



The Mystery of Gallagher's Ghost

Book Six in
The Orvie Mystery Series

By David Drake

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[Best if the books are read in order*]

by
David Drake

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BACKGROUND:

Orvie had been born soon after the conclusion of the Civil War in the United States – late 1800s. Due to an accident in a terrible electrical storm when Orvie was twelve years old two huge changes had taken place for him: He stopped growing older – forever to be a twelve-year-old, and he developed the ability to feel whether people were telling the truth about things in their past. He chose to use that skill to make life better for the good people he encountered. To conceal his agelessness, he had to move every year or so – in order to keep those around him from becoming suspicious. Wherever he went, he ran onto new mysteries that needed to be solved. These stories take place in the present. At the time this story takes place, he had finished seventh grade for the 112th time and was taking a year off from the classroom.

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CHAPTER ONE: A Ghost! Really?

From Florida, Orvie moved back north determined that time to spend at least some of the fall season in the Ozark Mountains of Northwest Arkansas. He had visited there a dozen or more times making it one of his favorite places in the country. He loved the gently rolling, low, green hills, the wide valleys with their ever-present fresh, clear, spring fed, creeks, and the people – some of the friendliest he'd met anywhere in the world.

Traveling a diagonal path across the state from southeast to northwest, he had crossed the low-lying rice fields, climbed the beautiful Ouachita Mountains of the east-central section and had finally arrived in the area he loved so much.

He had camped the night before on the bank of a lazy stream that hugged the hills along the eastern side of one of those wide valleys. October, in those hills, was still generally warm during the day with cooler nights. He had been glad for his sleeping bag and the small fire he had kept burning beside him. He knew, however, that with the sunrise the world would warm and his cutoffs would be fully sufficient during the day.

He skewered a slice of ham on a long stick to warm over the fire and removed a large potato from the coals where it had been baking all night. It may not have been a regulation breakfast, but then few things about Orvie were regulation.

He planned to follow the stream north figuring it would eventually lead him to a town or at least to people. He was eager to see what the next few days would bring. He rolled up his sleeping bag, stowed his other belongings in his backpack and shoulder bag, and doused and stirred the remaining coals from the fire.

He heard a piercing whistle from some distance behind him. It was one of those two fingers at the edges of the mouth whistles – loud and shrill. He turned toward the sound and saw a figure moving south along the stream. He raised his arm in greeting. It was returned. As they came closer to each other it became obvious they were about the same age.

“Hey! Hi!” Orvie called when within easy calling distance.

“Hey! Hi, yourself!”

“Some great whistle, you have there.”

“Thanks. I’ve been working on it. No special reason, but then I find I seldom need a good reason beyond just doing something for the fun of it.”

Orvie immediately liked the kid.

The boy was carrying no gear so Orvie assumed he lived close by. He extended his hand for a shake, but it was met by knuckles. He quickly accommodated to the newer greeting style and fist met fist avoiding any feeling of awkwardness.

“I’m Orvie with an ‘ie’.”

“I’m Joey with a plain old ‘y’.”

“You seem to be from around here.”

“You don’t seem to be from around here.”

Orvie thought it had been an interesting if somewhat odd beginning to a new relationship. Joey chose to continue.

“Mom and I just moved down here from Springfield, Missouri. Landers is sure different from what I’m used to – so small yet so much room, and such friendly people.”

“Landers is the name of the town?”

Joey nodded.

“Sounds as though you really like it.”

"Most of it."

That caught Orvie's attention. Most of it 'liked' meant some of it must 'not be liked'. He'd not push a new acquaintance on such a matter.

"I love the area, myself. Visit as often as I can."

"Where are you from?"

"North, south, east, west. You name it."

"Not a really meaningful answer."

"I know. Hope you can leave it at that."

"I got no problem with it. Just really making conversation, you know."

"You and your mom, you say."

"Dad died when I was really little. The memories I have of him are mostly artificial I think – second hand – things mom has told me. Either way, I'm glad I have them."

"Sorry. I'm without a father as well."

"Sorry, for you, too."

"I was headed north for lack of anything better to do."

"Eventually you'll come to Landers just off to the east."

"How large a metropolis is it?"

"About a thousand people and fifty dogs. Don't have a good feel for the cats – so many of them prefer to stay inside and spy on the world from behind drapes on window sills."

Orvie smiled assuming it had been meant to be humorous. It had.

"Had breakfast yet," Joey asked sounding like he wanted to spend time with the new guy.

"I have, actually. You?"

"Not really. Been off my feed recently. Scary things happening at my place."

"Scary?"

"Ghosts – well one ghost that just keeps hanging around our new house."

"Ghost? New house?"

"New to us. It's a hundred years old."

"The house or the ghost?"

It produced smiles.

"Both, I guess. Want to hear?"

"Sure. I love a good ghost story."

They walked on north. Joey relieved Orvie of his shoulder bag and talked.

"The house belonged to my mom's grandfather, my great grandfather – Joseph Gallagher. He was what you could call a recluse (hermit). Mom visited him every summer when she was a girl. The two of them got on really well.

"He died about six months ago, and left the house to her along with a lot of money. The deal is; however, we have to live in the house full time in order to receive the inheritance. Mom thought it would be a great idea – get me out of the city, away from the gangs, the huge schools, and all those kinds of negative influences.

"I really like it here. Never had lots of friends, but in this little school everybody is just naturally everybody else's friend – like it's built in. Only a grade school – twenty or so kids in every grade. Really nice."

"There must be a, 'but', in there somewhere."

"There is. What appears to be great grampa Gallagher's bother's ghost – Ralph – keeps appearing."

"His brother's ghost?"

"It's complicated. Apparently, as adults, Joseph and Ralph never got along. They bought the house together when they were young men, but after their falling out, Joseph bought out Ralph's share. Ralph always contended he'd been cheated, but in order to get out on his own and away from Joseph he took what was offered.

"Ralph married and had a passel of kids. Joseph just had the one – Mom's father. Ralph got the idea that when Joseph – his older brother by ten years – died, he thought he – Ralph – should have inherited the house. He had lawyers try to get it for him, but the will was iron clad and he couldn't. He died a few years later.

"Now, as the story goes in these parts, Ralph's ghost is determined to keep the place for himself and his offspring. So, he is haunting the house, trying to run us off.

He paused.

“Did you follow that, Orvie?”

“I think so. Hateful in life, hateful in death.”

“A guy of few words, I see. That pretty well sums it up.”

“So, are you and your mom staying or going?”

“First, neither mom nor I believe in ghosts so we aren’t buying that part of the deal. Up to a week ago it was mostly just inconvenient and we hoped to let whatever it was just run its course.”

“Something happened a week ago?”

“The ghost – I’ll call it that since there’s no better term, I suppose – began destroying things”

“Things?” Orvie asked.

“The chandelier in the entry hall. A window in the storage room at the back of the house. The mirror on the chest in Mom’s room – had been Joseph’s room and Joseph’s mirror.”

“If you don’t believe it’s the doings of a ghost, what then?”

“We have no idea.”

“It is a large house, I take it?”

“Biggest one in town by far. Three floors, a huge attic, a large basement. Nineteen rooms in the three main floors. Then there’s servants’ quarters out back above what used to be the stable – another four rooms. Those haven’t been used for a longtime.”

“Where does the ghost appear?”

“Mostly inside – on the open staircase in the great room on the first floor, in the entry hall, in mom’s room, coming up from the basement off the pantry. A few times it’s been seen walking across the side lawn.”

“I can’t imagine what the two of you do with all that room.”

“Mom’s an artist and a writer. She hopes to start a school for young artists and writers. Hold two or three month sessions with the students living in.”

“Interesting. Any progress toward that?”

"Some – all this ghost stuff has been quite a distraction."

"I can imagine. You said 'scary' and yet you also said you don't believe in the ghost stuff. What's scary, then?"

"We're afraid with the recent escalation (increase) in the destructiveness, he/it/whatever, may begin trying to hurt us – especially since we've given no indication that we're thinking about leaving. The effort seems to be to get rid of us – and that may come down to getting rid of us 'one way or another' if you get my drift."

"I do. Seems we need to find somebody with adequate reason to want you two out of there."

"We?"

"I tend to insert myself into mysteries when I come upon them. I've been known to help solve a few here and there."

"You offering?"

"You accepting?"

"You bet I am – can't speak for my mother, but I'd think you and I could get working on it regardless of her position on your participation."

"One problem," Orvie said.

It was his age-old problem and Joey picked up on it immediately.

"How do we explain your presence here? It's unusual for a boy our age to be out on his own – and I am assuming that for some reason you are out in the world on your own."

"I am, and as you seem to understand, I'd rather not have that advertised."

"I'm out of stories before I begin," Joey said.

"How about, that since I am homeschooled, my father and I have been camping in the hills doing a nature study unit and he was called back to work for a week. You ran into us and offered to let me stay with you and your mom. I can furnish a note to that effect and a phone number to call – it won't answer, but I can furnish it."

"I can live with that. Don't usually lie to my mom."

"I'd never ask you to do something you aren't comfortable doing."

Joey smiled, stopped, and turned around raising his hand high and waving at absolutely nothing.

"Aren't you going to wave at your dad before he's out of sight? I really liked him by the way. Like you, a man of few words. When did he say he'd be back – in one week?"

"That's what I heard him say."

"I'm sure glad he agreed for you to stay with me."

"He's a very trusting man and trusts me to be able to take care of myself."

Their faces met, grin to grin. They turned back around and moved on, the arrangement with Orvie's father apparently complete to Joey's satisfaction. Orvie was sure he was going to grow to like him.

Presently, the house loomed in front of them. Even in the daylight it seemed like the ideal place for ghosts and hauntings and other sorts of apparitions (ghostly stuff). It was dark in color, whether unpainted or painted some dark hue Orvie couldn't determine from that distance. It sat on the top of a low hill at the west edge of town and was surrounded by tall oak, elm and pine trees. A lane wound its way up to the front porch from the road below. The windows reflected light in streaks of blue and green tints like the glass panes of a century before. He could only imagine how spooky the setting would be on a moonless night during a lightning storm with wind and thrashing branches casting angry shadows across the widows and invading the bedrooms.

"My room is on the second floor, this corner in the front. Mom's is in the front center room. He pointed from one to the other. Orvie nodded.

"You okay bunking in with me? Got two beds and dressers and my own bathroom. Scads of closet space."

"Sounds fine. I have some money to pay for the food I eat."

"Mom would never take it. She inherited a boatload of money. Says we'll never need for anything. You can ask, of course, if that's what you want."

Orvie nodded indicating the message had been received.

“Which side yard does old Ralph walk?”

“The one to the left of the driveway. I can look down on it from the west side window in my room. The car’s gone so mom’s out. She’s helping with the scenery and set in a play at the school. Since this is Saturday morning, the parents are available to help. The school is like the social center of the community.”

“But you’re not helping?”

“I’m in the play so I’m not on any of the crews – scenery, set, lighting, tickets, and things like that.”

“What play are you doing?”

“Kip and the Shrink.* It’s a new two person play – a kid patient and the psychologist that’s treating him. A simple set – two chairs and such like in an office. Six scenes instead of three acts. Pretty cool. I really got the best part. The shrink’s part has to be played by a man so Mr. Adkins is doing it. He’s the art and drama teacher. We have developed a pretty good chemistry, I think it’s called – the way actors click together.”

“What do the other kids think about the new kid getting the lead in the play?”

“We have a play every month so everybody seems cool with it. I’ve done a lot of acting – community theater since I was old enough to waddle across the stage in a diaper. Some say I’m pretty good. I like to act. Something about putting myself into a character feels really great.”

“I suppose that may help explain how you and ‘my father’ hit it off so well earlier this morning.”

“I do have a vivid fantasy life. Mom has always encouraged me to think for myself and make up stories. Sometimes we can talk our way through an entire meal together and never once say anything that reflects reality.”

“What fun! You and your mother seem to have a really good relationship.”

“We do. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss having a dad, but things are what they are.”

“Seventh grade?” Orvie asked.

"Yup. All year?"

They exchanged a smile.

Orvie spent a moment thinking back over his 112 or so years in seventh grade knowing Joey would think that was the greatest thing ever. He couldn't share that, of course, so he let his thoughts return to the present."

"You, too – seventh," Joey asked.

"Yes. Sometimes it seems like I've been in seventh grade a hundred years."

"That would make a great story. You ought to write it."

Orvie smiled and moved on.

"Tell me about Mr. Adkins."

"Well, let's see. First name is Bill. About fifty, I'd say. A good teacher, but a little hard to get close to. His wife is a nurse; in fact, she was Great grandpa's caretaker the last few years he was alive. I don't know her except to wave and say hi. Mom says he's a good painter, but not a great painter. He seems to know just about everything there is to know about modern day artists. I trust mom's judgment on such things, but he reported some of his paintings stolen a month or so back so somebody must think they are good enough to steal."

"Oils, water colors or acrylic?"

"He works in all three, but he prefers oils, I think."

"What about your mom?"

"I think she's a little old for you, but go for it, I suppose."

He bent over in hysterics (a long laugh).

It had taken a long minute to climb the lane. They entered the house from the front porch. Orvie turned to look at the view before they entered. It was magnificent. The house looked out over the entire little town and beyond to the hills and valley where he had spent the night.

Orvie allowed a humorous thought to himself: 'What ghost wouldn't want to have that view all to himself!'

* *Kip and the Shrink*, by Tom Gnagey: A play to be read or performed. Available at online at Amazon.

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CHAPTER TWO:

Getting to Know the Ghost

There was a huge entry hall, perhaps fifteen feet square with several closet doors across the wall to the left and a sitting bench to the right – a place to remove and put on boots and such, Orvie figured, thinking back to how houses were built back in his own early years. From there they entered a huge great room (large living room) with a fourteen-foot ceiling. It was paneled in large squares of dark wood – fully unattractive to Orvie's way of thinking.

Joey began the tour.

"This is the great room, covered in the gosh-awfulest paneling anybody's ever seen."

Orvie smiled to himself – there did seem to be lots of common ground between them.

"The massive, curving staircase there to the left has twenty-five steps, each wide enough to sleep on. The room on the left through those double doors is the dining room. Behind it the kitchen and behind it the pantry and a storeroom. Behind the great room, through the doors at the rear are the den on the outside wall and a downstairs bedroom inside. There is a rear entry into the storeroom.

"Come on upstairs and we'll put your stuff in my room."

"He reached for the bedroll and then led the way."

Joey's room was to the left at the top of the stairs. His mother's room was to the right along with two others across

the front. A wide hall ran left to right with another set of four bedrooms toward the rear of the house. Joey's room was huge – Orvie figured nearly 25 feet square with closets and windows and window seats and four lights hanging from the center of each quadrant of the ceiling.

"I know," Joey said looking at Orvie's expression. "Big enough my whole class could live in here with room left over for the wrestling team to work out in the center."

He pointed back and forth between the two beds – "Mine, yours."

There were two desks, a couch, a half dozen overstuffed chairs with side tables and lamps, several tables with chairs, doors to closets and more.

"Not sure what you're concerned about, Joey. Seems like you have plenty of room here to share with one measly little old ghost."

"Just wait until you see him and then you can say if you'd want to be sharing a bed with him."

It was worth another smile between them – more from Orvie than from Joey. Orvie had to wonder just how much his new friend really didn't believe in ghosts!

Orvie put his things down on a trunk at the foot of his bed.

"I use the front closet. There are four others on the inside wall. Choose one for yourself. Just don't get lost inside it."

"I travel pretty light. I really don't have anything for a closet."

"I have more clothes than any four kids my age need. Wear whatever you want from my closet, then."

Orvie wondered what it was with all the kids he met trying to force clothes on him. He had two pair of cutoffs, two pair of jeans, two T-shirts, one sweat shirt and one hoodie plus his tennies and a set of socks for formal occasions. How could he possibly need more than that?

He shrugged – mostly for his own benefit – and nodded, recognizing Joey's offer, but not committing himself. If he would be attending the play he certainly hoped suits and

ties were not required. He hadn't been all trussed up like that for 90 years and sure didn't want to have to experience it again that soon.

"We redid my room first. I think mom felt guilty about uprooting me and all that. I was nervous about the move at first, but once we got here all that went away. I really like it here. The workmen tore out the paneling and put up dry wall and painted it. Did the same with the ceiling – horrible old tin ceiling. You like it?"

"Yes. Really nice. Has a good comfortable feeling to it."

Joey grinned clearly pleased that Orvie liked it.

"The bathroom's in there."

He pointed to the last door in the row of closets.

"Brand new. We just had it installed. A huge shower – my idea – and an exhaust system so the mirror never gets fogged over. I figure that will be handy once I start shaving. I'll get you a set of towels and stuff."

Orvie had to wonder what the 'and stuff' might be, but figured he'd find out in due time.

"Always stuff to eat in the kitchen," Joey announced.
"That's the next room that'll get a do over.

Mom has great plans for this old place."

"Has the ghost been in here – in your room?"

"We've never seen it in here."

"What time of day does it show up or is that in any way predictable?"

"Always near or after dark. That's about all that you can really count on, I guess."

"Can you show me the exact spots it has appeared?"

"Sure. Just four places inside, but it's showed up at each spot a couple of times."

"You said it was becoming destructive. You actually saw it do the destruction?"

"Well, no. It's supposition (an assumption) on our part. It wasn't mom and it wasn't me. The only other thing that's been inside is the ghost."

Joey got a disturbed look on his face.

"None of that made any sense at all, did it – a ghost we don't believe exists, doing the vandalism?"

"It didn't make sense to me, but then I'm new to the household."

"I suppose we need to begin considering other possibilities, huh?"

"I'd say so, yes."

Joey led Orvie down the hall to his mother's room. He opened the door and pointed to the place she said she had seen the ghost.

"How often in there?"

"Twice."

"And did its appearance vary from one time to the next."

"Not the way she describes it."

They closed the door and walked back to the stairs.

"It's been on the stairs four times – the last time was a few days ago – the night the mirror got busted up."

"Where on the steps does it appear?"

Joey led him to a spot a little below half way up the stairs.

"Right here."

"Have you seen it here?"

"Yes. Three of the four times."

"Always at the same spot?"

"No, actually. When on the steps, it moves upward, but always disappears before reaching the top."

"Show me where you've been when you saw it."

They went down to the main floor and took ten steps to the right – turning and facing the stairs from just inside the great room.

"About here."

"Every time?"

"Yes. Actually, I was sitting in this big chair doing homework. I like to do school work down here in front of the fireplace."

"Does it make sounds or say anything?"

"No. Nobody's ever reported hearing anything."

"That remark makes it sound like more than just you and your mom have seen it in here."

"Once, one of mom's friends was in the great room waiting for her to come downstairs. They were going to an out of town meeting together. It scared the poor woman so badly she left out the front door before mom arrived. She told her about it all later. She's the only other one."

"And you said in the pantry?"

"Yeah. Come this way."

They walked through the dining room and kitchen and arrived in the pantry. A door there led to the basement.

"Mom and I saw it come right through that door and I don't mean open it and come through I mean just come through it."

"How long does it hang around?"

"That time it stayed there for maybe ten seconds – maybe a little less. On the stairs, it has varied from I'd say twenty seconds the first time to less than five the last time."

"You said four places. You've showed me three."

"The entry hall. The door was open into the great room and mom and I were walking downstairs together. We never leave that door open so we couldn't understand it. It stood there looking up and shaking its fist at us."

"Does it look like Ralph? Do you have any pictures of the old gentleman in his later years?"

"We have two pictures and they are identical with what we've seen – right down to the clothes he wears. A dress suit out of the 1920's with a vest and top hat and high collar. There were probably more in the photo album but they seem to have been lost or mislaid. Maybe his brother Joseph tore them up – who knows."

"I assume you've looked over the areas after it's gone, to see if it left any telltale marks behind – footprints in the carpet or such."

"Well, no. I can't say we have. Should have, huh?"

"Only if something were left behind, I suppose."

"How was it seen out on the lawn? From out there, inside, where?"

"Always from inside the house. Once from my room. Twice from the dining room downstairs. Those last the longest – maybe forty or forty-five seconds."

"Any sort of warning the appearances are going to take place?"

"None that I'm aware of."

"Do they all look like the same image?"

"Like I said, as far as we can tell, yes. Makes sense because I doubt if ghosts would have any reason to change clothes."

"I must say that is something I have never contemplated. Think about the one outside compared with those inside."

Joey walked to the window at the far side of the dining room and looked out.

"There may be one thing, I suppose. The ones in the house are always at the same place in any one spot. Outside he wanders about more – not exactly the same path I guess I'm trying to say."

"And does he disappear outside like he does inside?"

"He does, but outside he looks up at the house and turns away, while he lifts his hat. It's like he turns into nothingness. He never does that inside. Inside it's more like he just walks off into nothing."

"Were there any rumors about such goings on before Joseph died – any ghost fables or lore?"

"None that I know about. I've never asked mom, but she might not have any way of knowing. She hadn't been down here for ten years or more before he died. The person who would know, I suspect, would be Mrs. Adkins the nurse who spent eight or ten years with him toward the end of his life."

"Will she be at the school working on the play?"

"I imagine so. She and mom are in charge of getting the furniture for the set. It's all supposed to come together for dress rehearsal Monday night."

"Can we go to the school – may we go to the school?"

They exchanged a smile.

"Sure. It may be awkward introducing you around to folks before mom meets you."

"Then we have to get me introduced to our mom first. I imagine you can think of a way to see to that."

"I can. I'll text her to meet me outside and introduce you before we go in. Mom will probably ride shotgun for us without ever needing to ask her. She tends to be a take charge sort of person."

"Who's directing the play, by the way?"

"Mr. Adkins."

"Even though he's in it?"

"Yup. It's mostly the two of us working things out between us anyway – not really direction if you get my meaning. It's been the most fun I've ever had getting ready for a production. He really listens to my input and together I think we're making it quite good. It's like six long conversations in which I do most of the talking. It's the subtle stuff that becomes really important – body language, inflection (tone), the looks we flash back and forth between each other, and things like that."

"You have any trouble remembering the long speeches?"

"No. I've always had a gift for memorizing lines. That's never a problem. I threw the script away after the first rehearsal. Mr. Adkins still refers to his sometimes."

They left the house and walked down the lane. It met a road that became the town's Main Street – all of two blocks long with a number of empty store buildings. The school building sat at the other end – the east end – of town. It was one story with a taller gym at one end and a cafeteria at the other. The Cafeteria had a stage at one end and was used like a community center for plays, dances, and things like that.

As they walked the sidewalk Joey pointed out the various houses and named the people who lived in each.

"I hope there won't be a test over this," Orvie joked.

"No tests at my house. Mom doesn't believe in them."

She says we need to make what we learn a real part of us and that just learning things so we can pass a test never really does that. We spend a lot of time using what I study. I love it that way."

"I like her philosophy."

They approached the school. Joey sent his mother the message. She met them at the cafeteria door.

Joey introduced his new friend and delivered the basic story. Orvie turned on the charm and they were soon inside where she was introducing him around as, 'Joey's new, good friend'.

"Is your wife here?" Joey asked Mr. Adkins.

"Up on stage fiddling with the rug and lamp last time I saw her."

And she was still fiddling with the rug and lamp when they located her.

"Mrs. Adkins, this is my friend, Orvie. He's staying with us for a few days while his father is away on business. He's fascinated with tales about ghosts, and since you know our house better than mom and I do, I was hoping you would be willing to answer a few of his questions."

"Certainly, although I doubt if I have anything that will shed light on what seems to be going on there now."

"So, nothing like that was going on while you were there with Mr. Gallagher?"

"No. Never. In fact, I only remember Ralph coming to visit once in all those years I took care of Joseph – that was the real live version of Ralph, understand. It wasn't a pretty get together, I can tell you that."

"Discord?"

"More aptly described as an angry, livid, fight. Ralph wanted to make sure the house was coming to him in the Will. Joseph said, quite humorously I thought, 'Not over my dead body!' I'm sure it hadn't been intended to be funny but . . ."

"Yes. I can see the humor the way you did," Orvie said. "During that heated discussion, did Ralph make any threats – not even sure what I'm asking? There is lore among ghosters that great anger assists a departed soul to move more easily

back and forth between the afterlife and the real world."

"Well, there was plenty of anger, if that's what's needed. But no threats that I can remember. My husband, Bill, was there many times but I'm sure he'll back me up on the no ghosts part of the story. You know how dramatic Bill is, Joey. If there was any chance for an astonishing story, he'd have been delivering it all over town."

"Just one more thing, and thanks, you're being very helpful. What's the prevailing theory around town? Sometimes folks won't give the principals like Joey and his mother, the real story about what they're thinking."

"That's true. Quite perceptive. I'd say the town's divided about 25% to 75%."

"Divided over which options?"

"More leaning away from ghosts, but nobody I've heard has any substantial alternatives to offer – other than that the two of you (she looked at Joey) may be a bit batty – your friend asked for the truth."

"And we appreciate it," Joey said.

They left her to her fiddling.

Orvie had sensed no deceit or falsehoods in anything she had told them.

Joey seemed excited.

"She found exactly the kind of chairs I suggested, open at the side armrests so more of our body language can be seen. My character gets nervous and fidgets around some. Solid sides would hide a lot of that."

"Good for your observation and her for tracking them down, then. I'm eager to see the play. When does it make its debut (first performance)?"

"Wednesday night. And that's debut and final performance all in one. It only takes one-nighters in this town to let everybody see it if they want to."

"Do the kids say anything about the ghosts?"

"Usually just after a sighting – they want all the juicy details. The girls ask how scared I got and the guys ask if the ghost hurt me. Boys and girls tend to be like two entirely different species."

Orvie had heard that before. In fact, he had probably said it himself a few thousand times!

CHAPTER THREE:

Secret Passages at Every Turn

They headed back to the house, still talking.

“What’s up on the third floor?”

“Along the east side, it is one large room – front to back – designed as a place for entertaining – dances and so on. On the west side are four rooms – two front and two back. Could have been bedrooms or guest rooms for the party goers.”

“Not used now, I assume.”

“Right. Not for decades the way I hear it.”

“How about the attic?”

“Never been up there. Stairs are at the west end of the hall between the four bedrooms on the third floor. Want to take a look?”

“Yes. I just came from living in an attic. I guess I’m drawn to them.”

“Really?”

“Just slept there, sometimes, actually.”

Nothing in Landers was more than a ten-minute walk away from anything else. So, ten minutes later they were back at Joey’s house. They continued on up to the third floor and were soon standing there in front of the door leading to the attic. It was locked.

“I never considered that it might not be open,” Joey

said. "Guess we need to get a key."

Orvie began feeling along the top of the door frame.

"Like this one?"

He inserted the large old fashioned key into the large old fashioned key hole.

The key turned. Click, click. Joey tuned the knob and pulled the door toward them. It opened revealing a sheet of cob webs and nearly a century of dust and grim covering the steps and walls.

With their arms, they spread an opening through the webs and started upstairs.

"I doubt if there will be electric lights up there," Joey said.

"I noticed windows on the east and west ends," Orvie said. "That should help us at least see the layout."

As Joey assumed, there were no lights, but as Orvie assumed the windows illuminated the area just enough to make things out. It was one very large open area. The ceiling was, in fact the inside of the uninsulated, steeply peaked roof. There was one surprising feature. Along the east side there was an open wooden structure of some kind nearly thirty feet long and attached vertically to the open roof beams at the top and to the floor below. Orvie moved to examine it.

"What do you suppose it is – was?" Joey said.

"My best guess would be bunk beds, four high. See. Sides, posts, slats across the bottom."

"Makes no sense," Joey said.

"Everything makes sense if you can just come to see it from the proper perspective," Orvie said. "How many are there."

Joey pointed as he counted.

"Twenty. Would it be for the servants?"

"I doubt it. You said there were servant quarters out back. A house this size would never have had twenty servants."

"Another mystery, I guess," Joey said. "You said you liked mysteries and you got mysteries – you're welcome."

Orvie managed a quick grin. He had an idea. Orvie always had ideas.

"Do you know anything about the Underground Railroad that operated in this area back during and before the Civil War?"

"The people who helped send runaway slaves up north where they would be free, you mean?"

"Yes. I've seen set-ups similar to this before that were designed just for that purpose. A stopover for rest or safety along the route. With this house being so close to the Missouri border it certainly could have served that function."

"Wow! That's pretty neat to think my ancestors would risk everything to help out the slaves."

"If that is what this is, then you can bet there's some way to get them up here and down from here other than the front stairs."

"A secret passageway, you mean?"

"A secret stairway, at least. Let's look around. We may need to get flashlights. I have two in my backpack."

"I have one in my desk."

A few minutes later they were back into the attic armed with plenty of light and with that, it more easily became clear that the structure was indeed a series of bunks. There were also wooden chairs and tables and trunks. Two of the trunks still had clothing in them.

"News duds for the travelers, I assume," Orvie said holding up a pair of pants and a shirt."

He turned his attention to the floor along the outer walls – the place he figured the stairs would be – if there were going to be stairs.

At the northeast corner, he found something in the floor – an iron ring at one side of what appeared to be a trap door.

"Over here, Joey. Look at this."

"A trap door, maybe?" Joey said.

"One way to find out. Let's see if it lifts up."

"What if that's where the ghost lives?" Joey said smiling unconvincingly.

"Then one of our mysteries will be solved, I suppose."

Joey leaned down first and gave it a tug. It moved, but was very heavy. Orvie lent a hand and they soon had it standing up back against the outside wall. They lit the area below. It was, indeed a stairway."

"Well, no ghost at least," Joey said as if joking.

"At least not up at the top of the stairs," Orvie said kidding him a bit about his obvious uneasiness.

"Add your light into the hole," Orvie said.

What they saw was a narrow, steep, filthy, spider infested stairway. It smelled dank, a century of musty stench rising up to greet them.

"Pe-ew! Joey said covering his nose.

"Probably should cover your nose and mouth with a handkerchief before we go down there."

"We're going down there???" Joey asked clearly less than happy at the prospect.

"Know an easier way to find out where it leads?"

"I guess not, but it's so dark and it stinks and it's filthy – none of the things the son of an artist really likes."

"I can go alone and you can stand watch up here," Orvie suggested.

"Stand watch for what? Are you just intentionally trying to spook me?"

"It is a bit humorous – a non-believer in ghosts seeming to be afraid of them."

"Not afraid, just discomfited by the thought."

"I thought 'discomfited' and 'afraid' were synonyms."

"You use your dictionary and I'll use mine."

They chuckled.

"I'm going down," Orvie said, hanky at the ready.

"Well, you're not leaving me up here," Joey said whipping out his hanky.

Orvie led the way. The steps were no more than two feet wide – side to side – and six inches deep – front to back. Each one rose nearly a foot from the one below. They had to assume a sideways posture to move down them one step at a

time.

It was slow going. The steps were slick from a century of accumulated dust. Even being careful, some of the dust kicked up into the air. The hankies had been a good idea.

After some time, they came to the bottom of the staircase where they were confronted by a door. It was locked.

"Oh, oh," Orvie said. "It's locked."

"Try this," Joey said handing down the key from the door to the third floor."

"You kept it on you. Excellent. Let's see if good fortune is shining on us today."

"You know, new friend, Orvie, from time to time you sound like a fortune cookie."

"I've had worse said about my speaking pattern."

"I just realized I'm hungry for sweet and sour chicken," Joey said.

Orvie inserted the key. It didn't work easily, but it did eventually turn in the hole. He turned the knob. The door opened into complete darkness. At first glance, dungeon would have been the best way of describing it.

"The basement, I assume," Orvie said.

"Could be. Can't see from up here behind you."

Orvie stepped out into the room and Joey stepped down behind him. They moved the beams from their lights around the area. It was a large room with damp, stone, walls and a low ceiling – no more than seven feet high. Very large supporting beams – nearly foot square – spanned the area from side to side. There were posts in those same dimensions spaced every ten feet standing on a quarried stone floor.

"Look over there – a door in the outside wall," Joey said indicating what he'd found by making circles against it with his flashlight.

"Like the door to a fortress," Orvie observed. "Six feet wide and made of thick planking with iron plates running side to side."

"You think it opens to the outside?" Joey asked.

"Maybe, but if the basement is underground, the way I suspect it is, I'd say it's more likely that it opens into a set of steps up to the surface or some sort of tunnel."

"Like a real underground railroad, you're saying?"

"Something like that. Have you ever heard stories about this house being connected to movement to help the slaves escape?"

"No. May not have been a popular topic for historical records in this area, you know – back when, I mean. The folks here now are very accepting of everybody."

"Is there a historical society in the area?" Orvie asked.

"I suppose Miss Parmalay might qualify."

"What is a Miss Parmalay and why might she qualify?" Orvie said smiling at Joey's reference.

"She's been the librarian at the school forever. She was born and raised right here in Landers. Knows the local history better than anybody. Students come up from the University down in Fayetteville to hear her talk about the Civil War as it unfolded in this area. The joke is that she led the southern charge at the Battle of Pea Ridge."

"I'd say she just might qualify, as you said. Can we find her today?"

"She'll be at home. Home on weekends and school on weekdays – that's her life."

"First, let's see if we can budge this door," Orvie said. "It's secured with two, wooden, two by four bars, top and bottom, wedged into open, metal brackets on each side of the door. Think we can dislodge them?"

"Only know if we try, as somebody I've just recently met would probably say."

They tried the top bar with one of them on each side. It lifted easily.

They used essentially the same plan on the bottom bar. It also came out with very little effort. They set the wooden, 2 X 4 bars aside.

"There's no key hole in the door," Joey said.

"So, I suspect there is no key necessary."

The handle in the center of the right side was a foot long, top to bottom and was secured to the door by eight bolts – four top and four bottom.

"You realize, of course," Joey began, "that if this does open underground it could be the entrance into the family graveyard – the eternal home of every ghost that my dead ancestors ever produced."

"You still have the privilege of returning up to the attic."

Before Joey could mount a response, they heard a loud bang/slam coming from the top of the stairwell, which they had just descended. They turned toward the noise.

"The trapdoor, you suppose," Joey said.

"That's what came to my mind."

"How could it have closed by itself?" Joey asked. "I detected no draft or breeze up there and the door lay back at quite an angle. It couldn't have just giggled loose."

"I suggest that since we are here and have gone to considerable work to get to this point that before we go back up and look into that, we see what lies beyond this door," Orvie said.

"But what if somebody's up there and closed it?"

"Think about it. Would they have closed it and then started down the stairs or would they have closed it and stayed up in the attic."

"That, I imagine. Stayed up there. So, you're saying we're safe down here."

"I didn't hear myself say that. I said let's get a look behind this door."

"Sometimes your honesty becomes a very unattractive feature."

Joey moved back to the stairway door, closed it and locked it.

"I can see we won't be leaving down here until you get that peek behind the door. Okay. Give the handle a tug."

Orvie tugged. He put his foot up against the wall beside the door and tugged. It didn't budge.

"Look for some secondary lock. I don't even know for

sure what I mean."

They searched the two upright outside edges of the door but found nothing. Orvie began looking across the top edge and Joey the bottom edge.

At the same moment, they each said, "Got something here."

It caused a chuckle. That was followed by another duet, "What?"

Another chuckle – longer and louder.

Orvie spoke first.

"I got a slot between two of the upright planks. Looks like a slide bar set into it that may slide up into the rock wall above it."

"Same sort of gizmo down here. I'll pull mine up and you pull yours down, I guess."

It had been the obvious plan and worked with no hint of a problem. While Orvie turned to examining the hinges, Joey turned and looked around the big room.

"I've been thinking that the basement that mom and I know is just west of that wall. It sure doesn't resemble this area in any way."

"I don't see a door connecting the two sides," Orvie said.

What would that mean, having a basement room you can't get into?" Joey asked.

"This side may only be accessible from the attic stairway and whatever's outside this door. If this house really were part of the illegal underground railroad, and if this were the way in and out, the builder had gone to great lengths to protect his interests, so having no door between the two basement areas would make perfect sense."

"Look over here on the left side of the door, Joey. What do you make of it?"

"Oil. On a hundred-year-old hinge. I don't get it. What does it mean?"

"For one thing, it means somebody is using it and keeping it lubricated."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but I suspect for easy and squeak-free entrances and exits."

Orvie tried the handle again. The door swung open easily – squeak-free, even.

"I don't get it," Joey said looking inside the opening.

"Neither do I. Isn't that great! Another mystery just waiting to tease our brain cells."

"You do have an odd take on things, you know?" Joey said.

"Been told that often, too. Are you going to pick up your marbles and go home because of it?"

Joey broke into a big smile.

"No. Just pointing it out. And, by the way, this is my home."

"Thank you, then, I suppose. But back to whatever this thing is."

They stepped six feet into a tunnel that had six-foot-high walls laid up in brick and a stone slab ceiling running from side to side. The tunnel was only six feet wide. None of that was, perhaps, out of place for construction of that era. However, the left side of the tunnel contained new construction – 2 X 4 and plywood construction. It extended two feet out into the tunnel and had metal doors every six feet. It went on for further than they could make out from where they stood – more than thirty feet for sure.

Orvie moved to the first door. It was locked with a modern-day lock. They moved on down the tunnel to the end of the wooden structure some sixty feet beyond. There were nine doors – all metal, all alike, all locked.

Orvie stopped and put his fingers to his lips as if asking for quiet. He leaned his ear against the wooden surface and motioned Joey to do the same.

"A hum?" Joey said/asked.

"That's what I hear. And look here at the far end of whatever it is. Two, four inch, plastic pipes. One comes out the bottom and the other the top and both have an L joint that allows each pipe to extend up through the ceiling – to the

outside, maybe."

Joey also had an observation.

"And back by the door from the basement I noticed a very small pipe – metal – one inch maybe – coming down out of the ceiling and turning almost immediately into the structure."

Orvie began thinking out loud.

"If you were going to store something down here what would you need to get rid of first?"

"Besides the filth left over from the Civil War? I'd say the high humidity. Anything made out of paper or cardboard or cloth would mildew over-night and be ruined."

"So, if these closets are for the purpose of storing things, they would need a super ventilation system of some sort."

"Right. I think I see where you're going, Orvie. The bigger pipes provide the inlet and outlet for air. The hum is the exhaust fan at the far end of the system and the little pipe beside the wall to the basement is the electrical feed for the fan's motor."

"You read my mind. The three questions remain: Why down here? What is being stored? And who is storing it?"

"And maybe all that's connected with the ghosts."

"How, you think?" Orvie asked.

"The ghosts scare us away so whatever this is won't be discovered."

"And the whatever it is," Orvie added, "must be something that happens often – involves some coming and going or that really wouldn't be a consideration. They could come at night and you'd never know it."

"If it's not supposed to be here, then it's probably illegal, right?" Joey said.

"Oh, yes. This has illegal written all over it. And I think your idea about it being connected with the ghost illusions is also right on."

"So, we have officially moved from ghosts to ghost illusions, now?"

"I'd say so, in fact, from the very beginning I've been thinking so."

"I suppose that should be comforting, but it really isn't," Joey said.

"Why not?"

"Since I don't believe in ghosts I never really thought they would be able to hurt mom or me, but illusions imply flesh and blood people behind this whole operation and flesh and blood people can most certainly hurt us if they decide to."

"Your points are well taken."

At that moment, the massive door to the basement slammed shut. The tunnel began filling with a mist of some kind.

"Gas!" Orvie called out. "Hanky time again and we need to run for our lives to wherever this tunnel leads us."

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CHAPTER FOUR:

Who Would Want to Kill Such Nice Kids?

They ran into the darkness only able to light their path a few feet ahead. They were over-running the lighted area almost before it became lit. It was like running a maze, blind. Orvie hoped there wasn't a solid wall of any kind ahead because they'd run into it at full speed and break themselves into little pieces.

The tunnel was straight and they ran on for several minutes – at least three blocks Orvie figured. That made it a very long tunnel. Although the mist was not keeping up with them they were presently relieved to find themselves outside on a grassy hillside ten yards above a stream. They fell to the ground exhausted, their eyes tearing from whatever chemical had been in the mist.

"You okay, buddy?" Orvie asked, wiping gently at his eyes with his hanky.

"I seem to still have all my vital parts, if that's what you mean. My eyes hurt like crazy."

"Don't press on them or rub them hard. Let's head for the creek where we can wash them out."

They stood and, nearly blinded, carefully picked their way down the steep hillside. Within a few minutes their eyes had been washed and were clear of the substance.

"So, that gives us two more things we need to take care of," Orvie said.

"One, move back to Springfield?" Joey said asking it like it were a humorous question.

Orvie smiled, but moved ahead.

"One, find the air exhaust and intake openings on top of the hill. Two, get back into that tunnel and see what we can learn about it."

"Well, for starters, look up there," Joey said. "The tunnel opening we just exited, is a cave made by Mother Nature not dug by Gallagher's Ghost."

"I figured that out while we were running it," Orvie said. "The walls suddenly become rough and irregular and the floor was littered with stones. I don't remember how far into our run that began, do you?"

"No, but I noticed it, too. It ran through my head that maybe it had just not been finished yet."

"I'm doubting that," Orvie said.

"Me, too, now. I just thought of a problem?"

"Only one," Orvie joked.

Joey continued.

"Now that – I don't know what to call him – Gallagher's Ghost knows we're on to him won't he move out whatever is in those storage closets?"

"He will if he's smart. All the more reason for us to get back in there immediately and examine what's what," Orvie said. "Then, we have to devise a way to keep Gallagher from moving his stuff."

"Okay, I guess. What are we looking for when we go back inside?"

"I suppose we'll know it when we see it," Orvie said.

They climbed back up the hill and reentered the cave.

"That entrance doesn't look too stable to me," Joey said pointing to cracks and fallen stones.

"It only needs to hold up for another fifteen minutes. Let's go."

Orvie set a fast pace understanding they had things that needed to get done in a hurry. After they had traveled more than a block in what was clearly still the cave, they came

to a depression in the left (south) wall. Upon further examination, it was a narrow opening about five feet high and three feet wide. They entered only to be faced by another door – metal and perfectly fit into the side of a slab of rock. It had a modern key lock.

“I guess that’s the end of this side trip, huh, Orvie?”

Orvie tried the knob. It turned. He pushed – the door was set so it swung away from them. It opened.

“My goodness!” Joey said.

Orvie described what they were seeing as he pointed here and there.

“A room – a fully furnished room – a dry, carpeted room with wall paper and a sofa and four overstuffed chairs and two large tables and what looks like a recreation room bar.”

“And a matching door on the other side. Do we open it?”

“I don’t think so. A door means a way of exiting and entering and perhaps that’s all we need to know at this point. Can you envision about where we are in relation to the house?”

Joey stopped and thought for a full minute.

“My best guess is that we’re about a hundred yards north-east of the rear of the house. It’s a spot on a wooded hillside. Except for the tops of the trees it probably can’t be seen from anywhere in the house or on the lawn and certainly not from the streets.”

“Keep that in mind and add number three to our new list – find that door or way into this room from the outside.”

They returned to the cave.

“This is interesting,” Joey said. “This is the spot where the tunnel meets the cave. See!”

“I do. A good observation. It seems clear that the tunnel was dug between here and the house as an extension of the cave. That would have been a tremendous amount of work back in the old days. It certainly had to serve some very special purpose – my guess is something to do with the Underground Railroad. This is really what I wanted to learn.”

“You mean we can leave now?”

"Yes. We need to go up top first and find those air pipes."

They trotted back to the entrance of the cave and were soon climbing the hill above the cave entrance. Once there Orvie spoke.

"We just follow the crest of this hill due west toward the house. The pipes – the openings – may be camouflaged in some way."

They kept to a fast pace knowing the pipes exited the tunnel relatively close to the house.

"Camouflaged in like a pile of stones that looks completely out of place?" Joey asked pointing.

"Yes. Something just like that. Let's disassemble it."

"Disassemble? You sound like a professor."

"That's been said before."

They each set about lifting a rock. Neither could budge the one they had picked out. Orvie dropped to his knees with Joey soon right beside him.

"Clever, see! The rocks are cemented together with air spaces left in between them. He leaned in close. This is the intake pipe. Feel the suction?"

Joey nodded and looked around the area.

"There is pile number two!"

It was ten feet away and a lower structure nearly two feet in diameter. It was constructed in a similar fashion as the first, but they really didn't resemble each other in looks – a good plan Orvie thought.

Joey's phone rang. It was his mother saying lunch would be ready in twenty minutes.

"That will give us time to head over and see if we can find that exit door from the room," Orvie said.

Joey led the way since he was familiar with the terrain. They descended the opposite side of the hill through the wooded area Joey had mentioned.

"That path on your property?" Orvie asked pointing to a stone path that curved down the slope.

"Never seen it before. It probably is, but I have little

reason to be up here in the woods. Chiggers and tics. Not things I want to party with."

"We need to follow it in both directions. Up the hill first."

In no more than a fifteen yards the path ended at a park bench sitting on a wide extension of the path – flat stones laid tightly up against each other. Sitting on it would not present a particularly good view of anything other than the trunks of trees.

"So, what, now?" Joey asked.

"You can bet the bench holds some secret."

Joey sat down on the bench. Orvie watched as he walked around it, observing it from all angles.

"I have a hunch," Orvie said. "Stand up. See the curved metal arms on each side. You stand to that side and I'll stay over here. Stand back a foot or so from the legs. Now do like I'm doing and reach under the arms and push and pull and see if there may be a secret lever."

They pushed and pulled for some time with no result.

"Maybe we have to push or pull on the same part simultaneously," Joey suggested.

"Good idea. Let's begin at the front and pull up there, then move to the center and do the same and then on to the back."

They didn't need to go further than the front. They pulled and each felt something flat retract back up into the underside of the arm. The front of the rock platform on which the bench sat clicked up and open a few inches tilting the bench back slightly. The boys gently lay the bench over backward revealing a set of steps leading down into the ground. They were cement. The passage into which they led was cemented all around and painted light blue. It was lit by attractive track lights in the ceiling. The floor was tiled in an interesting design. There were pictures hanging on the walls.

About ten yards along the underground corridor they came to the outside of what they assumed was the exit door they had seen in the fancy room inside the hill.

"It's built like a bunker," Joey said.

"It certainly is. Like the kinds that were built back in the

early fifties in case of an atomic bomb attack. Let's get out of here before the bench closes us inside – well you know what I mean."

Joey needed no coaxing. He led the way back outside. As they stood at the bottom of the stairs, Orvie pointed to a lever near the top of the opening.

"Undoubtedly the way to open the door under the bench from in here."

Once up the stairs they reset the bench and headed for the house on the trot.

"So, when do we tell my mom?"

It seemed to Orvie that pesky question came up every time he got involved in a new mystery.

"I'd rather wait until we know a little more. So far we only know a little part of 'the what' and how, but not a clue who Gallagher's Ghost really is."

Joey nodded in agreement.

"So what do we tell mom we did all morning?"

"You showed me the house and some of the sights around town."

"That's certainly the truth, I guess. I should be able to live with it."

"Go wash up," were the first words out of his mother's mouth.

Orvie had long ago decided that at meal times mothers would be fully unable to carry on a conversation if they didn't begin it with those three words.

The conversation flowed easily. His mother was everything Joey had described her to be; kind, gentle, intelligent, and sensible.

"I assume the art on the walls in here is yours," Orvie said at one point.

"Many are. A few are some I really liked from grandfather's collection."

"I noticed one in the second-floor hall that caught my eye. Like a collage (collection) of portraits of black folks – young, old, male, female. I figure there must be a story

related to it."

"It's one of my favorites as well. My great grandfather Gallagher, who built this house was a leader in the underground anti-slavery movement. Stories abound about him leading hundreds and hundreds of slaves to freedom up over the state line into Missouri. That is a painting he did – artistic talent seems to run in our blood line. I've had that painting analyzed to verify my own observation. It was added to over a period of twenty years, one face at a time. I figure each one represented some special person or somebody with a special tale to tell. I wouldn't part with it for anything."

"Do you have reason to believe this house was involved in the Underground Railway?"

"I have no information that it was. Knowing what I've learned about him, though, I wouldn't be surprised. He clearly had a big heart and a sense of moral responsibility (believed everybody should be well treated)."

The lunch was the perfect lunch for twelve-year-old boys – banana/peanut butter sandwiches, milk, chips, and ice cream with chocolate and raspberry toppings.

"We'll get the dishes, Mrs. Mills," Orvie said.

"Nonsense. You're our guest. You guys go do whatever guys your age do on a beautiful fall day like this. If you find any wonderfully colorful leaves bring them back. I'd like to make a collage. The colors are so vivid (bright) this year."

They moved to the front entry hall.

"So, what's next?"

"I'd like to go back up to the attic and see what might have closed that trapdoor," Orvie said

"I have the idea Gallagher's Ghost won't take kindly to that," Joey said.

"I think it's safe to assume he's left this realm for a while. I really do hope he returns this evening, though. I want to interact with him."

"Interact? With a ghost?"

"With the illusion of a ghost – at least that's what I'm hoping."

"Nobody's ever tried to do that before."

"Well, then, maybe old Ralph Gallagher's problem really is that he just has an unmet urge for mortal contact."

"Yeah, sure! That's why he's busting up the place."

"You with me or not?"

"Of course. Just laying the ground work for you to feel really guilty for the rest of your life if anything bad happens to me."

"Have I given you enough time for that?"

"Yes, I'd say so."

"Okay. Let's go then."

They were up the spiral staircase two steps at a time. Joey offered his key in case it was needed. It was. The door had been locked. On a hunch, Orvie felt above the door frame again. No key.

"Gallagher's Ghost still seems to be able to learn from his earlier mistakes," Orvie said.

Joey unlocked the door and climbed the stairs ahead of Orvie who had taken the key. He closed the door behind them – something they had not done the first time they had been there. He then moved up the stairs and joined Joey.

"Notice anything odd when we entered the stairway?" Orvie asked as they arrived up in the attic."

"That the wall of spider webs had returned, you mean?"

"Exactly. Old Gallagher wants to maintain the illusion that nobody comes up here. Artificial, like out of a Halloween spray can, I'm thinking."

They moved across the attic toward the trap door and lit it with their flashlights. A wooden crate was sitting on it. Orvie pushed against it.

"Heavy," he said.

Joey tried as well, as if to verify that. He nodded.

The lid was loose and they lifted it off.

"Metal stuff," was Joey's very specific description of what lay inside.

"Ankle irons and chains," Orvie said. "I imagine left over from the slaves who moved through here. They were

probably cut off of many of them after they arrived.”

“That’s unbelievable that one man believed he had the right to own another human being and treat him that way,” Joey said.

Orvie nodded, but knew they needed to move on.

“Let’s pull the crate off the trap door.”

“That sounds a whole lot like you intend to go back down to the basement.”

“I wonder why?”

The boys removed the crate and opened the door. In a few minutes, they were back in the basement at the big door that led into the tunnel. The wooden security bars had not been slipped back into place although the metal slide bars – top and bottom – had been slipped back into the stone where the door was set.

They soon had the door open and moved to the newly constructed storage closets.

“They’re still locked,” Joey said after moving down the line and trying several door knobs. “Do we try to get into them?”

“Should have brought tools – hammer, chisel, saw. Next time. For now, we can be pretty sure whatever’s stored in them is still here. The air exchange system is still on – hear it?”

Joey nodded.

“What we need to do is make certain that whatever it is, doesn’t get removed from in here.”

“And how do we do that?”

“We start at the tunnel entrance.”

Again, they moved through the tunnel into the cave and out the front entrance on the hillside. That time, however, it had not had to be a life and death dash toward fresh air.

“When you said the entrance didn’t seem stable, it gave me an idea,” Orvie said. “We need to collapse it – close it – so it can’t be used to remove whatever is stored inside.”

“Okay. I see. But there’s still the bench exit.”

“That will be next on our agenda. Let’s see what we

can do here, first. I'm thinking this is a secondary exit anyway. The bench provides a much shorter and more pleasantly designed route to the outside. You have any suggestions where to start, Joey?"

"Well, I figure if you want to collapse something you start by removing the support at the bottom. That's also where it seems the least solid. There's a sizable rock at the bottom on each side of the opening. If we could somehow remove them I'm betting the whole entrance collapses into a pile of rock and rubble."

"I just imagine you're right about that. We'll need a couple of long somethings to use like pry bars – downed tree branches, maybe.

They searched the area.

"Got something here," Orvie called out.

Joey joined him. A branch had been mostly broken away from the trunk – hanging there by less than an inch of wood. It was three inches thick at the trunk and ten feet long.

It was attached about eight feet above the ground.

"You think you can hold me on your shoulders?" Orvie asked.

"I think so, maybe not for a long time. What you thinking?"

"I can whittle my way through that part that's still attached and free the limb."

"Sounds like a plan. Let's give it a try.

"After several humorous failures at getting Orvie successfully perched on Joey's shoulders the cutting began. It took a while, but they stuck with it until the branch fell free. Like many twelve-year-old boys, Joey was stronger than he looked.

They dragged it to the entrance and began planning their strategy. Using smaller sticks, they dug away the dirt from behind one of the base rocks so they could slide the end of the large branch in behind it. With the branch in place, the boys moved to the other end of it and began pushing in such a way that the stone began easing out of the spot where it had sat for centuries.

Eventually, it moved enough so the stones and dirt above it gave way and fell, effectively blocking the opening.

"I guess if you ever want it reopened, a little digging should easily manage that," Orvie said as the two of them stood back and looked over their handiwork.

Nothing would be removed through that spot on that day.

They went around the hillside and met up with the stone path that led to the bench. They were soon there.

"Now to somehow deactivate the mechanism that works this gizmo," Orvie said.

They squatted down and set to examining the arms of the bench. The triggering mechanism was simple. Woven wire, running through the arms and down through the two back legs was attached to a switch underneath the slab. Both arms had to be operated at the same time for the switch to be activated. An electrical contact was made activating a solenoid (electrical release mechanism) that allowed the spring-loaded slab to pop open. When the slab was reset, the switch was put back in the 'ready' position.

"Pretty ingenious," Orvie said. "Using two, widely separated switches like that minimizes the possibility that they will ever be accidentally activated at the same time."

Orvie cut out a section of electrical wire that fed the switches so it could not be easily reconnected. They reset the bench. The whatever from the storage closets would not be going anywhere soon – at least not easily. The only obvious route left was up through the house and down the front staircase.

That reminded Orvie of something he'd been thinking about earlier.

"Now, let's go locate that secret passage that connects all three floors in the house."

"The what that does what in the what?"

///

CHAPTER FIVE: **Secret Passages**

“Explain yourself, pal. Secret passage?”

“We need to go back to the den,” Orvie said.

They set out toward the house. Orvie talked.

“Have you ever wondered why there are no windows across the back of the house?”

“I guess I haven’t, but you’re right, there aren’t any.”

“We know the steep steps from the attic go down inside the rear wall of the house and that requires two or so feet between the inside wall and the outside wall. We’ve seen that first hand. The question that comes to my mind is, why would a builder just waste all that room between the walls especially in a structure where constant danger from the authorities existed – the pro-slavery government of the day.”

“And that led you to wonder about secret passages?”

“Yes, it did. And I figure the den is a good place to begin. All that dark paneling and the bookcases across the back of the room are both just tailor made for secret entrances.”

When they got to the house they went directly into the den and moved to the back wall.

“Down here the secret stairs occupy only the far-left side of this rear wall – starting at the far right of the attic the way they do. So, let’s examine the right rear wall of the den –

the area that would be underneath those stairs.”

They ran their hands across the surfaces, pushing here and there looking for some sort of pressure switch.

“Could be two switches need to be activated at the same time like at the bench,” Joey said.

“Might be, but I’m thinking the bench deal was installed fifty years after this house was constructed,” Orvie replied. “I’m going to bet on one pressure point or pull out lever.”

“Like this one, maybe,” Joey said.

“What did you find?”

“A book on this bookcase that pulls forward at the top, just like in the old black and white horror movies. This whole section of the bookcase popped open here along the right-hand edge.”

“How in the world did you find it so quickly,” Orvie asked.

“The title popped out at me – no pun intended – The Gallagher Family Comes to the United States of America. It sounded like a book that could have been here since Civil War days. Most of the other titles are clearly more recent. Anyway, it was the most nondescript (dull appearing) looking book spine I’d seen – I figured you’d not want the switch to stand out in any way.”

“But it did, of course, by being the most nondescript,” Orvie said.

“Big surprise, Old House Building Ancestor Guy,” Joey joked as if he were addressing him back through time.

They swung the bookcase open and dust wafted (floated) out into the area. Inside was not what Joey expected to find.

“Not stairs in here, Orvie.”

Orvie stuck his head into the opening beside Joey and looked up and down. There were three very thick ropes hanging there – one in the center of the opening and two along the far-right side.

Orvie pulled on the front one to the right. It moved downward with very little effort. He pulled on the back one with the same result. In the first case the center rope moved

up. In the second it moved down.

"I think we have a primitive elevator here – built like a dumbwaiter in which food and dishes were moved from floor to floor – downstairs kitchen to upstairs dining room and the like. If we move one of these ropes in the right direction I just imagine a small platform will come into view hanging from the center rope – one person could step onto it and pull himself up or let himself down using one of the ropes to the side. I'm thinking it connects the basement, first, second and third floors."

"I'm amazed the ropes are still in such good condition," Joey said reaching in and touching the one in the middle. "Look at them!"

"Smell them. I think they are treated with some sort of preservative," Orvie said.

Joey sniffed and agreed with a nod.

"You thinking there are more than just one of these gizmos?"

"Very likely, I think. Maybe occupying the north end of one or both of the closets on the second and third floors. It would allow for a possible opening back in the storeroom as well."

"You thinking all this is related to the ghostly happenings?"

"Not sure. Old Gallagher needs some way to get in and out and move from floor to floor without being seen, and this sort of thing could certainly provide that."

"I'd sure like to take a ride in this contraption," Joey said looking up inside the opening."

"You have a lifetime left to do that. We need to get back down to the basement with tools and see what's inside those storage closets in the tunnel."

"Pace off this opening to see how far it is from the east outside wall. Then we can see if we can find an opening at that place in the basement."

Joey counted eleven paces. Orvie figured that was probably the equivalent of ten adult man's paces.

"So, how do we get down to the basement?"

"Up and over again. It's the only route we've left open to use."

They first went to the storeroom behind the pantry and selected a few tools. Then, they were on their way.

The door to the attic was still unlocked and they were soon up the stairs, across the attic and down the long narrow steep flight of stairs to the basement. It was becoming a familiar route. Again, the big door was only locked by the two sets of slide bars into the surrounding rock.

With that soon open they stopped to survey what they had to work on.

"So, where do we cut the hole?" Joey asked.

"How about cross the corner right here near the door from the basement?"

"Seems as good as any. How do we get started?"

"Just cut into the corner – the 90-degree corner – I guess. It's the only real place to easily start a hole. I assume there will be two by four uprights inside this plywood and maybe some moisture proof barrier as well."

"I'll start. It may not be easy sawing. We'll spell each other. Oh, one thing we really need to do first. How can we make sure that big old basement door can't be closed on us again? With no other way out from down here, now, we'd be in quite a pickle if that happened."

They moved back to the door opening. There were pipes running various places along the outside wall and across the ceiling of the basement.

"I got an idea," Orvie said. "Help me lift one of the wooden bars that are made to fit across the door into the brackets to keep it from being opened from out in the tunnel. We'll open the door all the way back against the wall and force the bar in behind that pipe in the ceiling and that one running along the base of the wall near the floor. It will hold the door against the wall and should make it very difficult for one person – or ghost – to remove it. We would certainly hear the commotion associated with it."

It took a good deal of work, but before long the job was finished. They were satisfied it would do what they needed it

to do and returned to the storage area in the tunnel.

Orvie began to saw across the corner at chest height. He had been right. Once through the plywood he hit the uprights. Ten minutes later he was still sawing and turned the job over to Joey. He sawed on for another ten. At that point they were through the uprights at the corner and were ready to begin sawing through the plywood sheet that closed in the front side.

Orvie issued a caution.

"Since we don't know how full the space is with whatever is stored in there, we need to take very shallow strokes so we don't go in too deep and ruin it."

Orvie took his turn. The progress was far more rapid just having to get through the one piece of wood. He came to another upright about twenty-four inches away from the corner.

"We need to begin cutting straight down from here toward the floor. That means we need to cut a vertical opening to fit the saw into. Need the hammer and chisel."

"I can handle that while you rest," Joey said.

He went to work and soon had a three inch up and down slit large enough for the saw. Orvie slipped the saw in and made the cut to within about two inches of the floor where he ran into another two by four running along the base.

"Chisel time again," he announced and Joey finished the cut to the floor.

They inserted a crowbar into the vertical cut and pried the plywood out enough so they could take hold of it and pull it loose from the bottom and the corner. Orvie had been right; there was a piece of thick plastic fabric hanging on the inside – the moisture barrier. He carefully slit it with his knife so it could be easily be put back in place to continue protecting whatever was inside.

He pushed it in and up out of the way. They trained their lights inside. They found dozens of objects an inch or two thick and varying in the other dimensions from a foot square to over three feet square. Each had been carefully wrapped in thick pieces of plastic moisture barrier. Each had

a small label in the upper right corner bearing a number.

"You know what this is, don't you, Orvie?"

"I think so – paintings – art work."

"Maybe we'll find the pieces Mr. Adkins had stolen."

"I think we're going to find a whole lot more than just those."

He ran the beam of his light down the length of the inside of the long closet as if to prove his point. The storage area was nearly full. There were dozens and dozens of pieces. Joey carefully removed one of the smaller pieces. They unwrapped it. They found what they had suspected. Framed art. They re-wrapped it and returned it to where they had found it.

"Let's put the plywood back in place temporarily – not that it will fool anybody, but may help protect what's in there," Orvie said.

In order to accomplish that several nails had to be removed. Joey handled that with the claw hammer. It fit back in place pretty well.

"What's next?"

"Way too many things. Let's start by seeing if we can find that elevator opening down here."

They looked over the rear wall of the basement, walking back toward the east. They saw the diagonal enclosure that held the stairway from the attic. It was supported by poles between it and the floor. On the east end were a series of built-in wooden cabinets. They filled the space from floor to ceiling.

"One of these, I imagine," Orvie said.

They opened them, one by one. They found what they were looking for exactly eleven paces from the east wall. The cabinet had two doors – a smaller one across the bottom and a large door spanning the upper four feet. When the upper one was opened, it revealed the same sort of setup as they had discovered in the den – the three ropes.

The lower door covered an area almost two feet high. Inside it was a wide wheel on an axle under and around which the rope on the right side was wound. It was one continuous

rope coming down the front side and going up in back. Pull down on the rope on the back side and the front one went up. Pull the front side down and the back went up. Orvie figured that somewhere near the ceiling on the back side of a third-floor closet or cupboard they would find a similar mechanism that handled the top loop in the rope.

"So, let me get this straight," Joey said. "The two ropes on the right side are really one continuous loop and go up to some sort of pulley system that turns a take up reel that pulls the actual elevator gizmo up when one rope is pulled and lets it back down when the other is pulled."

"Right. We really don't need to know exactly how it works because we're only interested in its function – allowing old Gallagher to move from floor to floor without being detected. I'm guessing there is at least one more on the other side of the basement – the part on the other side of that dividing wall."

"We can get down into it from the pantry on the first floor. That half of the basement is nicely finished with cement plastered walls. It's always dry and never smells musty."

"What's across the back wall?"

"Nothing, really. Like I said, just a cement wall."

"I'm thinking a secret panel even if it is cement," Orvie said. "We will have time to look into that later. We need to plan our next move. How about riding up the elevator up to the den?"

"I'm game, sure!"

Ten minutes later they had pulled the actual elevator platform into place and, one at a time, had made the trip up through the opening to the den.

"That was awesome!" Joey said. "Wish there was one that entered my room."

As Orvie closed the bookcase panel, Joey remembered something. He took several nails out of his pocket – left over from when they replaced the plywood in the tunnel – and handed them to Orvie."

"What's this?"

"From downstairs. Look at the head."

"Green. I see. Looks like it's been painted."

"The outside of the storage area wasn't painted and yet the nails all have green heads."

"Good work. I didn't pay attention to that. You have some idea about it?"

"Our school is always hurting for money – and the drama department is not high on its priority list for funds. One way we save what we can is reusing the wood that goes into building the sets for the plays. That includes pulling and straightening the nails to use over. The heads of any exposed set nails get painted. The set for the play we did last May – the final one of last school year – was a pool hall with its walls painted this shade of green."

"So, are you suggesting the nails used to build the storage units were put together with nails from the drama department?"

"That's not all; what color was the inside of that piece of plywood we removed?"

"I'm seeing what you're saying. It was this same shade of green. Plywood from the drama department, too. You're going to have to tell me about the folks that worked on that play."

"Up to my room."

They were soon there. The boys reclined on the beds propping their head up facing each other as they talked.

"There were lots of people. Like I said, the school is the social center of the town. There are always a slew of local folks there helping with things. We needed two pool tables so Cliff at Cliff's Cue – the local pool hall – lent us two of his – he only has four. He and his son were there a lot.

"Mom was there, she was drafted immediately to do the art work on the sets. Mr. Adkins, of course, since he directed it. And his wife who is like his goffer, finding and fetching whatever he needs. Mr. Martin is the principal and he does his best to support the drama and art and music departments. He likes to come and watch rehearsals. It had a large cast – maybe twenty. Mrs. Ellington did the choreography – she had her hands full teaching a bunch of 8th grade boys how to

dance. The first few rehearsals where hilarious. She used to dance up at Branson, Missouri in some of the shows. Marty, our town cop – we just have one because there's never anything for a cop to do here in Landers – helped build the set – he's also a handyman around town. I think he did most of the electrical wiring, also. He got the cop job mostly because the city officials felt bad that his mother was so sick and he had no money to help pay her bills. Always friendly and talkative."

"Like you said, lots of people. I don't suppose one of them happens to be a known art thief?"

Joey smiled.

"When I was in kindergarten I took a picture from Mary Louise Caudle's desk that she was going to give to Mark Brown instead of me – if that counts."

Orvie smiled.

"I still don't get it," Joey said. "So, somebody is stealing art work and hiding it the tunnel. Why the tunnel? Why that secret room? Why the secret entrance at the bench?"

"I can only speculate, but here's where my head is on it. The person storing the art is either the thief or, more likely, a middle man between the thief and people who want to buy great art at slightly reduced prices."

"Why do you say great art? We haven't hardly seen any of it yet."

"Think about it. Would somebody go to all the expense involved in what we've seen so far in order to sell poor art?"

"No. I suppose not. I see how you got there. What else you been thinking?"

"That the buyers are brought into the secret room we found. They come up the stone path – which we have to follow down the hill, by the way – enter through the steps under the bench, are wined and dined at the bar and shown the kinds of pieces they want. It may even be that certain pieces are first 'ordered', then stolen, then stored here, and then sold to the person who placed the order."

"But if the paintings are stolen the buyers can't really hang them up and show them off – the cops will be searching

for them."

"All that's true. I've heard of some collectors who just want the satisfaction of owning famous paintings even though no one else will ever know they have them. Those are the kinds with lots of money who would expect and appreciate the kind of treatment I imagine they are given down in that room."

"I see. Lots of money at stake makes this a really dangerous situation for us, then."

"I'd say so. It's why somebody is working so hard to get you and your mom to move out and leave the house vacant for them. It makes me think the art stealing and storing plan came into being before you two moved in. Well before that, whoever it is may have already invested a whole lot of money preparing that room and finding the necessary channels to such buyers."

"That's when the ghost entered the picture. Somebody really thought we'd be scared off by ghosts?"

"I'm sure that was their hope. As you've indicated, when the plain old ghost thing didn't work they stepped it up a notch and began destroying things."

"So, that is like a warning that things can get a whole lot worse than they are," Joey said.

Orvie nodded. Joey had said all that needed to be said.

The lights suddenly went off in Joey's room. Although that didn't make it dark it reduced the light considerably. The door to the room opened. There stood Gallagher's Ghost and he was not shy about entering the room.

CHAPTER SIX:

Two Sticks of Gum: Two Problems Solved

The boys sat up in their beds, and scooted back against the head boards. Orvie took off one of his shoes and threw it at the image. It went right through it and hit the wall beyond. He stood and walked toward it until he was standing right in its center. He turned and with his eyes searched the outside west wall behind the beds.

The ghostly image faded and disappeared. Joey stood and crossed the room to join Orvie.

"You threw a shoe at Gallagher's Ghost," he said flailing his arms in clear disbelief."

"Haven't you always wanted to see two souls/soles fight?"

"That was terrible. Really, why did you do that?"

"Just to satisfy me that it wasn't somebody dressed up like the old guy. If it had been a person it would have hit him and we'd have had a whole different scenario on our hands."

"Oh. I see. Maybe not as insane as I thought, then. Did we learn anything else?"

Orvie chuckled to himself at the use of the pronoun 'we'.

"We did. What's that shiny disk attached to the molding at the ceiling above the beds?"

"What disk? Didn't know there was a dick. Shouldn't

be a disk. Like I told you this room has just been completely remodeled – new drywall, new molding.”

“Well, then, we need to get up there and take a look. Got a ladder?”

To Orvie’s amazement Joey went to one of the unused closets and brought out a step ladder. Seeing the puzzled look on his friend’s face he explained.

“I used to make a lot of model planes when we lived up in Springfield. I’d hang them from the ceiling of my room. Mom got me my own ladder and it moved with me.”

“Do you see what I’m talking about up there?”

“I do now.”

“We need to get up there and take a close up look.”

Joey positioned the ladder and motioned for Orvie to climb.

“It’s not like anything I’ve seen before, Orvie said. “Got a camera on that phone of yours?”

“Of course.”

“You come up and take a few pictures of it so we can study it – look it up on the web or someway find out what it is. Don’t touch it in case fingerprints become important later on.”

Joey got the pictures and they soon had them up and running on Joey’s computer with its thirty inch LED monitor. Orvie described what they saw.

“A concave (shallow bowl shaped) disk about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch in diameter, silver in color on the inside making it a very good reflecting surface.”

“So, it reflects stuff. How did you discover it?”

“When I got inside old man Gallagher’s Ghost I noticed the focus of the light was coming from up there. I just spotted what was obvious from that place in the room.”

“It’s like a projector, you mean?”

“Something like that. Clearly this isn’t a projector, but I’m betting it reflected something that was projected onto it.”

“How could that be? A projector’s picture grows with distance - it shows a picture as big as a wall. And where would it be here in this room?”

"All good comments, observations and questions. May just make a detective out of you yet."

Joey grinned. Orvie continued.

"Question: What can project a pencil-lead thin image over long distances?"

"A laser. But that still requires a projector."

"Question Two: What kind of wire can carry a laser image?"

"Optic fiber wire – actually called cable, not wire, I think. I once saw it demonstrated at a science museum."

Orvie walked the room looking at the area around the top of the walls.

"I could help if you'd let me in on what we're searching for," Joey said following Orvie step for step.

"Okay, then, bring that ladder right here."

Orvie was soon up the steps and examining what at first appeared to merely be an unfilled nail hole in the molding.

"Got a magnifying glass?" he asked.

"On my desk . . . Here."

Orvie examined the opening and spoke about what he thought he had found.

"In this hole is the end of a tiny tube – maybe one of those optic fiber wire cable doo dads. You've seen them. Come up and take a look."

They exchanged places and Joey soon offered his opinion.

"That's what it is alright. Shall I take pictures?"

"As long as you're up there."

"If it comes down from up on the third floor that would be a bedroom that's right above this one, correct?"

"Right. Or it could be snaked along between the ceiling here and the floor up there and be coming from anywhere."

Joey came down the ladder.

"So, it might go up through the walls to the attic," Orvie added. "By the way, do you have any gum?"

"Chewing gum?"

"Yes, chewing gum."

"Desk drawer. Here."

He tossed him a stick and opened one for himself without question. Orvie climbed back up the ladder and chewed the gum for just a minute before removing it and sticking it over the optic cable opening.

"There. Now our dreams won't be interrupted by any more galloping Gallagher tonight."

"Hope the ghost guy likes Juicy Fruit," Joey said attempting a joke.

Orvie nodded recognizing it for what it had been.

"I think it's time to see where that stone path comes from," Orvie said.

A three-minute trot later found them at the bench and beginning to walk the path east down the hill through the woods.

"An ideal smuggling route," Joey said. "I lived here six months and I didn't even know about it. Nobody in town could see anybody coming or going."

The path wound back and forth down the hill maintaining a gentle slope. At the bottom of the hill it joined a cement sidewalk that ran along the west side of an abandoned, brick building. It looked to have been a warehouse many years before.

"Tell me about this building," Orvie said.

"I don't really know very much. Been abandoned for a long time. I've never seen any activity around it. Never even heard anybody speak about it. Don't know what it was."

They followed the sidewalk to the front of the building where it met a street – Mulberry – one street north of Main.

"Tell me about these two sidewalks," Orvie said. "What do you see?"

"I like it when you bring me into things like that, asking me to think about something. Anyway, the sidewalks. Well the one in front of the building is ancient, cracked, with weeds growing up through the cracks. The one to the west of the building looks to be brand new. So, your real question is, 'Why a new walk beside an abandoned ancient building'?"

"That's the real question number one. Real question number two is, why you didn't know it was being built? It can't be more than five or six months old from the level of curing I see."

"Just before we got here maybe?"

"I suppose, but not long before, for sure."

Orvie moved across the front of the building and around the east side to the rear. Joey followed.

"A garage door and a regular door in front and a regular door in back. No windows. Two stories tall. Must be like a dark old dungeon on the inside."

"There's a cellar door back here," Joey pointed out. "It must have a basement."

Orvie moved to the door, which laid on a slant out from the top of the foundation down to the ground. He pulled on the handle and to their amazement it opened up with relative ease. He lit the area below with his flashlight.

"Ancient cement steps leading down to a door in the basement wall," he said.

He made his way down the steps, Joey again at his heels.

"The door has one of those old fashioned key holes like the one to the attic. You still got that key?"

"Yeah, but it's the one to that door not this one."

"There were only three of four designs of those old keys. The locks were meant more for privacy than safety. Let's see if luck is with us – we have a one in four or five chance this key will work."

He inserted it. It didn't work.

Joey looked disappointed.

"Don't give up yet, my friend. This design has a slot in the middle of the flat blade that turns the lock mechanism. Got another piece of gum?"

"You're going to stick gum on the end of the key?"

"Watch and learn."

Orvie unwrapped the stick and put it in his mouth. He saved the foil wrapper and flattened it against the door, then

folded it in thirds the long way. He wrapped it around the blade of the key covering the slot. It went around twice providing twice the strength over the slot. He carefully inserted it again. Click. The lock turned and they were able to push the door open.

"I keep wondering how you know all this stuff."

"My experiences are just different from yours. You know art and acting and computers and optic fiber cable stuff and I know how to survive out in the world by myself."

Joey shrugged apparently accepting his contention.

Inside, they found a typical, dirty, damp, basement that reeked (smelled bad) of years of mold and mildew and who knew what else.

Orvie moved the beam from his flashlight here and there until he located the stairway. They approached it and climbed up to the first floor. Another door. Another old-fashioned lock. The foil covered key worked there as well.

Orvie opened the door slowly and with great caution listening for any sound that might suggest the area was occupied by someone. It was inky dark inside. He pushed the door further open and lit the area.

"Wow! Like the lobby in a high-class hotel," Joey said turning on his own flashlight.

They moved inside and examined the room. Orvie thought he had it figured out.

"A limo drives in through the garage door from Mulberry Street out front – see it has an automatic opener. It carries potential art buyers. The lights in here remain off so nobody outside can see what's going on. The door closes. The lights come on. The passenger gets out, entering this fancy reception room."

"What makes you say, limo?"

The cement area for the vehicle to sit on is far longer than would be needed for regular length cars."

"Amazing," Joey said.

Orvie continued.

"There are the two sofas and numerous chairs. Except for where the limo sits it has a carpeted floor and a chandelier

over the sitting area. Makes a great and comfortable first impression. From here the person or people are led outside to the stone path and up the hill to the bench where they enter the underground room. There, they examine the merchandise. They may even bring it back with them, stow it in the limo and they are taken somewhere private where their own transportation awaits them."

"Unbelievably, I think I followed that," Joey said. "It means this place had to be remodeled without anybody knowing it was going on – nights, I imagine."

"That's my guess. Seen enough?"

"If you have. I depend on you for knowing about this kind of stuff."

They locked the doors behind them as they left and were soon lying the cellar door back down into place.

Orvie had a question.

"Do you think anybody will be working at school to get ready for the play at this time of day?"

"I wouldn't doubt it. The VFW auxiliary ladies are making the backdrop and it's supposed to be put up this afternoon. It's a very simple set, like I said. The backdrop is just a black curtain that curves around behind the set in a big arc. The only lights are spots on the two chairs and the lamp table. Mom designed the set. Keeps cost low and allows the audience to just focus on the actors and the dialogue. A great arrangement, I think. More than you needed to hear in order to answer your question, I know. I'm just really excited about doing it."

"Have understudies (substitutes) in case you or Mr. Adkins get sick?"

"Sure do. Just like all first-class productions. Jack Wilson for me and Mr. Gildersleeve, the undertaker, for Mr. Adkins. Why do you ask?"

"Just seeing who else might have access to the nails and such."

The boys moved out on the trot and were soon at the cafeteria. Several men – husbands of the auxiliary members, Orvie assumed – were being supervised by way too many

independent minded women as they set up the frame to hold the curtain.

Marty, the cop, and Mr. Martin, the principal, were also there.

"Introduce me around," Orvie asked Joey.

Joey approached Mr. Martin.

"This is, Orvie, a friend visiting from out of town for a few days. He's interested in the play."

Mr. Martin offered his hand and they shook.

"I really like your little town, Sir. Such friendly people."

"Yes. We have a really good thing here. Mostly a quiet place. Nothing out of the ordinary ever seems to be going on here."

Orvie sensed no reason to think that was not the truth as he believed it to be – for the moment, at least, taking him off the list of possible suspects.

"Where do you go to school, son?"

"I'm home schooled, Sir. I come from sort of a free-spirited family. We like to do things our own way."

"Nothing wrong with free spirits. It's good to have met you. Hope you'll be here for the play. It's going to be the best thing this community has produced in a decade."

He patted Joey on his shoulder. Joey beamed.

The man excused himself to go offer his own suggestions to the men with the curtain.

"Seems like a really nice man," Orvie said.

"He is. Maintains a very positive atmosphere at the school. There's Marty. I'll introduce you."

"Marty. My friend Orvie, is here visiting mom and me for a week or so."

"Hi, Orvie, is it?" he asked as if wanting to make sure he pronounced it correctly.

"Yes. My shortened version of Orville – a name I've really never thought I fit very well."

"I understand. I'm Martin. Not a good name for a small-town boy. I only let my mother call me that."

It was worth smiles among the three of them.

"So, Marty, I hear you're the sole source of law enforcement in this fair city," Orvie said.

"Me and Jeffery."

"Jeffery?" Joey asked puzzled.

"Yeah. Jeffery Moss – he's working on an Eagle Scout merit badge in law enforcement. Usually within a few yards of me on the weekends. Down in Bentonville today at a cousin's wedding."

"Any big cases brewing?" Orvie asked with a grin suggesting it was more a put on than a serious question."

"Nothing big ever going on around here, I'm afraid."

Orvie got a mixed feeling message he couldn't immediately figure out.

"Joey tells me you're also a first-class handyman and electrician."

"Don't know about first class, but I get by."

Orvie sensed nothing. He'd try one more time.

"I have a question about plywood maybe you can answer. Back home we're thinking of putting up a wall to divide a pretty humid basement. I was wondering if there is a certain kind of plywood we should use in that kind of conditions. We'll be doing the work ourselves."

"There is plywood available that is specially treated for those conditions. You'll also want to use treated two by fours and such. If you're putting up dry wall, I'd suggest bathroom grade green dry wall. Hard as cement and it won't deteriorate in moist settings like that the way the regular kind would."

Orvie got a very mixed message. The information was correct – he knew that from personal experience – but there was a great deal of anxiety associated with the response. He would try yet one more time.

"We are also going to install outlets for our over the air TV set up. Do we use the old coaxial cable or the new optic fiber cable?"

"Stick with coaxial."

The answer was short and sweet with none of his more typical elaboration. Orvie sensed a huge surge in anxiety. It could have been as simple as his reaction to a question he

really didn't know how to answer – perhaps no knowledge of fiber optics and didn't want to expose his ignorance. It could have been something else.

Mr. Adkins came backstage where they were standing. He hesitated a moment and then approached them.

"Didn't want to interrupt a private conversation," he began, clearly trying to explain his earlier tentativeness.

"Nothing private, doc," Joey said.

It had been a private joke between them – 'doc' being what Joey's character in the play called Mr. Adkins' character.

"So," Orvie began, "I hear in the play you psychoanalyze the kid here. Think you're making any progress?"

Adkins chuckled.

"Not much I can offer to a perfectly adjusted young man, like Joey. We are really fortunate that he and his mother have come to be part of our community."

Orvie sensed something about that had been a major misrepresentation, but which part – the well-adjusted part or the happy to have him there, part. Joey's personality certainly was not a run of the mill specimen.

"I agree. Joey's a really great kid."

Orvie felt a rising sense of anxiety in Adkins.

"He and his mom certainly seem to like it here," Orvie went on continuing to push a bit.

The anxiety rose further.

"Joey tells me the two of you really seem to have a positive chemistry in the play. That must be a great feeling for an experienced actor like you."

"Yes. It is a rare thing when that happens. Will you be staying long enough to see the play?"

"Yes. I'm looking forward to it."

The answer caused another surge in anxiety.

"Well, I'm very glad you'll be able to see him perform. This young man has a real talent."

Again, Orvie received two messages – the first being a lie that he was happy Orvie would be staying. The second

was the truth about his evaluation of Joey's acting ability.

Mr. Adkins excused himself. Marty had left during the conversation.

"So, now what? Want to meet the auxiliary women?"

"No, thanks. Older women always pinch my cheeks and I'm not up for that today."

They were soon back outside.

"So, what did you think of them?"

"Interesting folks. Do you trust the folks you introduced me to?"

"Trust them? I have no reason not to. You see something I didn't?"

"Just gathering data."

"Yeah, like I believe that. You were interrogating them, very low key and subtly, but they were being grilled."

"Somebody in this town is behind the art thefts and the scheme to scare you and your mom back to Springfield. If it isn't one of these folks, it really has to be Gallagher's Ghost."

///

CHAPTER SEVEN: **Speculation!**

I guess if it's a choice between somebody here in town or a ghost, I'll have to go with the real live somebody. Do you suspect anybody?"

"We have no proof, only speculation, but solving a mystery usually begins with speculation."

He went on to explain.

"Marty has the carpentry skills and electrical skills to have built the storage area for the art and maybe even do the remodel of the underground bunker room and the warehouse. Why he'd choose to use wood and nails from the drama department is unclear if not unlikely.

"Mr. Adkins has ready access to the supplies here at school and having spent lots of years working on play sets, he has undoubtedly gained many of the same skills Marty has. However, some of his art was reported stolen.

"Mr. Martin just seems to be a really fine person who likes young people. You know or suspect anything about him that might make him a candidate for bad guy?"

"No. Like what?"

"Seems we're looking for somebody who either really needs a lot of money or somebody who wants a lot of money. Are all these folks longtime residents?"

Mr. Martin's been here for at least twenty years. Mr. Adkins for about the same. The librarian, Miss Parmalay was born and lived most of her life here. Cliff bought the pool hall

the year before mom and I came here. I got the idea once that maybe his son, Gary, had some sort of legal problems and they thought it was best to move away from wherever they'd lived."

"How old is Gary?"

"Fourteen. He was in 8th grade last year. Over six feet tall. The basketball team was after him, but he turned them down. This year he's gone to high school. High school kids get bussed out of town to school. I didn't really have time to get to know him very well – I was just here the last three months of school. He seemed a bit shy or standoffish – like he didn't want to belong here. Over the summer, he stayed mostly at the pool hall. I hear he's a really good pool player. That's not my thing."

"Has anybody in town had some disaster or huge expense come up in their life?"

"Marty's mother is real sick. She's in a special care home down in Bentonville. I suppose that's expensive. Marty can't be making much money. A farmer lost his barn to a fire this past summer. His name is Rakes. Not insured the way I hear the story. Mrs. Ellington, the dancer, has terrible arthritis and spends a few days every month at a hospital up in Springfield that specializes in treating that. I don't know about her financial situation, but being a dancer at Branson probably didn't make her wealthy. I guess teachers don't make much money so maybe one of them. I don't think I'm being much help."

"Data, Joey. We're collecting data. Without it there can't be a solution. A police detective once told me that only about one percent of the initial clues in a big case ever actually help solve a case."

"Okay then. I'll keep thinking."

"Who's the richest person in town?" Orvie asked.

"Other than mom, you mean. She's the richest by far. Next I suppose would be the mayor – Mr. Cutter. He owns a lot of property that he rents out – most if it away from Landers – down in Rogers and Bentonville and Lowell. Apartment houses and strip malls, the way I hear it. Been lots of money in that family for generations."

"Why does he live here if his business interests are elsewhere?"

"Landers is his family's home going back to before the Civil War – contemporaries with the Gallaghers. They were the two families that founded and have kept the town going."

"Any animosities (hard feelings) between those two families that you know about?"

"I don't. Miss Parmalay would be the best source of information about things like that – like I said she's always lived here and she's like the town's unofficial historian."

"How do we get to see her?"

"Go knock on her door unless you have some more devious (tricky) way you prefer to use."

It brought a smile to Orvie's face.

"Knocking is fine. Do we have time before supper or dinner or whatever the evening meal is called in these parts?"

"Sure. I'll call mom. I thought she'd be here at the school so I could talk with her about it."

He placed the call. She was on her way back from Bentonville where she had gone to find a lamp that suited her better for use on the play set. Dinner would be at six.

They walked up the street that ran north and south in front of the school – not surprisingly named, School Street. Her house sat near the northern edge of town. It was a small, one story structure sporting a new white paint job and light blue trim and shutters. There was a new white picket fence surrounding the lot. The car in the driveway was also new and not an inexpensive model. Orvie took it all in. Joey missed it.

Joey knocked – since Orvie seemed to have no better way!

A stately looking woman in her late sixties with brilliant white hair and bright blue eyes opened the door.

"Hey. Miss Parmalay. Like you to meet my new friend, Orvie, short for Orville, which he's not too fond of."

"Of which he's not too fond," she said correcting his grammar with a wonderful smile.

Joey turned to Orvie.

"She is known to do such things. Even the Mayor is fair game for her."

"Social or business," she asked.

"Social and history-related, I suppose," Joey answered.

"Interesting. A front door conversation or a sitting room conversation?" she asked.

Orvie liked her direct style and warm smile. He responded.

"We have several questions about the relationship between the Cutter and the Gallagher families down through the generations."

"That will be a sitting room conversation. Tea?"

"No thank you. About dinner time," Joey answered for them both.

They entered into a turn of the century – 19th to 20th century – home. The furnishings, rugs, artwork, wall paper, were all of that vintage (outdated era). It was neat and clean with nothing so much as an inch out of place, Orvie suspected.

"You boys may share the settee (couch)."

She took a seat in a very uncomfortable looking chair, but one she clearly preferred.

"So, do you have a specific question?"

"Just in general, I guess," Orvie said. "Particularly anything that might have caused bad blood between them, which might have continued from generation to generation."

"You speak well, Orvie."

Orvie shrugged and nodded. Miss Parmalay folded her hands in her lap and began.

"Back in the late 1700s there were two young men – Ezra Gallagher and Lucas Cutter – who both took a shine to the same young lady – do you know 'took a shine to'?"

"Had romantic feelings toward," Orvie said nodding.

"Yes, well she led them both on, thinking it was some kind of prestigious situation – an enjoyable little game – for her to have the two wealthiest boys in town pursuing her. Eventually it got to the point where the two young men fought

a dual with pistols. Lucas Cutter was mortally wounded, dying several days later. The young lady then shunned (rejected) the advances of Ezra, and eventually married someone else. The brothers of Lucas Cutter swore revenge on the Gallagher's, but nothing dramatic ever came of it. An intense dislike did grow and fester between the families and went on for several generations. It's been long forgotten and I doubt if Mayor Cutter even knows about it."

The boys stood. Orvie spoke.

"We thank you for your time and information, Miss Parmalay. Every town should be so lucky as to have a fountain of knowledge about their history as Landers has in you."

"Aren't you the young charmer! You know, the saying is that flattery will get you nowhere, but believe me, it will. If you were only about fifty years older I just might consider letting you woo me."

They exchanged smiles and chuckles, and the boys left.

"Woo?" Joey asked.

"Court, pursue romantically, date."

"You'd think she could have just said that – date."

"She did, of course, in her own way."

Orvie had understood immediately. He'd wooed a few young ladies himself a hundred years before – well, chased them with snakes – the ten-year-old boy's equivalent of wooing!

They walked into the kitchen at 5:55, famished.

"Wash up!" came the predictable suggestion.

Orvie smiled. He often wondered what would happen if he had already washed up when a mother said that. Yeah! Like a twelve-year-old boy would do that on his own!!

It was a fine dinner – as it turned out their name for supper – with meat loaf dripping in thick tomato sauce, boiled new potatoes, mixed vegetables, homemade rolls with honey butter, and ice cream with strawberries for dessert.

"Wonderful dinner, Mrs. Mills. Remind me to drop in out of the blue more often," Orvie said, clearly having not left

all his charm with Miss Parmalay.

Orvie stood and began clearing off the table.

"Remember about the guest thing, mom mentioned earlier," Joey said.

"In my book that's only good for one meal. After that, the guest label wears off. You and I will do the dishes. Usher your mom out of here."

Mrs. Mills nodded politely and made her way to the door with a minimum of ushering. She turned and winked. For whom it was intended was unclear. They each assumed it was for him.

As they finished and playfully flicked each other with damp dish towels, Joey spoke.

"Are you expecting the ghost to reappear tonight?"

"Oh yes. And not just some feeble manifestation, but something hyped up several notches from what he's – it's – done before."

"Like?"

"I don't know. My guess is you will be the first target since harm to you would tend to influence your mother more and faster than something leveled at her."

"Me? Target? Harm? Please get more specific."

"I have no idea. I just know we have to do what we can to protect you tonight."

"I'm fully in favor of that idea, by the way. Protection is always a good thing in my book. I hope you have something in mind other than bombarding the ghost with your shoes again."

"I'm thinking if I did that tonight we'd get a very different effect."

"You mean you think it will be some flesh and blood guy?"

"Face it. A projection can't do any damage or harm. The ghostly activities have already escalated (increased) on the damage front. I'm looking for it to become much more serious in its campaign to get you and your mother out of here. I think the encounter up in your room was strictly to see how I would be affected."

"How reassuring."

"What is realistic is often not reassuring," Orvie said all quite seriously. "What I'd really like to be able to do is to get close enough to whatever it is to mark it in some way – like with spray paint. I can't figure how to do that safely. Our ghost may be armed."

"Speaking of being armed," Joey said, "how about a paint ball gun for a marker?"

"Ingenious, young man. You know where we can come by a paint gun or two?"

"Middle closet, top shelf."

They were soon up in Joey's room and had the weapons in hand.

"These are top of the line. They'll lob a paint ball 200 yards, of course they're only accurate to about 150 or 200 feet if you want to make sure they splatter. At longer distances they tend to just bounce off the target – if you can even come close. They are not reliably accurate beyond a hundred feet."

"I'm fairly ignorant about such things," Orvie said. "How many balls will they hold – as many as a half dozen?"

Joey chuckled.

"These babies hold 400 and can fire 15 a second."

"My! I had no idea. That should greatly increase the likelihood of hitting a target."

"Oh, yes. You any good with a rifle?"

"Been known to hit a half dollar at fifty yards – back in the olden days with muzzle loaders, you understand."

"Yeah, sure – the muzzle loaders. I mean, I'm not doubting your accuracy. So, what do you think? Shall we make them ready?"

"I'd say definitely yes."

Orvie mostly watched as Joey went through the motions of inserting new CO₂ cartridges and hundreds of paint balls in two of the guns.

"I probably should take a few practice shots to get the feel of this gadget," Orvie suggested.

Joey went over to a window and raised it.

"See that bird house hanging from the oak tree. That's about thirty yards away, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, about. It looks like it needs a new paint job."

He knelt at the window and took careful aim.

"I'd just tell you that after twenty yards the balls begin to fall just a bit so aim slightly high."

Orvie nodded and adjusted his aim. He fired.

"My gosh, man! Dead center the first shot. I'm not even going to try."

"Only one problem I see," Orvie said. "What bird is going to want a lavender house?"

"Purple Martins, maybe," Joey came back.

"That was one of the greatest comebacks of all time, Joey. You are something else."

"Just hope I'm still alive something else by this time tomorrow."

"Oh, I see no reason for old man Gallagher to try and do you in. He'll continue trying to run you off with increasingly scarier and scarier antics."

"He just may be succeeding," Joey said.

"Never! You've got fearless Gallagher blood coursing through your veins."

"And that's right where I want it to stay – in my veins."

Orvie smiled. Joey had been dead serious. [That may have been an unfortunate choice of adjective – dead!]

"So, where do we set up for tonight?" Joey asked ready to leave the talk of danger behind.

"Let's move around. That way we have a better chance of crossing his path – not knowing where he plans to set things up. And he may show up in several different spots – thinking that will increase the anxiety level."

"And he'd be correct about that."

"Let's begin right here and hope he shows up out on the lawn. He only seems to have so many options so if he's pulling out all the stops I'd think that would be one of them. His strolls outside have been right after dark you said, right?"

"Right."

"We'll wait for him up here for a half hour after darkness sets in. Then we'll go down to the great room. Those are the two most likely spots for us to see him. Certainly not in your mom's room, and probably not in the pantry that long after dinner's over."

"That all makes sense. So, what do we do when we see him?"

"If we're pretty sure it's a solid figure and not a projection – and we could see right through that projection in your room – then we fire at exposed skin – hands, neck, face. It needs to be someplace it will stain for later identification."

"These balls are indelible so if they hit skin, it won't come off for a week," Joey said apparently feeling a bit more confident."

"I was under the opinion the paint in them was water base and easily removable," Orvie said, really asking.

"You're right. I special ordered these thinking I could hunt rabbits and squirrels without killing them. I'd just mark them and they'd be like mine."

"What an interesting take on hunting – non-violent hunting. I love it!"

While they waited for nightfall, they went on the web to find out more about the use of lasers and fiber optic systems. They found that what they had been witnessing certainly could have been arranged using those technologies. The equipment was very expensive, however. But, Orvie figured the sale of one expensive piece of art could more than handle it.

"We also need to see if recently stolen paintings are listed anywhere on the web," Orvie said.

"Everything is listed somewhere on the web – I'm sure stolen art is no exception."

Presently it was dark. They turned out the lights in Joey's room so they couldn't be seen as they took their positions at the window. Orvie waited with a paint gun. Joey surveyed the lawn with binoculars.

In far less time than Orvie had figured, there was Gallagher's Ghost walking across the lawn.

"That's not his regular path," Joey said. "Closer to the house than usual."

Orvie acknowledged the observation with a nod.

"He's all yours, Orvie. Thirty yards from here. At this angle, I'd aim three or four inches above whatever you're trying to hit. Remember, fifteen balls a second. Catching him off guard you should be able to cover him from head to toe if you want to."

Presently, the ghostly figure turned – like it always did – raised its hat, and was just ready – bare headed – to turn around and disappear when Orvie pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Joey Disappears!

Some of the profanity that immediately arose from the lawn contained words even Orvie, in his hundred and twenty-four plus years, had never heard strung together in just that way. It caused giggles.

Orvie recovered immediately.

“Did you recognize that voice or face?”

“You bet I did – both. That’s Gary, Cliff’s son.”

“Well, that does nothing but muddy the waters in a most confusing way.”

“Why you say that?”

“Cliff seemed to be one of only a couple that had no reason to be involved in all of this. What could he possibly have to gain?”

“Money?”

“Well, yes, I suppose that is the bottom line. We need to find out more about him before he landed her in Landers.”

“Pun intended?” Joey asked through a broad grin.

“Not really, but I’ll take credit for it.”

“So, now down to the great room?” Joey asked.

“I’d say so.”

Joey picked up his paint gun and they made their way down the staircase. As they descended the steps, Orvie

moved the beam of his flashlight along the upper part of the outside wall toward which they were moving."

"What's that about?" Joey asked.

"To see if we can get a reflection from a disk like the one in your room. From the way you've described them, I'm pretty sure the projections had to come from up there."

"Go back three feet to the right," Joey said, pointing.

Orvie readjusted the beam and he saw what Joey had seen. It was most certainly another disk. That suggested the end of the optic cable had to be near the ceiling right behind them. That they probably would not find so easily. It could wait.

They took seats in chairs along the front wall, from where they had a clear view of the staircase, and waited. Joey turned on the television – sound low, just enough to make the scene seem reasonable to a ninety-year-old ghost. Orvie set his gun on the floor on the side of the chair opposite the stairs – his right. Joey saw what he had done and followed suit. He understood; keep the artillery out of sight.

Orvie wondered what escape route a person would take after making his appearance. More than that, from where would he appear? Other than the staircase itself, there were really four possibilities – the front entry hall, the door to their left into the dining room, or one of the two doors along the rear wall of the great room: the door to the den on the right or the door to the bedroom on the left. The only direct escape to the outside would be from the front hall. With the two exits from the tunnel closed, the basement would offer no way out. He wondered if the ghost guy new they were closed. There was the back door in the storage room, but it had been locked.

They waited. They waited some more.

Suddenly, there was a loud crash in the den. Both boys sprung to their feet. Orvie put his finger to his lips and then motioned for Joey to return to his seat. He would check out the den and Joey would keep watch in the great room.

Orvie opened the door slowly and peeked inside. It was dark. He felt for the light switch beside the door. Finding it, he flipped it on. There was nobody there, but a large table

had been upended. That had apparently been the noise they had heard. He moved to the bookcase to see if he could tell if the elevator had been used.

The bookcase was standing open – less than an inch, but it had not been clicked shut. Somebody was in a hurry and getting careless. He swung the bookcase open. The ropes on the right side were swaying but not moving up or down. Someone had just used the elevator.

Orvie closed the opening and returned to the great room. Things were not as he expected them to be – Joey was not there. His paint ball gun was there. Orvie's paint ball gun was there, but Joey was not.

Orvie looked in the obvious places – the entry hall, the dining room and back into the pantry and store room. He checked the back door. It was still locked. He returned to the great room and took the stairs two at a time to the second floor. Joey was not in his room. There was a note on his pillow.

'Mrs. Mills. You have until Monday morning to leave this house for good. Your son will be returned at that time – otherwise . . .'

It answered the question of what had happened to Joey. It answered the question of what action was being demanded for the return of Joey. It implied a dire threat against the boy if the instructions were not carried out.

Clearly the time had come to get his mother into the loop. She was at a meeting and Orvie had no idea where. He had a decision to make: try to find her – she might even be in another town – or look for Joey. The second option seemed more reasonable and efficient.

He left Joey's room, climbed the stairs on up to the third floor, and was soon standing in front of the door to the attic. It was standing open. Something caught his eye. On the first step lay a nail – a nail with a green head. Joey had somehow managed to leave him a clue telling him he had been there.

Quietly, Orvie climbed the stairs. Once at the top he listened carefully. Hearing nothing, he turned on his flashlight and made his way across the area to the trap door. It was open, pushed back against the wall. He leaned down

positioning his ear to hear anything that might be going on down there. Nothing!

Well, nothing to hear, but there was another nail on the top step.

"Good old Joey. Always thinking," he said out loud.

The options were strictly limited once somebody entered those stairs. They were boxed in with the cave entrance collapsed and trap door under the bench deactivated. He supposed that switch at the bench could have been rewired if the problem had come to the attention of the bad guy earlier.

His dilemma was whether to risk a confrontation with the bad guy down the stairs or take some other avenue to find Joey. Since Joey had gone along without putting up a fight Orvie figured one of two things were now in play: either the man had a weapon or he had proposed a threat against Joey's mom or even him (Orvie) that Joey wasn't willing to ignore.

Orvie understood that he would be no match for an armed person so he decided to return to Joey's room. For a moment, he had considered pushing the heavy crate back on top of the trapdoor, but decided if Joey managed to get free, he might need to use that as his escape route.

He began searching the web for information about Cliff and Gary. The pool hall had a website. Cliff's last name was Zimmerman. He also had a pool hall a few miles north in Joplin, Missouri. That one had been established fifteen years before. Gary would have been born after it was started. That was probably where they had lived before coming to Landers.

There was an icon on the desktop labeled, Find 'Em. He opened it and was taken to a 'person search' site to which Joey had subscribed. He entered the name Cliff Zimmerman and Landers, Arkansas. The addresses of the two businesses came up. Lots of personal information was also available. Date of birth, date of his wedding, date of his divorce, Gary's birth certificate, phone numbers, emails, organizations to which Cliff belonged. None were related to art. His net worth, although not excessive, was more than comfortable. All and all, the information tended to confirm Orvie's first impression

that there were no reasonable things to connect him to Gallagher's Ghost or to the art stealing and selling scheme.

And yet it had been Gary playing the part out on the lawn. A conundrum. Orvie usually loved puzzling problems, but that one needed an immediate solution – no time to enjoy the process.

He grabbed a hoodie – with dark it had become chilly – and was soon headed on the run for the pool hall. The information indicated they lived upstairs. He circled the building looking for an outside entrance that might lead to the second floor. He tried what seemed to be the obvious door in the alley. It opened. He called up the stairs.

"Cliff. Gary. Anybody home?"

"Who's there?" came an immediate response – gruff and unfriendly.

"Orvie, a friend of Joey Mills. He seems to be in really bad trouble and I need to talk with Gary."

He heard low voices talking together at the top of the stairs.

"Come up."

He was soon there, met by a man who he assumed was Cliff. Orvie extended his hand. It was ignored

"Like I said, I'm Orvie a friend of the Mills family. Joey has been kidnapped and I have reason to believe that your son Gary has some information that will help locate him."

"You calling my son a kidnapper?"

"Absolutely not. I just believe he has some useful information that he isn't even aware he has. I know he's a purple mess right now, but I really need to speak with him."

"You know?"

Orvie nodded.

"Gary, get your butt out here!"

A boy, tall and purple, appeared from a door to Orvie's right. Orvie offered his hand, but it was ignored for a second time.

"I heard what you said to dad. I don't know nothin' about no kidnappin'."

"I understand that. What I really need to know is who got you to pretend to be the ghost up at the old Gallagher House earlier this evening. That's the person I'm after. I have to tell you whoever it is, is a very dangerous individual."

Orvie turned to Cliff.

"Your son is very likely in real serious danger."

"Give it up, Gary. Now!"

"I don't know who it was. I got an envelope with a note and a hundred-dollar bill in it. The note said somebody had a job for me that would take less than an hour and there would be four more bills just like that one for me when the job was completed. I was to meet somebody at the abandoned warehouse on the west side of town – take the fire escape out back up to the second floor at six thirty this evening. I owe dad a lot of money he used to cover some bills for me, so I figured five hundred for an hour's work would go a long way to paying him off.

"I met the person upstairs there. He scared the H E Double Toothpicks out of me, I can tell you that. He was dressed in an old-fashioned suit and vest and was wearing a ski mask. He waved the four bills at me when he saw I was about to leave and I stayed. He gave me a sack of clothes and showed me a picture of a man. He said I should dress like the person in the picture and he told me where to go and at what time I was supposed to walk across the lawn. He had me practice the last part – turning and raising the hat.

"Honestly, I have no idea who it was."

"You didn't recognize the voice, then."

"Can't say I did. He like whispered in a gravely sort of voice. I was scared and just wanted to get out of there. When I went to the door to leave he slipped the four, hundreds, into my shirt pocket and said if I didn't complete my job my dad's pool hall would be burned to the ground. That didn't give me no backin' out room, you see?"

"I did exactly as he said and when I turned and raised my hat I got plastered with all this purple crap – right out of thin air."

"Sorry about that. I shot you with a paint gun from

Joey's second floor window."

Gary seemed impressed.

"Really? From that far? Some shot, I'll say that much."

"I'll see if I can find some way to remove it. It's indelible. Again, sorry. Here's an idea. Mr. Adkins, the drama teacher at the grade school may know how to get it off. He knows all about makeup and things like that. If he can't remove it maybe he can show you how to cover it up with makeup."

"I'm not wearin' no makeup."

"Then I hope you can get used to wearing a purple complexion for the next month or so."

"I'll go see him. I know where he lives. Can I say you sent me?"

"Certainly. If I were you, I'd just say you had an unfortunate experience in a paint ball game and leave out all the rest."

"I gotcha. Thanks, I guess."

"That is hard call, isn't it – thank me or curse me."

Gary shrugged, that time offering his hand for a shake.

"Is there nothing at all you remember about him – height, build, eye color?"

"Okay, yeah, those things. About five feet ten. Broad shoulders and a pot belly. Brown eyes. He was a white guy, I could see the skin around his eyes. He wore fancy gloves that covered his hands. That help?"

"We'll only know that, if it helps, won't we. Thanks for cooperating."

Gary looked at his dad.

"No choice."

Orvie didn't want to think about what might have happened if he hadn't cooperated. Cliff was six-six, weighted two-twenty-five and had a face full of scars suggesting numerous fights of a serious nature. He suddenly felt sorry for Gary.

Orvie left down the steps, two at a time. He figured the only place that somebody could have been heading with Joey was the secret underground room next the bench. He ran all

the way thinking he really should have taken time to find Marty. He continued and was soon on the hill above the room.

He had been thinking it needed to have a ventilation system similar to the one in the storage area. It had been dry and held no musty, underground odor. He searched for openings like those from the storage closet that they had found on the back side of the hill. The darkness made the search more difficult.

Still, by knowing what he was looking for ('for what he was looking,' according to Miss Parmalay's preference) it didn't take long. He listened, but heard nothing but the quiet hum of the fan. It was another low, manmade, rock formation.

He'd try something to let Joey know he was around in case his friend was being held below him. He might be gagged or in some other manner forced to remain silent.

He leaned close to the inlet – the opening into which the air was being sucked – and spoke slowly in the eeriest low voice his twelve-year-old vocal cords could produce.

"This is the ghost of Ralph Gallagher. I place a curse on the man who is impersonating me. May your hair fall out and your fingernails turn green. Ha ha ha ha ha!"

It had been scary enough to send a chill up his own back. He leaned down and listened again still nothing. He stood and began to pace. He often found that helpful when he had a major problem to think through. He paced to the front of the hill just above the bench. He pace toward the rear of the hill, past the rock vents for the storage closets, to the small gardener's shed near a stand of trees.

It came to him that if the bad guy did have some way to exit the basement that he and Joey hadn't discovered, it might be that Joey was being held at the warehouse – basement, first floor, or second story. He was ready to abandon his search at the hill and head for the warehouse when he heard a faint though somehow familiar sound.

It had come from the ground. He knelt and turned his head, listening. It came again. To his right. He moved in that direction and waited, listening. It was coming from a large hollow log.

"A log in place of a pile of stones?" he asked himself.

He moved on his hands and knees and put his ear to the hollow opening. His cheek was met by a constant rush of air. There it was again – that very two fingered whistle with which Joey had first got Orvie's attention at the creek in the wide valley.

Orvie repeated his ghost impersonation and waited. The whistle turned to giggling.

"Orvie. That you?"

"It was the last time I checked. Are you okay down there?"

"Of course, not. I'm being held against my will by some guy in a ski mask and goggles."

"And goggles?"

"Yeah. Dark glass goggles. Can't my bad guy wear goggles?"

"Sure. I'll fill you in later. Where are you? I can't make sense of it. You seem to be on the wrong side of the tunnel – like across the tunnel from the secret room."

"That's probably because that's where I am. Can't describe the place more than to say it seems like more tunnel – rock walls, damp, stinking, irregular rock floor. There's a door at the tunnel. Didn't see it on the way in. Was blindfolded immediately in the great room. I'm thinking the crash we heard in the den was a diversion to get me alone."

"I think that's a bingo for sure. You were taken up stairs to the attic and then down the hidden stairs, right?"

"Right. After we entered the tunnel I took thirty-two steps – smaller than my paces – until we turned into this wherever I am now."

"Any idea about your captor?"

"Male."

"That narrows it down to about 50% of the population. Good ploy, dropping the nails, by the way. I only went as far as the first two, thinking I might be ambushed if I went down the hidden stairs."

"And I'm quite sure you would have been. We stopped at the bottom of the stairs for about ten minutes as if he were

waiting for you. I think his hope was to keep us both in here."

"Any suggestions about how I get you out of there?"

"None. The man left right after he tied my hands behind my back and to my belt so I can't use my arms. He also bound my legs and ankles. I've got myself standing and I've hopped around the area. It's about the same size as the secret room across the hall. I can't see how we missed the opening to this room."

"He threatened you into cooperating, I assume."

"Two threats: one a pistol of some kind and two he said – well, he whispered in a raspy voice – that he'd burn the house to the ground with my mother and you tied up inside it if I so much as breathed too loudly."

"Do you think you're in any immediate danger down there?"

"I have no way of really knowing, but I'd guess, not."

"If he were close to you he'd have heard the whistle, don't you think?"

"Yeah. I thought that over before I started doing it. I figured he'd give me at least one warning to stop if he heard me. In the meantime, I thought you or somebody might hear it. I doubt if he'd have let me continue if he had heard it."

"You hang tight, Okay?"

"Okay. Is mom okay?"

"She's at a meeting, remember. She doesn't know about it yet."

"If I can't figure how to spring you right away, I'll check back in a little while."

"If it's all the same to you, 'spring' sounds a whole lot better than 'check'."

"By the way you'll have to show me how you do that two-fingered whistle with your hands tied behind your back."

"Reveal my secret? Never!"

CHAPTER NINE:

Conked on the Head

Orvie knew he should contact Marty, but in his experience once he got adults involved they pushed him aside and made a royal mess of things.

On a hunch, he returned to the gardener's shed. He had noticed earlier that it was built up against a cement slab that sat into the hillside. As he approached it from the front for the first time he saw that the slab extended top to bottom and side to side behind the little building and was indeed sunk back into the side of the hill. The shed was no more than eight feet wide and five feet front to back. It was constructed of thick, upright planks made weatherproof with vertical strips covering the gaps between them.

It was locked with a padlock through a hasp lock (find pic on line). Three things were immediately obvious to Orvie: It was a new hasp, it had been installed by an amateur, and it was intended to keep something inside rather than keep people from entering it. Very odd! A hasp folds and the screws holding it to the door and frame are supposed to be underneath that folded hasp plate so when it is locked, the screws can't be seen – can't be removed. That one was laid out flat and the screw heads were right there. It would keep the door secure from the inside, but not from somebody with a screwdriver from the outside.

Orvie – always over prepared for things nobody else

would think about – took out his pocket knife, opened the screwdriver and went to work. The screws were soon removed and the hasp soon fell free – padlock still in place. He opened the door. It appeared to be just what it looked to be – rakes, shovels, a push mower, buckets, a hoe.

Orvie entered and examined the wooden back wall – he had expected it to be the concrete slab – it should have been the concrete slab. He tried to manipulate the hooks and shelf supports just in case any might be a pressure lock that would release another secret panel. He found a hook on the left side that did just that. When it was pulled toward him the back wall rotated on a central axle, providing an entry way back into the hillside.

He lit his flashlight and preceded into a tunnel similar in most ways to the main tunnel they had already explored and which held the storage closets – it was narrower and only five feet high. He had to stoop down as he walked. Ten feet into the hillside, and right where he figured it should be, was a metal door. He pulled. It opened.

At that same moment something hit Orvie on the head from behind and he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he was bound like Joey had described the way he had been trussed up. He struggled to open his eyes which did very little good since his surroundings were pitch black. He heard himself moaning.

"Hey, Orvie. Welcome back to the land of the living. It's Joey."

"What happened?" Orvie asked, knowing immediately from the size of the pain in the back of his head.

"The bad guy followed you in from outside. I could see his outline against the dim light from behind. I didn't know there was an entrance over there. You immediately fell to the floor. Apparently, he knocked you out."

"You think!" Orvie said still lying with his face on the wet stone floor.

Joey continued with the story.

"He had a box light and set it on the floor while he tied you up. He took everything out of your pockets like he did to

mine earlier."

"Okay, then, let's get out of here," Orvie said.

"Sure. Just like that. We'll get out of here!"

"Of course. You didn't think I'd come unprepared for the possibility of getting caught, did you?"

"More, please."

"I have two single edge razor blades in my mouth – still wrapped in the cardboard protective sleeves. We need to get your hands at my mouth so I can use my tongue to shove them out into your fingers. You open one behind your back while I roll over in position so you can saw away at the rope that's hooking my wrists to my belt. Once my hands are free I'll pull my feet through the loop my arms form. Once my hands are out in front where I can use them I'll untie your hands and we're as good as out of here."

"You brought razor blades in your mouth? Really?"

"Let's get after it. Move!"

In less time than either figured, Orvie's fingers were untying the rope that held Joey's wrists together. In another five minutes they were both free and headed out the new tunnel toward the shed. One problem. The hasp lock had apparently been re-screwed onto the outside of the door fulfilling its intended function to keep them inside. Perhaps it had been attached inappropriately on purpose and Orvie hadn't given the bad guy enough credit for the trickery.

"There are two spades over here," Orvie said. "Let's find them."

"Dig our way out?" Joey asked confused.

"We'll insert the metal spade part in the crack between the door and the frame and see if we can't pull those screws right out of the wood. They've been out and then back into those holes. I imagine they are fairly loose by now."

With the spades in place they began to pry. In short order, they had the door open. The moon was but a tiny slip in the sky and didn't really light up the darkness very well. At that point they had no flashlights. Joey knew the area and he led the way back to the house. It was going on nine when they walked up the front steps to the porch. Mrs. Mills' car pulled in

behind them. They retraced their steps back down to the lane to greet her.

“So, you have a good meeting, mom?”

“Very good. I think we’ve arranged for several great art teachers to come and hold week long seminars for the kids at school. I assume you boys are having a good weekend.”

Orvie took the lead with the answer to her question.

“Oh, yes ma’am. We’ve played a little paint ball, worked a bit on knot tying and untying, explored the house – that’s a great attic space – with some skylights it could become a super studio for you . . .”

. . . And,” Joey continued, “we made up a game we called Kidnap and Escape.”

They couldn’t help but laugh. Mrs. Mills just marked it up to twelve-year-old boys – a breed she had already decided she would never understand. They went inside and emptied the ice cream container before returning to Joey’s room.

“Okay, it’s time to run through what we think we know,” Orvie said lying back on his bed. “A few things happened while you were kidnapped.”

“Oh, like what?”

“Like Gary Zimmerman needs a good friend and I think you need to be it, but we’ll get to that later. I confronted him and his dad. I’m sure his dad doesn’t know anything about any of this and Gary was somebody else’s pawn – somebody who knew he was desperate for money and might not be big on legal considerations. Apparently, his dad is making him pay for whatever his previous legal problems cost. I don’t disagree with that, but the boy is terribly afraid of his father and I think that led him to jump at the money without thinking it through.

“He describes the man like you describe the one who took you – old fashioned suit, and ski mask. He didn’t wear the goggles with the dark glass when he met with Gary. I think that means he was sure that Gary didn’t know him well enough to recognize him just by his eyes. With you, however, he was cleverly careful so you couldn’t see them. That means it’s definitely somebody who knows you well. My list includes

Mr. Martin the principal, Marty the cop, and Mr. Adkins the drama teacher and your co-star in the play."

"Add Mr. Gildersleeve – he and I have practiced together a dozen times. Like I said, he's Mr. Adkin's understudy."

"Anybody else?"

"Mayor Cutter. I'm on a kid's advisory committee that meets with him once a month. I've been to his house several times – it's the second biggest house in town. If we're keeping the list just to men, I suppose that's it, then."

"You have any reason to think the person who took you is a woman and not a man?"

"Not really. Just trying to cover all the bases."

"Which of the men have brown eyes?" Orvie asked.

Joey thought for a moment.

"All of them, why?"

"Gary believes the man he dealt with had brown eyes. He seemed to have stood very close to him and got a good look."

"There is one thing I should tell you," Joey said. "While the bad guy was jostling me around to guide me into the room where you found me, I managed to slip a green headed nail into his back pocket."

"Excellent. It may be more help to us in narrowing down the field than it will amount to evidence. All the men have helped with the set or been around it so any one of them could have picked up a nail."

"Yeah. I see. I guess finding that suit is what we really need, then."

"That would be a clincher. I don't suppose you have pictures of the ghost, do you?"

"Sorry. In the moments of its appearance I was thinking more of my safety than saving the moment for posterity (future generations)."

"Hey, wait," Orvie said. "Gary said the guy gave him a picture of the ghost guy so he'd know just how to dress for his performance out on the lawn. We need to get back to Gary."

"Let's go. We get to his place by using the stairs at the back of the pool hall."

"I know. I've already visited him once this evening, remember. He looks terrible – the purple paint on the right side of his face. You'll want to laugh but don't."

They ran the back yards so they wouldn't be seen in case the ghost guy was keeping an eye out for them. In less than five minutes they were at the door at the top of the steps. Orvie knocked, quietly. He wasn't sure why. Fortunately, Orvie thought, Gary opened the door. Orvie put his hand to his lips and motioned him out onto the landing.

"If you're worried about dad hearing, don't. By this time of night, he's always passed out from booze. It's about the only time I'm at home that I feel safe. What you guys doing here?"

He looked back and forth between them and added one more thought.

"I thought the sharp-shooter-new-kid, here said you'd been kidnapped, Joey."

"I was. Old sharp-shooter here rescued me."

"Really. So what about me at ten o'clock at night?"

Orvie did the talking.

"You said the man with the money proposition gave you a picture. Do you still have it?"

He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the envelope. It contained the note and the picture.

"Great. What about the clothes?"

"They were plastered with paint. I put them back in the plastic bag and left them in the dumpster down in the alley."

"Can you show us?"

"Sure."

He led them directly to the sack.

"Thanks, pal," Joey said. "You've been a big help. We really have to get to know each other better. Once this thing gets solved you'll have to come over."

"So long as you don't make me play paint ball."

The kid even had a fledgling sense of humor, Orvie

thought.

"Well, I'll see you later, then," Joey said and the two of them turned to leave west down the alley.

"Oh, there is one thing about the clothes," Gary said.

They stopped and turned to listen

"When you examine them, you'll see that the entire back of the pants and coat are covered in black cloth so when the person turns away from the house it looks like he disappears."

"Excellent information. Thanks again!" Joey said.

They turned again and walked into the darkened alley.

Gary called after them.

"Thanks."

It's full meaning was unclear, but Joey raised his arm to recognize it and they walked on.

Once back in the bedroom Orvie suggested they scan the picture into the computer and see if Joey could raise anything that might be of help to them.

"Well for one thing," Joey began, "the outfit is on a mannequin (store window dummy) and not a person so if we were counting on seeing the guy we won't."

"The featureless heads of mannequins often have a store name on them," Orvie said. "Can you enlarge that area?"

"Like that? Yeah. I see. There are letters on it that stream off to the right side out of sight."

"L G S D plus maybe something else we can't see," Orvie said.

"L G S could be Landers Grade School. Landers General Shy Doofus, Landers Silly Grim Doings, I don't know," Joey said.

"Think about the letters to the right that we can't see," Orvie pointed out.

"Got it. That's the stencil the drama department puts on the stuff that belongs to it. LGSDD – Landers Grade School Drama Department – it needs another D at the end. There are several mannequins in the wardroom room behind

Mr. Adkin's room in the basement of the school building."

"Are there a lot of clothes in there?"

"A gazillion at least. Many of them are on hangers, handing from racks. More are stored in boxes that are labeled with what they contain."

"Ever remember seeing the ghost suit in there?"

"No. There is a shelf of boxes labeled period costumes. Could be in one of them."

"Can we get into the school building this time of night?"

"Don't you ever sleep, Orvie?"

Orvie smiled, but didn't respond otherwise.

"Sure, I can get us in there."

On her way up to her room for the night.

"Heading out for one more jog before beddy-bye, mom. Love you."

"Be home before dawn."

The boys were soon heading down the winding lane.

"Dawn?" Orvie asked.

"Her way of saying she loves me – it's our private code. The more absurd the more love."

Joey led them along alleys and across back yards until they reached the back side of the school building.

"The window to the boiler room can be raised pretty easily. Where we need to be is just a few rooms to the east."

They were immediately into the boiler room, along the hall and into Mr. Adkins room. Once in the wardrobe room Joey turned on the lights and closed the door behind them. It was a storage area with no windows. The door was solid. He went straight to the section that held the period clothes.

"They began reading the labels on the boxes. This may be what we want," Orvie said. "Early 1900s – Male. There are five boxes labeled that way."

They began opening them.

"This box is empty," Joey said. "So is this one."

Orvie turned around to the hanging racks.

"Let's see what might be handing up. If it were going to

be used frequently it might be hanging. What self-respecting ghost would want to wear wrinkled duds?"

"I think we have a bingo here, Orvie."

"What?"

Orvie moved to where Joey stood. He was holding up the pant leg of a gray suit.

"Take a whiff of this."

"A familiar odor – the damp floor of the tunnel and that dungeon we were held in."

"That I was held in. You just waltzed in, spit out a few razorblades and we left."

Orvie smiled. Joey seemed serious.

Orvie took the pants off the rack and held them up to himself. They dragged the floor by eight inches.

"I'm five eight. In order to fit into these, a guy would need to be over six feet. None of our potential suspects are that tall."

"Actually, Mr. Gildersleeve is more like six-four."

"What I was getting at was that the bottom of the pants would drag the ground no matter which of our suspects were wearing them. I suppose it may rule out Gildersleeve, however. I suppose that, again, everybody in town and their chickens have access to this room."

"Pretty much, yes."

"The back pocket," Joey said reminding them he had slipped a nail into the back pocket of his kidnapper.

"Here it is, sharp and green," Joey said. "Shall I take it or leave it?"

"Let's leave it for the time being. It may be usefully in some way later on."

They managed it back onto the hanger and replaced that on the rack. As they moved toward the door to leave, it opened. There stood Mr. Adkins looking very surprised. He might have been looking surprised because he didn't expect to see anybody in there – especially at that time of the night. He might have been surprised because he thought they were trussed up on the floor of the dark, damp, dungeon. He might

have been surprised because his arrival to put on the ghost outfit had been interrupted. Joey responded to the uncomfortable confrontation.

"Hey. Imagine meeting you here. Probably a good thing, actually. You know that one scene where I come into the office all dressed up? I was thinking maybe a turtle neck under a sport coat with contrasting slacks would be better than the suit and tie mom recommended. What do you think? I don't own a turtle neck and thought there might be one in here – there is so much stuff in here."

The kid was good – that much Orvie had to give him. For a moment, he even had Orvie thinking about the combination.

"I like that idea. Like you said, but I don't think we have a turtleneck in here. Does your mom know you're out roaming the town at this time of night?"

"She's okay with it. We're on our way home now."

The boys moved toward the door that Mr. Adkins was blocking with his body. Suddenly, they were not at all certain he was going to let them by.

CHAPTER TEN: **Final Preparations**

After a few awkward movements, Adkins moved back out of the doorway and the boys passed through.

“We can leave through the front door – you can always get out of a school building.” Joey said.

“No alarm system.”

“This is Landers, Orvie. Most the folks in town don’t even have keys to their houses. It’s a trusting, comfortable place. It’s the thing I like most about it. Just the opposite from the city.”

“Old Gallagher’s Ghost put a kink in all that for you, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, but we’re about to close in on the bad guy, right?”

“I hope so.”

A car drove by and they were bathed in a spotlight.

Orvie was startled by the move.

“That’s bound to be Marty,” Joey said approaching the car as it pulled to a stop.”

“Marty?” Joey said shading his eyes with his hands.

The light went off.

“Joey. Orvie. A bit late to be roaming the streets, isn’t it?”

“What time is it?” Joey asked as if surprised by the comment.

"Eleven, give or take."

"Didn't realize it was so late. We're headed home now anyway."

Orvie approached the open window.

"So, you usually patrol this late, do you?" he said trying to get a conversation started.

"Coming home from Amy Lou's – my girlfriend. Really, I never patrol anything. Waste of gas and time. This is Landers. Most folks don't even have house keys, here, Orvie."

It seemed like he had just heard that speech. It did make for a comfortable way of life, he agreed, but it also made it way too easy for ghosts to roam the halls of the big house up on the hill.

A car came up the street from the other direction and stopped, rolling down the window. It was the principal, Mr. Martin. He and Marty exchanged pleasantries and he waved and nodded at the boys before his vehicle moved on.

Orvie had an idea. He looked at Joey.

"Don't you think we should tell Marty about that guy that's been watching your house the past couple nights?"

"Oh, that guy. Yeah. Well, maybe that would be a good idea. You go ahead."

Joey, of course, had no idea what was going on in his new friend's unpredictable though usually fascinating brain.

"They've seen him several nights in a row watching the house. He moves around, east side, back, west side. Never see a vehicle just him. Average build, dark jacket, walks with a limp. They don't have any idea who it might be or what he might want. Just thought as the law enforcement person here, you should know about it."

"Yes. I should. You did the right thing by telling me. I'll take some passes by tonight and see what I can find out."

"We appreciate your concern and I'm sure Joey's mom will feel better knowing you're on the job."

Marty flashed a salute, rolled up his window, and moved on.

The boys trotted on.

"What was that all about?"

"Well, I figured if Marty's not our guy, and if our guy does return tonight, it can't be all bad to have a cop keeping tabs on things."

Joey nodded. Orvie continued.

"All the main suspects have now seen us tonight. If any of them are the bad guy, they also now know we are no longer their captive. That could mean an interesting night ahead."

"You do find ways to turn wonderful fall night strolls into terrifying midnight experiences."

"I try to do my part. But seriously, there is one more stop I'd like us to make. Does Adkins have a garage or basement?"

"Mr. Adkins? A garage. No basement. What's up?"

"I'd just like to take a peek and see if he has anything in there that might tie him to the whole Gallagher's Ghost thing. If not, we can probably take him off the list and move on to Mr. Martin's place and then Marty's."

"You aren't planning for us to sleep at all tonight, are you?"

Orvie grinned figuring the answer was obvious.

Adkins lived just a block south from where they had chatted with Marty so they got there quickly.

"Suppose he has an alarm on the garage door?" Orvie asked.

"Haven't you heard anything I've been telling you about Landers?"

"Right. No keys. Got it."

Orvie guided them around to the side door. The garage was not attached to the house. Predictably – there in Landers – it was unlocked. They entered. The car was still gone. Mr. Adkins may have still been at school. Just why he was there that late Orvie couldn't figure.

They had Orvie's penlight and found a case flashlight on the work bench across the back. Joey picked it up and turned it on.

"That's like the one the kidnapper had when he tied us

up. Only a few million like it sold, I suppose."

"Data, Joey. Data."

They moved along the bench and found nothing that would implicate the man.

Joey moved the light to the shelf above it.

"Interesting," Orvie said. "Same boxes as those in the garment room at school. Each one is labeled. even. That one looks interesting."

He pointed. He helped Joey up onto the bench and he removed the box and set it down. Orvie opened it.

"Well lookie here. Optic fiber cable if I'm not mistaken."

"And shiny disks and CDs that just might be the home of Gallagher's Ghost," Joey added."

"Let's put it back and get out of here."

"There is one thing, Orvie. Compare the hand writing on this box with that on the others up here. Sure looks different from all of them, to me."

"Excellent observation. Can you get some pictures with your phone – the electronics box plus a couple of the others for comparison?"

That was soon taken care of and the box was replaced. What had initially seemed like solid evidence, quickly weakened. Somebody else could have planted it to take suspicion away from them. Who? Martin, Marty, Cutter. Or, Mrs. Adkins could have done the labeling for herself or her husband.

"Let's make tracks for your place. We have a better chance of controlling things there than we do out here."

"So, it sounds like you're expecting bad things tonight.

"I suppose so. You played that just right back there with Marty, by the way – putting the conversation about the stalker in my lap and all."

"I figured you had one of your off the wall ideas so, having no idea what it might be, it was about all I could do.

After Orvie's comments about being safer at home, Joey picked up the pace and by the time they reached the front porch they were running a full out sprint. It continued

right on up the steps and into the entry hall.

The downstairs was dark – his mother had apparently turned off the lights. At least they hoped it had been she who had turned off the lights. Orvie soon had his penlight lighting their way.

“Let’s rescue some chips and candy bars from the pantry before we go upstairs,” Joey said.

He turned the light on in the pantry and went about finding the goodies. There was a noise on the steps behind the door that led to the basement steps. Orvie made the ‘be quiet’ signal with his finger to his lips. He also made the ‘turn the key’ motion with his hand.

Joey pointed to above the door frame. Orvie felt along it and came down with the key. Quietly, he inserted it in the lock and turned it. He was immediately standing in the middle of the ghostly image. He turned and scanned the opposite wall, pointing at the spot where from which the light was being projected.

The image was soon off. He pulled a chair over to the wall and climbed up so he could examine the surface of the molding.

“It’s the end of an optic fiber cable with some sort of lens on it. No disk reflection at this point.”

He got down and put the chair back.

“Wouldn’t you think that the bad guy would know that by now we’d be on to the projected image thing?” Joey said.

“If he’s got a lick of smarts he would. Maybe ghosts don’t take their intelligence with them into the great beyond.”

He had intended it as humorous. For a moment, Joey took it seriously. Orvie continued.

“I’m thinking at this point it’s just his way of saying he can be anywhere in the house anytime he wants to be. Another way of keeping us uneasy.”

“He’s succeeding, I can tell you that,” Joey said.

“Let’s show him that he no longer has access,” Orvie said.

“I’m in favor of that, but how?”

“We’ll leave the old key in this lock but turn it half way

past the position from which it can be withdrawn from the key hole – like this, with the head of the key crosswise in the hole. That way it can't be forced out from the other size and another one inserted to gain entry."

He pointed for them to leave the way they came. They gathered up the goodies, added two sodas, and went back to the great room. They stashed the food on the steps leading to the second floor and Orvie led them to the den door.

"Key?" he asked, already feeling for it on the frame up above.

He found it and placed it in the keyhole following the plan at the basement stairs. Joey had already moved to the bedroom door on the left side of the room and did the same thing there.

"I figured better be safe than sorry," he explained. "I know we haven't found a secret passage in there, but there could well be one."

"I agree."

"The front door while we're here?" Joey asked.

"Yes. Good thinking."

"The outside door has a modern lock with a separate dead bolt," Joey explained.

With that door was secured, they climbed the stairs to Joey's room. Orvie had something further on his mind

"Since we don't know for sure about passages or the elevator system in the rooms on the third floor I suggest we also lock them. Do you think they have keys?"

"I can't say from personal experience, but all the rest of the rooms had that one stashed up above it so I imagine they do also."

Assuming that was the next piece of business, Joey led the way up to the third floor. He had been right; the keys were all there. They soon had them all locked and secured. They stood talking on the third floor.

"That still leaves the trapdoor in the attic," Joey said.

"It does," Orvie said. "It leaves the trapdoor in the attic as the only way in for a real live Gallagher's Ghost. If he's planning something for in here tonight he'll have to come

through that door that leads to the attic.”

“And how does that help us?”

“I’m betting he’s planned something for tonight and I’ll bet he’ll keep searching until he finds a way in. The more locked doors he meets the more upset he’ll get and the more upset he gets, the less clearly he’ll be thinking. All we need to do now is to figure out a way to capture whoever comes through that door from the attic.”

“Oh. A great plan. Lead him into the house without any idea about how to capture him.”

“That’s where we collaborate,” Orvie explained. “Team work. Partnership. What ya got in your room?”

“Wet pants – well almost.”

“Be serious. We may not have much time here.”

“I was being serious, but I can change wavelengths. What I have here, the boy asks. Well, I have rope, I have a huge marble collection, I have a mini spotlight, I have the paintball guns, I have books, I have, pillows and mattresses and sheets and blankets, chairs. I’m not sure where to go here, Orvie.”

“I think you have it solved.”

“Really? Good for me. When do I get to hear my solution?”

“It will emerge as we go along. Let’s bring some supplies up here and get started.”

“I’m all in favor of getting started. You got our list?”

Ten minutes, five trips back and forth from Joey’s room to the third-floor hall, and a candy bar apiece, and they had accumulated quite an arsenal of unconventional weaponry.

“While I string a section of rope through the hem of this pillow case – I’m going to have to make a small hole in it – you take the marbles and spread out half a dozen over each of the steps coming down from the attic.”

“Ah! I begin to see the plan – well part of it.”

Joey took the large container of marbles’ to the top of the stairs, and began working his way down. By the time he had finished, Orvie had the rope threaded through the hem with two feet of it left on each end.

"Now, make a noose with some of the rope – use about twenty feet of it."

"We're going to hang the man?"

"Not in the traditional sense," Orvie said. "We need it to open up into a circle of about three feet and slip closed really easily."

"I can make a noose – got a merit badge in knots back in sixth grade."

"I know. Saw it on your bulletin board in your room, ergo I'm asking you to make it."

"Very observant, young sharp shooting lad."

"Why, thank you, lad with the best junk food stash on the planet. Chips?"

"No thanks, I'll get right on this noose, I think."

"While Joey worked with the main section of rope, Orvie tied the ends of an eight-foot piece of rope to the legs of two study desk type chairs. He snugged them up the legs to about six inches from the floor.

Presently, Joey offered the noose for Orvie's inspection.

"Great job!"

"So, what's the exact plan?" Joey asked.

"We are assuming that the bad guy will be unable to get any solid traction in this stairwell and will slip and fall down the steps to the bottom. We will leave the door unlatched so any pressure from the other side will make it fly open. At that point, if he's still conscious, he should stand up. If he still has hold of a flashlight by that time, I will shoot a paint ball or fifteen at the lens and black it out so it will be useless. Our eyes will be adjusted to the darkness. If he's been using a flashlight, his won't be – at least not to the same degree. With one of these chairs on each side of the door and the rope stretched tight between them he should then trip and fall on his face. While I slip the pillow case over his head and shoulders and down his arms, tying the rope in the hem tightly around him, you will snug the noose around his ankles and tie it tight.

"At that point you fly down to the front door and unlock it. On your way down you call Marty and give him a SOS for

help. I think turning on the porch light would be a nice touch. I'll sit on the intruder until you and the cavalry return."

"Only about a gazillion things that could go wrong with that plan, but it's what we got so let's go with it," Joey said.

"On the other hand," Orvie said, "only about four or five things that we need to have go right. I like those odds."

They turned off the light and sat back against the north wall between the doors to the two spare bedrooms.

"Where's the soda?" Joey asked.

"Here."

"Where's the chips?"

"Here."

"Where's the bad guy?"

Before Orvie could come up with some smart Alec remark, they heard footsteps crossing the attic above them. Joey reached out and clutched at Orvie's leg. It didn't mean he stopping feeding his face with chips and guzzling soda, but he continued to tighten his grip.

The footsteps stopped" Orvie whispered. "Let's get our stuff and take our positions.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN:

The Capture of Gallagher's Ghost

The crash and bumpity, bump, bump, ride down the stairs was accompanied by several outcries indicating severe hurt was taking place. The door flew open. The figure struggled to its feet. Orvie fired at the flashlight. From such point blank range, not only did it hit it dead center and make it go dark, but the force knocked it from the man's hands. The intruder stepped forward tripping over the stretched rope just as planned.

Orvie was on him immediately, the pillow case slid in place and the rope was tied behind his back to hold it in place. Joey lassoed the kicking legs and cinched the rope tight winding it in and out through the man's legs to keep it in place. He rushed for the top of the stairway and rode the wide wooden rail to the second-floor landing. A quick transfer to the railing of the bottom flight and he was almost immediately at the door to the entry hall. He had made the call. He flipped on the porch light. Fifteen seconds later Marty appeared, handgun drawn.

That surprised Joey. He didn't even know the man owned a gun.

"This way."

They rushed up the stairs. Joey's mother came out of her room into the hall and flipped on a light.

"What's going on, Joey."

"We just caught Gallagher's Ghost. Stay here where it's safe until I give you the all clear."

She didn't pay attention to his admonition, of course – she was the mother who gave the orders; Joey was the boy who followed them. NOT!

Once on the third floor, Joey turned on the hall lights. He had to smile. Orvie was sitting on somebody's pillow covered head – squirming and making every effort to turn over. Had he succeeded he'd have turned his head right off his neck.

"Glad you could come to our party," Orvie said as the others arrived.

Mrs. Mills stood back arms folded, dumbfounded.

Marty and Orvie stood the captive up on his feet.

Orvie looked at Joey's mother.

"It only seems fitting that the woman of the house should reveal the real Gallagher's Ghost."

He untied the rope holding the pillow cover in place. Joey took his mother by her arm and they moved to the man. She reached up and with only a little difficulty pulled it off.

"Mr. Adkins!" Joey said. "I really, really, really, wanted it to be somebody else. I respect – well, respected – you so much."

"Grow up kid. I've taught in this crumby, two bit, town most of my adult life. And for what? A crumby house, a crumby car, a crumby go nowhere job. I had my chance at the big time. It was all supposed to be so simple. I set things up in an abandoned house. I'd received the stolen art, stored it, and showed it to the buyers. I'd take a percentage and everything stayed clean – the buyers would never show the paintings so I took zero chance of being caught. Then you two came to town. I knew every nook and cranny of this house from the years my wife worked here for Joseph. When I learned of your intention to occupy the place I set about making the necessary arrangements to bring Gallagher's Ghost to life. That should have also been simple."

"Then, this boy wonder, here, arrives on the scene and makes everything begin falling apart. What kind of a name is

Orvie, anyway?"

"Very likely the name of the last new twelve-year-old you'll ever meet," Marty said.

Orvie had one final question.

"I'm just curious what you had planned for in here tonight."

Adkins sighed deeply and nodded toward his shirt pocket. Marty felt it and removed a small vial.

"Three tiny pills," Marty said. "The label reads cyanide. One of these babies forced into somebody's mouth and they'd be dead in ten seconds."

"Just to make it clear," Orvie said. "Three pills – one for Mrs. Mills, one for Joey and one for me?"

Mr. Adkins nodded, closed his eyes and tears began streaming down his cheeks.

Marty put in a call to the Sheriff's office for transportation to the county jail – Landers didn't have one. Before he escorted Adkins down stairs, he turned to the others.

"I've been the town cop here for nearly fifteen years now. Tonight, is only time I've ever really felt like one. I went on my first stakeout tonight. I took my side arm out of its holster for the first time tonight. I captured my first genuine bad guy tonight, and now I'm going to really get to read somebody their rights – for the first time."

Orvie and Joey looked at each other and raised their eyebrows wondering just how Marty was going to relate the story about his awesome capture of Gallagher's Ghost. Oh, to be a mouse in a corner at the local café that next morning.

* * *

The boys slept the clock around the next day. Mrs. Mills still really didn't understand what had happened, after all the boys had been right there with her all day.

The stolen art was placed in the custody of the FBI since it had come from all over the country and would eventually be returned to its rightful owners.

The play was a huge success. Mr. Gildersleeve made a top-notch psychologist counterpart to Joey's troubled boy

and his six-foot-six-inch frame almost fit into the chair Mrs. Mills had so carefully selected to fit the much shorter, Mr. Adkins. The simple stage set she had designed received rave reviews.

Orvie thought back over his long career in solving mysteries and figured that one had been the first that he'd ever helped solve in just one day – one very, very, long and exhausting day.

He remained in town until the following Friday morning – after all, his 'father' would be waiting for him beside the beautiful clear creek in the wide green valley there in his beloved Ozark Mountains. Maybe on his next visit to northwest Arkansas, he'd even get to spend some time enjoying them.

He wondered what fascinating new people he would meet around the next corner of his life and what baffling new mysteries lay in wait for him and his special skills. If he lived to be 300 – and he very likely would – he'd never forget those twenty-four exciting hours working with Joey to bring down Gallagher's Ghost.

The End