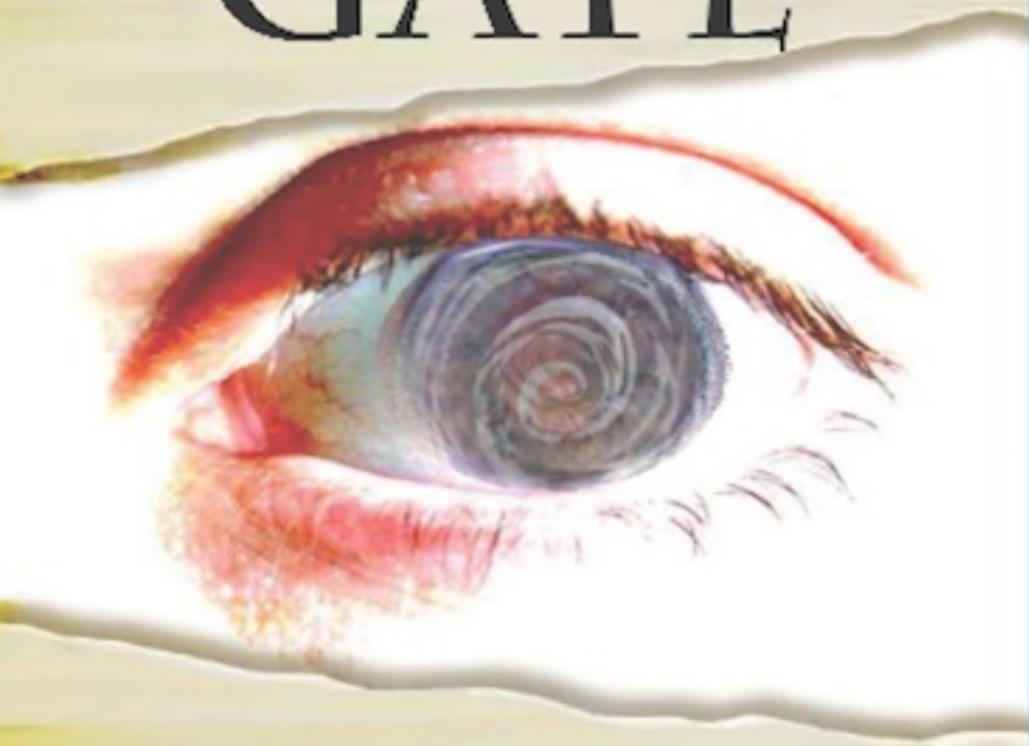
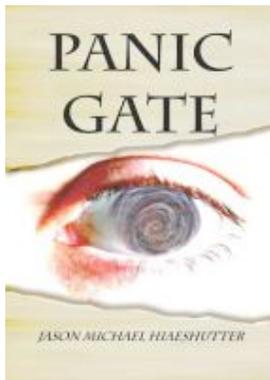


PANIC GATE



JASON MICHAEL HIAESHUTTER



Since the beginning of time, spiritual cults have been the crux from which all modern religions were born. But when two young orphans tapped into the powers of the oldest cult in history, an entire town suffered from their actions. Now, 35 years later, the lone survivor of an unspeakable tragedy must return to the scorched town of his youth to finally put his old demons to rest. Albeit, at a hefty price...

Panic Gate

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PANIC GATE

Jason Michael Hiaeshutter

Matchstick Entertainment

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First Edition

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ONE

I

It was around one in the morning when the fire began to die down. David grabbed another piece of wood and threw it on the dwindling flames. As he looked around the campfire, he could see the uneasy smiles of his three buddies. Rebecca, the only one not burdened with testosterone, was the first to admit the uneasiness.

“I don’t feel so comfortable here,” she said as she stared at the burning embers.

The others immediately understood. David, in particular, was starting to believe that coming to this site was a big mistake. The group had come to the old Holland Acres on a dare but it hardly seemed worth the bragging rights anymore. Felix, however, decided making light of their situation was the best move to break the tension.

“Oooh,” Felix taunted her. “You afraid of the Holland Ghost?”

The others gave a nervous laugh as Rebecca held up a finger, giving Felix the universal signal for fuck you.

The group laughed, but deep down, they all felt the tension. Even Felix, with his tough-guy attitude, was having that same I-don’t-feel-so-comfortable sensation.

He just had no intention on voicing it. He had a reputation to look after.

The dare had seemed quite silly at the time they took Professor Powers up on it. Powers spoke of the legend in class as if it were his religion. As the story went, Isaac Holland was a craftsman who lived on the property almost forty years ago. When a couple of men from a small company called Quantum Plastics came around to buy his property, he flat-out refused the offer. Shortly after he turned the buyers down, his land suffered a terrible fire and Holland's entire estate burned to the ground, killing him and his wife in the process. Ever since that day, the land had been surrounded by rumor and legend, that it was haunted by the ghosts of Holland's family. Professor Powers had lectured on this with great excitement. When Felix blurted out in class that it was all nonsense, Powers asked if he'd be willing to camp on the property for a night. Not willing to back down, Felix got his friends together, Keith, Rebecca, and David, and they set out to prove the legend wrong. Now, however, they were all having second thoughts.

"You know," David finally blurted, "nobody who'd ever come out to this place has come back alive. Have I mentioned that?"

"Yeah you mentioned it." Felix looked to Keith. "How many times now, Keetser? Forty, fifty?"

“At least,” Keith agreed.

Mumbles of disapproval followed as the others lovingly threw their empty beer cans at David. Of course, they were empty. Cans with beer still in them would have been a party foul.

David began again. “All I’m saying is—” and stopped suddenly as he heard a loud crack in the woods. “Did anyone else hear that?” he ventured in a whisper.

“It was nothing,” Felix scoffed; “quit bein’ a pussy.”

“Excuse me, a pussy?” Rebecca raised an eyebrow. “Is that your way of calling women weak? He’s a pussy and that makes him weak like a woman, right?”

“Nah, I just—” Felix stuttered.

“You know as well as I do,” Rebecca reminded him, “she who has the pussy holds power.”

A loud cheer followed as the gang hooted their approval at Rebecca’s statement. Keith followed up with an in-your-face motion directed at Felix.

David continued his concern through his uneasy smile. “No, seriously. I think something is out there.”

Felix rolled his eyes. “Just shut up and drink another beer,” he said. “With any luck you’ll pass out for the last few hours here, and then you can crawl back to your mommy where you belong.” With that, Felix threw David another sixteen ounce can of MGD.

David caught the can in midair and popped it open. He was just about to take a swig and concede to Felix that he was probably right when he saw a dark shadow

pass behind Keith. The group continued laughing and making cracks about each other but David could no longer hear them. Their words seemed like mumbles as he followed the movements of the dark figure through the tree line. His mind was screaming with words of warning to his friends but somehow, the words stopped in his throat. The best he could come up with were a couple barely-audible groans that went completely unnoticed by the others. An instant later, which somehow seemed longer to David, the shadow leaped from the tree line. The figure was swinging a large tree branch. The branch landed right on the top of Felix's head, bashing his skull wide open. Poor Felix, still smiling, never had the chance to know what happened to him. As the others screamed, David just sat in silent fear, watching the massacre of his friends. Rebecca's face was smashed in by the blunt force of the shadow's branch and she fell into the fire, sending the flames ever higher as she landed. Keith got up and tried to run but the figure threw the branch at him with such brute force, it pierced completely through his back and the boy fell to the ground with a thud. Finally, the dark new comer turned to David. The shadow, whatever it was, was wearing a dark hood and David was unable to see the hidden face underneath. The figure charged at David. He looked down at Rebecca's burning skull. It was smashed in like a pumpkin but her eyes were still

open, staring at David in an unblinking look of terror. It was the last thing David would ever see.

THE SCOUT

September 15, 2014

ONE

I

To say that Calvin Tanner awoke with a tremor would be a severe understatement. These were not tremors that Calvin suffered from, but night terrors.

They had been coming, on and off, since his childhood, so when the awareness set in of his true surroundings and the cold sweats enveloped his body, the feeling was clinically familiar.

Calvin's first waking motion was to feel the immediate area around where he slept. He hadn't had an episode bad enough to soak his sheets in many years, but still, it never hurts to check. His wife Chloe would not be too happy to wake up to a pool of her husband's piss.

The dreams hadn't been bad enough to cause him to piss himself since he was a boy. Back when he lived in the orphanage with the others. Bobby, and Dennis, and—well, it'd be best not to relive those days if he could help it.

Not that Calvin really could help it. It seemed every day of his adult life started out this way. He would wake long before the alarm clock got a chance to do its job. Then he would sit up in his bed, thinking and remembering the old days when life was simple. Before life itself turned into a nightmare all its own. Not that he

had seen it coming. How could he? How could any of them have predicted what was to come?

Despite his restless nights, his days were very productive. He lived with his beautiful wife, Chloe, in their own little corner of Los Angeles suburbia, drove a nice hybrid Audi S5, and walked his husky, Donovan, every morning. And as for a job, he had the mother lode of all careers. He was the location scout for the biggest hit reality show in America, Panic Gate.

What made the show a hit could be anyone's guess. It was the typical, run-of-the-mill reality show with all the usual gimmicks. But when ratings speak, sponsors listen. And for whatever reason, in five years' time, the show had become a phenomenal success.

Calvin had only one job with the production of the show. He needed to scope out the locations with the greatest potential for thriller hijinks. In other words, he found the places that had the biggest fear factor. He was given a specific budget to pay for any permits and zoning costs that went with the location, and from there, the prop men would do the rest. And thanks to Calvin's relentless nightmares over the years, he had the best eye in the business when it came to what looked creepy.

Not able to sleep any longer, Calvin started his day. He put on his jogging shorts and a white T-shirt and grabbed Donovan's leash. The obedient husky ran to his

master the second he heard the chain rattle and then they were out the door.

Calvin couldn't remember his dreams much these days. The memories would fade almost the instant he sat up in bed. As he ran through the neighborhood, he'd try searching his brain for any inkling of what the nightmares were about, and what caused him to wake up with such extreme fear. But nothing ever surfaced. At one point, he'd even tried counseling, but it had served no purpose. The counselor suggested several types of exercises and mind games to get Calvin to remember, but all that would surface were flashes of that night in the orphanage and he really didn't want to go there. In the end he felt that if he couldn't recall the dreams on his own, they just weren't that important. Besides, what was the big deal, anyway? So his sleep would get cut a little short. Big deal, right? Early to bed, early to rise, and all that.

After his run, Calvin got ready for work. He donned his best suit and sucked down half a pot of coffee. There was a network meeting this morning and he need to look good for the execs. He was always trying to schmooze the network for more money for his budget. Then again, so was everybody else. There wasn't a single department that didn't whine that its job was, in fact, the most important. But Calvin was convinced that he needed the biggest budget. After all, no location, no show.

He wasn't too worried about the remaining budget for this season, however. Most of his work was done for the year. Episodes for reality TV were usually shot way in advance and most of this season of Panic Gate was already in the editing process. All he really had to worry about now was finding a spot for the season finale. Over the years, Panic Gate had become known for its immense big budget season finales and Calvin had no intention of making this year any different. Even if he didn't get an extra amount mid-season, he had a good chunk of change available for the biggest episode of them all.

II

Production meetings were, without a doubt, the worst part of the job. This was all Calvin could think about as he listened to the president of the network drone on about ratings, sponsors, and every other issue Calvin didn't give two shits about. That was, until his part came up. The part that made him envision his perfect season finale rapidly flying away.

For half a decade, Panic Gate had steadily held the number one slot in the Nielsen Ratings for reality TV. Normally, this would be good news. However, in an unsuspecting turn, the network decided to pull Panic Gate's budget by nearly 50% for the remainder of the season. The usual corporate idiots, in their infinite wisdom, decided it best to take money from their biggest hit in order to feed a mid-season replacement

in another time slot. Panic Gate, their sneering reps and secretaries told him, was doing well enough that they could afford to cut a few corners and still have a strong season.

Calvin's face turned beet red with anger as he watched his perfect five-year run of record-breaking finales disappear before his very eyes. Panic Gate's finale had been perennially named "The Biggest Scare of the Year" by TV Guide. Now, the money he had set aside for this year's whopper was dwindled to next-to-nothing and you can't generate much of a scare with a white sheet on a string and a couple of jack-o-lanterns.

Calvin left the meeting with his head held low. He really had to prove his worth this time. He had a huge finale to plan and a small pile of pocket change to plan it. Of course the vultures would come. People who were always looking for the opportunity to steal his job. The best job on the show. People who would wait for him to break under pressure and then make a big save. People who would come up with a plan before he did and beat him to the punch. Not only would he have to worry about finding a good location without a budget, he would have to watch his back lest someone else beat him to the big "save the day" idea.

After the meeting, Calvin took a long lunch, deciding to clear his head over a sandwich at the deli across the street. Usually this was his favorite place, but today he

just couldn't find an appetite. His stomach simply felt too knotted to eat. He wouldn't have been surprised if he ended up with an ulcer out of this.

The knots in his stomach made him wonder why he even chose this job. If he chose it at all, that is. Maybe the job more or less chose him. "I kind of fell into it," he'd tell people. With his nightmares, who knew fear better than him? But Panic Gate wasn't really fear, now was it? This was more like bottled fear. A big novelty act, or packaged terror. None of it was ever real, and when it came down to it, the contestants knew it. It wasn't like what Calvin lived through. What he'd seen. That was real fear.

Sitting in his chair and staring at his untouched sandwich, he found his mind returning to the days in the orphanage. Of course, he hadn't known then what She could do. No, not then. But how could he have known? How could anyone? Now, he was the only one left to remember. Calvin shook his head, trying to shake away the memories. He didn't want to think of those things. Of those times. Instead, after a deep breath, he attempted to choke down his sandwich.

Calvin spent the remainder of the day in his office racking his brain with ideas for how to make a strong end to the season, but that evening, he drove home without a single proposal. He sat in silence at dinner, and eventually Chloe got him to open up. He made a couple mentions as to the budget cuts and his dilemma

with finding a new location to end the season, but for the most part he didn't get into it. He knew she wouldn't really understand, so there was little point in getting too in-depth. Instead, he let his wife believe she'd lightened his spirits and they decided to take Donovan to the park.

Donovan ran ahead as Calvin walked with his wife along the park's bike path. As they walked, Chloe did her best to soothe Calvin's worries.

"It's not like this is the hardest obstacle you've ever faced," she told him. "So you don't have the big budget you had last year; is it really that big of a deal?"

Calvin appreciated his wife's attempts at helping, but she just didn't get it. How could she? She was what people in the industry referred to as a sheep. Every night, mindlessly engrossed in the magic of television, with no understanding of the hard work and dedication involved in bringing it to the screen. But she was just trying to help, and Calvin didn't want to start a fight. "You're right, honey. I'll try not to worry about it anymore today."

Chloe smiled at her husband and squeezed him closer with the arm she had wrapped around his waist. "Good," she responded. "You'll give yourself an ulcer from worrying so much. Life is too short for all this."

Reluctantly, Calvin smiled back. Of course he wasn't going to stop worrying. He just didn't want to make waves. Sure, life was too short. Certainly, it was too

short to fight with his wife when he should just be enjoying her company. *If she thinks she's helping*, he thought, *why burst her bubble?*

Besides, just being here already made him feel a little better. Walking through the park with his wife and his faithful dog was good. Why let the problems of tomorrow spoil the present?

Just as Calvin was about to relax into his enjoyment of the evening, Donovan began barking loudly at the tree line. "Whoa, whoa," Calvin said. "What's the problem, boy?"

But the dog wouldn't stop barking. He whined a couple times between barks. A long whine, though, almost like a howl, possibly out of frustration that he couldn't tell his master what got him all wound up. Suddenly Calvin heard something in the trees, and he too became uneasy.

It was hard to pinpoint exactly where the uneasiness was coming from. It was broad daylight, after all, and this particular park was never known to be a dangerous area to spend time in. Even if it were after dark, there would still be no reason to believe they weren't all perfectly safe.

Looking ill at ease over Donovan's outburst, Chloe spoke up. "What is it, Calvin? An animal? A squirrel, maybe?"

"I don't think so," Calvin answered.

After a tense moment, the tree line rustled louder, and a dark-haired man in a white T-shirt and tan Bermuda shorts emerged from the woods. He was very tan and his pearly white teeth shined brightly through his phony smile. Calvin recognized him immediately, and tried to hush Donovan's barking. But the dog, unconvinced, continued to snarl at the newcomer and growl quietly.

Chloe immediately rolled her eyes and stared crossly at her husband. "I thought you were done with this, Calvin. You promised me."

"I am done, honey," Calvin assured her. "I don't... this will just take a second." Ignoring his wife's irritated sigh, Calvin followed the man into the woods, and as soon as the first leaves obscured their faces from his wife, he stopped him. "What's this about, Stark? I paid my money, it's over."

Stark raised an eyebrow, feigning surprise. "Oh, did you?" he asked. "Looks to me like you've got a bit of a balance left, Tanner. You must have forgotten the interest."

Calvin was about to raise his voice, but the bulge under Stark's T-shirt reminded him to keep his cool. "Come on, man," Calvin pleaded. "Give me a break. It took forever to get the money this last time. Nobody ever said anything about interest."

Stark shrugged his shoulders; his smile never faded. "Look, Cal," Stark began, reaching his arm around

Calvin's shoulder. Calvin tried to shrug it off, but Stark, still smiling, held tight. "If it were up to me, I'd call it all even-Steven, y'know? After all, you were one of our best customers. But you quit, man. Juan doesn't take too kindly to customers that go cold turkey on him. It's bad for business. He has to keep up appearances. Do you realize what would happen if he let everyone on his distribution list just up and walk away? He'd be done. Nobody wants that."

Calvin closed his eyes and sighed. Just the mention of Juan Gonzalez made him feel uneasy. When he started doing business with him, his head wasn't on all that straight. After all, how many coke addicts think clearly when they're looking to score? Juan offered his merchandise on credit. Credit that almost cost him his marriage. Two years later, Calvin thought he was clean and debt-free. Now Stark was here, proving that Calvin's foolhardy belief that these gangsters were out of his life was dead wrong. "How long do I have?" he finally asked.

"Two days." Stark's smile broadened. "But that can be extended. Your credit is still good, and we have a special for returning customers."

Calvin clasped his hands into his face. "Come on, man," he pleaded, "you know I'm off the stuff. I haven't touched that shit in so long."

Stark shrugged. "Well, all right, then. I'll be by tomorrow to get the money." With that, Stark began to walk away.

“Tomorrow?” Calvin asked, panic surfacing in his voice now. “You said two days.”

Stark turned back to face Calvin again. He didn’t speak, but his smile remained bright as ever.

Calvin hung his head. “All right,” he reluctantly agreed. “Give me a gram.”

Stark, still smiling, raised an eyebrow.

Calvin shut his eyes tight. “Fine, do up an eight-ball.” He said this through clenched teeth.

Stark nodded and pulled the bag out of his pocket. “All right, that’s my boy. And since you are a frequent flyer, we’re going to give you the other half gram for free.” He handed the bag off to Calvin. “Welcome back, brother. Payment is due next month.”

Again, Stark turned and walked away. Calvin stood still, hardly breathing until Stark was completely out of sight.

“Dammit,” he grumbled and stuffed the bag into his coat pocket.

Trying to get his newly-acquired score out of his mind, he raised his head and walked back out to the path. He was not surprised to see his wife standing there waiting for him with her arms crossed and her look stern. He tried to feign a smile, but it didn’t do any good. She knew him too well.

“Unbelievable!” she shouted. Calvin raised his hand in an attempt to tell her it wasn’t what she thought, but she yelled right over it. “Unbelievable!”

“Honey wait, I can exp—” was all he had time say before she laid into him.

“You promised me you were done with this shit, Calvin.” She grabbed him and pulled him toward her, thrusting her hand into his pocket. When she felt what she was looking for, she pulled the bag out and held it in front of him. “You can explain? That’s what you have to say, you can explain?” and she threw the bag in his face. “You and that shit enjoy your evening. I’m going to my mother’s!”

Calvin watched his wife storm away. He started to call to her, but stopped himself as he looked at the eight-ball bag that was now at his feet. As he bent down to pick it up, Donovan lowered his head and whined. “It’s all right, buddy,” he assured his pet. “I won’t use it. I’ll just explain everything after she cools down. It’ll be all right.”

III

Calvin and Donovan came home that evening to an empty house. Calvin dropped the bag on the coffee table and sat down on the couch to stare at it. Donovan went to the kitchen to get a couple laps from his water bowl, then came back to sit at his master’s feet. Calvin stroked his dog’s neck as he looked at the bag of packaged death in front of him.

It’s not like this was my fault, Calvin thought. It wasn’t tonight’s events he was referring to. It was the

years prior when he fell into that shit in the first place that occupied his mind.

The nightmares had gotten real bad for a while and he hadn't thought he could take much more. A friend got him started on the coke and for a while it really did seem to help. The nightmares still came, but the coke took the edge off and the dreams didn't seem to bother Calvin as much. But before long, he wasn't bothered by much else either. He and Chloe hadn't been married long at that point, and the abuse put a huge strain on their domestic situation. Chloe had threatened to leave him if he didn't straighten up.

Being an orphan, Calvin had never been in a family situation before. Chloe's family had been good to him and he finally felt like he was part of something. He loved her, but he was in danger of losing the whole family life. He worked hard to quit the habit, and with the support of Chloe's family he did it. Unfortunately, by the time he quit, he'd piled up an immense amount of debt with Juan Gonzalez.

For two years, Calvin paid off Juan's men. About four months ago, Calvin had paid off the last of the money he owed and thought he was free and clear. He didn't realize that that wasn't how the game was played. Juan wasn't going to let Calvin just walk away. He was going to make him stay in debt, whether he wanted to or not.

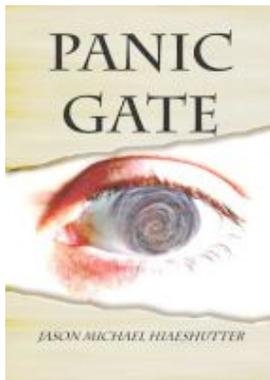
After about an hour and a six pack of Old Milwaukee, Calvin had figured out what he was going to

tell his wife. He was going to explain how he was muscled in to buying the bag, but he wasn't going to use it. He figured he could start turning around and re-selling it to people at work in order to keep out of debt with Juan. He worked in show business for Pete's sake, the industry was full of people who did the shit. He'd get rid of it in no time. Feeling like he'd completely solved this dilemma, he went to bed feeling good. It may have been the alcohol, but he really felt okay. Even his budget problem didn't seem so bad anymore. *Everything is going to work itself out*, he thought as he drifted off to sleep, *just wait and see*.

IV

It was around four in the morning when Calvin woke up to his all-too-familiar cold sweats. He rapidly gasped for air as he tried to remember the specifics of his dream. Was he back in the orphanage? Was he with Them? He couldn't remember. In complete frustration, he stormed into the bathroom.

Calvin stared at himself in the mirror as he attempted to catch his breath. He splashed some water on his face, but it didn't seem to help. When his mind went to the one thing in the house that might soothe him, he tried to ignore the allure. *No*, he told himself as he squeezed his temples. *No, not that*. But the pull was too strong, and before he knew it, he had the bag open and the contents spread out along the coffee table. After a couple lines, Calvin sat back on his couch,



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