

IT ALL BEGAN WITH A FEELING.  
JUST AN EERIE FEELING....

TOM

# PAWLIK

VANISH



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*Vanish*

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*For Colette, who inspires me*

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VANISH



**IT ALL BEGAN WITH A FEELING.** Just an eerie feeling.

Conner Hayden peered out his office window at the hazy downtown Chicago vista. Heat plumes radiated from tar-covered rooftops baking in the midafternoon sun. A late-summer heat wave had every AC unit in the city running at full capacity.

He narrowed his eyes. Every unit except the one on the building across the street. On that roof, a lone maintenance worker in blue coveralls crouched beside the bulky air conditioner with his toolbox open beside him.

Conner watched the man toil in the oppressive August heat. Something

hadn't felt right all day. Despite the relative seclusion of his thirty-ninth-floor office, Conner couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched.

It had begun early that morning when he stopped for gas. He could have sworn the guy at the next pump was staring at him. Conner saw his face for only an instant. But it looked strange somehow—dark, as if shrouded by a passing shadow. And his eyes . . .

For a moment, his eyes looked completely white.

Then the shadow passed and the guy turned away.

Conner dismissed it at first as merely an optical illusion, but he had the same experience with a truck driver on the Edens. Then there was the kid in the green minivan, the woman in the parking garage, and the guy on the elevator. Each time Conner only caught a glimpse, and each time he saw the same shadowed countenance with white, soulless eyes.

By the time he got to the office, he had been in full paranoia. His neck and shoulders were tense. He stopped at his secretary's desk. "Nancy, do you notice anything strange about me today? People have been staring at me all morning."

Nancy just curled an eyebrow. "You mean other than the horns sticking out of your head?"

"Very funny."

Nancy loved her lawyer jokes.

Conner had retreated to his office and closed the blinds but found himself peering through the slats every few minutes. He'd first noticed the maintenance man at nine o'clock. It was now almost three. Either the guy was hopelessly incompetent, or he wasn't really working on the AC unit at all.

It was ridiculous, of course. There was no way the guy could even see him from that position. Conner turned back to his desk and his work. He had a meeting with clients in a few

minutes and desperately needed to focus. He tried to push the thoughts from his mind, but he was still on edge as he joined them in the conference room.

Annie Malone was a mousy redhead and her husband, Jim, a beefy blue-collar guy—not the sharpest tool in the shed. At least that was the way he came across. Conner had to remember to keep his words simple and his sentences short.

Annie was shaking her head as Conner sat down. “I just . . . I’m still really uncomfortable with this whole thing.”

“I understand your misgivings, Annie,” Conner said. “I do. But you lost your child and you’re legally entitled to compensation for your pain and suffering. And mental anguish.”

Annie bit her lower lip. “But Philipa recommended we go with a C-section—”

Conner held up a hand. “Okay, first, it’s Dr. Trent, not Philipa. You call her by her first name and suddenly the jury sees her as your friend—”

“But she *is* my friend.”

“This isn’t personal, Annie. This is about business. Dr. Trent charges you for her services, doesn’t she? She’s not treating you for free, is she?”

Annie hesitated. “Well . . . no . . .”

“And in exchange for your payment, you expect a level of competence. You should be able to trust that your doctor will give you sound advice. That she’s looking out for your health and safety.”

“Well, yeah . . .”

Conner leaned forward. “Look, Annie. This isn’t like you’re taking money from a friend. Doctors have medical malpractice insurance to cover them in situations like this. It happens all the time. It’s a part of doing business.”

Annie still looked doubtful.

Conner paused and turned to her husband. “Jim, you make, what, forty . . . fifty grand a year?”

Jim shrugged. “Around that.”

“And you support four kids on that. You pay your bills. You try to live right,” Conner continued. “Trent makes a six-figure salary. Part of her business pays for insurance that covers her in case something goes wrong like this. You’re not taking money from her. Her insurance company compensates you. That’s why she has it.”

Jim just looked down.

Conner leaned closer. “A settlement could be in the millions, Jim. What would you do with that? You could retire on that. Pay off your house. Buy a bigger one.”

The Malones exchanged glances.

Conner leaned back again. “There’s nothing dishonest about this. You lost your child due to someone else’s negligence. That’s a pain no parent should have to endure. We can’t bring Erica back. We can’t make you whole. But I want to make sure you get some compensation for your grief and suffering. The law allows it.”

In the end, the Malones said they wanted the weekend to think it over. *Pray* about it, they said.

*Pray?*

Conner felt his jaw tighten. He would never understand how people could live through such a terrible event and still come away trusting in some higher power.

They reminded him of his ex-wife.

As the Malones gathered their things, Conner caught a glimpse of Jim. A shadow seemed to pass over his face, and for a split second, his eyes turned white. Then he looked away.

Conner frowned as he watched them leave. For a moment he thought he might follow them out and demand to know

what was going on. Instead, he returned to his office and busied himself with paperwork. But now the sensation was stronger than ever. Like someone was standing right behind him.

He spun around and opened the blinds.

The maintenance guy was still there, crouched down, working on the AC unit.

Conner rubbed the tension out of his neck and watched for a few minutes. His gaze drifted down to the street, and when he looked up again, the repairman was standing. Toolbox in hand. Facing him.

Conner blinked. *Facing* him?

He jerked back in his chair. The guy was *watching* him!

He squinted and leaned closer. He had a hard time focusing but . . .

This guy . . . had no face!

The man stood there for only a moment and then stepped behind the AC unit. Conner rubbed his eyes. Was he seeing things? There were only shallow, fleshy indentations where the repairman's eyes and mouth should have been. The guy must be wearing a mask or—

*“What are you going to do when you're alone?”*

The voice drove a shudder down Conner's spine. He tore his gaze from the window to see Gus Brady in his doorway.

Conner narrowed his eyes. “What'd you say?”

Gus chuckled. “Did I wake you up? I said, ‘What are you going to do with the Malones?’”

“Oh . . .” Conner shot a glance back at the empty rooftop. “They, uh . . . they said they wanted the weekend to talk it over.”

Gus raised his eyebrows. “Talk it over? What's there to talk over? It's a slam dunk malpractice.”

“Well . . . not quite. It seems Annie Malone’s developed a bit of a friendship with her OB.”

Gus rolled his eyes. “Oh, for pete’s sake—”

“Don’t worry. I’m working on them.”

“Friendship’s got nothing to do with it, Connie.”

“I know.”

“That’s why they have malpractice insurance.”

“I know.”

“It’s not personal.”

“I said I’m working on them.” Conner leaned back and stretched his neck.

“You okay?”

“Yeah . . . I just . . .” He was briefly tempted to tell Gus about the faceless maintenance man. “I’m fine.”

“Hmm.” Gus bit his lip. “Well, don’t let this one get away. This one’s huge.”

Gus disappeared down the hall and Conner spun back to the window.

He surveyed the empty rooftop and shook his head. It must have been some kind of optical illusion, like how hot asphalt looks wet from a distance.

But still . . .

He dialed Nancy’s phone. “Can you get me our building security office?”

“What?”

“I saw someone on the roof of the building across the street who looked a little suspicious and . . . I just want to see if everything’s all right over there.”

“You mean like a terrorist?”

“Just get me the number.”

A minute later, Nancy called back and connected him to building security.

“Mr. Hayden?”

“Yes.”

“Your secretary mentioned you saw someone on the roof of the Brighton building across the street.”

“Yeah, it looked like a maintenance guy working on the air-conditioning unit, but he . . . well . . .” Conner wasn’t quite sure how to describe it. “At one point he turned in my direction. He was just standing there, and it looked like he had some sort of . . . mask on.”

“A mask?”

“Well . . . or like a nylon or something. Something was covering his face, I think.”

“How good a look did you get at this guy?”

At that point Nancy came in and peered out the window too. Conner pointed to the rooftop. “Uhh . . . not too good. I mean, just for a second, but I thought it was kind of strange for him to be looking at *me*.”

There was a pause at the other end of the line. “Most likely he was just facing in your direction. I doubt he could see you from that vantage point.”

“Well, I just thought it was a little strange.”

“I see.” Another pause. “We have someone on the phone with their building management. They, uh . . . they confirmed they were having some work done on one of their AC units. But it was their own maintenance guy. Apparently he checks out. They’re going to send someone up to have a look anyway.”

Conner sighed. “Okay. Sounds like a false alarm. Sorry to bother you.”

“Not at all, sir. We appreciate you letting us know. Can’t be too careful these days.”

Conner hung up and Nancy chuckled. “You obviously have

too much time on your hands if you can spend half the day staring out the window.”

Conner shrugged. “I just happened to see him standing there.”

Nancy nodded. “Mmmm . . . Well, anyway, your ex-wife called to find out if you had left yet. You’re supposed to pick up your daughter for the weekend.”

“*Rachel.*” Conner swore and looked at his watch. “I was supposed to be there by five. Marta’s gonna kill me.”

He scooped the papers into his briefcase.

Nancy chuckled again. “I told her you weren’t here. I said you were probably stuck in traffic.”

“You’re the best.” Conner nodded toward the window. “Let me know if they find anything.”

Then he was out the door.

Conner snaked his black Mercedes through the afternoon traffic, mulling over the excuses he could give Marta. He knew none of them would work. After fourteen years of marriage, she knew him far too well. He could picture the look on her face already. Marta always wore a sort of tight-lipped half smile when she was angry.

It was nearly five thirty when he pulled up her driveway in Lake Forest. He shut the car off and sighed. He’d given up the handsome brick Tudor to Marta in the divorce settlement two years ago. And been glad to do so. It had become infested with too many memories. Too many things he preferred to forget . . .

He knocked and let himself in the front door. “Sorry I’m late.”

Marta’s voice called out from down the hall. “In the kitchen.”

Conner moved down the hallway into the breakfast nook. “I ran into some construction. You know how it goes.”

“Yeah.” Marta was rinsing some dishes at the sink. She turned around. Her lips were drawn tight in the familiar smirk.

Conner sighed. “What now?”

Marta shook her head. “It’s just that there always seems to be construction or extra-heavy traffic or *something* that makes you late whenever you’re coming to pick Rachel up. But when it’s time to drop her off again, somehow you manage to be a few minutes early.”

Conner shrugged. “That’s because I’m always coming from *downtown* when I pick her up and from *home* when I drop her off.”

“Mmm.” Marta seemed to brush off his explanation and went to the back stairway. “Rachel,” she called. “Your father’s here.”

“It’s not a conspiracy, you know,” Conner persisted.

“She hasn’t eaten supper yet.” Marta wiped the table.

“I’ve got it covered.”

“And I’ll be over Sunday at eight thirty to pick her up for church.”

“Church?” Conner raised an eyebrow. “You make her go to church now too?”

“She wants to go. She even joined the youth choir.”

“You sure *she* wanted that?”

“I haven’t pressured her to join anything,” Marta said. “You know Rachel. No one can make her do anything she doesn’t want to do.”

Conner frowned. “She sings, too?”

“She’s got a beautiful voice. They’re doing a special number this week. You should come.”

Conner chuckled and shook his head. “Yeah . . . I don’t think so.”

“Not even to hear your own daughter sing?”

“That’s pretty low,” Conner said. “Using our daughter to get me to church.”

“You know it’s not always about you, Connie,” Marta shot back. “Did you ever stop to think what it’d mean to Rachel? to have her father there to hear her sing?”

“You think I don’t care about her?”

“No, it’s just that for the past two years I’ve been watching you two grow more and more distant.”

“Look—” Conner’s expression darkened—“I’m doing my best here. Okay? It’s not like I don’t have any other responsibilities.”

“This isn’t about your work, Connie. It’s about our daughter. Rachel’s growing up—she’s *fifteen*—and you’re missing everything.”

“I come to her birthdays,” Conner offered. “I see her every other weekend.”

“And even then it’s like you’re miles away. It’s like she’s just an imposition on you.”

Conner rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on, Marty—”

“You had *two* children, Connie.” Marta’s tone iced over. “Only one of them died.”

She pushed past him and headed for the hallway.

Conner caught her arm and spun her around. “Don’t take a cheap shot like that and just walk away.” He loomed over her small frame. “You were the one who pushed me out of her life, so don’t start complaining about it now!”

Marta didn’t back down. “This started long before the divorce, Connie. After Matthew died, *you* were the one who pushed *us* away—”

“*This doesn’t have anything to do with Matthew!*”

They turned to see Rachel in the back hall with her coat and backpack. She stared at them, chewing a piece of gum. Then she shook her head.

“I’ll be out in the car.”

As she walked away, the anger drained from Conner. He felt a little sheepish for having gotten so easily rattled. Why was it every conversation with Marta ended in an argument?

“Look . . . I—”

“No, you were right,” Marta said. “It was a cheap shot. I’m sorry.”

Conner sighed. “I know I’ve been working a lot, but I was planning to spend the whole day tomorrow with her. We’re going to the Cubs game.”

Marta nodded. “She’ll like that. And *talk* to her. You know, ask her about what’s going on in her life. She’s not a cynical teenager. She *wants* to be with you.”

“It’ll be good,” Conner said. “We’ll have a good time. We’ll bond.”

Conner and Rachel drove home in silence. Rachel stared out the window with her headphones on, humming to a song. Conner felt a bit relieved at not having to make small talk and a twinge of guilt for feeling relieved.

For all his efforts, he still couldn’t shake the sensation that had plagued him all day. He found himself peering at every pedestrian and into every passing car. His behavior was so obvious it even prompted a remark from Rachel.

“You looking for someone, Dad?”

He chuckled a bit. “No, it’s just been a very strange day.”

They turned up the elm-lined boulevard to Conner’s condominium.

They ate supper in further silence. The soft clinking of forks on plates was broken only by an occasional cough. Conner picked at his food, shifting his gaze between his plate and his daughter. He brooded over conversation topics with which to engage her other than the church choir. He didn’t want to risk providing

an opportunity for her to invite him to the service, but still he wondered whether her motives for joining were genuine or if her mother had pressured her. Finally, he decided to take the risk.

“So your mom tells me you joined a choir. . . .”

Rachel looked up and stared at him almost placidly, as if waiting for him to finish the sentence.

After a few grudging seconds, he obliged. “. . . at church.”

Rachel smiled and nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

He thought he saw a glint of amusement in her eyes. She went back to her meal, offering no further details. Conner drummed his fingers on the table, then tried again.

“So . . . you like it? Is that something you enjoy?”

Rachel smiled again. “Yep.” And went back to her meal.

“Because . . . I just want to be sure it’s something *you* wanted to do. Not . . . y’know, not because your mother—”

“I like it, Dad. Okay? I *wanted* to join.”

“That’s fine,” Conner said. “It’s just that your mom can be a little pushy about her religion. . . .”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “I can sign an affidavit if you want.”

“Okay, okay.”

“Take a polygraph?”

“Look, I just want to be sure you’re not . . .”

“Not what?” Her pleasant tone had evaporated. “Not being brainwashed? Is that what you think? I’m part of a cult or something?”

Conner’s jaw tightened. “You’re *my* daughter too, you know. And I think I have a say—”

“That doesn’t give you the right to dictate what I can believe.”

“I’m not trying to dictate anything. I just want to expose you to diverse points of view. And to appreciate the fact that there’s more than one way of looking at the world.”

“Then why don’t you practice what you preach?”

Conner shook his head. “*What?*”

“Why don’t you even *try* to respect Mom’s beliefs?”

“I’ve never denied your mother the right to her own beliefs. I just don’t want her pushing them off on you to the point where you’re biased against my views.”

Rachel leaned back and stared at him for several seconds. “Do you know why I started to go to church with Mom? Because I watched how you both reacted when Matty died. All you did was get angry. It was like you didn’t even want to look at us anymore. But Mom found something that gave her comfort.”

Conner scowled. “Comfort in an outdated book written by religious bigots?”

“Comfort in God,” Rachel said softly.

“*God?*” Conner leaned over the table. “Let me tell you something about God. If He has the power to create the universe but can’t spare a few seconds to keep a little boy from drowning in his own pool—if He even exists at all—He’s either too selfish or stupid to care about what happens to any of us!”

Rachel’s eyes widened. She opened her mouth as if to answer him but couldn’t seem to find the words. Finally she shook her head and got up. “I think I’ve had enough pleasant conversation for one night.”

Conner blinked and looked down at his clenched fists, white knuckled on the table. He straightened up. What had come over him? “Rachel, I—”

“You know, I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

She left the room and Conner sat staring at his plate. He shook his head, dizzy from his rant.

A half hour later, he had retreated to the solace of his study and retrieved a bottle of Scotch from his liquor cabinet.

He downed his first glass, poured a second, and sank into his leather armchair.

Outside, the low rumble of thunder signaled the approach of a late-summer storm. Conner rolled his neck. He had been sore all day, and his squabble with Rachel hadn't helped any.

As he downed his second glass, his eye caught a framed photograph on his desk across the room. It was Rachel's picture from her tenth birthday. Conner moved to the desk and frowned. Ten? Rachel was fifteen now. He picked up the picture and ran his finger along the frame. Had it been that long since he had gotten an updated photograph of her?

His gaze drifted to one of the lower drawers. He slid it open and retrieved another photograph. It was the last picture they had taken together as a family. Five years ago at Disney World. He couldn't stand to look at it, but he couldn't bear to throw it out.

His finger cleared a path through the veil of dust on the glass. Matthew gazed back at him like a phantom. Tousled blond hair. Mischievous grin. Blue eyes squinting in the sunlight . . .

Conner's gaze moved to Marta: the slope of her nose, the curl of her lips. His chest ached as he tried to pinpoint exactly when during the last five years he had stopped loving her. It was as though a hedge had sprouted the day Matthew died and grown taller day by day. Their grief kept them from even speaking in the days after the funeral. But days soon turned into weeks and weeks into months. Eventually they were miles apart under the same roof.

Conner had withdrawn into his work, refusing to talk or even to see a counselor as Marta had suggested. He didn't want to console or be consoled. His anger consumed him. Anger at circumstance and blind chance. And at a God he

didn't believe was there. Soon he found himself avoiding Marta and Rachel altogether. He watched their suffering but could find nothing to say to them. His anger allowed him no room to comfort them. When Marta turned to religion, his anger found a new target. And when she tried to push her faith on him . . . that was the end.

Thunder rumbled louder now, low and sustained. Flashes of lightning lit up the night sky. Conner went to the patio doors.

Something wasn't right. For one thing, no rain had been predicted in the forecast he'd heard earlier. For another, this storm was rolling in from the east. Off Lake Michigan. The clouds churned and billowed like the black, acrid smoke of a chemical fire. Lightning flashed inside the billows. Long, sustained flashes of multiple hues. Red, amber, and blue.

Conner's frown deepened. He called back into the house. "Rachel? You see this?"

The cloud bank extended north and south as far as he could see, rolling westward quickly. Like a blanket stretching over the sky. The peals of thunder grew louder as it approached.

Conner stood, gaping at the sight. "Rachel," he called again. "Come take a look at this."

It rolled over the house. No more than a couple hundred feet, Conner guessed. The clouds swirled directly overhead and the deep rumbling shook the house.

Conner's mouth went dry. This was no storm. . . .

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom has a BA in communication and works in the marketing field. He has also been active in Christian teaching, youth work, and music for over twenty years. His first novel, *The Way Back*, took second place in the 2004 Operation First Novel Contest run by the Jerry B. Jenkins Christian Writers Guild in association with Tyndale House Publishers. His second novel, *Vanish*, won first place in the 2006 contest. In addition to writing fiction, Tom is also an accomplished songwriter and musician who writes and records at his home studio. He and his wife, Colette, live in Ohio with their four children and one large dog. Visit Tom's Web site at [www.tompawlik.com](http://www.tompawlik.com).