom of the stairs, the aisles empty except for the mess he'd made during his attempted escape.

What the hell…was I seeing things?

Had his guilt and fear gotten so out of control that he was cracking under the pressure?

It doesn't matter. Not now. All that matters is getting the fuck out of here before the cops show up.

Except how was he supposed to do that? The Driesens were right upstairs. Sure, they were old. He could probably just rush past them, knock them down and run out of the house. But violence wasn't really his thing; he had no desire to hurt an innocent person, whether on purpose or by accident. Besides, if he did that and then still got caught, there would be added charges of assault. Not what he wanted.

Perry glanced around the cavernous basement. There had to be windows. He'd seen them from the outside. It was just a matter of locating them. He returned to the spot where he'd fallen and located his penlight, which was still on. Aiming the tiny beam around, he walked along the aisles of shelves until he found a window set high up on a wall. A quick examination showed it was a simple latch type that opened inwards. He pulled it down but the space it provided wasn't nearly large enough to squeeze through.

If he could get the square pane of glass completely off, however…

The sounds of arguing escalated upstairs and it sounded to Perry like old man Driesen was winning. That meant very little time was left. Throwing caution to the wind, Perry grabbed the edges of the window pane and yanked down as hard as he could. With a little

twisting, he was able to pry the metal arms right off the frame. Making no effort to keep quiet, he dragged a box of canned goods over to the window and used it to boost himself up. It was still a tight fit, and he was only halfway out when a hand wrapped around his calf and pulled hard on his leg.

"Gotcha!"

Perry dug his fingers into the ground and dragged himself forward across damp grass, flailing and kicking with his legs at the same time. His foot struck something soft and he heard the old man cry out. At the same time, the pressure on his leg disappeared. With a final push from his knees he slid free of the window, scraping skin from his waist in the process. Praying he hadn't hurt the old man too badly, he got up and sprinted for his car.

Two minutes later, he was on his way home, with alternating visions of police cars and demon masks coming after him.

The early morning hours of Thursday were an exercise in hell for Perry. He spent them on the couch drinking coffee and watching the dark square of the window that faced the front of the house, expecting at any moment to see the driveway lit up by police cars.

His hands trembled and his foot tapped an erratic rhythm on the carpet while his mind raced with different scenarios, none of which ended well for him. He couldn't imagine the police not coming for him; after all, he'd bungled the robbery in practically every way possible. How many times had he fallen in the basement? Twice? Three times? He couldn't remember, but it didn't matter. He had to have left some kind of evidence behind. Plus the way he cut himself on the window frame—that wasn't just evidence, it was goddamned DNA! Add to that shoe prints, and probably tire prints as well…he was a goner. It was just a matter of how quickly the police tracked him down.

By the time the sun peeked over the horizon to announce the arrival of Thursday morning properly, Perry was already wired from caffeine and adrenaline and unable to sit still for more than a few minutes at a time.

The sound of something falling over upstairs made him cry out and jump from the couch, spilling coffee in the process.

"Perry Spellman."

The same voice from the Driesens' house! Only now it was in one of the rooms above him, either the office or the guest bedroom.

Endy! It had to be him. Playing some kind of weird game, disguising his voice. Or using

a recording.

It doesn't matter. What matters is he's in my fucking house again!

Perry ran up the stairs and into the office. No one was there, but the closet door was open just a crack.

"You son of a bitch, I know you're in there," Perry said, his voice almost an animalistic growl as he stalked across the room. Fully prepared to beat the living hell out of his former friend, he threw open the door and raised his fist.

And then screamed and jumped back.

Staring at him from the darkness of the closet was the Polynesian mask.

"Endy!" He shouted the word so loud that his throat actually hurt. "You motherfucker! I know you're here! Come out and face me like a man!"

Perry ran from room to room, alternating between calling Endy a coward and demanding he stop playing games. After searching the top floor, he descended to the first floor and went through every room. Then it was the garage. With no luck there, he went back up the stairs and into the attic. By the time he was finished, every closet door stood open and sweat dripped from his forehead and neck. He'd found no sign of Endy or any kind of device that could have played a recording.

Assuming Endy had somehow snuck out, Perry returned to the office and hoisted the offending mask in his arms. His fear of the police momentarily forgotten, he stowed the mask in the front seat of his car and threw the car in reverse, his destination firmly in mind.

Endy's house.

Let the rat bastard know I'm on to him. He can't scare me with this fucking thing anymore.

The first hints of morning traffic were beginning as Perry pulled up in front of the tiny, unassuming two-bedroom ranch. Somewhere out of sight someone was playing music too loud, the *thud-thud-thud* of a bass drum sending vibrations through Perry's seat and through his body. He looked around but couldn't see anyone on the streets or in their yards.

There was no car in Endy's driveway and the lawn looked like it hadn't been mown in a month, but that didn't deter Perry. He figured Endy was just making sure the place looked empty. Satisfied no one was watching, Perry took the mask and flung it towards the front steps. It didn't reach, but it landed close enough so that anyone approaching the porch would be sure to see it.

Good enough to get a message across.

Perry hit the gas and sped down the street. The seismic drumming faded away as he left the neighborhood.

Next time I'll toss a can of gas and a match. See how he likes that.

When he arrived home, there was a message from Linda waiting for him on his voice mail.

"Good morning, sweetheart! I'll be home late tonight. I'm leaving this afternoon for sure, I promise. Call me when you get this."

Perry groaned. In all the craziness, he'd forgotten about Linda's imminent return. He pounded his fist against the kitchen counter. It was all too much! The police, the money, Endy…what the hell was he supposed to do?

And that's when the idea came to him.

Vacations.

People were always going on vacations. And many of those with service contracts contacted the company ahead of time, instructing them to bypass the usual protocols if the house alarm went off and immediately alert the police. All he had to do was get into the master files, see who was on vacation, and then take a quick trip over there while the neighbors were at work. If he was lucky, he might even find one of Endy's accounts on the list.

This time Perry used his own computer, because it wouldn't be suspicious for him to log on from home on a day off. He checked his email and then accessed the master list, scrolling through the names but not opening any of the files, so there'd be no trace of his visit. He felt like shouting for joy when almost immediately he found one of Endy's recent customers on the vacation list.

He planned on completing his break in during the mid-morning hours, but there were still the police to worry about. God knew they could show up at his house any time. Figuring he had a better chance of avoiding arrest by staying on the move, he changed his clothes and then spent the next two hours driving aimlessly around town, until he couldn't take waiting anymore.

The house he'd chosen sat in the middle of a secluded street. Perry parked one street over and then walked to his target, his outfit very different from his previous robberies. This time he wore a gray suit and black shoes. He carried a leather briefcase in one hand. His hope was that a well-dressed businessman wouldn't arouse any suspicions. He could be homeowner, a salesman, or just someone on their way to work.

With a quick prayer that all nosey housewives were otherwise occupied, he walked up the driveway and around to the back of the house. There he made quick work of the lock on

the garage door and hurried inside. He had about forty seconds to disarm the keypad before the silent alarm triggered.

According to the count in his head, he made it with fifteen seconds to spare.

Just in case he was wrong, though, he headed directly to the upstairs bedroom. This time there'd be no casual searches, no hemming and hawing over what to take. It was strictly jewelry, which he tossed into his briefcase. Bracelets, rings, watches, earrings, broaches. Anything he could find with jewels or gold. He didn't care if Carlo didn't give him a fair price, as long as he made enough to replenish the remainder of what he'd lost. A hasty search through the drawers in the bedroom also revealed an envelope with eight hundred dollars in it, which Perry stuck into his pocket.

Then it was back out the garage and down the sidewalk, walking as if nothing in the world was wrong. Although he kept his face forward, he did his best to scan the nearby houses for any signs of faces in the windows or curtains falling back into place.

He saw nothing.

Once in his car, he drove right to Carlo's shop, calling just before he got there to say he was stopping by and that it was important. As he expected, Carlo was waiting by the back door, an eager look on his face. He knew important not only meant good merchandise, but also the opportunity to get the merchandise at a great price.

Twenty minutes later, Perry left the shop with exactly twelve thousand dollars in his pocket, not counting the cash he'd swiped at the house. He figured he could have gotten twice that amount if he hadn't been so desperate, but it didn't matter. He had enough to bring his account back up to where it should be. The extra cash he'd use to pay for the electrical work in the house and take Linda out for a nice dinner.

Better pray it's not your last supper, his subconscious reminded him. He grimaced, the idea of doing jail time once again digging its claws into his guts.

At the bank, he made sure to take his deposit to an assistant manager rather than a teller, just like he'd done the previous times.

"Another big deposit, Mr. Spellman," the man said. He didn't exactly have a suspicious look on his face, but it wasn't his usual friendly smile, either.

"Let's just say I'm not the investing type," Perry said, using one of his rehearsed explanations. It was the first time the man had made any comment. When the banker's eyes narrowed in a frown, Perry launched into the second part of his story, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"A friend offered me the chance to double my money on a sure thing. It didn't pan out.

I was lucky to make my money back before my wife found out. Between you and me, that's a friend I won't be speaking to for a long time."

"Very lucky," the banker said, handing over the stamped deposit slip. His expression had changed again, this time to one of obvious disdain. Any other time and Perry might have felt annoyed at being judged. However, this time it was exactly what he'd hoped for. Let the dumb shit think Perry Spellman had a gambling problem, as long as it kept him from mentioning the unusual deposits to a supervisor.

Back in his car, Perry leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes as he let out a long sigh of relief. He was beginning to think that maybe his luck was finally turning around. He'd made his money back, which meant no more robberies. Linda was returning home, meaning there'd be some semblance of a normal routine again. He hadn't let the house burn down.

And maybe, just maybe, the police weren't looking for him. He'd passed several patrol cars during the day—the sight of each one causing a minor heart attack—and not one of them had paid him any attention. If the cops wanted him for questioning, surely they'd have his license plate number and a description of his car by now.

Maybe they're not looking into the break-in because nothing was stolen. They must have bigger crimes to solve, right?

The possibility gave him some small comfort, although it didn't stop him from doing two drive-bys of his house before he pulled in, just in case the cops had it staked out. Not that he had any idea of what he'd do if they did. Run? Where? It wasn't like he was going to leave the country and start a new life. Or buy new identities for him and Linda.

No, he was pretty much fucked if the police really were looking for him.

After a call to Linda, who said she should be home by nine, Perry tried to take his mind off his potential arrest by cleaning the house. It didn't work, but keeping busy was better than just sitting around obsessing over things. He checked his email a couple of times as well, personal and work. Nothing out of the ordinary, which meant the cops hadn't gone to his job.

After he had the house ready for Linda's return, he opened a beer and considered his situation.

Elkwood was a decent-sized city. Not a huge one like LA or New York or Chicago, but still pretty big. Big enough to warrant three zip codes within the city limits. There had to be, what, dozens of robberies every week. If not more.

How much attention were his going to draw?

He hoped none, especially since there wouldn't be any others. Even if they did, Endy would be the first suspect. After all, Perry's only goofs had been at the Driesen house. There really was nothing to tie him to the other robberies.

Except Endy.

That was the real monkey wrench. What was Endy up to? How had he found out about the robberies? And why play practical jokes on Perry instead of just making an anonymous call to the cops?

If he exposes you, he gets exposed, too.

Which meant he had something else in mind. Revenge? Or maybe it was just scare tactics, just a message to let Perry know he was watching.

If that was the case, then everything should stop, because I've stopped. Unless he's worried about me framing him.

Perry ran his hands through his hair. Endy could be in the process of a reverse frame, some kind of plan to shift the blame away from himself and back to the real perpetrator.

"Christ." It was all too confusing for Perry. He wasn't a criminal; he was just a guy who'd been burned by a friend and pushed to the edge to keep his wife from finding out.

And look where he'd ended up.

Perry finished his beer and opened another. Things were out of his hands. The cops, Endy, it was all too much.

"Fuck it." He chugged half the beer down. There was nothing he could do but wait. Wait to see if he got arrested. Wait to see what Endy did next. Wait for Linda to come home.

"And while I'm waiting, I might as well drink. What the hell. I don't have to work until Monday!" He pulled two more beers from the fridge and went downstairs. The time on the cable box showed just after four, more than enough time to watch some of the game and shower before Linda got home.

It didn't take long, though, before he found it getting harder and harder to keep his eyes open. The somnambulistic pace of the game, together with the beer, had him fighting to stay awake.

It was a fight he never had a chance of winning.

Perry opened his eyes to darkness and a distinct feeling something had woken him, but he had no idea what. A sound? A touch?

A sense of déjà vu set his skin tingling and the hairs on his arms rose to attention. Wide

awake now, he rose from the couch and went to the bottom of the stairs. Behind him, the TV droned on, the voices of old sitcom stars creating a background noise that made it hard to hear any sounds that might be coming from upstairs. The cable box read 8:42.

Close to nine. Was it Linda upstairs? Why hadn't she woken him when she'd come in?

Something went *thump,* loud enough that he heard it distinctly despite the chatter of the TV.

He gritted his teeth. *Endy! It had to be. He'd broken in again, just like before. Was probably doing something to mess with my head again.*

Not this time.

There were only three ways in and out of the house. One through the downstairs door that led to the garage. Upstairs there was a front door and a back door.

Instead of going up the stairs, Perry slid the love seat over and blocked the steps. Then he eased open the door to the garage, exited through the side door, and went around to the back. He knew the back door would be unlocked; it always was, unless they planned on being gone for more than a day. As quietly as he could, he went up the steps to the back deck and opened the sliding door just enough so he could slip into the kitchen. From there it was just a few steps across the tiled floor to the hallway, which he accomplished without a sound, trailing his hand along the counter to help guide his way through the near-darkness. A faint vibration reached him through his feet and his hand, a sensation like someone was playing music in another room, although he couldn't hear anything.

Before leaving the kitchen, he paused just long enough to slide a large knife from the butcher block on the counter. Then he stepped into the hallway.

A thin spray of light fanned out from beneath the office door.

Definitely Endy, Perry thought. *If Linda had come home early she'd have either woken me up or just gone straight to bed.*

His anger rose up, a physical presence that threatened to erupt in the form of a primal scream.

Got you now, you motherfucking bastard!

He stormed down the hall, already laughing in his head at how perfect the whole situation was. He'd beat the hell out of an "intruder" and then call the cops, who would not only pin the other robberies on Endy but likely any evidence at the Driesens', too. It would look like Endy had tried to frame his former co-worker for everything. Instead, he'd be the one taking the fall.

Perry didn't even bother turning the knob. He kicked the door just below the handle,

breaking the lock and frame in the process and sending the door flying open. He leaped into the room, knife held high.

"Got you, motherfucker!" he shouted, echoing his own thoughts of a moment earlier.

An empty room stared back at him.

It took Perry several seconds to notice the room wasn't quite empty after all. A body lay face down on the floor, a puddle of red sauce spread out beneath it.

Perry frowned. Why was there a woman lying in spaghetti sauce in his office? What the hell kind of trick was Endy playing now?

It's not a trick, Perry. You know that. Just like you know who the woman is.

Perry felt something like a cement block land in his stomach.

His brain was right. He did know. He'd lived with that body, that blonde hair, those legs, for too many years not to recognize them instantly.

Linda.

He slowly sank to his knees, his legs not collapsing so much as lowering his body to the ground so it wouldn't topple over. His body seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. He understood he was in shock, just like he understood Linda wasn't lying in sauce. He understood, but he didn't comprehend. Not yet.

That didn't come until he saw the marks.

At first they made no sense. Strange designs drawn on her arms and legs and neck with black and red magic markers? Who would do something like that?

Then some of the red marker dripped off one arm and landed silently in the not-sauce, and he saw the markings for what they really were.

Bites.

Someone had bitten Linda over and over, sunk their teeth into her flesh until her blood flowed out…

That was when Perry lost it.

The agonized wail that had been building inside him clawed its way out and he grabbed Linda's body, turned her over so he could see her face. A coating of blood hid it from him and he wiped his hands at it, his motions growing more frantic when the blood wouldn't go away.

It wasn't until he saw the twin black holes where her nose should have been that he realized her entire face was gone.

With a horrified gasp he fell backwards, desperate to get away from the skull-like visage staring at him with bulging, dead eyes. The true horror of her death was a sledgehammer to

his chest, knocking the air from his lungs.

In that same moment, one clear thought came to him.

Endy didn't do this.

There was something much worse in the house than his traitorous friend. Something that could tear the flesh off a person, mutilate their body, without making a sound.

Despite his sudden terror, guilt filled him, making him sick in a way even the corpse on the floor couldn't.

You slept through your wife's murder. She was killed right above your head while you were dreaming.

Blood thudded in his temples, *thump-thump-thumping* until he could barely hear his own thoughts.

No, it wasn't his blood.

It was the drumming again, louder this time. Coming from the other end of the hall, in the living room or dining room. Someone was down there, tapping on the floor or the wall to psych him out.

And it was working.

Gripping the knife in his right hand and wishing he'd gone into the garage for his gun, Perry took a deep breath and prepared to face the man who'd murdered his wife.

The far end of the house was darker than before, the vague shapes of the furniture oddly distorted and somehow menacing. The drumming grew louder as he approached the living room, the *thud-thud-thud* so powerful he could feel it in his fillings.

And still he couldn't see the intruder.

As he drew even with the kitchen entrance, Perry noticed a sharp demarcation on the floor and up the walls where the shadows turned from charcoal gray to impenetrable black. He felt like he'd come upon a cave at night, an analogy that didn't help his nerves at all.

A warm breeze washed over him, carrying scents that were at once familiar and out of place: barbequed meat, offal and wet leaves. The combination left him confused; the steady pounding on the walls or floor made it even harder to think.

You're freaking out, he told himself. *Linda's dead, her killer's somewhere in front of you in the dark. Stop being an idiot and just call the damn police.*

Perry paused. He *was* being a fool. Going after a murderer with a knife? Fuck that! It was time to call the police.

Except that would mean turning his back on whoever was hiding in the dark. Of course, he could back up, but then he'd have to deal with seeing Linda's corpse again, and he didn't

think he could handle that. The only phones upstairs were in the office and…

The living room.

The phone was by the couch. Only a few steps away, but if the killer was also close by…

As if in response to his thoughts, a deep, gruff voice spoke from somewhere by the back of the dining room.

"*Perry Spellman. Ma-te. Ma-te!*"

A glimmer of hope sprang to life in Perry's chest. The intruder was nowhere near him! He could dash into the living room, grab the phone and get out.

Picturing where the end table was in his mind, he jumped forward.

And found himself falling down a soaking wet hill, mud splattering his clothes, rocks and sticks gouging his skin. The knife tumbled away into the darkness as he clawed at the slick ground to stop his out-of-control descent.

His hip smashed into a thick tree and he cried out as electric pain raced down his leg. Turning, he wrapped his arms around the rough wood and held on while rivulets of water rushed past him and a torrential rain blasted through the canopy of a tropical forest, drenching him in seconds and nearly blinding him as it rolled off his forehead and into his eyes.

The steady pounding he'd heard in his living room was even louder now, a thundering *boom-boom-boom* that sounded like a hundred pairs of hands pounding on a hundred drums. Voices chanted in time with the beat, shouting strange but familiar words in an unknown language.

"Ma-te! Ma-te! Ma-te! Loko inu! Loko inu!"

Another noise reached him. Something large moving through the undergrowth, crashing through bushes and vines. Between the rain and the darkness he couldn't see ten feet in any direction, but he knew whatever was coming wasn't anything he wanted to face, not if it was large enough to hear over the machine gun sound of rain on leaves.

He pushed away from the tree and staggered down the hill, which quickly leveled off to flat land. There was no time to wonder what the hell had happened, how he'd been transported to another place. Only one thing was important: finding safety.

The sounds of his pursuer grew closer and Perry tried to move faster, but it was impossible in the darkness. Branches and leaves slapped his face and arms. His feet threatened to slip out from underneath him with every step. More than once he tripped over unseen rocks or roots, catching himself at the last moment by grabbing onto a tree or vine before falling face-first into the ground.

And still the crunch and crack of breaking foliage grew closer, now accompanied by a deep-throated, raucous sound that was half laughter, half inhuman growl, like a hyena, only amplified ten-fold.

He expected to feel a heavy body crash into him at any moment, sharp claws piercing his flesh and tearing pieces away. He had no idea what was chasing him—a lion? A tiger? Something even worse?—but he had the idea it was toying with him, waiting until just the right moment before pouncing, like a cat circling a wounded bird.

"Perry Spellman!"

Hearing the animalistic voice shout his name caused Perry to stumble and fall to his knees.

What the hell was behind him? Was it a group of people chasing him? But why?

"Leave me alone!" he cried out. "I didn't do anything!"

"Perry Spellman."

The voice was no longer shouting, but somehow even more frightening in its softer, harder tone. Perry turned and faced back the way he'd come. Pushing water and hair from his eyes, he searched the darkness for some sign of his pursuer.

There was nothing but black and gray.

"Desecrator." The word came from somewhere behind him.

Perry gasped and turned in the other direction. Was that a hint of movement amid the dim shapes of the trees?

"That which is tapu is most sacred." This time the voice was to his left.

He was surrounded!

"I don't know what you're talking about! Please, just let me go!"

As he stood there, the rain lessened enough that it was no longer a downpour but just a steady drizzle. At the same time, something appeared in the jungle before him. A tiny spark of red light like a distant fire. Then there were two. He tried to calculate how far away they were. Fire meant a camp of some kind. If he could just get there…

Two more points of red appeared.

A sick feeling erupted in Perry's stomach.

He glanced behind him. Another pair of red lights. Two more pairs to his left. Now he could see they weren't exactly round, they were more oval. And angled from side to side.

Jesus God, they're eyes! All around me!

"Ma-te. Ma-te. Ma-te!" The chanting grew louder, as did the drumming accompanying it. With a start, he realized the drumming was *inside* his head as well all around him.

Something slammed into him from behind, a heavy weight that knocked him onto his stomach and sent his face into the mud. A terrible pain blossomed in his thigh, a pain like vinegar poured on an open wound. Perry screamed and rolled over but whatever had hit him was gone. He put a hand to his leg and felt warm liquid that he knew without a doubt was his own blood.

Using a tree for support, he climbed to his feet. There were more eyes in the darkness now, at least a dozen glowing pairs all fixed on him.

"Please. Let me go. Whatever I did, I'm sorry."

Another soundless attack sent him chest-first into the tree so hard he struck it and bounced off. It took a moment before he felt a new pain, this time in his left shoulder. A second later there was blood running down his arm.

"Ma-te loa. Ma-te loa."

"I don't understand!" Perry shouted, desperate to have them stop before he bled to death.

"Time to die, Perry Spellman."

"No!"

Perry pushed away from the tree and sprinted into the jungle. He no longer tried to be careful. He ran at full speed, dodging trees and branches when he saw them in the near-pitch dark, hitting them with his shoulders and arms when he didn't see them in time. He ignored the pain, all his attention focused on getting away from the *things* that wanted him dead.

The primitive, ancient-man part of his brain understood there was nothing human after him. Something unreal, something beyond natural, was hunting him. Not Endy, not the cops. Whatever the monster was, it had killed Linda and tried to kill him. It had played games with his head, used his own guilt and fears against him. Even used the mask…

The mask!

Suddenly it became clear in Perry's head.

It was all about the mask.

He felt like a ten-ton weight had been lifted from his back. Relief and anger and humiliation surged through him all at the same time.

There was nothing supernatural going on. That's what *he* wanted Perry to believe. Him. The man who owned the mask.

Jenson Kellogg.

Somehow he'd found out Perry had stolen the idol and concocted a plan to not only get

it back, but drive him crazy in the process.

He probably drugged me. Set up this whole elaborate scheme. God knows he has the money to do it.

Which meant none of it was real. Not the rain or the jungle.

I'm probably lying on the floor, or in the bathtub. He's pouring water on me and stabbing me with my own knife.

Rage surged through Perry. The fucker had killed Linda and was torturing him all because of a goddamned idol.

"I know what you're doing!" Perry shouted into the night. "It's not gonna work. I'm on to you."

At that moment the jungle gave way to a wide, open space. Perry found himself on a beach, the sand almost white under the cloudy skies. Somewhere along the way the rain had tapered off to a fine mist. Ahead of him, an endless black ocean stretched to the horizon. To his left and right the beach was a runway of white paralleled by the sea and jungle.

The pounding of drums reverberated from within the trees, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. Perry moved away from the tree line, closer to the ocean. The steady shushing of waves on sand was familiar to him from vacations at the Jersey shore. Cool water washed over his feet and he danced away, amazed at how real the drug-induced hallucinations were. Every breath brought with it the briny scent of salt water and the thick odors of thriving vegetation and rotting leaves. Sand shifted beneath his feet and it grew harder to walk as he got further from the water line. His clothes, soaked from the rain, hung like weights from his arms and legs, making each step a mighty effort that brought him a little closer to exhaustion.

It's not real, he kept telling himself, as he slogged through the sand. *It's not real. You just have to wake up.*

Except he couldn't. His breathing grew ragged as he trudged down the beach, the drums and voices delivering a constant threat of death from within the dark tropical forest.

Without warning, a line of fire burst to life ahead of him, the conflagration stretching from water line to tree line. Dark shapes moved within the flames, silhouettes of inhuman forms. Perry turned to go back the other way and found an identical barrier behind him. As he stared at it, the line of fire began to move towards him. A quick glance in the other direction confirmed his worst fear: the other fiery barrier was doing the same thing. Any thoughts of running back into the jungle were crushed when he saw the dark shadows moving within it, their red eyes giving their presence away.

Trapped! Perry's mind whirled with frantic thoughts as he sought some way to escape. The water offered no solution. Even if it wasn't real, he could just as easily die from drowning in a dream as in real life. With nowhere to turn, he sank to his knees in the cool sand and held out his arms to the monsters in the jungle.

"Please! Tell me what you want. I'll do anything!"

"It is too late, Perry Spellman."

One of the dark shapes stepped forward and even from forty yards away Perry knew his life was over.

It was the Polynesian idol, only grown larger. It had the same jagged teeth, the same slanted eyes, the same sharp tusks and horns, only now it stood as a tall as a man and walked on spindly legs. An equally-thin set of arms sprouted from below the giant head. The impossible creature shouldn't have been able to move, yet it walked with sure-footed agility. Other things emerged from the forest as well, shorter but no less ugly. All of them were variations on the same theme: carved totems and tikis somehow brought to life, their gigantic heads balanced atop miniature bodies.

And all of them looked angry.

"I'm sorry!" Perry shouted at them. "I didn't mean any harm. I'll bring you back! I'll turn myself in to the police! Please!"

In response, a small tiki, barely two feet high, darted forward and took a bite from Perry's leg, scurrying away with a quarter-sized piece of flesh in its mouth. Perry screamed and fell onto his side, clutching his injured calf.

"Hurts, doesn't it?"

The new voice startled Perry from his pain. It was human, nothing like the rough, growling tones of the idol. He looked up and saw an ordinary man standing among the tikis, staring down at him with a stern look on his face.

"Who…who are you?" Even as he asked, Perry recognized the man.

"Jensen Kellogg," the man said, confirming Perry's memory. "You've been a bad boy, Perry."

"I'm sorry." Perry felt no shame at hearing the whining tone of his voice. "I was desperate. I needed—"

"We know all about you. You made a dishonorable decision and then when things went bad, you committed dishonorable acts. The mask was a gift. The embodiment of a sacred being, which you desecrated. You broke the law of *tapu* when you stole it. In their world, you committed a deadly sin. The Akua tried to tell you but you didn't heed his warning. And

now the Akua and his offspring have come to take your soul to the underworld."

"No!" Perry got to his feet but something struck him in the back and he fell to his knees again. Thin fingers gripped his arms and shoulders, pinning him in place with supernatural force.

"Goodbye, Mr. Spellman." Kellogg gave him a mock salute and then walked into the jungle, his form quickly disappearing into the dark depths.

The Death tiki stepped closer, the smaller living idols following close behind. Its mouth opened wider and wider, until it took up the entire face below the glowing eyes.

"Ma-te! Ma-te!" the miniature tikis chanted, and although Perry had no knowledge of Polynesian languages, he understood the meaning of their intonation.

Die! Die!

Darkness closed in over Perry, a black sky in which red eyes burned like coals. Razor-sharp teeth bit into his arms, his chest, his legs.

And then there was only pain.

ELKWOOD—Police are still investigating the bizarre murder of Linda Spellman in her home last night. Her husband, Perry Spellman, is missing and wanted for questioning for both his wife's murder and a series of local robberies.

In a related story, the victim of one of those robberies, Jensen Kellogg, awoke yesterday morning to find one of the items stolen from his house, a rare, hand-carved Polynesian artifact, on his front porch.

"I don't know who took it, or who returned it, but I'm glad to have it back. It has a lot of sentimental value along with its obvious monetary significance."

Captain Arthur Ruiz stated that evidence linking Spellman and a former associate of his, Endy Almorgardo, to the robberies had been found and…

Perry opened his eyes to pure darkness. Despite being unable to see anything, he wanted to shout for joy at the fact that he was still alive, his body whole again and pain-free.

It was *a dream!*

He held his hands out in front of him, moved them around to see if he could feel anything. He had no idea where he was; all he knew was that he wasn't in his own house. That much he could tell by the rough, hard ground beneath him.

"Hello? Is there anyone there?"

A series of lights flashed on around him. Perry closed his eyes at the sudden brightness and then opened them again.

Oh, God.

Not just lights. Red lights. In pairs.

He had time for one loud scream before the Akua and its tikis attacked.

The third time Perry woke up, the Akua of Death added a new twist: it was Linda who savaged him with a shark mouth and tiger's claws, her body made of rotting flesh and all the skin gone from her face, just as she'd been the last time he saw her.

After that, Perry didn't think Hell could get any worse.

Then he discovered eternity was a long, long time.

And the gods were very imaginative.

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 50 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, http://about.me/jgfaherty, and www.jgfaherty.com.

Look for these titles by JG Faherty

Now Available:

Castle by the Sea

Coming Soon:

Fatal Consequences

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

Castle by the Sea

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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.


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