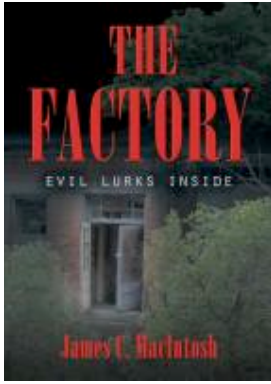




THE FACTORY

EVIL LURKS INSIDE

James C. MacIntosh



When recently divorced Nick Grant rents a home in a small town, he is unaware of the danger that exists in his new neighborhood. The abandoned shoe factory where Nick walks his dog will soon become the site of some disturbing discoveries, turning his world into a nightmarish sequence of events. A caustic elderly neighbor inadvertently helps to lead Nick into a fight for his life on a warm spring evening.

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James C. MacIntosh

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First Edition

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all my loyal and devoted readers.

chapter one

Nick Grant strolled casually along Cedar Lane, occasionally feeling a tug on his wrist from his two-year old dog, Romeo's leash. Romeo loved going on his afternoon walks and joyously displayed his pleasure, when Nick held up the leash, by jumping vigorously, high into the air.

Nick unbuttoned the top of his pullover, allowing the warm, late May air to caress his throat. Happy for the early dismissal from work, due to a smoky, albeit harmless fire in the plant's boiler room, he decided to extend the walk, awarding Romeo the benefit of his unplanned afternoon off.

Divorced for two months from his wife, Sydney, Nick had agreed to give up his share of their home in Sheridan, some seventy-seven miles east of his new home in Morgantown. In return, Sydney capitulated by dropping any claim on his significant 401k savings. The generous Nick continued the payments on the house in Sheridan for one year, allowing Sydney the time needed to square away her own financial situation.

Some of Nick's generosity had been fueled by the great deal he'd been offered by his long-time friend, Alan Carter, the owner of the house which Nick was now renting. Alan, aware of his friend's urgent need for

housing, had made a rather unique offer to Nick. He would rent his old mill house, in Morgantown, at a lower monthly rate for his friend than he'd normally charge; in addition, if Nick lived in and maintained the house for three years, Alan would offer the house to him for the current market value, less one half of the rental payments that Nick had made in that time period. For Nick, it was a no-brainer; a well-constructed two-bedroom house on a dead end street, with a large yard and a run for Romeo, in a quiet neighborhood, with mostly older folks and no children, save for the occasional visits from the grandchildren of Arthur and Katherine Riley, Nick's next door neighbors.

The neighborhood itself, gave off a seedy appearance, mostly due to the fact that none of Nick's neighbors were particularly interested in flower gardens, or decorative landscaping. The only thing that mattered to Nick, however, was that the people on Cedar Lane seemed to be somewhat friendly and one, or two, were actually outgoing. He attributed the standoffishness of the others to the fact that he was the new kid on the block and they were uncertain as to whether he could be trusted with their friendship. Earning their trust was something that he decided to work hard at developing.

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Noticing that the tugging on his wrist was becoming more urgent, Nick glanced down to see that Romeo was straining mightily to pull him into the short driveway which led to the vacant building, which once housed the Hardeman Shoe Factory. For some reason unknown to Nick, his dog seemed to be obsessed with investigating whatever intrigued him on the shoe factory property. Nick was equally determined not to let him do that. He yanked on the leash, causing Romeo to step back a bit. Undeterred, Romeo lunged forward again, only to be pulled backwards by his increasingly impatient master.

“Romeo, no! You do this every day! We’re not going in there! How many times do I have to tell you?”

The chastised mongrel reluctantly obeyed his master, but, not without one final tug, a few yards further down the street. Nick wondered what it was that had aroused such interest in Romeo. He thought about how curious the dog had been when they all lived together in Sheridan, in happier times. He remembered how Sydney had broken into raucous laughter, when she’d found Romeo sniffing all of the cleaning solutions stored under the kitchen sink. She’d remarked to Nick at that time that she thought he might have been looking for a cheap high from those odors.

Romeo had come by his name honestly. On the day that Nick had brought him home from the Kill Shelter, the

exuberant, nearly full-grown pup had shown his appreciation by latching onto Sydney's leg, in an aberrant display of affection. Nick remembered Sydney's laughter, as she calmly removed the love-struck dog from her leg.

"Easy there, Romeo." She'd admonished.

"That's it!" Nick had exclaimed. "What a great name!"

The two of them had shared a hearty laugh, before preparing the new family member's sleeping quarters. Early the next morning, Nick made an appointment with the vet to squelch any further unwanted sexual advances by Romeo.

When the couple divorced, it was Sydney who proposed that Nick take the dog with him. "Nick, he really loves you and should be with you."

Now, Romeo had begun to whine, a tone of desperation present, as he once again tugged hard on the leash.

"Oh, all right!" Nick gave in, as he turned to head back toward the entrance lane to the decrepit old building. "I don't know what the hell is so interesting in there, but, now you've piqued my curiosity, so let's go and find out."

As the pair approached the building, Romeo kept up his relentless tugging, seemingly urging his master to hurry and keep pace with him. His nose remained close to

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the ground, as he sniffed inquisitively at whatever tantalizing odor had aroused his interest.

Romeo plowed through a thickly weeded section of what used to be a small lawn, outside one of the factory's windows. When he reached the wall of the building, he turned to the right and continued snuffling along the foundation, until he came to a stop, twenty feet past what appeared to be the window to a former office. When Nick peeked through the dust-caked window he caught sight of several old filing cabinets strewn throughout the dingy office. It appeared as though someone had taken what they needed from the file cabinets and moved them aside, in order to gain access to the other pieces of office equipment. There were several large drums lining one of the walls, making Nick think that someone must have stored them in that room, for want of a better storage area.

Nick's attention was immediately drawn back to Romeo, whose investigation was reaching a fever pitch. At first, the inquisitive dog stood on his hind legs, his front paws resting against the red brick façade. He whimpered once or twice, before settling back on the ground, where he began to dig at the loamy dirt.

"What is it, Romeo?" Nick queried, knowing there would be no answer. The dog, sensing his owner's confusion, looked up at him and gave a short, sharp bark.

Then, he immediately resumed his digging. Nick had seen enough.

"All right, that's enough, fella'." Nick gave the leash a hard tug. "Come on, I don't want you digging there. You'll get us both in trouble."

As he turned, steadily pulling on the leash, Nick was struck with an odd, eerie sensation. A sudden chill crept slowly up his spine and he shot an uneasy glance in the direction of the factory. There was something out of place, he thought, although he had absolutely no idea what it might be.

"It's just an old building, with maybe some not-so-good memories for those that worked here." He thought; *"These old factories tended to be sweat shops and I'm sure many of the workers here were mistreated. It's not like that, today, thank goodness."*

Nick and Romeo left the Hardeman Shoe Factory property and continued on down Cedar Lane, until they reached the end of the street. They turned and walked back, turning right onto Browning Road, following that for a half-mile, until they reached Route #20. In this section of the Interstate highway, there was a decent sidewalk, which ran for several hundred yards, before ending at an intersecting way. When they reached that intersection, Nick steered Romeo in a one-eighty turn and they backtracked to the factory property, where, that same

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sensation began to reoccur. Nick hurriedly dismissed it, chalking it up to a case of nerves. Since the divorce, he'd become less sure of himself. Sydney had been his insurance policy against failure, in all walks of life, both in his work, or, his ability to make good life decisions.

As he urged Romeo steadily back toward their new home, Nick realized how much he missed his ex-wife.

"Maybe I'll call her after I eat." He thought.

The dog picked up his pace and abandoned his previous attempts to check out the grounds of the factory. He was anxious to go home, knowing that his evening meal would not be long in coming.

Chapter Two

Nick held his cell phone in his hand, debating with himself whether to call Sydney. The supper dishes were done and put away and Romeo was comfortably sprawled out in his doggie bed. He hesitated, as he prepared to dial his ex-wife's number.

"I'd like to hear her voice, but, I don't want to seem too needy. After all, that was one of the things she'd complained most about me; the' constant need for affection', she'd called it."

He placed the phone in the pocket of his jeans and turned on the television set. The evening news was, as usual, full of negative news stories and Nick began to channel-surf, hoping to come across some lighter viewing fare. He settled on Jeopardy, a game show which always posed a challenge for his intellect. The game show had only been on for a few minutes, when there was a knock at his door. Romeo let out a short bark, rising from his comfortable doggie bed and striding quickly to the door, emitting a series of soft 'chuffs' as he walked.

When he opened the door, Nick was surprised to see one of his neighbors, Katherine Riley, standing before him, holding a medium-sized box, filled with what appeared to be delectable goodies.

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“Arthur and I thought you might enjoy something sweet, Mr. Grant.” The still-attractive senior citizen remarked, holding the box out for Nick to take.

Reaching for the box, Nick replied; “That’s very nice of you, Mrs. Riley. But, please, call me Nick?”

Nick glanced beyond Katherine, asking; “Where is your husband?”

“Oh, you know Arthur.” She answered. “Once he settles down in front of that TV set, he doesn’t budge until it’s time for bed.”

Nick didn’t know Arthur Riley, other than to nod, or say ‘hello’ on occasion, when they’d pass on the street while walking their dogs. The Riley’s owned a Chihuahua, Eddie, who had taken it upon himself to launch into a loud, angry display whenever he spotted Romeo. This didn’t bother Arthur in the least and Nick sensed that Arthur considered Romeo to be an intruder, as Eddie obviously did, in his territory. Nick also found Arthur to be unfriendly in their dog-walking encounters and so far, he’d chalked it up to the ‘distrust of the new neighbor’ issue, which seemed to be prevalent among some of his neighbors.

Uncertain as to what would be proper, Nick hesitantly asked; “Would you like to come in?”

“Oh, dear, no.” Katherine responded. “I’ve got to get back home. Arthur worries so if I’m gone for too long.”

Relieved at her rejection of his invitation to come inside, Nick thanked her once more and closed the door as Katherine headed back to her house.

He set the box down on the small end table next to the TV and sat down, removing the delicate tissue, which covered whatever lay beneath. His hand fell upon a soft brownie and Nick popped it into his mouth, devouring the treat in one bite.

As he reached for another, he thought he heard a loud voice coming from outside. The voice, that of a woman, sounded fearful. He listened, to see if he would hear it again, but, there was no sound. Romeo, however, was sitting upright and alert, his ears perked. The dog got up and quickly walked to the door, where he let out a soft whine, before turning to look at Nick, with pleading eyes.

Alert to the possibility that Mrs. Riley may have fallen, he smiled down at his dog.

"All right; let's check it out, old buddy. I guess you need to pee anyway." Nick said, as he gathered his jacket.

As soon as Nick opened the door, Romeo bolted, heading across the front lawn and in the direction of the shoe factory.

"Romeo, come back here!" Nick hollered, his words falling on deaf ears. He heard a low growl emanating from Romeo and knew that there must be someone out there, in the darkness.

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Nick hurried along, trying to keep pace with Romeo and falling further behind his exuberant pooch. By the time he'd reached Ephraim Boyd's house, the last one before the factory property, his dog was nowhere to be seen. Nick called out several times to the dog, before seeing the door to Ephraim's house swing open.

"What the hell's all the damn fuss out here?" The clearly annoyed voice belonged to old Ephraim himself and he was obviously not happy with Nick. "What do ya' have to be yellin' so loud for? Are you trying to disturb the whole goddam neighborhood?"

Nick immediately apologized. "I'm sorry, Mr. Boyd. My dog took off on me and I don't know where he is."

"That don't mean you got to be wakin' the whole damn neighborhood. Call him quietly."

"I'll try to be quieter." Nick accepted his reprimand, despite thinking that the old timer seemed to be overreacting.

"See that you do.....unless you feel like dealing with the cops."

A wave of anger swept up Nick's face and he calmly kept himself from lashing out in response to the old man's unnecessary threat of calling the police department.

Ephraim Boyd had begun to go back into his home, when he suddenly turned and called out to Nick; "I see you was snoopin' 'round the fact'ry earlier. You got no

business in there. Stay the hell out of that property, ya' hear?"

Nick could now feel his face flush with anger, furious that this man had the gall to say something like that. Intent on avoiding an ugly confrontation, he continued walking in the direction of the factory, giving the old man the impression that he hadn't heard his unsolicited warning, or was simply ignoring him.

"Didn't you hear me?" Ephraim yelled.

Nick waved a hand high in the air, in an impudent acknowledgement of the old man's question.

"Loud and clear." he answered.

"If you go on that property, you'll answer to the cops, ya' hear?"

Nick kept on walking, trying his best to completely ignore the old tyrant. He felt the pulse pounding in his temple and inwardly congratulated himself for keeping his temper in check. When he reached the Hardeman property, he called softly to Romeo, whistling just as softly several times. He walked up the entrance drive and checked the area near the building where Romeo had excitedly dug earlier. There was no sign of the dog. Stepping back onto the asphalt pavement, which wound around the building to the rear, where it expanded into a large parking area, Nick almost tiptoed to the rear of the building, ceasing his calls for Romeo. He hadn't thought to

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bring his flashlight with him and now wished he had. Upon reaching the corner of the building, Nick turned to his left and followed the parking lot halfway down the back side of the factory, until he noticed a rear door, which stood ajar. He pushed the door open enough for him to step inside and waited, hoping his eyes would adjust to the blackness of the building's interior. The crunch of broken glass under his shoes was evidence that vandals had left their calling card in the old building. A sudden thought of Romeo cutting the pads of his paws on the glass shards caused him to wince. He whistled once more, calling out in a louder voice for Romeo. Again, there was no answer, nor any indication that the dog was in the building.

A sudden clang to his right caused Nick to jump, a sharp gasp emanating from his throat.

"Who's there?" he called.

Nick heard no reply. He called out again to Romeo, but, heard and felt only the soft puff of a late evening breeze, as it gently wafted through the drafty old building. The breeze carried within it, a stale chemical odor. Dismissing the sound as possibly some olden tool becoming dislodged from its place on a shelf by the breeze which blew through the open door, Nick called to Romeo once more and waited. Certain that his dog was not in the building, he pulled the door back to the position in which

he'd found it and backtracked his way out of the parking lot and out onto Cedar Lane.

As he neared his home, he heard a quick series of 'brip-brips' and turned to see a set of blue roof lights go on behind him. He stopped and waited, as a uniformed police officer stepped from the cruiser and walked toward him.

"What's up, officer?" he asked.

"That's what I'd like to know." The patrolman responded. "Do you mind telling me your name and what you're doing out here alone?"

"Not at all." Nick answered. "My name is Nick Grant. I live in that fourth house up there on the left. I'm looking for my dog. He ran off when I opened the door."

"We've had a complaint that you were trespassing on private property and you were creating a disturbance."

Nick emitted a scornful type of laughter. "I was calling for my dog, that's all. I know who called you. He got all upset with me, claiming I was disturbing the neighborhood. He told me to knock off the noise and I apologized. He said a few other things, namely that he'd call you guys if I trespassed on the shoe factory property."

"Did you?"

"Only to look for my dog. Believe me, I'm not a thief, not that there'd be anything worthwhile to steal in there, if I was one."

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The cop held his gaze on Nick, taking note of the fact that he wasn't carrying any stolen goods with him.

"It looks as though you didn't find your dog."

"No, I didn't. I'm hoping he'll come back when he's tired. He's never run off like that. Oh, I should tell you the reason I think he took off. Right before I let him outside, I heard what sounded to me like someone yelling. Romeo, that's my dog, heard it too. I think that's the reason he ran off."

The officer stepped closer to Nick.

"That could have been one of your neighbors. We've got some volatile folks on this street. Do you mind showing me some ID?"

Nick produced his license and handed it to the cop. Satisfied that Nick was who he said he was, he handed the license back, with this admonition.

"The person who called is one of our regulars. It doesn't take much to trip his alarm, if you know what I mean. My suggestion to you is to be careful not to aggravate him."

Once again, Nick laughed.

"I'd say it was more like him aggravating me."

"I hear what you're saying, but, try and stay clear of him. Although I didn't see you trespassing at Hardeman's I want to remind you that the fence outside the property is clearly marked with 'No Trespassing' signs. You'd be wise

to heed them. I hope you find your dog. Have a good night.”

With that, the cop got in his cruiser and left. As the officer had begun to turn away, Nick noticed the name ‘Bingham’ on his name plate. He’d remember that name, as this cop seemed to be a good guy. Nick turned and noticed Ephraim Boyd standing in his front window, holding the curtains apart, to be certain he had a good view of what went on out on the street. Nick held a stare for a minute, tempted to offer the old man a one-finger salute. He then turned and went home.

Chapter Three

Nick paced nervously through just about every room in the house. Unable to stop thinking about Romeo, he glanced at his watch. It was now 9:30 p.m. and he'd planned on waiting until 10 o'clock before resuming the search for his wayward dog. By that time, he'd hoped, old man Boyd would be sound asleep. He wasn't anxious to be paid another visit by the police department and that would certainly be the case if his grumpy neighbor saw him about, in front of his home.

"To hell with it!" Nick blurted out, to only the empty house. He picked up his jacket and hurriedly put it on, as he opened his front door. He walked down the street, in the direction of the factory, deciding wisely to wait until he was well past Boyd's house before attempting to call out for Romeo. As he turned into the driveway to the Hardeman building, he emitted a series of soft whistles, the kind that he knew Romeo would recognize. In the darkness, he spotted the dark form of an animal walking toward him. Nick was easily able to recognize the familiar trot of Romeo, as the tail-wagging dog came nearer.

"Hey, buddy! Where have you been? You had me worried, there." Nick bent to pat Romeo and noticed that the dog had something in his mouth. He started to remove what appeared to be an old rag, but, Romeo held his grip,

refusing to give up the treasure he'd found. Nick pulled harder, holding one hand on the dog's head as he did so. Finally, he was able to wrest the rag from Romeo's mouth. Nick tossed the cloth to one side.

"Don't be putting those dirty old rags in your mouth, you nut!" Nick gently admonished, as he tousled Romeo's head. "Now, come on! Let's go home and go to bed."

As Nick turned to head back home, Romeo sped ahead, giving his master the impression he wanted to play. Romeo tore off up the street, before turning suddenly and running straight towards Nick. He ran a few yards past the curious man and snatched up the rag which Nick had thrown on the ground.

"No, Romeo, leave that alone." Nick cried out, as he made a futile attempt to seize the rag from the mouth of the dog. Romeo was too quick, however and kept what he knew was a safe distance ahead of his owner, preventing his prize from being taken from him again. Nick simply shook his head in mock annoyance. He was happy to have his dog back and obviously, none the worse for wear.

Once the pair was back inside the house, Nick caught a better glimpse of what Romeo held between his jaws. It was an article of clothing, either a shirt, or, blouse; and it was covered with what looked to Nick to be blood stains.

Not wanting to engage Romeo in a tussle inside the house, where whatever was on the cloth might stain the

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furniture, Nick headed for Romeo's bag of treats. When he opened the bag, the always-hungry dog immediately dropped the rag and trotted out to where Nick stood in the kitchen. He tossed the treat to the opposite end of the room, where it slid under the kitchen table. Romeo was on it swiftly, which allowed Nick the chance to run in to the living room and pick up the piece of material. When he held it up in the air, there was no doubt that the item was a women's blouse. The blood stains didn't appear to be fresh and Nick stared at it for a moment. Deciding that it might have been a rag which someone had used in the factory, he stepped into the back hall and dropped the blouse next to the trash basket.

When he stepped back into the kitchen, he was greeted by a questioning stare from Romeo.

"Don't even think of giving me that look!" Nick teased. "Here; you've got all of these cool toys to play with.....cool, *clean* toys." Nick dragged out the big cardboard box, which contained more than a dozen chew toys. Romeo's response was to cast a forlorn gaze at the door to the back hall.

Within the hour, both master and dog were sound asleep in their respective beds.

Chapter Four

After a shower and shave, followed by a hurried breakfast, Nick warned Romeo to behave himself, before heading out the front door to his car. As he approached the car, he heard a familiar voice murmuring loudly out on the street.

“Get away from me, you no good bastard!”

The voice belonged to old Agatha Frome, a middle-aged little woman, who suffered from some type of mental illness. The first time he'd passed her on the street, while walking Romeo, she had blurted out; “Get away from me, you sunuvabitch” and Nick had responded by saying; “Excuse me?” It didn't take him long to realize, however, that the strangely behaving woman hadn't even heard his reply. Later that day, one of his neighbors had informed him that Agatha lived in a halfway house out on Route #20 and seemed to enjoy her daily walks on Cedar Lane. Other than her odd exclamations, Agatha appeared to be harmless. Nick felt pity for her each time she'd pass by him. Agatha, in addition to her mental state, was also beset with a host of physical problems; a severe case of Osteoporosis caused her to bend forward in the classic hunchback style. She also had a limp, which Nick attributed to arthritis, as witnessed by the deformed knuckles on her hands. The most serious, in Nick's mind,

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was the deep rasping sound, which emanated from her lungs as she breathed. He found himself wishing he could afford to take the ailing woman for treatment. Nick knew she couldn't be more than fifty to sixty years old and he thought that if she were in better health, she would live to a good age.

Nick watched Agatha for a few moments, until she was well past his property. He wondered what was going through her mind. She did not appear to be alert to the presence of people around her. Was she aware of the weather? Apparently so, judging by the warm jacket buttoned up to her neck. It was cool on this Thursday morning, surprisingly so for this time of the year. Did the woman have a purpose in her walking, or, was her daily trek more of a long-imbedded habit?

Suddenly realizing that he was now running late, Nick jumped into his car and backed out of the driveway. As he prepared to make a left turn onto Browning Road, he noticed that Agatha was not ahead of him on the street. As he looked around, he saw that she was three-quarters of the way up the entrance lane to the Hardeman Shoe Factory and she had picked up her pace noticeably. He slowed his car to a crawl, craning his neck to watch where she was going next. In a few seconds, Agatha turned the corner and disappeared around to the back of the

building. Nick glanced impatiently at his watch, debating whether or not he should follow her.

Unexpectedly, his cell phone chimed and when he pulled the car over and answered, he heard the voice of his immediate supervisor, Fred Turley.

"Nick, I hope I caught you before you left for work."

"I'm driving away from my house at the moment. Why? Is there a problem?"

"Yeah, there is. Apparently the damage from yesterday's fire is a lot worse than originally thought. The CEO decided to shut down for the weekend and get cleanup crews in here. He's hoping to be back in business for Monday morning. It looks as though we're all going to be getting a four-day weekend."

"Yeah, too bad it wasn't a *paid* four-day weekend."

"Oh, but, it is!" the gleeful voice announced. "The plant insurance covers not only the cost of the cleanup, but, also any employee time lost because of the incident. So, enjoy your days off and I'll see you Monday morning."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks." Nick placed his cell phone back in the cradle on the forward console of his Camry and thought for a moment. Despite the apparent good news of not being required to work for four days and getting paid for two of them, he could not erase the thought of Agatha Frome vanishing behind the factory building. He glanced in his rear view mirror, which coincidentally offered him a

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panoramic view of the entire area where Agatha had been walking.

He wanted to follow her to the back of the building out of curiosity more than anything else, but, knew, at the same time, that if he came upon her, she might freak out and start screaming. With old man Boyd more than likely up and about in his kitchen, any commotion would certainly result in another call to the police. He decided to sit and wait, in his car, for a while longer, just to see if she returned. After a five minute wait, he put the Camry in gear and began to drive to a wider area of Browning road, in order to turn around. He kept his eyes in the rear mirror, expecting to see the wandering woman pop out from behind the brick structure. A sudden movement in front of him made him slam his foot down hard on the brake pedal. It was Agatha, who had apparently emerged from the wooded area to his right.

Oblivious to the fact that she'd come close to being struck by a car, Agatha plodded forward, not casting the slightest glance in Nick's direction. She slowly ambled down Browning road, in the direction of Route #20, headed for home.

As he took a moment to catch his breath, Nick could hear Agatha's faint voice calling out, some thirty feet away; "Get away from me, you bastard! I said; 'get away from me, you no good sunuvabitch!'"

Now, it all made sense to Nick. *"That must be part of her daily walk. She does a turn around the factory and there's probably a path through the woods that she uses to get back to Browning. Maybe she's not as out of it, as she appears."*

A sharp knock on the driver's window made Nick jump and cry out. When he looked up, he was greeted by the face of Melvin Boyd, Ephraim's 48-year-old son.

"Are you okay, Nick?" Melvin called through the closed window.

Nick hurriedly rolled the window down and answered; "Yeah, I'm fine, thanks. I had pulled over to take a call on my cell phone and when I was finished, I wasn't paying attention when I began to drive off and damn near hit Agatha, as she was coming out of the woods. It shook me up a bit."

"I'll bet it did." Melvin replied. "Someday, she's gonna' get herself killed. She doesn't notice anything; not a damn thing!"

"Well, let's hope that's not the case." Nick responded. He put his hand on the button to raise the window, but, Melvin had more to say.

"Hey, Nick; about last night. I'm sorry for what was said to you. I hope you won't hold that against my Dad. He goes off on things every once in a while, but, he's really not a bad guy."

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Nick waved his hand in dismissal.

"Not a problem, Mel. We all lose it now and then. The cop understood why I went in there."

Melvin tapped Nick's shoulder, in a friendly gesture. "Thanks Nick. I appreciate that. I was ticked at him when he told me he'd called the cops on you."

Nick merely smiled.

As he started to back away, Melvin said; "You better get moving, Nick. You're already late for work."

"Nope. Got the day off, Mel. Maybe I can catch up on some work around the house."

"Good for you!" the younger Boyd replied. "Catch you later, Nick."

Nick watched Melvin in the driver's-side mirror, as the man trudged back to the house he shared with his father. With a quick look around, to be certain there were no more Agatha's darting out of the woods. When he knew it was safe to do so, he turned the Camry around and drove the short distance back to his house, where he was greeted with much enthusiasm by Romeo.

Nick's first chore would be to take out the rubbish, as he now remembered that today was trash collection day for his neighborhood. Morgantown was one of the few remaining towns in Massachusetts which provided trash

collection service for its residents. Of course, the service did not come without a price, which was added to the tax base. Still, the folks in Morgantown liked having the pickups available to them and were satisfied not to have to write a check each month to a private hauler.

As Nick lugged two large bags out to the curb, he noticed his neighbor from across the street, Jimmy Belton. Jimmy was a widower, whose wife Madeline, had died a few years back. Nick wasn't sure just how she died, but, had heard it was a work-related disease. Madeline, for years, had been a stitcher at Hardeman's. Jimmy had also worked there, as a delivery driver. Nick had heard from his friend, Alan Carter that Jimmy had filed a lawsuit against Hardeman's, but, was unable to proceed because the company had filed for bankruptcy, meaning all of the major creditors would be at the head of the line for any financial settlements from any of the remaining Hardeman Shoe Factory's assets.

Although Jimmy had always been friendly towards Nick, it was apparent that he felt no love for the owners of the company whom he held responsible, in part, at least, for his wife's early death.

Nick called out to Jimmy, who was busy planting flowers around the flagpole on his front lawn. Jimmy was a Viet Nam vet, who had been injured in battle. He still walked with a pronounced limp in his left leg, the result of

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several pieces of shrapnel taken during a mortar attack. Field surgeons removed what they could, but, hesitated to remove one piece, nestled too close to one of the discs in his lower spine. It was a source of pain for Jimmy, as well as the cause for his limp.

Jimmy looked up from his planting duty and gave a quick wave back.

“Beautiful day!” Nick hollered.

“Sure is.” Came the reply. “Why are you home today, Nick? Shouldn’t you be at work by now?”

“They had a fire in the boiler room at the plant yesterday. Now, they need to clean up the mess. They gave me the weekend off.”

“Lucky you.” By this time, Jimmy had stood up and begun to walk out into the street. Nick met him halfway and the men took a couple of steps off to the side, to avoid being in the roadway.

“What the hell was that jackass yelling at you for, last night? I heard him telling you to be quiet and I damn near went out and told him the same thing. Boy, that guy’s got a big mouth!”

“Oh, that.” Nick said. “Romeo took off on me and I followed him down to the shoe factory, where I lost him. I looked around there for a while, but, couldn’t find him. But, before I got to the factory, Mr. Boyd came out and started yelling at me to keep it down. I apologized, but, he

was really fired up and told me that he would call the cops if I trespassed on Hardeman's property. Is he a part owner, or something?"

A short guffaw erupted from Jimmy Belton's mouth. "He's no owner; he's just a damned busybody, that's all. I told him once that he acted like an old woman. He wasn't too happy with me after that. As a matter of fact, he doesn't speak to me anymore."

Jimmy mockingly placed his hand on his chest. "That just about broke my poor little heart."

Nick smiled and Jimmy went on.

"Yeah, I saw the cruiser pull up and the cop talking to you. Ephraim Boyd can act like an idiot at times. What did he expect you to do, send the dog a telepathic message?"

"Well, I don't hold anything against him." Nick offered. My dad always told me to never judge a man unless you've walked a mile in his shoes."

"I never really understood that old adage, but, you were wise to not let him get to you. Otherwise, someone like that would keep shittin' on you until he owned you." Jimmy paused, before adding; "Just remember, Nick; we're not all like him. This is a decent neighborhood. Most of us on this street worked at Hardeman's at one time or another, in our lives. Yeah, they screwed all of us in the end, but, I figure you've got two choices; you can let it eat

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at you, like a cancer, or, you can put it behind you and move on with your remaining time on this earth.”

“I guess that’s a good philosophy to live by.” Nick said. “That brings me to my next question. Were these houses built for the workers at the factory?”

Jimmy nodded. “They sure were. Mr. Hardeman built these shortly after the war; the big war, I mean. He built thirty-two houses, twenty-two of them on Cedar Lane and ten on Browning. He offered them to his workers at a price that was affordable. Money was tight for a few years, until the economy kicked in again. Maddie and I were both in grammar school at the time and both of our parents took advantage of Mr. Hardeman’s generosity. She and I grew up on this street. She actually lived in the house you’re renting now.”

Turning toward his house, Jimmy continued; “I ended up inheriting this house from my parents after they died. Maddie and I were married at that time and we lived here until she passed, shortly after the factory closed.”

Nick asked; “How long has it been since Hardeman’s went out of business?”

Jimmy used his right hand to swat at a pesky Mayfly which persisted in buzzing near his eyes.

“Eight years.”

“Wow!” Nick exclaimed. “From the looks of the building, I’d have guessed that it’s been empty for over

twenty years. Even the outer property is badly overgrown."

Jimmy smiled. "It doesn't take Mother Nature long to reclaim her earth. But, just so you'll know; the factory building itself was built back in the late nineteenth century. It had housed a corset business. When that folded, Mr. Hardeman was able to get a good deal on the building and re-tooled for the shoe operation."

Nick was anxious to learn more about the history of the Hardeman Shoe Factory, its employees and the people living on Cedar Lane.

"So, am I to assume that everyone on this street worked for Hardeman's?"

"Not everyone." Jimmy answered. "Three of the houses at the far end have recently been sold to younger folks who have no connection to Hardeman's. Your friend bought Maddie's parents' house and I believe four, or, five homes on Browning Road are now owned by newcomers to the neighborhood. Eventually, all of us will die off and the face of the neighborhood will be completely changed."

"What about Mr. Boyd? Was he always so grumpy?" Nick queried.

"Nah, he actually wasn't a bad guy. He's got some problems now and I admit that I feel a little guilty for being ticked off and not speaking to him. I think he's got the same type of cancer that Maddie had, but, he's pretty

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tight-lipped about that. Besides that, he's extremely bitter about losing his pension. He worked there longer than anyone, forty-seven years and lost everything he expected to have in retirement. As if that weren't enough, he lost his wife shortly after the factory closed. Everything seemed to collapse on him at once."

Nick slowly nodded, as he said; "I guess he's got good reason to be grumpy. Does anyone know why Hardeman's went under? From what my friend, Alan has said, it was a booming operation."

"Oh, it was!" Jimmy replied; "Mr. Hardeman was a savvy businessman, but, when he died suddenly, about ten years ago, his daughter and son-in-law took over, along with a friend of the son-in-law. Now there was a shady character, if ever there was."

"The friend of the son-in-law?" Nick asked.

"Yeah; Aikman was his name. He ran some sort of investment business, which everyone suspected was a scam. He and the son-in-law talked Hardeman's daughter into placing the pension accounts under his care. When the company went under, it wasn't hard to figure out who had the pension money. As far as the basic operation of the shoe factory, none of them had the slightest idea of what they were doing and the operation went downhill fast. To top it off, the three of them shut it down in the middle of the night, with absolutely no warning. Their

pockets were lined with all of the pension funds and not one of them ever had to answer to it in court. The bankruptcy judge assumed that they were poor business people and let them off the hook. That left a lot of pissed-off workers, who were suddenly out of a job *and* a pension.”

Nick seemed stunned by all of this information and Jimmy added another tidbit.

“Even Aggie lost everything. Worst thing was, how would she ever get another job, in her condition? Old Mr. Hardeman had a big heart when he hired her, without batting an eye, even though she had a host of physical and mental problems. He saw something good in her and he was right. She was the best damn janitor ever. “

“Agatha worked there too?” Nick was surprised to hear this. “Maybe that’s why she likes to walk around the building.”

Jimmy said; “Yeah, she’s got a regular routine and nothing disturbs it. Maybe she remembers better days at Hardeman’s. Or, maybe she’s hoping to find someone waiting around back to offer her old job back to her. In her mind, that’s entirely possible.”

“That’s sad. In fact, the whole story is sad. Every one of you was affected by the stupidity and greed of a few people. Thanks for telling me this, Jimmy. I feel like I

understand much more about my neighbors now, than I did before.”

A muted bark alerted Nick that Romeo knew he wasn't far away from his front door and now wanted to go for a walk.

“Oops, I guess Romeo wants his walk.” Nick said, effectively ending the conversation.

Jimmy seemed to be a bit pensive, as he lowered his head. “You want to know the real sad thing about this? Those three are all living the high life on our money, while we scrape by as best we can. Thank God I was smart enough to invest some of my money in a separate savings plan.”

Nick presented Jimmy with an intense gaze, before offering his own take on the subject.

“I don't want to sound like one of these guys who has a quote for everything, but, another thing my Dad used to say was; ‘What goes around, comes around.’ I truly believe that, Jimmy. Those folks will get theirs, someday, believe me.”

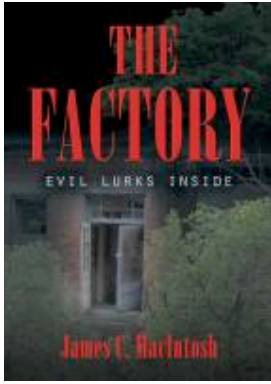
Jimmy Belton gave Nick a curious look, surprised at what he'd just heard coming from the mouth of his neighbor.

“You may be right.” Jimmy replied. “I just hope I live long enough to see them all brought to trial and punished.

Although it's a long shot, it would also be nice if all of us were able to recover our pension funds."

The two men shook hands cordially, before each going their separate ways. When Nick opened the door to his rental house, he was greeted enthusiastically by Romeo, who jumped up and down, spinning in circles, in a comical display of happiness that his owner was home again.

"Come on, fella' we'll go for a short walk, okay?"



When recently divorced Nick Grant rents a home in a small town, he is unaware of the danger that exists in his new neighborhood. The abandoned shoe factory where Nick walks his dog will soon become the site of some disturbing discoveries, turning his world into a nightmarish sequence of events. A caustic elderly neighbor inadvertently helps to lead Nick into a fight for his life on a warm spring evening.

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