



-- For Immediate Release --

Virtual Terror  
A psychological thriller by Dr. Jeri Fink

**Your Death Will Be My Cure...**

This book is a work of fiction. Although Melanie Wylie and Nate Mayor and the author may have circumstances in common, none of the actions or events is based on real events in the author's life. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. Although the author and publisher have made every effort to ensure the accuracy and completeness of information contained in this book, we assume no responsibility for errors, inaccuracies, omissions, or any inconsistency herein. Any slights of people, places or organizations are unintentional.

*Copyright ©2000 by Jeri Fink*

*All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system - except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a magazine or newspaper - without permission in writing from the publisher.*

---

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting  
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;  
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,  
And the lamplight o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
Shall be lifted - nevermore!  
-- Edgar Allan Poe, The Raven

**Virtual Terror**

**One**

**Prologue**

She stared at the gun muzzle pointed directly at the center of her forehead. Her heart pounded. The blood rushed to her face, setting her on fire. Stay calm, she told herself. He doesn't really mean it.

"Kill," he snarled.

Strange, echoing sounds surrounded her. Like the inside of seashells. When all you ever hear is the sound of your own blood.



The muzzle held steady, boring into her. He breathed heavily, the gun moving slightly as his hand trembled.

Was she supposed to see her life rush by? As if on cue, she was flooded with bizarre unconnected images; a bride doll with red cheeks and an empty eye socket; a tiny black puppy sprawled dead on the street in front of her house; her father's face, swollen with rage, shouting that lying was very wrong.

"Kill." A single tear edged its way down his cheek.

"It's time to stop this," her voice was toneless - a psychological murmur.

"Why?" He stretched the word out so it sounded like a rubber band ready to snap ?? wwwhhhyyy?

"Because," she took a deep breath, "it's inappropriate."

There was a long silent pause - a standoff in the drama. The air was accusingly still, reverberating with sounds previously unnoticed: the rhythmic hum of a digital clock, the whoosh of an air ventilator, the agony of a creaking chair. They were so loud. The sounds you never hear.

"Kill?" he said. A question.

She hardened her voice. "It's inappropriate behavior," she repeated. It was a reprimand. Bad boy. He jerked back as if slapped. His eyes widened and his mouth went slack. A muscle in his cheek twitched.

"You don't want to kill me," she continued.

His gun shook harder. She watched his fingers tremble. The gun did a crazy dance in the air.

"Why not?"

"Is it loaded, Jake?" She pressed him.

She could see him turn the question over and over, trying to integrate the meaning.

"Why would I ever want to hurt you, Doc?"

"You wouldn't, Jake. Put the gun away and go home."

"Why would I ever want to hurt you, Doc?" he said again.

He's asking himself the question, she thought. She followed his gaze as it shifted from her face to the gun. He stared at the weapon as if he had never seen it before. It was a macabre examination, choreographed from deep within.

"You don't want to hurt me," she hissed. "You know that."

Jake nodded, turning the gun in his hands.



It wasn't pointed at her. The crisis wasn't real. He didn't want to kill her - he wanted the other - the ghostly figure in his vivid past. She summoned clinical self-control to blanket emotion, slowing her heart and containing the compulsion to shut down. She assessed the gun -- a derringer, tiny snub-nosed, and ugly. Jake sighed. "It's loaded, Doc." His hands steadied.

"I know."

Suddenly, he flipped the gun, pointing it at her head. A smile crept across his face. "Yeah, it's loaded," he said happily. In one motion he turned the gun on its side and slid open the barrel, popping out four live bullets. They flipped into the air and in a slow motion curl, fell to the floor. Jake grinned. "Scared you?" Her eyes were riveted to the bullets lying on the floor. She couldn't speak.

"Yeah," he said happily, the voice of a little boy who just successfully pulled off a prank. "I really scared the Doc."

He shoved the gun into the front pocket of his jeans. On the breast of his matching denim shirt was a tiny black-and-white embroidered human skull. It was smiling.

"Now, don't you feel better Jake?" She forced the words, her voice cracking. He stared at her agreeably.

"Yeah, I feel a lot better."

Where should she go from here? "You don't want to kill anyone. It just makes you feel powerful in a very negative way."

He reverently rubbed the brown plastic grip of the gun. Slowly his fingers traced the rigid barrel buried deep in his pocket, stroking it up and down, up and down. She shuddered.

"I don't know, Doc. I just don't know anymore."

An edge had crept into his voice. Keep the little boy going. Her eyes skipped from his face to the bullets and back to his face again. She couldn't help it. "Keep it in your pants," she said softly. "Keep it in your pants, go home and put it away."

Jake stopped rubbing the derringer and stared at his hand quizzically. "It's like it has a mind of its own."

"You control it, you control you. You have to believe that." She stared at his hand.

"Yeah, right." Suddenly Jake shoved his hand into the pocket. She caught her breath. Not again. Her mind careened with possibilities -- he was losing it and the gun was still loaded. He would point it at her and not be able to stop. He would snap the trigger and . . . he would win.

Jake waved a check before her eyes. "I owe you for two weeks."

She sucked in her breath. "Yes, you do."

"Sorry it's wrinkled," Jake grinned.



"Time to go." Her voice was controlled, perfectly modulated.

"Yeah, time to go."

He stood up. She smiled empathetically. There was no formal goodbye. "I'll see you next week," she said to his back. "Without the gun."

No answer.

The screen cleared. Dr. Wylie collapsed against the gray leather chair.

She had purchased the psychotherapist's computer game several months earlier. In the beginning, she played Virtual Terror only occasionally. As the weeks passed she became "hooked" - increasingly drawn into the digital psychological dramas. For the last two weeks, following her final appointment, she felt more compelled to play with the virtual patients, fighting to raise her score. But the results were always the same: a painfully mediocre "fair." She had to be a better shrink than that.

"You have not responded, Doctor Wylie. The game is over. Your final score is one hundred and twenty five. Your patient Jake did not take any violent action. His behavior, however, remains dangerously unpredictable. Thank you for playing, Doctor Wylie."

The screen exploded into a haze of colors and muted voices. As usual, Melanie was captivated by the display. After ten seconds it cleared to a solid blood red with orange block letters splayed belligerently across the field.

FAIR.