**Playing for Keeps**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Carefully, Jason leaned out the open window and peered about. The moon was half full, providing him with plenty of light to see that the side lawn was smooth and empty, the hedge dark and unbroken. Nothing moved, nothing was out of place.

He pulled his head back in and listened for a moment. He heard nothing but crickets and his own breathing; his parents and his kid sister were, he was sure, sound asleep.

The coast was clear.

Cautiously, he climbed headfirst out the window onto the porch roof, then pulled himself down the sloping asphalt shingles on his belly. At the edge he reached down and grasped the corner pillar, then gradually worked his feet around, crab-fashion, until he was able to swing his left leg down onto a foothold in the gingerbread.

From there it was easy; he slid the other leg around and shinnied quickly down the pole to the railing, and dropped from there down behind the bushes.

The bushes rustled more than he liked, and he froze for a moment, staring out at the vacant lawn gleaming silver in the moonlight.

The way was still clear. He was out of the house, free to roam. He could slip down to the pond and catch himself a frog without his parents knowing a thing about it.

He gazed critically at the wide back yard, and decided that it was too open, too visible. He would find another route, rather than cutting straight across all that lawn.

The hedge that ran along the boundary with the McPhersons’ yard would provide cover. He could follow it to the back corner, then make a short dash to the trees, and from there to the pond it was all woods.

A dash across the side yard, the long creep down the hedge, another dash, and the woods. It would be easy. It would be fun, too, as if he were a soldier dodging bullets or something. He crept out from behind the bush, looked quickly to either side, and ran.

A dozen steps and he was across the lawn, diving for the shelter of the hedge’s shadow. He landed on his knees and elbows with his nose inches from the leaves, leaves that looked dead black in the pale light.

He glanced back at the lawn just in time to see the shadow stretch out across the grass.

Horrified, he looked up.

A figure loomed over him, shadowy black, tall, taller than seemed possible, its head bloated and misshapen. He gaped up in surprise. He fought down the urge to cry or scream as a gaunt hand reached down toward him.

The hand grabbed him by the back of his collar and hauled him upright, then yanked him clean off his feet. He dangled helplessly.

“Guess what, kid,” a deep, deep voice said. “I’m the boogey man.”

He wanted to say something smart, something scathing, in reply to this terrifying stranger, but all he could manage was, “No, you’re not; there isn’t any boogey man.”

Teeth glinted as his captor smiled. “Maybe you’re right, boy; maybe I’m not. But I might as well be. Now, you must be Jason Price; why don’t we go see hat your parents think about you being out at this hour?” He casually lifted the struggling boy over the hedge and marched up the street, Jason still dangling from his hand.

From his altered angle Jason could see his foe more clearly; he was no longer a mass of empty shadow. The weird bloating of the head was really just a battered wide-brimmed felt hat; the teeth were flat human teeth, the eyes dark and smiling, the hands large, but just hands, with only five fingers apiece. He was just a man, whoever he was.

They reached the street and turned left, toward Jason’s house, and Jason demanded, “Put me down; I’ll walk from here.”

“I don’t think so,” the other replied; he marched on.

“You’re ruining my shirt,” Jason complained.

His captor shrugged. “That’s too bad.”

He turned and marched up the front walk, strode smoothly up the porch steps, and with the boy still dangling from his right hand, rang the bell with his left.

There was a long moment’s wait, and Jason heard banging and voices within. The porch light flashed on and his father opened the door, wearing his old bathrobe.

“What is it?” he said, blinking.

“Mr. Price?” the self-proclaimed boogey man said. “I believe this belongs to you.” He held Jason up to the light.

“Jason?” Price gaped, then remembered himself. “Oh, of course. Thank you, Mr. Crowley. Where’d you catch him?”

“Oh, I happened to be behind the hedge next door when he climbed down the porch.”

“Oh. Well, thank you; put him down, I’ll take care of him now.”

“All right.” Crowley lowered Jason roughly, not quite dropping him. “He’s all yours for now, Mr. Price.”

“Thank you, Mr. Crowley.”

“Just remember,” Crowley said with a broad smile, “the third time I keep him.”

Price managed a feeble reflection of the other’s grin. “Of course.” He grabbed Jason’s arm and hauled him into the house. “Good night, Mr. Crowley; thanks again.”

Crowley tipped his hat and stood, smiling, as Price closed the door.

As soon as the latch clicked into place, Jason demanded, “Who’s that guy? What was he doin’ back there?”

“Never mind who that is, Jason; what the Hell were you doing outside at this hour?”

“Aw, Jesus, Dad, I just wanted to go down to the pond and catch some frogs when there wasn’t anybody else around to scare ’em off!”

“Well, you’ll have to find some better time to do it than the middle of the night! Don’t you know it’s dangerous running around in the dark? You could get arrested, or attacked. You’re lucky it was Mr. Crowley who found you, and not some pervert!”

“How do you know Crowley’s not a pervert?” Jason countered.

“Well, if you must know, he’s the new security patrolman for the block; the Neighborhood Council hired him last month.”

“So what business is it of his if I go catch frogs?”

“That’s one of the things we’re paying him for, to make sure you kids don’t go running around at all hours, so we don’t have teenagers screwing in the woods back there.”

“What’s that got to do with me? I’m only eleven!”

“And that’s too damn young to be running around at two in the morning!” Price bellowed.

Jason sensed he wasn’t going to get anywhere by arguing his right to roam free at night. “I still think Crowley’s a pervert!” he said, trying a different tack.

“We checked him out, boy, don’t you think we didn’t — and if he is a pervert, that’s all the more reason for you to stay in at night the way you’re supposed to, so he won’t catch you again!”

Jason couldn’t think of an answer to that; he shut up and stared at his father in silence defiance.

He wasn’t actually punished, just sent back to bed. He watched his father close and lock the window, then stamp out and close the door. He sat in bed, thinking, and it was a long hour before he finally slid down and fell asleep.

The following night he stayed inside, but spent two hours crouched at the window, watching the yard, watching the MacPhersons’ yard, studying every detail of the hedge in between, leaning over to stare at the woods far off to the right.

He saw no sign of Crowley, but he didn’t risk climbing out; he had seen no sign of Crowley before he was caught, either.

The next day, at school, one of the kids mentioned “the boogey man,” and Jason was surprised to hear that half a dozen of his friends knew about Crowley’s presence. In fact, some knew considerably more than he did.

“He’s six foot five, my dad says,” Bill Jenkins told him. “Six foot five, and he weighs a hunnerd and sixty-five pounds, but he’s strong enough to pick a kid up and carry him like he weighs nuthin’.”

Jason nodded agreement. “He’s strong, all right.”

“He lives in the top floor apartment at that place on Elm, the one with that tower on the corner, and he sleeps all day and only comes out at night. He was like that anyway, that’s why they hired him.”

“Maybe there’s something wrong with him, so he can’t stand the sun,” Sam Hessen suggested.

“Maybe he’s really the boogey man, like he says,” Jim Fairleigh said.

“There ain’t any boogey man!” Jason said.

“How d’you know?” Jim countered.

“There just ain’t,” Jason insisted. “He’s like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, something the grown-ups use to get kids to behave.”

“Well, this Crowley guy sure is strange, whether he’s the boogey man or not,” Bill said. “He tells everybody he’s the boogey man.”

“I think he’s a pervert,” Jason said.

“Naw,” Bill said. “They wouldn’t hire a perv!”

“How would they know?”

“Well, he ain’t never been arrested, I heard my dad tell my mom that. Clean record, he says.”

“If he’s really the boogey man they wouldn’t have caught him,” Jim pointed out.

“There ain’t any boogey man,” Jason insisted.

“Where’d they find him?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know,” Bill replied. Nobody else volunteered any more information.

Jason mulled it all over, and after he had given it sufficient thought he announced to his friends, “I’m not gonna take it.”

“What aren’t you gonna take?” Sam asked.

“I’m not gonna take this Crowley character or any of his boogey man crap. It’s a free country, ain’t it? Who’s he to tell me I can’t take a walk in the middle of the night if I want?”

“He’s just doin’ what our parents want, that’s all,” Joe Kimball said. “I don’t think it’s his idea. I kinda think he likes kids, from what I seen; he’s always makin’ jokes and smilin’, talkin’ about how he’d like to keep ’em.”

“Well, I’m not gonna take it,” Jason insisted.

“Suit yourself,” Bill said with a shrug, “but I’m not gonna argue with him.”

The bell rang, putting an end to the conversation.

That night Jason watched out his window again, very carefully, starting the moment his bedroom door was closed. He saw no sign of Crowley anywhere. He waited and watched.

The moon was two-thirds full, the sky was clear, and Jason saw no sign of Crowley. He heard the crickets chirping, an occasional frog calling faintly to him from the pond.

Finally, at half past two, he slid out the window onto the porch roof and made his way to the ground.

From the bushes by the porch he stared critically at the hedge. That had been his mistake, he decided, going to the hedge. Crowley might be lurking there right now, and even if he weren’t he could sneak along the other side and Jason wouldn’t be able to spot him.

If he were to go straight across the back lawn, though, Crowley wouldn’t have anywhere to hide, and Jason didn’t think he was the sort who would chase a kid halfway across town. No, Jason told himself, Crowley was an ambusher; it went with the calm smiling style.

With that in mind, he slipped out from behind the bushes and headed straight back toward the trees, across the open expanse of lawn.

As he passed the back corner of the house something grabbed the back of his shirt, and he was snatched up into the air.

“Guess what, Jason,” that deep voice said. “It’s the boogey man, and I’ve got you again.”

Jason was furious; how could he have been caught so easily? He thrashed, kicking, and tried to drive his elbow back into Crowley’s chest.

Crowley did not bother with subtlety; his left hand flashed out as his right twisted, and his long bony fingers clamped around Jason’s throat.

“Stop it, boy,” he said.

Jason struggled for another few seconds, then stopped as his air supply ran out. The grip loosened.

“Listen to me, Jason,” Crowley said. “I don’t want any of this from you. I caught you where you had no business being, outside at this hour; now you behave yourself, or you’ll get a lot worse than anything you’ve got from me yet.”

The voice was flat and deadly, and Jason believed it completely. He put up no further resistance as the rest of the scene was acted out much as before. He was carried helplessly to his front porch, the doorbell brought his father, and Price and Crowley exchanged polite words, Crowley smiling all the time. He was then left in his father’s custody.

This time he didn’t talk back or argue; the memory of that grip on his throat was too fresh. He nodded quietly and went back to bed when his father had finished yelling.

The next day, however, the pain and fright had faded, and his indignation had begun to mount. How had Crowley dared to treat him like that? He was an innocent child, not some kind of axe-murderer trying to escape. His parents were paying their fake boogey man to protect them, not to manhandle their children. What if his larynx had collapsed? He’d seen that happen on a doctor show on TV, and the person had almost died, and they had had to cut her throat open and stick tubes in.

He told himself that he should have complained, should have said something to his father. Why hadn’t he?

Well, he decided, it wasn’t Dad’s business; this was between him and Crowley. He’d handle it on his own. He was almost twelve now, old enough to take care of himself.

Besides, he wasn’t sure that his father would believe him. A glance in the mirror showed no bruises or other marks on his neck.

He thought about it for the rest of the day, making plans, and that afternoon, while he was at Sam’s house and Sam was in the bathroom, he snuck into Sam’s older brother Al’s room. He knew that Al had what he wanted; he’d seen him show it off once, and had seen where he put it afterward.

It was right where he had seen it before. He stuck it in his pocket and hurried back out of the room before he was caught.

That night it rained, and Jason stayed inside. He woke up briefly around three and glanced out the window, and thought he saw something tall and dark moving across the lawn. Before he could focus on it it was gone; he stared futilely for a few minutes, then went back to bed.

The rain lingered through the following day and night, but the day after that was sunny and warm, a lovely spring day.

Night arrived, and Jason watched television disinterestedly as he pretended to do his math homework. Finally, at ten-thirty, his mother turned off the set and shooed him upstairs.

He lay awake in bed, waiting.

At one, he rose and dressed silently, then fished his stolen prize from its hiding place in his bureau drawer. With it safe in his pocket he crossed to the window and opened it.

The night air was cool and fresh, the singing of the crickets soothing, but Jason wasn’t concerned with that. He stared out at the lawn, studied every foot of the hedge, peered at the back corner of the house.

He didn’t see Crowley, but he had no doubt that the tall dark man was out there, waiting.

He hoped he was out there. He intended to show this Mr. Crowley that Jason Price wasn’t just a rag doll you could throw around as you pleased.

He climbed out onto the porch roof, made his way to the ground, and without preamble marched boldly out across the lawn.

Crowley reared up from behind the hedge, his shadow falling across Jason so suddenly that the boy started. Jason’s hand dove into his pocket.

Crowley stepped through the hedge with a hissing of branches against cloth, and strode purposefully toward Jason.

“Not this time, Mr. Boogey Man!” Jason said as he whipped out the switchblade and pressed the button.

Crowley didn’t say a word; he just kept coming, one slow deliberate step at a time.

That wasn’t in the plan; Jason had thought that Crowley would stop at the sight of the knife shining silver in the moonlight, would stand back frightened, and Jason had planned out a little speech, telling him that he couldn’t bully Jason Price. But Crowley wasn’t stopping.

He finally came to a halt one step away from Jason, staring down at the boy from the black shadows of his decrepit hat.

“Get away from me!” Jason said, brandishing the knife.

Crowley reached out with both hands, reached out and hooked his fingers into the front of Jason’s shirt. He hooked his fingers into the fabric and clenched them into fists, and started to pick Jason up off the ground.

“No!” Jason shouted; he stabbed wildly.

Crowley gave a little grunt as the knife was jammed into his belly, and the world froze for the two of them.

Jason stared in utter horror at his hand, at the short little slit he had cut in Crowley’s flannel shirt, and at the gleaming steel blade that joined the two, the blade that was sunk three inches into Crowley’s flesh.

He hadn’t meant for this to happen. He had just committed murder. He had stabbed a human being, stuck a knife into a man.

All he had wanted to do was scare the man, the way the man had scared him. He hadn’t meant to hurt anyone. He was a good boy, not a trouble-maker or a delinquent.

He was going to jail, and the other prisoners, the real murderers, would beat him and do whatever the terrible things were that men did to each other, and he might be stabbed himself, might feel the steel biting into him and his blood spilling out hot and red. He stared in fascinated revulsion at the knife, at the gleaming steel blade embedded in Mr. Crowley’s belly.

He realized, at last, that the blade was clean. There was no blood.

The hands tightened on his shirt and yanked upward, and the moment of frozen time was broken and gone. The knife pulled out of the flesh, and still no blood flowed. Instead Jason smelled burning, hot and metallic, and saw a wisp of black smoke curling up. The tip of the switchblade was black where it had gone in.

His eyes moved up across Crowley’s chest to his face, a face that was somehow changed from what it had been, as if a mask had come off. The tall figure grinned, and a dusky red glow showed between jagged teeth. His eyes gleamed dark green around slit pupils.

“Guess what, Jason,” that deep and terrible voice said. “I really am the boogey man.” The grin widened, the red glow brightened.

“And the third time, I keep you.”

*end*