

THE FATE OF LEAVES

A TONY MASON STORY BY

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CHAPTER 1

The sun wouldn't rise on the first day of autumn for another few days, but the air had already changed. Crisp, clean, and at three in the morning, biting even. A subtle wind nipped at Tony Mason, and it brought with it the scent of gasoline. The nearby American tulip trees rustled overhead. Leaves broke off and sailed through the gentle cool air, landing all around Mason, as he flicked the lighter's strike. A flame appeared.

He'd killed plenty of people, but he'd never really felt responsible for their deaths. Sure, he'd killed because his country had needed him to, had been hired to kill people, and had killed ruthless people simply because they needed it, but in all those times he wasn't the responsible party for the killing. Rather, the country was responsible, the person who hired him was, or even the people who were just existing as poor human beings were the responsible parties. Not Mason. He had always just been the tool. This time, however, he felt differently.

The weight of this responsibility hung heaviest of all the weights he had ever carried. *Sophia ... Ryker ...* Mason sighed, guilt eating him whole, at the thought of their names. This time it was his fault. He'd made a decision that put them in jeopardy. Further, he trusted the wrong person, and that ultimately led to their deaths. At the time, he thought he was doing what had to be done to protect them. In hindsight, he should've listened to Sophia and left the country with her and their son.

He groaned slightly thinking of his last goodbye with them just hours before. One last night of sharing a bed with the only woman he had loved. A last embrace from their son. Both at the time seemed normal, not special in most ways, like he'd do both again a thousand times. *If I only knew ...*

Another breeze pushed across the property surrounding the home where he and Sophia, while they were married, had lived with their son. The 1920s bungalow-style house had been built at the end of a dirt road off the Veterans Memorial Highway, near where it and the Kentucky 329 East met. Just southeast of Interstate 71. They'd built the home exactly the way Sophia had wanted it. It had been her dream house; the

place where she had wanted to raise her family, where she had wanted to live forever. *Forever here*, Mason thought, sighing again.

The gust extinguished the lighter's flame, and in doing so pulled Mason back to the task at hand. He placed his thumb on the strike again and paused. He looked one last time at his families' home, the yard, and at the playset to his left. Seeing the swings, slides, tunnels, and monkey bars, memories of playing with Ryker flooded over him. Happening all at once like they were the same sensation, numbness, loss, and emptiness strangled him. Then another breeze sent another bundle of leaves into flight. They landed around him again, as he grinded the lighter's strike turning sparks into flame. Mason bent into a squatting position, and with a deep breath and an empty heart, he placed the lighter in the gasoline-soaked grass. The gas ignited. The flame grew powerful quickly, and it followed the trail from Mason's feet through the front yard. At the house's front steps, it split three ways. One flame continued up the steps to the front door, where a concentrated load of gasoline emboldened the flame to spread across the front of the house. Meanwhile the other two paths sent flames around the perimeter and enveloped the home in a fiery ring.

Heat hit Mason square in the face, which was fine with him because it dried his tears on impact. He looked away from the house, wanting to avoid seeing its final moments, wanting to not think about what he had left inside. He had placed both Sophia and Ryker's bodies in the bed he used to share with Sophia. There they'd be together forever, next to one another, embracing. Mother and son. For all eternity.

Trying to control his emotions, he looked toward the sky. The brightness of the fire had played a trick of light and dimmed out the stars from view. The flames' light instead had illuminated the trees above. Mason watched the branches move in the breeze. More leaves broke free. He followed their flight with his eyes. Some landed gently on the ground while others were consumed by the house fire.

Soon the extra containers of gasoline he'd left inside the house ignited. Their canisters exploded, dispersing flames in all directions, as he'd planned. He needed the house to burn quickly and completely. Mason didn't care if the authorities discovered the fire was arson. He wouldn't be anywhere near here when they arrived. *In fact, I'll never be near here again.* He sighed, trying to keep his pain controlled, and fought back more tears. *Nothing to come back to now.* Plus, he needed to hide for a while. Needed to figure out what to do next, where to go, how to continue without his family.

Mason rubbed away the tears that the heat hadn't dried, thought about the last time he tucked his son into bed here at the house. He had read him a bedtime story. Had laid with him until the boy had fallen asleep. He remembered watching Ryker's chest rise and then fall. He remembered feeling the boy's beating heart. *The signs of life ...*

From the back pocket of his jeans, he produced his only keepsake of his family – a photograph. Sophia and Ryker smiled brightly in it. *Like they never would again.* It would be all he needed to keep them alive inside him.

Wood crackled loudly then part of the porch collapsed. Mason stuffed the photo back into his pocket, imagined kissing his family goodbye again, then he walked to the waiting rental car. Climbed in. Triggered the ignition. And he left the burning property behind.

CHAPTER 2

TWO MONTHS AGO

Meghan Kirklin closed the refrigerator door, disappointed she hadn't found inside what she had wanted to eat. Not that she knew what she had wanted. She had just stood there with the door open for a few minutes, looking. Opening a draw. Closing a drawer. Searching the shelves. To no avail.

She finally closed the door when Pearl Zager, her partner, said, "You keep looking in there like the contents are suddenly going to change."

"I know." Kirklin leaned against the kitchen counter and crossed her arms in front of her. She said, "We should've gone to the store last night."

Zager worked three days a week as a nurse at the hospital, but she'd picked up two extra shifts this week.

"We both were too tired for that. I'll go after my ride," Zager said. "At least get lunch and dinner."

"That'd be good. You don't mind if I stay and work, do you?"

"Nope," Zager said. "I'd prefer you come with me, but I get it. You have kids to save."

Kirklin smiled at the response, appreciating that Zager understood her calling. She hated working on Saturdays. She'd much prefer to be riding along the grassy paths of the Birdsong Nature Center in Thomasville, Georgia with Zager, but she'd received a call late the night before from a friend. He had identified someone who needed help.

Zager pulled on and fastened her royal blue Andes 2-liter hydration pack that looked more like a schoolkid's backpack than it did a hydration system.

"You want anything special from the store?" Zager asked.

"No, not really. Maybe some dark chocolate for dessert?"

“Okay.”

Zager kissed Kirklin goodbye then pushed her Trek Lush mountain bike out the back door.

Kirklin rose off the counter and checked the refrigerator one more time. There still wasn't anything inside that interested her, so she grabbed a bottled water and made her way through the house to her small home office. She sat behind her desk and dialed in to her voicemail. She pressed play to listen to it again. “Megs? It's Bryan Tolberg. I have another one for you. It's a sad one ... but they all are, aren't they? I'll scan in the documents and email them to you. Call me back when you can.” And he left his cell number.

She deleted the voicemail and booted her laptop. As promised, Tolberg had emailed the files he referenced. Kirklin printed them out, organized them into a file folder, then kicked back in her chair and read through the papers.

Retta Newton. Five years old. Already endured twelve broken bones by the hands of her mother's various boyfriends. Her mother, Coreen Newton, had been an addict and a prostitute, but when she found out she was pregnant with Retta, she bought her way out of that life. All it took was recruiting eight girls ranging in ages from ten to 13 to replace her. Since then, she'd cleaned herself up and, according to her, had remained drug-free. Coreen had tried to do right by her daughter. She had held the same administrative assistant job for the last two years after bouncing job-to-job for three years. She'd maintained a small apartment in Cincinnati, Ohio. Put the child in day care. Earned her GED. She had even tried taking online college courses. All good things. But she couldn't break the cycle of inviting abusive men into her life. And most of those men abused Retta as well as Coreen. The most recent man had nearly beaten Coreen to death and was now threatening to finish the job. According to Bryan Tolbert's report, Coreen was ready to make another life change. Coreen had reached out for help at a church near her apartment. The preacher there knew of Kirklin's organization, so he put out feelers, which led him to Tolberg, one of the many feeders of people into Kirklin's organization.

Kirklin heard the back door open and close. She checked the clock on the wall. She hadn't realized that three hours had gone by. She swallowed the last drops from her bottled water, now room temperature. Rubbing her eyes, Kirklin felt exhilarated at the opportunity to help save Coreen and Retta and drained from studying the emotional transcripts of the interview Tolberg conducted with Coreen.

“I'm in the office,” Kirklin called out to Zager, who came around the corner and stood in the office doorway. “How was the ride? Need help with the groceries?”

Zager had a soft, round face. Tender. Easy and welcoming. She was attractive, physically fit, and exuded a dynamic presence that allowed her to be the center of attention in any setting. Kirklin loved that about her, but the Zager standing in the doorway only exuded fear. Absolute fear. She appeared weak. Perhaps broken.

“What is it?” Kirklin asked.

Zager’s words came out slowly. “Griff wanted to meet you.”

Her statement stunned Kirklin, froze and terrified her even.

“What do you mean?” Kirklin managed to ask.

Zager screamed out, arched her back, as Griffin Lattimer showed his face, which displayed a combination of sadistic smile and physical exertion. Kirklin stood from behind her desk in protest, not able to say a word. She couldn’t stop from staring into Zager’s helpless green eyes until Lattimer’s exertion relented and Zager fell to her hands and knees. Kirklin saw the knife in Lattimer’s right hand. Dripping bloody.

“No,” Kirklin managed a whisper.

“Yes,” Griffin replied. His grotesque smile made another appearance.

“Pearl?” Kirklin said.

Like swinging a hammer, Griffin slammed the blade into Zager’s back, right below her left shoulder blade. He yanked the knife toward him, tearing flesh and breaking ribs. Then he did it again. Slam, yank, ripping and tearing and breaking. Then again.

“No!” Kirklin screamed this time.

Somehow Zager stayed on her hands and knees. Adrenaline maybe. Shock.

Skin hung from her flank. Rib bones, muscle, and organ tissue fell to the floor beneath her. She looked up and could see Kirklin screaming, but the pain had overwhelmed her senses so much that she heard not a single noise. She couldn’t even tell that Lattimer had stopped raking his knife along the left side of her rear torso. She just looked at Kirklin, wanting help. She finally attempted a crawl to her lover, and that’s when her body gave out. She collapsed onto the hardwood floor with a thud.

“I told you you’d never have her,” Lattimer said, out of breath.

Kirklin couldn’t scream anymore. The situation was too much for her brain to process. She lost her strength like Zager had, and she fell to the floor too. Shaking with fright, tears escaped Kirklin’s eyes. Sweat broke out all over her like an instantaneous fever. She knew Lattimer could kill her too, and she wouldn’t have any way to fend him off.

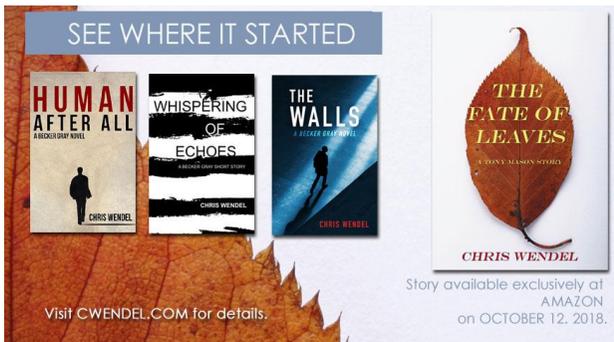
She lay paralyzed. Zager’s strained breathing was the only noise in the room. Zager’s eyes darted everywhere, seemingly looking for something, but they soon stilled. Maybe looking at Kirklin’s eyes, maybe not. But Kirklin was looking into Zager’s eyes, seeing her pupils dilate, seeing them go dim.

Kirklin hoped Lattimer would kill her too.

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Chris Wendel is best known as the author of the Becker Gray series. He is the *Solo Medalist Winner* in the Suspense/Thriller category of the New Apple 2017 Summer eBook Awards for *Human After All*. He is also an author of books in the genres of business and poetry. He is a native of Lakeland, Florida, where the Det. Becker Gray novels are set. He still lives in Florida. To learn more about Chris, visit him at <http://www.cwendel.com/>. Reader List - [Sign-up here](#). Social Media: [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Good Reads](#)