

JC GATLIN

The
Cypress
Trap



A SUSPENSE – THRILLER

Chapter One

Grover Lott hated swimming. What's more, the very thought of jumping from the side of a cliff into a deep channel some thirty-odd feet below paralyzed him with fear. But what choice did he have?

Standing on the edge of the rocky precipice, he looked down. Four teenage boys, like fuzzy action figures in the blue water, splashed and whooped and called to him. Their voices carried on the breeze, and Grover squeezed his eyes shut. He had tolerated them in gym class, believing he'd never have to lay eyes on those boys again after graduating from high school last May. Still, for some unknown reason, their association continued.

Slipping a hand into a pocket of his cutoff jeans, he pulled out his lucky rabbit's foot. It wasn't any ordinary charm, but the foot of a large Arabian Cape hare. According to legend, it was a prize won at the 1930 Chicago World's Fair and cursed by a shaman. Ordinarily Grover scoffed at the idea of a superstitious talisman, but this was different somehow. His fingers caressed the soft pink fur, felt the solid splint of bone inside. He

squeezed it into his palm so tight his knuckles ached. It soothed him, though, and gave him the courage to open his eyes.

He looked over at his buddy standing beside him.

Owen Meeks, his best friend since third grade, challenged him to jump. Six feet tall but still a couple inches shy of Grover, Owen lowered his voice and placed a hand on Grover's shoulder. "Come on! There's nothing to it."

Grover looked past his friend, to the rocky plateau stretching into overgrown woodlands. At the edge of the tree line, a good twenty feet or so away, another boy hollered as he pulled a blue-and-white-striped collared shirt over his head. Grover ignored him and turned to Owen, who was waving his arms at that boy.

"Groves' not movin'," Owen yelled, and nudged Grover a bit harder. "Think he's chicken'n out on us or someth'n."

Grover relented and took a step back. He squeezed the rabbit's foot tighter in his palm. Tall and skinny, barely weighing one sixty, he'd always loomed over his classmates. When he stood up straight, he was easily six foot three. But he never stood up straight; his head hung low, chin to chest, especially when he walked through the crowded campus or in the hallways between classes. His parents scolded him and told him to stop slouching. You'll never play basketball. Or baseball. Or run track, they said. But he didn't want to do any of those activities anyway. He only wanted to play the clarinet. That's where he wished he were now—locked in his bedroom with his books, playing his clarinet.

Not outside in the heat. Not here on the cliff edge with a group of juvenile delinquents he really didn't know and didn't care to know. Drinking. Swearing. Swimming.

Owen pushed him again. “You’ve seen us do it a thousand times. Hell, you’ve seen us do it two thousand times before.”

Grover looked down at his friend. For some reason, he realized long ago, Owen did care. Owen always wanted to run with this gang. He wanted to belong. And he wanted acceptance. It puzzled Grover. Even more perplexing was why Owen wanted Grover to be part of that group as well.

Grover inched to the brink of the cliff and gazed down. It was a long drop to the crystal waters below. Now all four boys were grouped together in the channel, chanting, encouraging him to jump. Grover took a deep gulp of air and two steps back.

“I can’t do it. You can’t make me,” he said to Owen, and then spotted their buddy.

Bare from the waist up, Darryl had gripped his collared shirt in a way that made it look like a blue-and-white-striped flag. He dropped it, slipped a pair of wire-rimmed glasses on his nose, and marched over to them. Darryl and Owen grabbed hold of Grover’s arms and walked him back toward the ledge.

“Come on, Groves,” Owen said again. “There’s nothing to it.”

“Well, if you’re not goin’, I’m goin’.” Darryl released his grip, moved a couple of feet to the side and stepped out of his jeans. He looked back at Grover. “Ya know what the guys down there are think’n right now?”

Grover studied him and considered his options. He glanced over the edge of the cliff once more. If he didn’t jump, he could run into the woods behind them. Or he could step off the ledge and take the plunge. But it was too high. He knew it. The drop too far.

Grover shook his head in protest. “I don’t care what they think.” He took several steps away from the edge.

Owen and Darryl approached him again, and he felt their hands on his back. He locked his legs, scraping his heels across the rock. “No. No. No.”

Darryl sighed, letting him go.

“Watch me, okay?” In his underwear now, Darryl removed his glasses and handed them to Owen. Darryl jogged several feet away from the ledge, turned, and sprinted forward. Leaping, Darryl sailed off the cliff ... free-falling for what seemed to Grover like minutes before dropping into the water with a splash. It sent ripples fanning out in wide circles toward the center of the channel and back against the banks. The boys swimming below cheered.

Grover heard them and heard Darryl call to him. His voice carried all the way up to the ridge. Grover listened, but it didn’t ease his fears. He felt Owen’s hand on his shoulder again.

“You see, there’s nothing to it,” Owen said.

“I don’t want to jump.” Grover shrank back, shaking his head and squeezing his eyes shut. He didn’t even want to look down.

“You’ve got to, Groves. Else you’ll never live it down.” Owen nudged Grover toward the ledge.

Grover opened his eyes. He turned to Owen and said, “Those guys. ... They’re not my friends. I don’t care what they think.”

“Then care what I think.” Owen wrapped a hand behind Grover’s neck. He tilted Grover’s head down, closer to his. “I’m your best friend, right?”

Grover pulled away. “If you were my best friend, you wouldn’t make me do this.”

“I’m making you do this because I am your friend.” Owen nudged Grover’s shoulder again. “I don’t like it when people dis you.”

Eyes tearing up, Grover stared at him. "I don't care what they think."

"Do you care what I think?" Owen walked toward Darryl's shirt and jeans crumpled in a pile on a rock. He set the glasses on top of the pile and returned to Grover. "I'm losing respect for you too."

The words stung and Grover averted his eyes. Perched on the edge, looking down at the water, he felt his heart beat faster. He was sweating and his legs weakened. Without thinking, he reached in his jeans pocket for the rabbit's foot. It wasn't there. His hand immediately went to the other pocket. He checked his back pockets.

Panicked, he moved away from Owen. Grover's voice went up an octave. "It's gone."

"What's gone?"

"My rabbit's foot. It's gone." Grover dropped to his knees and began to search the rocky plateau. "Where is it?"

Owen took hold of his left arm and yanked him to his feet. He pushed Grover back to the ledge.

Grover pulled his hand away. "No, you don't understand. I need to find it."

"Get over it," Owen said. "It's just a stupid toy."

"It's not a toy." Panic rose in Grover's voice. "It's the foot of a *Lepus capensis*, an Arabian Cape hare."

"It's okay. I get it." Owen smiled and nodded. His voice fell low, little more than a whisper. "Don't worry about it."

Grover hesitated, took a breath, and made sure he'd heard correctly. Owen nodded. Grover forgot about the rabbit's foot with a rush of relief. He wasn't going to have to jump. This calmed him and he stood straighter.

"It'll all be okay," Owen said. There was a glint of excitement in his eyes.

Grover noticed it just as Owen lunged forward. He grabbed Grover's outstretched arm and yanked him hard toward the edge of the cliff.

Grover stumbled, waving his arms. His body turned as he fought to regain balance. His breath rushed out of his mouth with one terrified cry for help and he reached for his friend. Owen pulled away. Rock crumbled beneath Grover's feet as he tumbled backward.

He dropped.

His brain processed that he was falling and he could feel the wind rush against his face, screaming in his ears. His arms thrashed wildly, side to side. His hands grasped for something, anything ... then a shoulder slammed against the cliffside. It knocked the wind out of him, spinning him around in a midair somersault. He plummeted facedown and saw the water rush up to claim him.

Like a solid thing.

Like concrete.

And he smacked it hard.

He submerged, deep, fast. The hollow, warbling sound of water overtook him, filled his ears, his mouth, his lungs. His body cut through the blue expanse until he smashed into the sandy bedrock.

After several moments of unnatural silence, Grover's broken body rose to the surface.

Chapter Two

Fifteen years later ...

With her bare feet propped on the dashboard, Rayanne stared at her husband sitting behind the steering wheel. She smiled at him, but his eyes, hidden behind mirrored sunglasses and beneath a camouflage ball cap, remained focused on the road.

Owen Meeks had barely said two words since they had left Tampa three hours ago. Now they were several miles past the Georgia state line, where the interstate veered north and local traffic had to exit onto a two-lane county road.

Absorbed in her story, Rayanne paid no attention to the route. “So we confirm that there’s a family of raccoons living in these homeowners’ attic, and guess who he picks to climb up there and go get them? Guess.” She raised her voice to compete with the rattle of the boat trailer in tow behind them. She’d been struggling to talk over its clank and clatter for the better part of the trip.