

TERROR BY NIGHT

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TERRY CAFFEY WITH **JAMES H. PENCE**

*The true story of the brutal Texas murder
that destroyed a family, restored one man's
faith, and shocked a nation*



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Terror by Night: The True Story of the Brutal Texas Murder That Destroyed a Family, Restored One Man's Faith, and Shocked a Nation

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To Penny, Bubba, and Tyler

To Michelle Lynn Pence (6/1/87–6/8/87)
and
Elaina Michelle Pence (6/10/09)

God, in His sovereign grace and wisdom, took our first child,
Michelle Lynn, on June 8, 1987, when she was one week old.

Almost exactly twenty-two years later—just as I was finishing this
book—He gave us our first grandchild, Elaina Michelle.

Our God is a God who restores.

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Introduction

*You have delivered my soul from death,
My eyes from tears,
And my feet from falling.
I will walk before the LORD
In the land of the living.*
—PSALM 116:8-9 (NKJV)

AFTER I LOST my precious wife and family, along with everything I owned, the last thing I wanted to hear was that God would work all things together for good because I loved Him and was called according to His purpose. I wasn't angry with God. Not at first, anyway. But I did feel like He'd abandoned me. In the weeks following the brutal murders of my wife, Penny, and my two sons, Matthew and Tyler, and the arrest of my daughter, Erin, I entered into a time of spiritual and emotional darkness that I wouldn't have dreamed possible only a few months before. I felt as if the doors of heaven were shut and God was the One who'd closed them.

I couldn't understand that. I had dedicated my life to serving Him.

Despite some struggles with our daughter Erin and her choice of boyfriends, Penny and I had entered into 2008 very optimistic about the future. Soon after we were married in 1989, we'd started working with the youth in our church. That continued when we were at

Miracle Faith Baptist Church several years later. During that time, I sensed God calling me to a broader ministry. I did some pulpit supply for local pastors, and the more I preached the more I felt that God wanted me to move in this direction. After I'd been preaching for several years, my church made plans to formally ordain me for ministry. They set the time of my ordination for April 2008. I still wasn't sure if I was going to be a pastor or an evangelist. All I knew was that I intended to serve God.

I wanted my family to serve Him, too. When we moved out to our twelve-acre property in Alba, Texas, our neighbor and dear friend Tommy Gaston presented us with a split cedar log. On it, he'd inscribed our family name, "The Caffeys," in large letters. Below that, he added the Bible reference Joshua 24:15.

I knew the verse well. "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." I love that Scripture verse because in it, Joshua took a stand on serving God. I felt that since God took a stand for us when Jesus died on the cross, my family and I would also take our stand for Him.

But in the aftermath of March 1, 2008—my personal 9/11—I didn't understand what was happening. I'd taken my stand for God, but God had allowed something terrible to happen to my family. Where was He? Had He turned His back on us? Had He forgotten us?

I felt like the writer of Psalm 88:

*I suffer Your terrors; I am overcome.
Your burning anger has passed over me;
Your terrors have destroyed me.
They have surrounded me like water all day long;
They have encompassed me altogether.
You have removed lover and friend far from me;
My acquaintances are in darkness.*

—PSALM 88:15-18

I wandered in a black fog that offered no hint of clearing. And there I would have remained, were it not for the gracious hand of God.

Some may wonder why I'd want to write a book about what happened to me. To be honest, there were times during the process that I wondered that myself. As I worked through the various chapters of *Terror by Night*, I dredged up memories, thoughts, and experiences that I would have preferred to leave buried. There were times when I simply had to stop working and cry for a while. It would have been very easy to quit. Nevertheless, I wrote this book, not because I wanted to, but because I had to.

Terror by Night is not about my loss and personal tragedy; it is about God's faithfulness. I walked through horror so great I can't imagine anyone else living through it, let alone me. But all the time, God was there. I did not always sense His presence, especially not at the beginning. At times I didn't even want His presence. And, yes, there was a period when I became angry at His silence. I'm not proud of it, and I'm not saying it was right to feel that way. But that's how I felt.

And yet as I faced profound loss, God never left my side. As I look back, I can see His hand in everything that happened. And I have dedicated the rest of my life to sharing with others how God has used this tragedy to bring about good.

I know that by writing this book, I open myself to the charge of trying to profit from my tragedy. God knows my heart. That is the farthest thing from my mind. I have no desire to profit from my family's deaths. I'd give anything to have them back. I wrote *Terror by Night* so that God would be glorified and so that those who read it would understand that no matter what comes into their lives, God still cares. I want everyone to know that God loves them and that even in the worst tragedies they can trust Him, because He has everything under control.

Finally, I want this book to be Penny, Matthew, and Tyler's legacy. Their lives were cut short in a terrible tragedy, but through *Terror by*

Night, they will continue to have an impact in this world for Jesus Christ. To borrow from the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews, “Even though they are dead, they still speak.”

—Terry Caffey

CHAPTER 1

A GATHERING STORM

*You will not be afraid of the terror by night,
Or of the arrow that flies by day. —PSALM 91:5*

THE DAY MY WORLD started to collapse was about as pretty as they come. The sun shone in a crystal clear, blue sky, and the air had just enough nip in it to remind you that it was February. North Texas winters are unpredictable at best. One day you might scramble to keep your car from sliding off an icy highway, and the next day lounge around in shorts and a T-shirt. This wasn't a shorts-and-T-shirt day, but it was beautiful all the same.

Around 10:30 a.m. on February 20, I pulled my van into the parking lot of King Place Apartments to check on my father. He had just

been released from the hospital a few days before, and I wanted to see if he needed anything.

My sister and I had moved him to Greenville, Texas, from his home in Garland the previous year. He had been struggling with diabetes and heart trouble for several years, and it was not unusual for us to receive several emergency calls a month. This meant we drove an hour and a half from Alba to Dallas each time he called 911. When the emergencies became more and more frequent, my sister Mary and I had finally sat him down and told him that he had to move closer.

I wanted him to move to Emory, a small town of about twelve hundred only a few minutes from Penny and me, but he dug in his heels.

“Emory is too small. There won’t be anything for me to do there.”

I understood. After living his whole life on the outskirts of Dallas, my dad thought a move to a rural farming community was too much to ask. Greenville became our compromise. It was about halfway between Emory and Garland and shortened any emergency drives to about forty minutes. Its population of about twenty-five thousand was more suitable to my dad. True, it wasn’t Garland or Dallas, but at least there would be things for him to do. And because I worked in Greenville, I could check on him regularly.

This day, he didn’t answer when I rang the doorbell.

I knocked on the door and waited. Still no response. I wasn’t particularly worried. Daddy had made some friends in the months since he’d moved to Greenville. Maybe one of his buddies had picked him up and taken him out to coffee at the Royal Drive-In, a local Dairy Queen clone and a regular hangout for many of Greenville’s senior citizens.

I decided to make a few more deliveries and check on him later.

But when I stopped by again after lunch and still couldn’t get a response, I knew something was wrong.

“Daddy, are you okay?” I called his name and knocked again.

Then I pounded.

No answer.

Fear welled up inside me as I walked around to the back of the building. I tried the sliding glass door, but the metal burglar bar was still in the track. I cupped my hands around my eyes and peered through the glass but couldn't see my father anywhere.

I had to get in there.

I went around to the front and used my spare key to unlock the door, but the metal security chain kept the door from opening more than a few inches.

"Daddy? Clarence?" I called through the crack.

Silence.

Finally, I kicked the door in. Fear gave way to panic as I ran through the apartment, calling his name.

I found him lying facedown in his bedroom. My throat tightened as I crouched down and touched his hand. I checked his wrist for a pulse but knew I wouldn't find one. His body was already cold.

That was the first time I had ever seen a dead body that wasn't in a funeral home.

At first I fought back the tears. I'm not sure why. Maybe I felt the need to be "strong" or "responsible" because I was the one who found him. But this was my dad. And as the reality of his death began to sink in, I gave in and let my tears flow.

Daddy had suffered so many health problems over the past few years that on some level I think I knew his death was coming. But that didn't make it any easier when the time came. It just hurt so much, especially because it had happened so suddenly. I cried not only for the loss of my dad but also because I didn't get a chance to say good-bye, to say all the things a son needs to say to the father he loves before they part for the last time.

My one comforting thought in those moments was that I knew where my daddy was. He loved the Lord and had trusted Jesus Christ

as his Savior many years before. I knew without a doubt that one day I would see him again.

I pulled out my cell phone and called 911. Then I called my wife, Penny. She had loved Dad, too, and needed to know that he was gone.

UNPLANNED EXPENSES

Even though funerals can be expensive, you don't really think about the expense when you lose loved ones. You want to show one last time how much you cared about them and how much you will miss them. You want them to have a nice funeral. It's not too much to ask.

We knew that my father had a small life-insurance policy that would cover his funeral costs, so we weren't worried about money. But when we met with the funeral director, we learned that my father had cashed in the policy without telling any of the family. There was no money to pay for his funeral.

Penny and I walked past a line of expensive caskets costing thousands of dollars each. We weren't poor, but we had only a few thousand dollars in savings. I felt a twinge of guilt as I said, "Could you show us the least expensive one you've got?"

The funeral director smiled and told us that he understood. He showed us a casket that cost only fifteen hundred dollars. But a service at the funeral home and the burial would be two thousand more.

"We can't afford that. Can't you go any cheaper?" I said, now feeling really guilty.

We spent some time looking at different options and finally got the price down to eight hundred for the casket and fifteen hundred for a direct burial with no graveside service. We would also hold the funeral at a church rather than at the funeral home.

Penny and I cleaned out our already small savings account to pay for my father's funeral.

CLEANING OUT THE APARTMENT

The rest of the week was a whirlwind of activity. My dad had been on a month-to-month lease at King Place, because he was thinking about moving to a different complex. Unfortunately, that meant we had only a week to clean out his apartment. Otherwise we'd have to pay another month's rent, and we didn't have the money for that.

So in addition to preparing for a memorial service, we had to clean the apartment, pack my dad's things, and try to sell them. We decided to hold an estate sale at the apartment on Saturday, the day before the service.

To say it was chaos at my dad's apartment that day would be a gross understatement. My sisters, Mary and Tina, along with Tina's three grown children, assisted Penny and me as we sorted through all my father's belongings, kept what we wanted, priced what we didn't want, set the items out for the sale—which was running at the same time—and cleaned the apartment room by room. To complicate matters, all of our children were there. Between our three, Mary's two girls, and Tina and her children, not to mention the people who'd come for the sale, it was standing room only in that little apartment. You could hardly move. That's why we were delighted when Penny's sister, Mandy, stopped by to see if she could help. When she saw the children running in and out of the apartment, she offered the perfect solution.

"Why don't I just take the kids over to my place for the day?" she asked.

Mandy lived in Greenville, so the kids wouldn't be too far away. And it would definitely make it easier for us to get our work done. We all agreed that this would be a huge help, so Mandy piled the kids into her car and took them to her house until we were finished with the sale.

I had no idea then, but that decision set in motion a downward spiral of events that would ultimately lead to the murders of my family.

THE FUNERAL

We held my father's memorial service on Sunday, February 24, at Grace Baptist Church in Garland, my father's church. He'd maintained his membership there even after he moved to Greenville. Because we had paid for a direct burial, there was no casket or viewing. Dad had been buried a day earlier at Williams Cemetery in Garland, in a plot beside my mother. For the memorial service, we set a few pictures of Dad on the Communion table. About 150 people filled the little redbrick church building.

Musically, it was a family affair. Music had always been an important part of our household. Penny was a member of the Southern gospel group called The Gaston Family Singers, and she could play gospel piano with the best of them. The children loved to hear her, and the sound of her piano filled our house daily. One of our favorite family activities was to stand around the piano and sing while Penny played.

As the service began, Penny played, and our sixteen-year-old daughter, Erin, sang "Come Morning" and "I Want to Stroll over Heaven with You." Later, my thirteen-year-old son, Matthew, and I played "Amazing Grace" on harmonica, and then my niece Courtney sang. Tyler, only eight, didn't take part in the service. He was too shy.

Pastor Allison brought a message from the Twenty-third Psalm. I don't remember many of the details; everything was such a blur. I do remember that he told some good stories about my dad. The service wasn't fancy, but it was a fitting tribute to a fine man. I went home that day sad but also happy that my dad was not suffering any longer and that he was in a better place.

• • •

When a funeral is over, it's time to slowly begin to adjust to a new life, a life without the person you've lost. But I had no time to adjust. No time to grieve. I took the next few days off and spent much of

the next week wrapping up the details of my father's life: turning off utilities, stopping his cable service, closing out his bank account. It was a stressful time, but at that moment I had no idea it was only the beginning. I didn't know it then, but my father's death was like the dark sky before a tornado. Soon a storm would blow through my life and leave devastation behind it.

One week to the day after my dad's funeral, Penny, Matthew, and Tyler would be dead. I would be in the ICU, fighting for my life.

And Erin would be in jail, charged with three counts of capital murder.