

THE EMPATHY EFFECT

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Screaming Dreams

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For my darling daughter, Juliana

(I never thanked you for the loan of that sword, thank you)

Many thanks to Steve Upham for publishing another
novel of mine and to Peter Tennant for all the red ink
he had to use in editing it.

EMPATHY

Some people think only intellect counts: knowing how to solve problems, knowing how to get by, knowing how to identify an advantage and seize it. But the functions of intellect are insufficient without courage, love, friendship, compassion and empathy.

— Dean Koontz

Human altruism is thought to be based, in part, on empathy. To be empathetic, you need to understand the thoughts and desires of others.

— Joan Silk

CHAPTER ONE

JUNE 3rd 2009.

You'd think *I'd* have seen it coming. *I* of all people, a guy blessed with the ability to imagine himself as another person, or you could even say *feel* that other person's emotions, and so it therefore stands to reason that I should foresee the probable actions of that person and guard against them.

Well, you would think that, wouldn't you? *I'd* think so too and usually *I do* foresee those actions. Nevertheless, when you find me like this, trussed up like a turkey at Christmas – and bear in mind it's not even December yet, so the possibility that I'm *impersonating* a turkey awaiting the oven should be discounted – then you just have to wonder *how* I got here ...

Oh, now I guess you're thinking, perhaps he's a masochist. He's the type who gets off on being wrapped to one of the support legs of Mumbles Pier with industrial strength cling-film whilst the incoming tide laps gently around his crotch and his friend's little dog – which he was taking care of – has been thrown into the water with a brick attached to its lead. Or, you might think he's the type who *enjoys* being told that his girlfriend has been made to swallow condoms filled with cocaine until her stomach is full to bursting. Wrong again. Could I be filming the next James Bond blockbuster? Well, check it out. Is that a camera over there? Is it capturing the simulated horror on my face as I act out Bond's cliff-hanger opening scene in which a scantily clad, nubile young woman will surface between my legs with a wicked smile and a knife in her teeth? Is she going to cut through the wrapping and save me? Then please, roll the opening captions!

I wish it *were* true, that this is only a film, but it isn't. I really *am* cling-filmed to this rusty old pier.

Some human beings have the ability – some say through a gift, but *I* say through a bloody curse – by means of a sophisticated and imaginative process, to place themselves in another human being's position and therefore sense how they feel, gauge how they will act, or react. This ability, whether or not you want to go with the 'gift' word, usually has its roots set deep within the recipient from an early age, and through time, develops as its host matures. This is regardless of whether the owner of this gift nurtures or denies it. Don't ask me how it works. I don't have a clue. But work it does. Perhaps the 'gifted' have that little extra which normal humans lack. I'm not talking about magic or anything like that. No, I like to think it's more along the lines of recognizing emotions in others on a finer scale than '*normal people*'. Perhaps *we* see facial expressions and body movements differently. The tone of a voice (I'd go as far as saying even the way a person smells) can give the likes of someone like me an insight into how that person is feeling inside and how he or she will react to certain stimuli. So if you want me to put a finger on what it is I do, or perhaps feel, then I can't answer you because it's just as much of a mystery to me now as it was twenty-something years ago when it first manifested itself.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I haven't wandered around all this time in the dark not understanding or *seeking* to understand *why* I'm different. I've been prodded and poked by the best. Doctors, psychiatrists, priests – you name 'em, I've been poked by 'em. They all more or less come out with the same word for me. Empath.

My name is Cooper Jones, and I'm highly empathic. Oh, and yes, the water is now up around my neck and you're concerned that I'm going to start drowning soon.

See?

I *told you* I was empathic ...

CHAPTER TWO

THREE DAYS EARLIER: MAY 31st

My name is Cooper Jones and I'm an alcoholic,' I mumbled and thought, *and you don't give two shits. Nevertheless you'd like to get into the pants of that redhead over there, and I can't really blame you, as I wouldn't kick her out of bed either.*

The counsellor nodded sagely, held up a finger with a garish sovereign ring on it. 'Number one. You've made the first step in beating your addiction, Cooper, by coming here tonight and admitting it. Everyone, make Cooper welcome.'

I looked hopefully at the redhead but she, along with the other losers in the dank and grimy meeting-hall, just clapped with the enthusiasm of Hitler's hairstylist and mumbled various salutations, which I knew none of them meant. I smiled sickly and wondered how long I'd have to endure this torture before I could get out and have a pint. Licking my lips, in sensuous anticipation of the amber liquid that would soon flow over them and cheekily stroke my dry tonsils before nestling in the warm welcoming boudoir of my stomach, I realized I was staring at the redhead and she was licking her lips back at me. Now, a non-empath would think he had pulled at this point, but I knew better. She was gagging for a pint just as badly as I was. George, our counsellor, thought something else though and the hate that dripped off him threatened to swirl over my Clark's Loafers and soak into my socks.

I love my Clark's ... wait, before you think I have some sort of shoe or foot fetish let me explain. My feet are wide. Ducks look at my feet with envy; I try to avoid ducks whenever I can. When

I've fancied a change now and then, I've bought other shoes, and with a dexterity that even Houdini would have been jealous of, I've crammed my flippers into more stylish footwear. Usually they last about an hour or two before the torture becomes too much to bear and my poor old feet demand freedom. In my job I use my feet a lot.

'Number two.' A second finger was raised and I couldn't help but feel the gesture was aimed purely at me. 'We are all here because we've given up on ourselves. We are seeking help from each other because we can no longer control our lust for alcohol. I was once like you, but with the help of our members my lust has been overcome.'

Looking at George speaking and watching his eyes flick over his captive audience of four men and one woman I can't help but think once again, as I have thought a number of times this evening, *how the hell can't these people see him for what he is!* It was as plain to me as if someone had tattooed it across his greasy forehead, that George was in it for ... the babes. Alcoholics or recovering alcoholics are a delicate species of human. Apart from the chaos that churns up in their systems through the lack of their craved-for drug (because it *is* nothing more than a drug for the likes of me, and people similar to me) there is the fragile nature of their psyche. It's as if we stumble from one stupid, self-harming addiction into another. I've seen people go on the wagon one day and take up gambling, smoking or comfort eating the next. Moreover, some crave the company of others, even if that craving results in sex that isn't particularly wanted, but given, almost as if in payment for the companionship offered. George may have been a recovered alcoholic who felt an obligation to help others attain the same freedom from booze that my feet sought from winkle-pickers, but that must have been a long, long time ago. Now I felt nothing from him other than disdain for the men and desire for the woman in our little group. Empathy, eh? Whatcha gonna to do?

The minutes blurred into hours as my mind switched off and wandered away on a voyage of its own. It has a tendency to do that. Perhaps you've already noticed. I can easily pass hours waiting for a bus or train with no need of a book or outside

stimulus to break the boredom. Within my own head reside ideas and thoughts that, I've often imagined, should I ever put pen to paper would either make me the next winner of the Booker, or get me committed. Whether this skill is a part of my gift, or just a useless human behavioural imperfection or fault I can't say, but I'm pretty good at it, and it passes the time. I can drive, but find it so boring that, even though the car is under my complete control, many a time I've found myself miles past my destination. Usually I'm completely unaware that the turning off the motorway had passed hours ago. Don't get me wrong, if someone jumped out in front of me my reflexes would have worked like anyone else's. I obey the speed limits, indicate when necessary. On the outside it would appear that I was driving like any normal person would do; however, my mind would probably be on a spacecraft in high orbit over Jupiter or snorkelling off the Great Barrier Reef with Halle Berry. I sold my car after tallying up the wasted money spent on petrol and worn tyres. It's cheaper to go by taxi.

Whitney Houston was singing '*I will always love you*' to me. She had on that black satiny number with the hood fetched up halfway across her head. I was Kevin Costner looking around the dance floor with eagle-eyes, just waiting for someone to make a move on her, when someone grabbed my shoulder and I looked up into George's eyes.

'Thanks for coming, Cooper. I know it was your first time but it would be nice if at the next meeting you'd participate a little more.'

The wooden school-chair (the type that was invented to cripple little kids and deform their backsides with its oak surface carved into two scalloped recesses where someone, somewhere, had measured a goblin's arse and used it as a template) screeched in horror as I stood up and pushed it back. It had probably become attached to me but I couldn't tell as all feeling below my waist had gone. My legs trembled slightly as they took my weight and wondered what the hell they were supposed to be doing.

'My pleasure, George. Ahem, it was a very enlightening lecture.' I tried to blag it.

His smile forewarned me of the trap. 'What did you think of the video?'

Video? Had he put a video on? Behind him, the redhead was making drinking signs and I thought, *bitch ... yeah, yeah, I want a drink just as much as you.* But then she put a finger into her mouth and mimed vomiting and what, for a moment, I thought was a demonstration of her pregnancy. Then it dawned on me she was doing a charade of George's video-show. I blagged some more.

'Good video, George. Just goes to show what drink does to your insides. Projectile vomiting, apart from being messy, doesn't do your system much good either. Quite a strain, and don't talk about the beer-gut which will inevitably begin to show after time.'

He did a great job of holding the smile on his face as he nodded. Normal people would have thought nothing about the almost imperceptible sound of grinding but I knew it wasn't really a smile sitting there on his face. It was more like the snarl of someone trying to grab the only seat when the musical chairs tune had just finished and only one bum would be able to fill the vacancy. The grinding was his molars. I waited for him to spit out the enamel he must have worn away.

The meeting hall door let in a mini tornado as one of my fellow drunks escaped in a flurry of wet stuff. His leaving precipitated an avalanche of anonymous alcoholics out into the night. Redhead made it to the door before George thought of something to attract her attention and she stopped whilst I walked past and I mouthed, *'thanks!'* to her. She smiled sweetly, and this time I didn't need my gift to know that on some level or other we had bonded.

Stepping outside into the beautiful Welsh evening, I tried to lose myself and not take any notice of the fine, misty rain that seemed to swirl, like countless tiny moths, around the harsh, orange bulbs high up on the lamp posts. Then the tornado decided to make its presence known again; the tiny moths turned into a wind-frenzied deluge that was trying to whip my coat up over my head and I fought it desperately, wondering if the weather was conspiring to blind me before blowing me under a bus. Well at least I wouldn't see it coming.

Now some empaths imitate the feelings they can sense in

others, both knowingly but also subconsciously, and at times *I* suffer from this too. However, I can recognise most of those moments and manage to do something about them. I get angry and depressed enough on my own without unknowingly emulating the feelings of people around me. Leaving the pokey old hall, I had felt a mixture of relief and desire. The relief was that I was finally out from that depressing environment. The desire was to have a drink, which was not simply a need to quench a thirst but also to top up the buzz that my pre-meeting drinking session had given me. I had disguised the sin with extra-strong mints.

Another emotion flickered on the edge of my senses like a half-seen movement from the corner of your eye. Not knowing why, I suddenly felt a wave of anger sweep over me, and for a brief moment I attributed it to my battle with the elements and their attempt to rip my raincoat away. When another feeling impinged upon my awareness I understood that both were dripping over from people around me, an impression that was confirmed by a glance at the redhead and George as she stamped out of the hall, leaving our dear counsellor holding his face. Needless to say, the second emotion I'd felt was embarrassment.

I suppose the first time I felt the feedback from other people's minds was when I was a child. Perhaps I'd felt it before that particular time but didn't really recognise it. However, recognising it on *that* occasion saved my life, but didn't save the life of a school friend, Lisa Turner. It was in all the papers at the time. I was a witness even though I didn't really know exactly what I *had* witnessed. Looking back now, I know there was nothing I could have done about it. But it is still painful to remember. If only I'd been more determined perhaps I could have stopped her getting into the car, but who would have guessed that Reverend Pritchard was an evil bastard who had a taste for young children? Who, except for someone like me?

I remember the taste of the evil sloughing off the man like a snake shaking off its old skin. After Lisa's funeral, her family moved away but not before Lisa's twin sister, Becky, simply stared at me and I knew from her unspoken words that she

blamed me for Lisa's death. It was a hard thing for a seven-year-old to cope with. Twenty-three years later and I still can't cope. A beer or ten helps.

'I'm parched; want to buy me a drink?'

My mind fast-rewound to the present. See? I told you I tend to drift off now and then. I didn't even see 'Red' approach.

'Sure, Red,' I replied, and then glanced at George standing like a loon, framed in the doorway. 'You've invited George?'

A girlie laugh was her answer and I felt my stomach leap, and it wasn't through lack of booze either. This girl liked me, and I definitely fancied her. She was tall, held herself well and had that translucent sort of complexion only found on true redheads, and of course on vampires. Now if only I could control my alcohol intake tonight I'd stand a chance of scoring.

If only ...

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