

Rook V

by Graham Masterton

Chapter 1: Swimmer

'Mikey, honey! Don't splash!' she called, as she tilted her wide-brimmed straw hat onto her head and eased herself down on the sun lounger. Mike, as usual, took no notice whatsoever and continued to chase his younger sister around the pool. 'Mike! if you go on splashing you'll be out of that pool so darn fast!'

'He's wetting my hair!' Tracey protested. 'Mom, he's wetting my hair!'

'All right, young man, out of there!' she said, putting down her John Grisham novel and standing up. But at that moment she heard her mobile phone warbling *The Bells St Mary's* from inside the house. 'That's your father - you wait until I tell him what you've been doing!'

She hurried across the hot red-brick patio and into the sunroom. Mike was still splashing and Tracey was still screaming. Mike had always been a handful, ever since he was old enough to crawl around the room and pull tablecloths down onto the floor, along with framed photographs, vases of flowers and lamps. Now he was nine he was even worse, and Jennie found him almost impossible to control.

She found her phone under one of the floral cushions in the living-room.

'Doug, is that you?'

'Hi, sweetheart. I just wanted to let you know that this financial forecasting meeting is going on a whole lot longer than we expected. I'll probably grab a bite to eat with George and Sandos and I'll see you later.'

Tracey was screaming even more loudly than ever. *'Mommy! Mommy! Come quick! Mommy come quick!'*

Jennie cupped her hand over the phone and shouted, 'Mike! You're going to be in such trouble when I get back out there!'

'What's that?' asked Doug. 'Mike playing up again?'

'Well, what do you expect when you're never home, and even when you are, you always spoil him so much?'

'Oh, come on, Jennie, I'm working my fingers down to the bone. How do you think we can afford a pool and two automobiles *and* a skiing vacation every winter?'

'Mommy! Mommy! You have to come quick! It's Mike!'

'I have to go,' said Jennie. 'The kids are raising three kinds of hell out there.'

'Listen ... before you go, can you make sure that you get my tan suit out of the cleaners. And can you call Jeff Adamson down at Ventura Pools and see what's happened to that new filter he was going to fit?'

'Okay, okay. What time do you think you're going to be back?'

'I don't know. There's a possibility that I may have to stay over.'

'Oh, yes? What's her name?'

'What do you mean? Whose name?'

'The possibility that you have to stay over.'

'Oh, don't start that again. I may be a workaholic but I'm a *faithful* workaholic.'

'*Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!*'

'For goodness' sake!' Jennie snapped. 'I'm on the phone to daddy!'

'Well, it sounds like you'd better go, anyhow,' said Doug. 'Listen, I'll call you after we've eaten and let you know what's happening, okay?'

Jennie walked out through the sunroom. It was so dazzlingly bright outside that she wasn't sure what she was looking at. The bushes on the left-hand side of the swimming-pool area abruptly shook, as if somebody had walked through them, although there was nobody there. The surface of the pool itself glittered and sparkled, and it was only when she came out of the sunroom that she saw Tracey right up to her neck in the water, her wet hair plastered over her face like a shining brass mask.

'What's happened?' Jennie screamed at her. 'Where's Mike?'

Tracey pushed back her hair. She was wide-eyed with panic. 'Mommy, I couldn't save him, he went right under.'

With a sick Jolt of dread, Jennie ran to the edge of the pool. She couldn't see Mike at first, but then she caught sight of a pale shape right at the bottom of the deep end. 'Tracey!' she screamed, 'call 911! Tell them to send an ambulance, fast!'

Without hesitating, she took a deep breath and dived into the water, her straw hat flying off her head. She plunged under the surface and swam down toward Mike with such power that she felt her shoulder-muscles cracking. She had never been a good underwater swimmer, but now she managed to reach Mike with only four or five strokes, and seize his arm. He turned, in an idle swirling motion, and rolled over, so that he was staring at her. His eyes were wide and he had an extraordinary expression on his face, as if he were smirking at her.

Jennie swam up toward the surface, dragging him after her. She came splashing out of the shallow end of the pool holding him in her arms, his legs swinging, his head hanging back. She laid him on the side of the pool, and immediately started to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. God, he couldn't be dead. She hadn't been talking on the phone for more than a couple of minutes. How could he have drowned so quickly?

'Come on, Mike,' she begged him. 'Come on, Mike, you have to breathe. Come on, darling, you have to breathe!'

Tracey came out of the house. 'Is he drowned?' she asked, in a high, fearful voice.

'Did you call the ambulance?' asked Jennie.

'The lady said they were coming real quick.'

Jennie blew desperately into Mikey's mouth. His lips were so cold, he felt as if he had been dead for hours. As she blew, the tears streamed down her cheeks and dripped onto his face. 'Breathe, darling, you have to breathe!'

It seemed like forever before she heard the siren warbling in the street outside. Mikey's eyes were still open and unblinking, and he lolled from side to side as she tried to force the water out of his lungs. It still looked as if he were smirking, and she couldn't believe that he was dead. She almost expected him to jump up and start skipping around the pool, and laughing at her.

Two paramedics came hurrying across the yard. One of them, a short Hispanic woman with thick black curly hair, gently helped Jennie onto her feet, while the other one knelt down beside Mike and checked his vital signs.

'He's going to be all right, isn't he?' asked Jennie, knowing that he wasn't, knowing that he was already dead, but praying that two trained paramedics could work a miracle over him. After all, they did it in ER, didn't they? And she'd seen so many news reports of kids who'd been drowned, and then brought back to life. In Canada, that busload of kids who went through the ice.

'Why don't you come inside?' the paramedic asked her, taking her arm. 'Come and sit down.'

'That's my son,' Jennie protested. 'That's my only son!'

The other paramedic stood up, and came toward her with the saddest expression she had ever seen. 'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'There was nothing more we could do.'

Jennie twisted her arm free and walked toward Mikey's body on legs that seemed to have no more strength than dry sticks. She knelt slowly down beside him and cradled his head in her lap, a Southern Californian *pieta*. On the ridge of the house, four or five quail clustered, and for once they were silent, as if they sensed the dreadful tragedy of what had happened.

And Jennie sensed something, too. A coldness, as if a cloud had passed over the sun. It wasn't just shock. It wasn't just grief. It was something more than these - as if something deeply malevolent had passed through the yard. She looked toward the bushes that she had seen shaking as she came out of the house. There was nobody there, and if there had been, she would have easily seen them, because the bushes were so sparsely planted. But as she peered toward them she saw that - in the shadow of the orange tree - there were six or seven wet footprints on the bricks. Adult-sized footprints.

The paramedic came out of the house rolling a gurney. He lowered it next to Mike and said, 'Let's make him more comfortable, shall we?'

Jennie nodded, and lifted Mike onto the sheet 'Don't cover his face,' she said. 'Not yet, anyhow.' She glanced inside the house and saw that the woman paramedic was taking care of Tracey, and that her neighbor Blanche had just come into the living-room, looking tearful and distressed.

She left Mike and walked around the pool until she came to the footprints. There was no question about it ... they were grown-up footprints and in the shaded corner of the patio they were still wet, although the sun had already dried any others that might have been leading up to them.

Blanche came out, her mouth puckered with grief, and put her arms around her. Now, however, Jennie felt strangely calm. She found herself pressing her cheek against Blanche's dry, sun bleached hair without any emotion, and burying her chin in Blanche's sleeveless seersucker top. She didn't need sympathy. She needed revenge. Somebody had been here. Somebody had entered their yard and killed her son. She wanted to know who it was. She was determined to know who it was.

Lieutenant Harris circled the pool area, frowning at the pool, as if he expected another body to come floating to the surface. He was short and broad-shouldered, built like an overpacked flight bag, with a wayward plume of reddish hair and a bright red scar on his chin. If Columbo had been real, he would have looked like Lieutenant Harris. But unlike Columbo, Lieutenant Harris had no intuitive ideas about who might have killed Mike.

'You saw the bushes move?'

'That's right. I came running out of the house and the bushes were moving.'

'Like what? Like the wind was blowing them?'

'There wasn't any wind.'

'But there could have been a gust. Come on, this is almost Santa Aria season.'

'There wasn't any wind.'

Lieutenant Harris walked over to the oleanders and shaded his eyes to look between them. 'A person couldn't hide here, right?'

'No, not really.'

'So if somebody *was* here the chances are that you would have seen them, right?' 'I couldn't have missed them. But there were all of these footprints.'

Lieutenant Harris circled around, peering at the bricks. 'Well, sure, if you say so. But they're gone now, right? They've all dried up. They were circumstantial evidence at best; and now we don't even have that.'

Jennie said, 'You don't really believe me, do you?'

Lieutenant Harris took a crumpled restaurant napkin out of his pocket and dabbed at his forehead with it. The day was so hot that it was almost deafening.

'What can I say? Your son drowned and I'm really sorry. But there's no *prima facie* evidence here that anybody else was involved. Those footprints ... well, they could have been yours, right?'

'I never went over to that side of the pool.'

'Well - you don't *recall* going over to that side of the pool. But, you know ... when you're in shock, your memory can be pretty deceptive.'

'Lieutenant - I never went over to that side of the pool. But there were footprints there. Grown-up sized footprints. Somebody came into this yard and pushed Mike under the water and I'm sure of it.'

Lieutenant Harris covered his mouth with his hand for a moment, and looked down reflectively into the pool. Then he said, 'I talked to Tracey, as you know.'

'Sure. Tracey always tells the truth.'

'Well, this time Tracey said that she didn't see anybody else in the yard, except for herself and Mike. She agreed that you were gone for only a matter of minutes. Two - maybe three at the most. But Mike went under and she couldn't do anything to save him. It's a tragedy that happens here in Los Angeles every day of the week. You have a pool, you have children, there's always a risk that they're going to drown. But what do you do? Have no pools? Or never have children?'

'Mike could swim like a little fish. He never would've drowned.'

'Well, let me tell you, I'm sorrier for what happened here than words can express. But I think this was a tragic accident, and we're just going to have to accept it at that. I'll leave it to the coroner, of course. It's his decision. But I don't seriously think that we're looking for anybody else.'

He paused, and his rumpled brow was glistening with perspiration. 'If you or your husband want to talk to anybody, Mrs Oppenheimer ... we can put you in touch with specialist counselors.'

'No,' said Jennie. 'I think I know who I need to talk to.'

Jim was trying to fit a 4ft statue of Hanuman, the Nepalese ape-god, into a cardboard box measuring 3ft 10 ins. Hanuman had six arms and six legs and the strained, anguished expression of a chronic constipation sufferer. After twenty minutes of struggling to pack him, Jim's expression was almost the same. He was being watched from the back of the couch by his cat Tibbles Two, who repeatedly closed her eyes as if she were too exasperated to watch his efforts to achieve the impossible, or if she couldn't understand why anybody would want to keep a 4ft statue of Hanuman, the Nepalese ape-god, in the first place.

'Hanuman is lucky, okay?' Jim snapped at her. 'And since I've had about as much luck as Wily Coyote lately, I feel the need to take him along.'

Tibbles Two said nothing but closed her eyes completely and pretended that she was asleep. Jim was still slightly afraid of her. Since she had appeared in his life, and attached herself to him, he had increasingly felt that she was looking after him, instead of the other way around. He opened the cans of 9 Lives, that was for sure; but it was Tibbles Two who seemed to control his spiritual destiny.

Whenever she looked at him with those agate-yellow eyes he felt that she was waiting for him to take another step into the unknown - that she was waiting for him to follow her to places that *she* had been but he never had. The unknown zone.

But he was packing up now to take up a new posting with the Department of Education in Washington, D.C., and Tibbles Two would have to remain in this apartment block in Venice with his friend and self-appointed super, Mervyn Brookfeller. He knew that Mervyn would take almost unnatural care of her. Mervyn took almost unnatural care of everybody and everything. Although he wasn't paid for it, he hoovered the hallways, he dug coffee-spoons out of jammed Insinkerators, and he ran errands to Ralph's for the older residents. Jim had even stood at a half-open doorway once, and watched Mervyn feeding old Mrs Kaufman with Cream of Wheat, doggedly and patiently, like a caring parent with a small child. Mrs Kaufman was wearing an old green flannel bathrobe and Mervyn was wearing a spangled emerald T-shirt and white stretch tights. It had almost been enough to bring tears to Jim's eyes.

At last Jim admitted defeat and pulled Hanuman and all of his grinning ape-attendants out of the split-open cardboard box. 'You'd think they'd make their religious figures a standard size, for God's sake.'

Tibbles Two turned her head away.

At that moment, Jim's mobile telephone rang, and he climbed over the couch and a stack of boxes to find it. Sometimes he really enjoyed TT's company, but most of the time he found her exasperating. She ate, she slept, she stared at him, but she never answered the phone and she never brought him a beer out of the icebox.

'Mr Rook?'

'Yes, it is. Jim Rook here. Who wants him?'

'Well, I don't know whether you'll remember me. Jennie Oppenheimer. Well, Jennie Bauer when I was single. I was in your class in '91.'

'Jennie Bauer ... Jennie Bauer ... Hey, yes! Of course I remember you! Sure! I remember all of my students, even the students I'd rather forget. Let me see now ... *King Lear* ... when Cordelia weeps over the dying king, and says "Had you not been their father, these white flakes/ Did challenge pity of them" ... what did you say? "Does that mean he had dandruff?" Yes, Jennie. I remember you. I remember you *clearly*. Long blonde hair. Very cute. Short little span of attention, I'm afraid to say.'

'My son's dead.'

Jim didn't know what to say. He very rarely heard from his students, after they had left Special Class II at West Grove Community College. They always swore that they would write, and keep in touch, but he always knew that they wouldn't. Those who had been saved by his remedial English class from a life of car-washing and dog-walking and other Mac Jobs were always too busy to remember the scruffy teacher who had shown them the difference between Hamlet and ham-and-eggs; and who had brought them to the edge of tears with his recitation of poetry by John Frederick Nims; '*Inference of night wind, a rumor of rain.*'

'I'm very sorry to hear that,' said Jim - thinking *why is she telling me?* I haven't heard from her since the leaving party after her final exams. 'What happened? Was it an accident?'

'He drowned. It happened yesterday morning. Mike and his sister were playing in the pool and I left them alone for only a moment, but he drowned.'

'I'm so sorry. That's a tragedy. How old was he?'

'Nine, and he was such a good swimmer. '

I don't know what to say, Jennie. My heart goes out to you. Was Mike your only boy?'

'His father's devastated. We can't have any more children and he's blaming me.'

'It's the shock, that's all,' Jim reassured her. 'He'll get over it. An accident is an accident.'

'But this is the point, Mr Rook. This is why I'm calling you.'

'Hey, listen. I think you can call me Jim now. We're not in Special Class II any more.'

'I know ... but you do still have that ability, don't you?'

'Ability?'

'You can still see - well, you can still see ghosts and things like that?'

Jim didn't say anything, but he thought: *uh-oh what's coming now?* So many people who found out that he could see spirits and other supernatural presences wanted him to help them with all kinds of other-worldly problems. Either they wanted him to summon up their late Uncle Charlie to find out what he'd done with all of his rare Civil War coins; or else they wanted to discover if a chilly presence in their kitchen was the cause of all of their rotten luck. They never seemed to accept that supernatural manifestations walk among us all the time, with their own tragic problems and their own complicated agendas, and spirits are hardly ever interested either in contacting the still-living, or helping them, and especially not in harming them. They were benign, most of them - benign and slightly stunned, like the victims of a bus crash.

But Jennie didn't say what he expected her to say. 'Listen, Mr Rook, I came out of the house and I was sure that somebody had just pushed their way through the bushes. Then - when I was trying to save Mike - I saw wet footprints on the bricks around the side of the pool. They weren't a child's footprints - they weren't Mikey's or Tracey's - but there was nobody else there. Tracey tells me that she didn't see anybody, and by the time the police arrived the footprints had all dried up. The detective told me I was in shock. Well, I was in shock. Of course I was in shock. But I know what I saw.'

'So ... uh ... what do you want *me* to do?'

'I want you to find out who murdered Mike, Mr Rook. I want to find out who pushed him under the water, and why.' She was crying now, and she was so grief-stricken and exhausted that her voice acquired a deep throaty undertone, as if she were starting to sing an aria in a tragic opera.

'Jennie ... I'd love to be able to help you. But this sounds like police business to me.'

'I told you. The police don't believe me. They're going to say it was an accident, or parental neglect, or whatever.'

Jim sat down on the arm of his couch. Outside the window, the sun was gradually sinking over Venice and the evening sky was the color of boysenberry jelly. 'Jennie, I'm packing up to leave. I've been offered a job with the Department of Education in Washington, D.C.'

'You're *leaving*? What about Special Class II?'

'Well, we all have to move on. This is going to give me the chance to help students all over the country, not just LA.'

'When are you going? Do you think we could meet?'

Jim looked toward Tibbles Two but all she could do was yawn, and dig her claws into the cushions. Either she was provoking him into making a decision, or else she was trying to tell him that he was wasting his time. She was only a cat, for sure, but he had seen what she could do before. Her nose was more finely-tuned for fortune-telling cards than any of the so-called 'psychic sensitives' that he had ever met.

The day before he had been offered his new job in Washington, she had scratched out of his Grimaud pack the eight of diamonds, signifying 'delay' and the ace of diamonds, which represented 'a wicked woman.' Then - haughtily - she had stalked back to the couch, and curled herself up, and sat there watching him to see what his reaction would be.

Jim said, 'I'm packing now, as a matter of fact. I'm supposed to be flying out Wednesday morning.'

'Mr Rook - I'm sorry, Jim - I know this is an imposition. But I know that Mike didn't drown by accident, and I don't have any other way of proving it.'

Jim raked his fingers through his tousled hair. In the mirror on the other side of his apartment, another Jim Rook, with his face back-to-front, did the same thing. The Jim Rook in the mirror was thinking: *when you take on a student, when you teach her how to write and how to talk and how to make her own impression on the world around her when does your responsibility end? All of that poetry you taught her, all of those plays, all of those hours struggling with Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson and Kenneth Patchen: 'Have you wondered why all the windows in heaven were broken?'*

The trouble was, he knew what the truth was; and the truth was that a teacher's responsibility never ends, any more than a parent's or a priest's.

'Okay,' he said. 'Do you know the Café del Rey, on Admiralty Way? I can meet you there at - what, maybe eight o'clock?'

'I'm sorry,' Jennie told him, and he could tell that she was crying. 'I'm so frightened - I'm so scared - and I couldn't think of anybody else to turn to.'

After she had hung up, Jim sat on the edge of the couch with his head bowed. He had promised himself that he would never again answer an appeal for help from anybody who was troubled by supernatural events - or seemingly supernatural events, anyhow. He had nearly died from pneumonia at the age of 9, the same age as Mike, and ever since then he had seen faces and people and things that he didn't want to think of, ever again.

Shadows, ghosts. Demons running through the streets, and screaming at him out of closets. Dead people, standing outside supermarkets. Sad and bewildered faces, reflected in windows, when there was nobody there.

He couldn't take any more of it. People didn't seem to understand that he found his psychic ability even more frightening than they did. He had no choice about what he saw. If he went to visit a friend, and his friend's dead grandfather was sitting in the corner of the room, and only Jim could see him, what could he do about it? What was he supposed to say?

As he sat there, Tibbles Two dropped off the couch onto the floor. She padded across to the coffee-table, where Jim had stacked all his various decks of mystical cards. She stood up on her hind legs and tipped the Grimaud deck onto the floor, so that the cards were scattered out of their box, all over the floor.

'Thanks, TT,' said Jim. 'It's nice to know that there's somebody even messier than me.'

He knelt down to pick up the cards, but while he was shuffling them back into order, TT picked one out of the deck between her teeth and walked off into the kitchen with it. 'The hell -' said Jim, and followed her.

TT was standing over her water-bowl. With great care, she dropped the Grimaud card into the water, and watched it as it sank.

'Great move,' said Jim. He knelt down and picked the card out of the water, and shook it. It was the death card, the card of the empty-eyed skeleton, the nine of clubs, wrapped in a dark gray sheet with a scythe over his shoulder and an hourglass in his hand.

'What's this?' Jim asked her, holding up the dripping card. 'All of a sudden you're playing boats?'

TT stared at him as if she couldn't believe how stupid he was.

'What, then?' he demanded.

She came up to him and flicked the card out of his hand with her paw. Then she picked it up in her mouth, and dropped it back in the water-bowl.

'Death in the water,' said Jim. 'That's what you're telling me, isn't it? Death by drowning. And more than one death.'

He fished the card out of the water-bowl and shook it. 'Listen ... I'm going to see Jennie and try to find out what happened. But I can't do anything more than that. I'm still leaving for Washington Wednesday, and when I'm gone, I'm gone for good. And nobody else in the world is ever going to discover that I can see their recently-deceased nephew playing ball on their lawn.'

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