

The logo consists of the letters 'LMP' in a stylized, white, cursive font with a horizontal line extending to the left.The text 'Marc Miller' is written in a red, cursive font, and 'Ghost Writer' is written in a black, cursive font below it, all contained within a yellow, scalloped-edged oval.

People are dying.
The town's usually
playful ghosts are
being blamed.

The background is a photograph of a log cabin in a wooded area. The cabin is made of weathered logs and has a gabled roof. It is surrounded by tall trees with green leaves. The ground in front of the cabin is covered with fallen leaves and some grass.

THE HAUNTING OF HICKORY HOLLOW:

An Ozark Ghost Story

by

Marc Miller, Ghost Writer

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Number four in the series

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CHAPTER ONE

There is no doubt about it; mid-June is the ideal time to visit Northwest Arkansas. Nights often drop into the upper fifties and daytime highs seldom stray beyond the mid-eighties. I am on my way southeast from *Eureka Springs*, one of my favorite small towns in the universe, on my way to *Hickory Hollow* a speck on large maps and nonexistent on the smaller versions. The sun is straight overhead making it a world without shadows – quite different, I imagine, from the one I am about to enter. The generally deep blue sky is punctuated by small, puffy, white, clouds. I have to wonder if their unhurried manner is a reflection of the slow pace preferred by the folks who live below, *or vice versa*.

After some two hours of navigating the winding, narrow, roads and mounting the lush, gentle, hills, I have descended into Hickory Hollow. It is a compact valley named – surprisingly – not after the trees that grow here but after its early settler, Jeremiah Hickory. A lazy creek – *the Sandy* – hugs the south hill as it flows east. The town, carrying the same name – *Hickory Hollow* – spans the valley from the gently rippling water, across the mostly level valley floor and then moves part way up the hill to the north.

The view as one comes down off the hill, transports you back in time to the pre-civil war era – log and rough hewn buildings with hand cut shake shingles, narrow streets, and stone chimneys and fireplaces. The once rut-ridden, dirt-faced, main street – actually it has no name, none of the streets do – has been graveled in deference to progress. Along both sides it sports wide, raised, wooden, sidewalks, mostly covered in porch-like fashion with overhangs at various heights from the building facades. Hitching rails frame the two central blocks as if expecting the Cartwrights or the Cavalry to arrive at any moment.

The two absurdities in the picture are the cars and pickups dotting the community, and a huge parking lot just to the west of town; it can easily hold five hundred cars. I assume I understand its purpose but will find out for sure, shortly.

Closer inspection of the main drag suggests it is not the typical one horse, hill town. There are two dozen buildings facing each other across the only truly wide street in town. There is a grocery store and a General Dollar store, which must provide the basic necessities for the residents, while the rest cater to tourists. Granny's Ozark Candy. Uncle Elmer's Leather Shop. Patty's Pottery. Aunt Sally's Hand Made Apple Dolls. Hickory Hollow Ghost Central. Toys from the Hollow. The Hickory Hollow Gazette. Grampa Gray's Photography Shop. Period Portraits by Patty . . . and there is a parade of others including two oversized restaurants, a five floor hotel, and a Theater boasting – on the two gaudy billboards outside – lantern slide shows, moving pictures, and dramatic extravaganzas live on stage daily.

At the western city limit sign – which boasts *412 people, 5 friendly Ghosts, and one despondent Apparition* – there is an information center which provides a variety of services including brochures about the activities available there, ticket windows for the plays and such, a bank of cold drink machines, and restrooms large enough to accommodate the majority of the little town's residents at one

time.

I arrived shortly after noon on Monday, the Hickory Hollow day of rest. The shops were open but the main events in the downtown theater and the open air amphitheater in the woods just to the east of the main drag were not in operation. The single area in town that was always bustling with activity was the old hotel. It had sixty, small, generally uncomfortable rooms, offered no air conditioning and minimal 'facilities', charged folks a minimum of \$300 a night, and required reservations nine or more months in advance.

The hotel was haunted – or so the story had been told since the late seventeen hundreds. (Thus, the *boo-ming* business.) Ghost groupies came from all over the world to have *The Hickory Hollow Experience*. They were generally friendly, energetic, spirits, and guests were guaranteed at least one extended sighting during their night in residence. I didn't know the whole story but since first hearing about it several years before it had been on my list of places to someday visit.

My sudden appearance in the valley was in response to an urgent invitation from Adam Engle, the present owner of the hotel. He and three other local business men had chipped in to finance my stay and enlist my help in handling some ghost-based problem. I wasn't sure of the details but any unusual ghostly phenomenon was enough for me to pack my bags, gas up my red Chrysler, and head south from my home in Indiana.

My name is Marc Miller – ghost writer. I investigate supernatural goings on write ghost-based novels. I've been in the area just to the north and west of the Hollow on three other occasions to do research for books* and have grown to love the people, their softened, utilitarian approach to the English language, and the magnificent countryside.

Since there was no parking along the main street, I parked on a side street several blocks from the hotel – it had no parking lot – and walked the boards, enjoying the sound of my heels on wood and the sight of colorful displays in the shop windows. During my thirty five years of life, one thing had become absolutely apparent to me about myself; I could, under no circumstances, pass a candy store. I entered and drooled my way around the shop. If everything there had really been made by Granny, she must be quadruplets who need no sleep. Regardless, I made my purchase of lemon drops and a ten inch, solid, white chocolate ghost, before moving on to the hotel. My most immediately pressing conundrum became whether or not I would, in fact, ever be able to bring myself to eat that beautifully fashioned little ghost.

"Marc," came the pleasant though clearly uneasy voice from behind the massive check-in desk.

"And you would be Adam, I assume," I said stepping up to take his extended hand.

He nodded.

"You said a little after noon and it's a little after noon. I like promptness in a man. Had lunch?"

"No. Picked up some candy in case lunch wasn't in my immediate future. More honestly, I picked up some candy just because there was candy available

to be picked up. My main vice, I suppose – junk food.”

I offered him a lemon drop, which he waved off with a quick smile.

“First, let’s get you settled into the *Tommy Suite*.”

“Tommy Suite. I can honestly say I’ve never before stayed in a Tommy Suite. I’ve been shot at by Tommy *guns* and some of my work has been panned as Tommy *rot*, but never a Tommy *Suite*.”

“Tommy is the teenage ghost of the Coolidge family. It’ll make more sense after I fill you in on things. Each of the family members has a suite named after him. Joel, Virginia, Tommy, Larry, and William. One on each floor – center of the east side – facing the cabin that . . . Well, like I said, it will all make sense later. Your luggage?”

“Three bags in the trunk of my car, a red Chrysler with Indiana plates parked on the side street next to the leather shop.”

“If you’ll give me keys I’ll send Winkie for them. He’s completely trustworthy.”

“I’m sure he is.”

I handed Adam the trunk key and he rang the desk bell. A tall, slender, man, gaunt in appearance, perhaps twenty, perhaps forty – I couldn’t be sure – emerged from behind a curtained doorway to the left of the desk.

“Three bags, Red Chrysler, Indiana plates, somewhere up Jake’s street,” Adam said by way of instruction.

Winkie looked me over and eventually nodded as if to say he thought I was worthy of his assistance. He planted a time worn straw hat on his unkempt hair and left through a rear door. I’m sure I had a question on my face. Adam explained.

“Winkie is good help, dependable, honest. Can’t speak. Poorly coordinated. Doesn’t appear to have much upstairs but everybody likes him. You can always pick him out in a crowd – only ever wears black and red checked shirts. I have no reason why so don’t ask.”

“I’m curious about his age – for no legitimate reason, I suppose.”

“Not sure. About twenty five, maybe a year or so younger.”

“Winkie is surely not his given name.”

“Wilbur Winkler. Comes from a hill family. Mother and father were cousins as were each of theirs. Not much of that goes on around here anymore but *Yates Mountain* is pretty much a country unto itself. Outsiders aren’t welcome up there – aren’t *tolerated* would be more like it.”

He pointed out the south window toward the hill across the creek.

“And Winkie is *here*, why, then?”

“Just showed up one day when he was about thirteen, maybe fourteen, I guess. Later on we learned that his parents had been struck dead by lightning and he had witnessed it. He wandered down here and he’s been here ever since. Lives in a shack he built on the south bank up a piece into the woods on the hill.

The *Tommy Suite* was on the third floor. There were two sets of stairs in the hotel, the main one on the front – the north side – and the narrower, back stairway on the south. They were bare wood steps and poorly lighted – by

design, I assumed, to further the ghostly ambiance.

The *room residency card* on the inside of the door said the suite rented for five hundred dollars a night with a two night maximum. Odd, I thought, setting a *maximum*. There were two rooms and an add-on, private bathroom carved out of the bedroom. At five hundred a night I figured that came to about a dollar a square foot. The East wall of each room had a six by six foot section of three, double hung, windows with a narrow door opening out onto a wooden deck. The ceilings were low, seven feet, at best. Two frosted globe light fixtures – converted to electricity from gas – sprouted from each wall five feet up from the floor.

The rooms were decorated with garish, flocked, burgundy and gold, striped, wall paper above a three foot dark wood wainscoting that encircled them. A beautiful old, period couch and several, more or less matching, chairs and occasional tables filled the bare floored sitting room. An almost double bed, dresser, chair and antique library table graced the bedroom. The marbled bath was small and to the point – sink, stool, and shower all within a three foot by seven foot space. A heavy, burgundy, draw drape served as its door.

The suite was spotlessly clean. In the closet hung one set of clothes – shirt, vest, pants – with boots on the floor below. I was told they were authentic teen gear from 1799 the year the story began, and they were *not* to be touched. They were there for the sole use of the ghost of Tommy Coolidge and I was warned not to be surprised if they were removed during the night and dirty clothing left in their place. The idea of cleanly ghosts had never entered my mind. How fascinating.

By the time Adam had opened windows and turned on several fans, Winkie arrived with my bags and insisted – in a generally friendly way – on hanging and stashing my clothes for me. He went about the task in a well practiced, deliberate, manner. I offered him five dollars but instead he pointed to the sack of lemon drops on the dresser.

"Sure. Take them," I said, growing more and more interested in the gangly young man.

In a careful, methodical, fashion, he removed *five* – one, I assumed for each dollar I had offered him. He delivered an appreciative nod, folded the paper candy bag closed, and left the room.

"A fascinating character. I didn't mean that in a negative way," I hastened to add. "As a writer I think in terms of characters for my stories and his aura has wonderful potential."

Adam nodded and with his arm suggested a chair in the sitting room. We both sat looking out over the town and countryside to the east. The amphitheater was visible in the distance. Adam took a pair of binoculars from one of the table drawers and handed them to me pointing.

"From here you can watch the '*Haunting of Hickory Hollow*'. It's the play set in the outdoor amphitheater and held six nights a week May through October. See the cabin. It's where the Coolidge family was killed during a raid by a group of vigilantes who mistakenly thought a gang of desperados were holed up inside. They shot the place up and then burned it to the ground. The whole saga is

recreated right there – horses, shooting, fire, collapsing roof, the whole shebang as they say. It's preceded by a native Ozark music program with backwoods dancing and story telling. Makes quite an evening and of course, as the fire dies down and the lights dim, some or all of the Coolidge ghosts frequently appear, which substantially raises the adrenalin level of the guests – even though they are always expected."

"It's the Coolidge family ghosts, then, that inhabit the town."

"That's the story."

Adam winked. I wasn't sure how to take it but went on.

"So, there are the five ghosts: father, mother, the teenager and two younger boys?"

"Larry was twelve and William was six," Adam added.

"The entire family was wiped out during that case of mistaken identity, then?" I asked.

"The oldest child, Clarabelle, age nineteen, survived. She worked as a maid at the first hotel that stood on this site and lived in. She left soon after the raid and was never heard from again."

"Ghost lore usually purports some reason for their existence – their mission or some such thing," I said, hoping for more.

"There's a saying in these hills: 'Beware of the playful cat for he'll soon snatch your dinner.' The Coolidge ghosts have always been a playful lot but folks hereabout insist they're just mimicking that cat – waiting for their chance to take their revenge."

"Revenge on whom?"

"Colonel Rankin. It was he and his men – Rankin's Raiders – that killed the family. Colonel Rankin owned the theater here in town. The new one was built on the same site but is a dozen times larger. It's Rankin's ghost that lives in the theater. Sometimes one of the Coolidge ghosts – usually Tommy – goes over and teases or torments the Colonel. He's been seen chasing Tommy across the stage, sword drawn and screaming. Tommy often swings down on a rope – Peter Pan style – interrupting performances."

"So, these ghosts speak?"

"Like women at a quilting bee."

Again he winked. I began getting the idea there was more to the story than met the eye – the winking eye it would seem.

"They talk to the tourists?"

"Oh, no. Only to each other. It's as if the rest of us didn't exist. Who knows, to them, maybe we don't."

"So, let me see if I have this straight. The Coolidge ghosts haunt about town rather willy nilly – here and there. The Colonel stays in the Theater. Tommy visits this room to change clothes and enjoys tormenting Colonel Rankin over at the theater."

Adam filled in more details.

"Clothes are provided in each of the Coolidge suites. It is here in the hotel that they are sighted almost every night. They're a playful lot. You may find your belongings moved from place to place for example or the lemonade you've

been enjoying suddenly may turn salty. They enjoy pulling covers off our residents during the night and flicking the lights on and off. Tommy and Larry often team up – they dance and sing, play leap frog, and can frequently be seen running down the main drag out here at midnight tossing a ball back and forth."

"I'm puzzled. *Why* was I brought here?"

Adam grew serious. He turned toward me in his chair and folded his hands on the arm.

"The livelihood of this area depends on the ghostly appearances. Without them the streets roll up and we disappear. During the past several months there have been a series of serious accidents, several resulting in the deaths of local residents. They are blamed on the Coolidge ghosts. We need to put a stop to the accidents. Our tourist traffic hasn't slowed down yet – I suppose because the victims have all been local folks and word really hasn't had time to get out. We're fearful for the tourists, though, because we don't understand what's happening."

"So, the part of the lore about taking revenge on the locals seems to have begun?"

Adam tried to explain.

"Perhaps. It's more complicated than that. The belief is that when somebody dies at the hands of an evil person, that ghost is given the freedom to return home as often and stay as long as it wants to – to make up for the premature passing. That way they won't miss their beloved friends so much. It also holds that the spirit of anyone that takes his own life is forever a prisoner of the place where he dies."

"And that second part is important, why?"

"When the Colonel learned of his horrific mistake, he went into the balcony of his theater and put a bullet through his head."

"So," I said, clarifying, "The spirit of the Colonel, therefore, has to stay within the theater forever."

"That's how the lore tells it."

"Why would the ghosts want to harm the locals?" I asked.

Adam shrugged and shook his head, clearly bewildered.

"If we knew that, we'd at least have a starting place," he said.

"Have there been any potential investors on the scene recently?"

Adam looked surprised at my turn of the conversation.

"No. None that I know of. You're thinking somebody might be trying to drive the prices down to make himself a long-term bargain?"

"It's a possibility I've encountered before."

"I'll ask the other men but there is nothing afoot like that to my knowledge."

"Afoot? You don't seem to speak the local-eze. You're a move in, are you?"

"No. Actually. Born and bred here. Spent four years in England studying after junior college. Six years in such places tend to play havoc with one's native tongue – so to speak. English teachers take it as their sacred duty to devastate the natural cut to your language pattern if it's different from theirs. I *kin* cut ya a few local phrases if'n ya has a yearnin' ta git a ear full."

"I love that sound, but you don't have to go back to your old ways for my

benefit. You said the *other* men. I assume you mean the other three who joined with you to bring me here."

"Right. There's Bart Franklin, the present owner of the theater; Chris Gregory, owns the stage coach and train ride concessions; and Dave Hall, who has the amphitheater and puts on the big show there."

"I imagine you four represent a large share of the money in this town."

"Yes. That's a fair assessment. It leads me to the *Hickory Hollow Association*, however. The four of us are cousins, sharing the same grandfather. He was the original force – the brains – behind the whole tourist business here. He understood it needed the support of all the residents to make it go so he formed an association and each resident was given a share in a trust fund. Thirty-three percent of the profits from any tourist related business here in the Hollow goes into the trust and four times a year it is disbursed to the share holders. In return, they agree to play the parts of the citizens of an 1850s village. They dress the parts, work the parts, take care of the town, the streets, the trash, and everything associated with the enterprise.

"It was a wise move on Grandpa's part and has been a blessing to the folks here. It is a closed community in the sense that real estate is not sold outside the community circle and long term rentals are not allowed. Think of it like a mini Disney World – they wouldn't allow outsiders to take up residence in there either. Hickory is an entertainment enterprise first and a place to live second."

"So, no local person would seem to have any reason to be perpetrating these recent crimes."

"That's right. It will take food off their tables if the enterprise goes belly up."

"Any immediately apparent connection among the victims of the several accidents?"

"None, so far as I can see. I've arranged diner tonight for the five of us over at the Ozark Cafe in one of the private dining rooms. It will give you a chance to ask your questions to all of us at once and for us to put our heads together about it all."

"Sounds like a fine way to begin. How welcome will I be here? I mean, how can I expect to be accepted by the locals?"

"Your picture was run in Saturday's Gazette with an article asking everyone to cooperate fully with you. Growing up here, one tends to become infatuated with ghostly phenomenon. The name, Marc Miller, is pretty much a household word in Hickory Hollow."

I nodded appreciatively as Adam continued.

"Your best resource for historical details about this area and the local lore will be Sarah Smith. She's the unofficial historian in these parts. Seventy five if a day. Still runs the library. Taught eighth grade here some forty years. Only retired six or eight years ago."

"I'll make it a point to meet her. The library is where?"

"A block or so south of where you parked your car. Open Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from noon to six."

"Perhaps this afternoon, then. I think I'll catch a bite to eat and then get familiar with the town. Anything I should know, first?"

"Two things. *Kate's Café* on the east end of the main drag has the best blue plate specials on Mondays, and breakfast every day. Second, if the locals refer to you as a *damnyankee* – it's *one* word here – take it as a term of endearment. It's no different, really, than referring to someone from England as an Englishman. Once, of course, it meant something quite different but time has a way of changing – ameliorating – the emotions attached to certain words and phrases."

I smiled and nodded.

We walked back down the stairs together. On the landing at the second floor Adam turned and pointed behind us.

"This is one of Tommy's favorite places to appear. He seems to enjoy leaping down the last six steps onto this landing. The indentations in the plaster here are where his head hits when he miscalculates."

"A ghost that leaves head impressions? Most ghosts in my experience walk right through walls."

Again the wink. Again no explanation accompanied it. I would be patient.

I found my way to the cafe – *Kate's Kafe* – as it turned out. Maybe that's where the 'K' in my first name went. The menu was replete with dishes that included either *Hillbilly* or *Ghostly* in their names. I settled on the Fair-haired Ghostburger Plate and a Hillbilly Huckleberry Shake. Fair-haired, I discovered meant cheese, and huckleberry tasted a lot like blueberry to me. It was delicious so I shouldn't be going on about it. The burger came with Ginny's Fried Taters and a Pickle Patch Pickle. It was fun and the rustic surroundings felt comfortable.

There was only one other man eating there. It was hard to establish his age through his full white beard and gold rimmed glasses. My guess was sixtyish. I tried to catch his eye and nod a friendly greeting but he was intent on making notes on a yellow pad. I wouldn't intrude. Presently he got up, paid his bill and left. The cashier called him Mr. Haskins as if they were more than casual acquaintances. I doubted that he was a local and yet outsiders were discouraged from over-staying their welcome. When the waitress came to refill my iced tea I asked.

"Mr. Haskins. He somehow seems familiar to me but I can't place him."

It was a bold faced lie but one I felt was harmless. (Mother wouldn't have agreed with me.)

"Henry Haskins. Here doin' research fer a book on the original families that settled in this here area. Been here a while. Not really friendly. Not really unfriendly neither – I didn't mean that. Rentin' a room up at the Widow Crawford's place."

"Widow Crawford?"

"Middle a the street behind the theater, ya know?"

"Oh, yes."

I tucked it away for future reference. He and his knowledge of the families might well come in handy. I would make it a point to meet him later.

She had a question for me.

"You a *shake 'n desert* guy or a *shake fer desert* guy?"

I thought I'd caught her meaning.

"Shake *fer*, I guess. Too full for anything else just now. I may stop in later for some of that Col. Rankin Raspberry Pie, though."

"You'll love it! Best with Uncle Walt's vanilla ice cream – more expensive that way, but best."

I nodded and placed a ten on the table. She understood it included a tip, fattened somewhat because of her informative conversation. She had a wonderful smile and shared it freely and naturally.

I went outside and sat on the edge of the board sidewalk, dangling my legs to the street and leaning back, somewhat uncomfortably, against a square, rough hewn, post. A barefoot boy – ten, maybe less – came running down the street in pursuit of a runaway barrel hoop. He was dressed in historical costume. I wondered if he knew it was historical. I stuck out my leg and caught the hoop around my ankle.

He came to a puffing stop.

"Thanks Mister. Them hoops gets minds a their own, sometimes."

"I can imagine. Can you believe that I've never rolled a hoop like that in my whole life?"

"Really?"

His eyes grew wide. Clearly it was more than a role he was playing – it was his life.

"Wanna try? I kin teach ya. I'm a good teacher. Got a little brother and I teached him everything he knows."

"I appreciate your offer but I think I'll take a rain check on that."

The boy looked up at me blank faced. I realized he hadn't understood my reference.

"Some other time, if that's okay."

He nodded and his grin returned.

"No offence, Mister but ya talk sorta funny, ya know? Like a tourist."

"I suppose I do. I'm from Indiana and we talk a little differently up there."

"That's okay. I kin hep ya with that, too, if'n ya wants. I'm Rusty."

He held out his hand. It seemed well practiced and genuine. I shook and reached into my shirt pocket and took out two lemon drops, offering him one.

"Thanks, Mister. Loves Granny's candy."

"How can I find you when I'm ready for my hoop rolling lesson?"

"I'm the only Rusty in town. Just ask anybody. I tend ta git around. Never could set still. Pa says it's' cuz I'm all boy. Ma says I'm hyper. Granny says I got worms. Like Pa's idea best. Feed my hyper pills ta the dog, though I do drink black coffee regular ta kill off any worms if'n that turns out ta be the grounds fer it all."

"Coffee does that, does it? Good to know."

Rusty nodded, deliberately, apparently content in the knowledge that he had just taught me something valuable.

"Can you point me toward the library?"

He turned and pointed.

"Turn south at the leather shop and go a block and a half toward the creek – we call it the *Sandy* around here. It's a little red building. Miss Sarah's the librarian. One a the nicest ladies in town. Bein' that you're not from here you can't git a card so you kin jist tell her Rusty said you could use his. She'll take good care a you."

"Well! Thank you. You have been a big help, *Only Rusty In Town*."

He grinned and nodded, then spoke.

"I better git. S'posed to be up and down this street fifty times today. I love this job ya know."

He and his hoop left in a cloud of dust. I stood and made my way toward the library. It was the reddest red building I'd ever seen. I had to wonder if there was some significance to the color or if the painter just got a good deal at a factory outlet store.

Sarah was every bit as old as she had been described though she walked erect and exuded energy. She spoke impeccable English. I wondered if Rusty had ever offered to teach *her* how to speak.

"Sarah, I assume," I said offering my hand. "I'm Marc Miller, in town for a week or so and a new friend of a small whirlwind known as Rusty. He said if I'd drop his name you'd take good care of me."

She smiled a wonderful smile.

"He is a darling although I can tell you that I'm happy I retired before he hit my classroom."

"Energetic?"

"To say the least. You're the author, aren't you?"

"Guilty."

"Adam said you'd probably stop by. Word travels at the speed of light around here – nearly as fast as Rusty. How can I help you?"

"I need a crash course in everything ghostly about Hickory Hollow."

"A big order. There are no books written on the subject, though I assume that is now a temporary condition."

I smiled not committing myself to do a book.

"I have a file drawer full of folders with clippings from the local paper and a number of term papers my students have done through the years. You are more than welcome to use any or all of what I have."

"Let me start with the half dozen file folders you think might bring me up to speed the quickest."

She hesitated only momentarily before pulling and handing over the folders. She provided minimal guidance.

"This one contains clippings from before I was born. This one deals with the past twenty five years. Here is an excellent term paper one of my students did the last year I taught. It took first place in the state literary competition. The others contain my own personal notes and photographs I have taken since the year I began teaching – can you believe that was fifty five years ago?"

"Time flies," as they say.

"And I *have* had fun," she added, completing the intention of the saying.

I believed her. Her eyes danced and her hands were calloused – not the pampered hands of a stay inside and read, old maid, librarian. I imagined she had a flower garden and probably could still paint her own house. That reminded me . . .

"One question, if I may. The color of this building. Any significance?"

"The local lore says that ghosts love red and I want them to be fully comfortable here. I painted it myself, if you can believe that. Took two months last fall but every stroke is mine!"

She was clearly pleased and proud of the accomplishment.

"I painted a deck chair last fall," I said. "As I recall that took me approximately the same length of time."

She chuckled.

"I like you, Marc Miller. I've read your books. Aside from your overly liberal use of the dash – at least that helps me know she really *has* read my stuff – I love them."

"I suppose we all have our idiosyncrasies. I tend to try and stuff too much into one sentence. Dashes help the reader keep it sorted out."

"There *are* periods and semicolons, you know."

"Now, you're sounding like a teacher!"

"Shame on me."

"Would you prefer that I use this material here in the library?"

"Feel free to take it with you. I have no doubt you'll be careful with it."

"That I will. Thank you. I get the idea, however, that your brain may well be my best resource. I hope we can talk later."

"Most certainly. Just say when. Nice meeting you. Be careful out there. The occasional stray barrel hoop has taken out more than one visitor already this summer."

I liked her immediately. She was genuine and open – the kind of teacher youngsters surely liked and benefited from. I felt sure she would be one of my best resources. With the folders locked inside my brief case I took off for a stroll around town. There looked to be seven north-south streets – two of which were to the west of where I had parked. There were two streets running east and west on the south side of the business section and four to the north. A winding road wound its way up the northern slope and a number of larger houses – all period appropriate in design – could be seen in and among the trees there.

As I recall the dictionary defines 'hollow' as a small valley or basin. Hickory Hollow qualified on both counts – small and basin-shaped. Although the range of side-by-side, east to west hills – mountains they are called locally – wind through the area for a hundred miles and are the major geographic features, two, far higher hills tend to block off the valley just to the east and just to the west of the little community forming the basin. Sunrise comes late to the town and sunset early as the prominences block its path. The same is true for the moon, of course – a useful phenomenon in an area that depends on the mysteries of darkness to ply its trade.

I circumnavigated the outskirts of the village in less than an hour – giving myself plenty of time to stop and talk with the residents and discuss the meaning

of life with several playful pups. As I began making my way down the main drag from the west, back toward the hotel, Rusty and his hoop rolled up along side and joined me on my walk.

“Gittin’ ta know the place, I see,” he said.

“That’s right. Nice looking town. Neat and clean. Can’t understand why the street’s aren’t named though.”

“Oh. They’s named. Jist no signs. Tried to put up signs once but the ghosts done tore ‘em down. Guess ghosts don’t like street signs. I’m told they was green. Should a been red. Anybody should a knowed that.”

“Any idea how long ago that was?” I asked.

“Summer of forty-two, the way I hear it.”

“Would that have been nineteen forty two or eighteen forty two?”

“Nineteen, I reckon. Never thought ta ask. Miss Sarah will know. I seen ya go into the library.”

“I used your name just like you said I could and she let me check out a number of things.”

I patted my briefcase.

Rusty nodded as if not at all surprised.

“I have to ask,” I said after a moment of silence.

“How come you’re called *Rusty*. Where I come from a youngster with white hair like yours is referred to as a towhead.”

“Here too. I was born with bright red hair like my mama. She knowed it was gonna be red before I was borned ‘cuz I hear tell it give her awful indigestion. Then I got the fever when I was goin’ on two and lost all my hair. It come back in white. I’d already got my nick name. I’m glad. Rather be a Rusty than a Whitie, I think. Rusty sounds manlier, don’t ya think?”

“Yes. I suppose I’d have to agree. Got a real name?”

“Yup. Don’t give it out, though. No offence but if you had mine you’d clam up about it, too.”

“I’ll never ask again. Friends don’t press friends, where I come from.”

“Here neither. Guess Indiana ain’t so different – except for talkin’ – from the Hollow.”

“When do the ghosts come out . . . to play?” I asked, not sure how to phrase the question.

“After the moon rises – ‘bout seven here in the holler this time a year. The Colonial pops up most anytime there inside the theater. Just has to be dark ya see. Ghosts don’t like the light. Can’t really see ‘em in the light anyways. They glows like, and it takes the dark fer ‘em to be seen.”

“Do you have a favorite . . . ghost, I mean?”

“Larry, I guess. He’s about my age. Used to like Willy but ghosts never do get older ya know. So I s’pose come my seventeenth birthday it’ll probably be Tommy. I hear you’re staying in the *Tommy Suite*.”

“That’s right. I was surprised it was available on such short notice.”

“Adam saves one or two back for special things – like you comin’ ta town.”

“Oh. That’s a special event is it – my coming to town?”

“Yes, Sir. We all been reminded to keep a tight zip on the Covenant.”

His offering posed two questions. I'd let the second one pass for the time being not wanting to put Rusty in the position of being tricked into spilling the beans – or the *Covenant* as it were.

"Tight zip?" I asked referring to his first reference.

He looked up at me and zipped his lips shut. The demonstration was intended to be the full and complete answer. I nodded that I understood and didn't push for more, though the idea of a covenant among the towns folks was the most intriguing thing I'd run across so far.

Back in my room, it rated an entry on the first sheet of one of my yellow pads. The page would go untitled for the time being, but already had two entries – 'Covenant' and 'Adam's winks'.

I began by looking through the photographs. They were mounted on heavy, black, album paper and each picture was held in place by the little, black, triangular, lick and stick, corner, holders used when my mother was a girl. They were presented in the order they had been taken and each had a date written underneath in white ink. Some had additional comments. Either the technology improved over time or Sarah's picturing clicking skills had. I'd split the credit between the two.

They suggested more questions that I needed to ask. There were photos of the entire ghost family engaging in various activities and then some in smaller groups, as well as individual pictures. There were snapshots of the Colonel in the theater. Then there were some I had not been prepared for. Apparently the ghosts of the Raiders on horseback also made appearances. There were shots of them approaching the train and coach and one clearly taken while hanging out the window of the coach with the Raiders riding ahead of it, as if being chased. I started another yellow pad with another set of questions.

The term paper proved to be the most useful at the moment. It provided a concise summary of the history. The Coolidge family had been in the area just long enough to erect their cabin when the raid took place. The Colonial and his men had been away for several weeks chasing bands of cut throats that had been terrorizing the territory. As they entered the town from the east they noticed three familiar horses in the new Coolidge corral – horses with distinctive markings that one of the groups of bad guys had been riding. It was on that basis that the raid was launched.

In reality, Mr. Coolidge had purchased them from a drifting, horse trader that very day. Colonial Rankin, frustrated at his lack of success elsewhere, jumped at the opportunity to salvage his reputation and the melee ensued. It was that very night that the first sighting of the Coolidge family was made. Several months passed before the Colonial began appearing. With time the legend grew – 'matured' was the term the young writer had used in her paper.

Rankin and the Coolidges are buried side by side in the cemetery behind the church – it is the third church to sit on that site since then. The ghost boys are often seen playing among the gravestones, though that area is not generally made available to the tourists – the locals think that would be in some ways sacrilegious.

The ghosts of Rankin's Raiders only began appearing some thirty years

ago and have become an almost daily occurrence during the past ten. I have to wonder why it took them so long to make their return. The account states that only one of them – Jake Planter – remained in town after the massacre. The other dozen or so left in disgrace immediately after the incident. The term paper did not provide a basis in the lore as to why they would have assembled again and returned to ride together, although by the time they started being seen they were certainly all long dead.

Clarabelle Coolidge, the oldest daughter, buried her family and then also left. There is no local record of exactly where she went, though there was a rumor she had always wanted to live further north; Missouri or Kansas were the best recorded guesses of those who had known her.

By the time I had given the material a quick once over it was time for dinner with the four men who had summoned me. I was eager to meet them. I had the idea there were several agendas operating and that – so far, at least – I was only privy to one.

* The Specters of Carlton County, The Malevolent Ghost of Charlie Chance, and The Kettles and the Keeps: Ghosts at War.

CHAPTER TWO

It being Monday, the restaurant was virtually empty. Adam had arranged for a cozy small room off the main dining area. The four of them were already there when I arrived. I checked my watch. Ten 'til seven. They had gathered early. Whether that was to hold some kind of strategy session or just reflected their high level of anxiety I had no way of knowing. I guessed, some of *both*.

Adam made the introductions. Bart Franklin owned the theater. He, like Adam had already seen fifty. He appeared to be in good physical shape and probably touched up his hair. He was married but had no children. His wife was the program director at the theater having studied drama in California as a college student.

Chris Gregory ran the two ride concessions – the stage coach and the old train. The youngest of the four at forty eight, he seemed the oldest. His well tanned skin bore deeply set wrinkles and his sparse hair was white and uncombed. Chris had never married and had worked hard to run and improve the rides.

Dave Hall had the outdoor amphitheater and ran its programs. He looked the part of a professional and was the only one who wore a suit to the occasion. His still thick grey hair was neatly combed and his shoes polished. He and his wife had three children, all adults and all involved with him in his business.

I knew from the information Adam had provided before I accepted the assignment that they had all gone to college. Bart had a degree in electrical engineering and had been a pioneer in computer applications – more as a pastime than a profession. Chris had not finished college. He became interested in aviation and spent time flying just about anything that could take to the air. He still competed in hot air balloon races. Dave had a degree in architecture and had used his skills to create new faces for the old buildings – all in keeping with the historic period. Adam was the oldest and had spent the most time in college – six years. He had majors in English history and education. I must admit it seemed odd to me that the Grandfather, who had groomed them to take over the Hickory Hollow business, had insisted that they spend time pursuing higher education, first. I wasn't against it, mind you. It just felt odd.

They stood and offered hands all around. The four of them were beer drinkers. I stuck with lemonade. The food was served family style: fried chicken, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes with white gravy, home made bread, and more side dishes than I can remember. Desert was the Colonial's Raspberry pie, ala mode. Word *did* get around! Apparently, my activities would be closely monitored.

The men presented the legends very much as I had already learned them. The concern was financial but more than that had to do with the safety of the residents of Hickory Hollow. Two had been killed.

One – who I learned was Rusty's uncle – had fallen off the train as it crossed the trestle bridge and apparently died in the plunge into the shallow, rocky, stream below. It was generally agreed by the four of them he would *not* have fallen. They were sure he had been pushed. He had been one of the

storytelling conductors on the train and had held that position for the past thirty plus years.

The other fatality was an older man who was so crippled with arthritis that he seldom worked around the town anymore. Most days found him rocking on his front porch, regaling tourists with tales of days gone by. In that way he had made a productive contribution to the overall ambiance that the community worked so diligently to create and maintain.

"Then there are the other accidents," Bart said.

"Tell me about them."

"Well, the Benning's house caught fire. Suspicious circumstances. All of them could have been killed if the dog hadn't begun barking at the smoke."

Chris jumped in.

"The Blackwell brother's logging truck had the brake line cut and it was through Boyd's sheer talent as a truck driver that they didn't careen off the road and over the cliff."

"And then Boyd was in the middle of it again," Dave added. "The chain on the saw he uses to notch the logs broke and cut a gash in his belly fifteen inches long. Almost died on the spot from blood loss."

"So, it sounds like there may be some kind of a hit list, is that what I'm hearing?"

"At least as far as Boyd's concerned it seems that way," Dave said.

"No ideas why?"

They looked at each other genuinely bewildered. Each shook his head.

"I asked about pressure to sell," Adam said. "Nobody has even received inquiries about selling."

Each man shook his head again verifying what Adam had said.

"Any threats of any kind against any of *you*?" I asked.

Again heads shook.

"Is there any connection among the victims?"

"We've wondered that, too. We just can't find any," Adam said continuing as the spokesman for the group.

"This won't put me on any of your top ten lists," I said, "but I have to ask. What's the chance it's one of you four out to swallow up the whole operation for himself."

Initial chuckles soon turned into full blown belly laughs. They were genuine in nature, not provoked by tension. I supposed I was way off base.

"About as unlikely as the moon going out," Chris said. "Grandpa handpicked us to run this operation but more than that he raised us to be honest businessmen and loving cousins. He sent us to college so we'd know more than just what goes on here between these four mountains. Not a chance, you see, but we all understand why you had to ask."

"So what's left?" I asked rhetorically, then answered with a question. "The ghosts have gone batty?"

"The lore tells us there may come a time when they begin taking their revenge."

"On whom?" I asked. "How would they select their targets? Why at this

time? What would they have against Boyd, for example? What did Boyd ever do to them?"

"Probably not Boyd, himself," Chris said, trying an answer. "I'd guess it's something he represents to them."

"Like? Help me here. Brainstorm a bit. Possibilities?"

Bart tried.

"Well, Boyd is in charge of rebuilding the cabin every day. Every night it gets burned down as part of the play. Every day he and his crew rebuild it. Maybe the ghosts don't want it rebuilt."

"Or," Adam said following up on the idea, "He and his men cut trees to use for logs. Maybe the Coolidges don't want the trees cut. Maybe they fear for the forests."

"What about the old man in the rocker?"

Dave tried.

"He was a story teller and that kept the legend alive. Maybe they are tired of having their story retold. Maybe they are tired of having their tragedy exploited. Maybe they can't find their peace until the legend is forgotten."

The same, story telling, logic could be applied to the conductor but no one brought it up.

"If that's the case," I said, "I would think *you* four would be the logical targets."

Bart rubbed his throat as if suddenly very uncomfortable at the idea he might be on the hit list.

"We have three men who walk the streets wearing sheriff badges while the tourists are here," Adam said. "They aren't trained police, but the tourists assume that they are. We never have any big problems. Sometimes a drunk gets out of hand but a little time in the old jail sobers him up and he's escorted out of town. What I'm trying to get around to, is do you think we need to bring in some deputies?"

"I'd rather not yet, but that really has to be your call. This is Sheriff Carter's county isn't it?"

"Yes. You know him?" Bart asked surprised.

"From a previous case up at the *Ozark Hills Academy*. He's a good man."

The four men looked at one another uneasily. I didn't understand but chose not to react. That would also go on the as yet untitled yellow sheet. I now had three entries there.

"I am taken with the fact there seems to be no bars in town and no alcohol on the menus in the restaurants – though I see you four managed to be served."

"It was grandfather's preference and we think a good one. Booze, crowds, and ghosts just don't mix. If somebody needs that kind of help to get through what we have to offer then we'd rather not have him around. We don't prohibit folks from bringing in their own – no way to enforce that. We have signs saying no public drinking will be tolerated. Just managing the usual problems like heat exhaustion, heart attacks, and lost kids are enough without having drunks to contend with."

"Your Grandfather was a wise man, it seems."

“He was that,” Adam said sealing my impression.

“Let me offer several initial impressions, gentlemen,” I began. “Number one, I’ve chased ghosts all my adult life and I have to say I’ve never known a place to have such regularly active spirits. Second, also unusual, it seems they appear on cue as if you have some mutual agreement. Third, since I’ve never run across such a pact between mortals and specters I either have to believe this is a first for me or some kind of a put on. Since, clearly, you are all intelligent men, that leaves me with the impression that if it is a put on, you four must be the perpetrators. Forth, if that were the case, however, I assume you would not have brought me into things so for the time being I will dismiss that possibility. Fifth, at some point I will need to be told about the Covenant.”

Heads turned and throats swallowed. The four remained silent – according to the *zip your lips clause* in the covenant, I assumed. I moved on, changing the subject.

“Haskins. What can you tell me about him?”

Again it was Adam.

“Showed up about six weeks ago and asked permission to stay for an indefinite period while he completed a genealogical study of the residents here and in the surrounding area. He’s a historian from some university up in Nebraska. On summer sabbatical, I believe he said. Quiet. Stays to himself. Spends time talking with folks and takes copious notes. Follows the family trees back as far as he can.”

“I thought long stays were prohibited here,” I said wanting clarification.

“We made an exception. The dean of his college called and asked if we would accommodate his request for a “summer visa” I think was his term. We decided to allow it. He hasn’t caused any problems and he does bring in some revenue. He’s promised to share his findings and we can work that into the things we have to offer around here – *Are you related to the ghosts?*”

It seemed a reasonable and straight forward explanation. I let it go. Well, almost.

“Who would the ‘we’ be in that decision?”

“The City Council. It’s composed of five residents over the age of 21. They serve rotating terms of five years – one is added and one leaves every year.”

“There’s a thought,” Bart said. “Boyd is to begin serving his term on July first – our year runs from July to June. It’s a nightmare for the businesses but it’s been that way for a hundred years – before the income tax year reared its ugly head.”

“You’re saying maybe somebody – the ghosts, I guess we have agreed are the culprits in all this – doesn’t want Boyd to serve?”

Bart shrugged. “You asked us for *any* possibilities!”

“Yes. My question was for clarification, not to be confrontational. What about the rocker man?”

“His name was Jasper Oliver,” Adam said. “He had served on the Council several times but not for a decade or more.”

“Was he in any way a controversial figure while serving? Try to chase the

ghosts away or anything? Now *I'm* engaging in way-out possibilities.”

“There are no controversies for the Council. Things just continue on a pretty even keel from year to year. They see that the town runs as a town, schedule duties, and so on. This Haskins thing is the first real non-traditional decision they've had to make in years.”

“I'll try again,” I said. “Could it be the ghosts were unhappy with the Council's decision to let Haskins come here?”

Again shrugs and shaking heads. I continued spinning ideas. It is one thing I do well.

“Perhaps the Coolidge family had – has – some dark secret they don't want uncovered. Something about why they showed up here. Maybe they had been in trouble elsewhere. Do you know where they came from?”

“Tennessee. Sarah probably knows. I don't recall the need for details ever coming up before,” Adam said.

“Could it be that Haskins may be close to uncovering something untoward in the Coolidge history? Have any of you been interviewed by him yet?”

They each shook their head.

“I suppose that could seem suspicious,” Adam said.

“I suppose it could. I'll need to spend some time with him. It will be interesting to see how he reacts to my presence here.”

I salvaged the last crumbs of crust from my pie plate and dabbed at my lips as if to remove the evidence. (A habit remaining from my cookie jar pilfering days, no doubt!) There were other things on my mind.

“Why are the ghosts getting the bad rap in all this? I would think your first approach would have been through the Sheriff's office. He was notified, right?”

“Oh yes. Immediately. He has launched an ongoing investigation. Nothing that we know of has come of it yet, though,” Adam said.

“It was the roses, I suppose, that led us to the ghosts,” Bart offered, getting back to my original question.

“I am lost.”

These men were clearly smart but their presentation had been disorganized beyond belief.

“Virginia, the Coolidge mother, was apparently allergic to roses. First thing they did – even before raising a cabin – was to destroy the rambling roses on the property. Now, whenever the ghosts get upset about something they destroy roses.”

“For example?” I asked.

“At one point the church fathers decided it would be a nice gesture to put a low iron rail around the Coolidge graves to mark them for the tourists. As the ground was being prepared, all the rose bushes around the cemetery were plucked clean of blooms.”

Chris had something to add.

“Then the time the City Council was about to vote on a proposal to change the name of the town to *Coolidge*, most all of the roses in town were damaged.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Decades ago. Before our time,” Chris explained.

“And recently?”

“Yes,” Adam began. “The conductor always wore a red rose in his lapel when they were in season. The several bushes on his property were uprooted just before his death. There are climbing roses at the end of old Jasper’s front porch. They were cut off about a foot above the ground. Boyd found a dozen *wilted* roses on the seat of his truck the day his brakes failed.”

“Roses would seem to play some part in this. Whether it’s ghostly antics or someone trying to lay blame in their direction is hard to know of course. How did old Jasper die?”

“Smothered in his sleep with his pillow. The Sheriff’s deputies are certain of that – something about feathers found in his nose and throat.”

I suppose I need to touch base with Sheriff Carter.”

“Do you want me to arrange that?” Adam said.

“Probably still have him on speed dial in my cell phone. Seems like once a number gets in there it never finds it’s way out. That has the kernel of a science fiction story. All the unused numbers in a cell phone get together and plot to do something or other. Sorry, I smell plots everywhere I turn.

“Let me get back to the case at hand. I’ve been going through some historical material that Sarah provided and I am struck by the fact that the ghosts of *Rankin’s Raiders* didn’t enter the picture until recently. What’s the scuttlebutt connected with that?”

Again the men shifted uneasily. Chris answered.

“The first sightings were some thirty years ago, I think. The information you have is probably more accurate than my memory. Then about ten years ago they became a part of the community, I guess you could say. They show up daily now, always riding together and always outside of town, often along the railroad track or the stage trail.”

“I have to wonder – them being violent men, and all – why *they* have not been considered contenders for the bad guys in all of this.”

The men looked at each other and shrugged. Either this was the most ignorant set of smart men I’d ever encountered or they were unwilling to share some pivotal piece of information with me. I would be patient for another day or so, but if they were not forthcoming by then I’d have to confront them. Perhaps it had to do with the Covenant. Perhaps it was the town and not the Coolidge family that harbored a dark secret. The possibilities were getting more and more interesting.

“Tomorrow I want to experience everything Hickory Hollow has to offer. A matinee at the theater, stage and train rides, the show at the amphitheater and whatever else there is.”

“Second matinee is usually best,” Bart offered. “I’ll meet you out front at three. I suppose you’ll want a balcony seat. It’s where Rankin’s ghost typically shows up – no guarantee, of course.”

“That sounds fine.”

“The first evening train ride leaves the station at seven – that’s about twilight this time of year. The ride takes twenty minutes. I’ll accompany you if you like. That would put you back in time for a stage ride at seven thirty – takes

fifteen minutes and will get you back in time for the big show at eight.”

“Sounds like a good plan, gentlemen. And what do the tourists do during the morning – the daylight hours?”

“Hopefully, they buy the shops clean,” Adam said. “Leather, pottery, dolls, even Ozark musical instruments. Then there’s the traditional leisurely breakfasts, lunches, and suppers – you probably call it dinner.”

“Actually it’s supper where I come from, too. It looks like I have a busy day ahead of me. Unless you have something else on your minds, then, I’ll take my leave. Oh, one thing more: Do the ghosts typically take Monday off like the other residents here?”

Dave, who had been the most reticent of the group, offered a response.

“It seems to us that the ghosts react to the presence of people. When there are fewer people you can expect to see fewer of their antics. It’s like they play to the audience. I’m not sure how else to put it.”

“You put it very well. Thank you. Until tomorrow then. Thanks for the magnificent diner and the patience you’ve all showed throughout my inquisition this evening.”

There were chuckles and sighs. Less as reactions to my attempted humor, I imagined, than because the ordeal had come to an end.

The men re-huddled as I left. Were they arriving at some preliminary evaluation of my performance or was it something else altogether?

As I moved outside and closed the door behind me, the gas streetlights flickered and dimmed. I saw the faint outline of a figure coming down the street in my direction.

“A ghost – on cue?” I asked myself out loud. It was more of a question than a speculation.

It was walking right down the center of the street, something slung across its chest – a gun belt perhaps. I stepped back into the shadows and watched. Presently the mystery was over.

“Hey. Mr. Miller. That you over there?” Came Rusty’s unmistakable, husky voice.

I stepped out into the light. He had slipped the hoop over his head and was carrying it on his shoulder across his chest.

“Yes. Good evening. Isn’t it kind of late for a lad your age to be out and about?”

“Maybe. Thought I better come an see how you’re big meetin’ went.”

“Fine, I guess. You had reason to think it wouldn’t?”

“Oh no. Didn’t intend that. Walk ya ta your room if ya like. I guess that’s where you’re off to.”

“I guess. Doesn’t seem to be much going on here on a Monday night.”

“Nope. Our day off, mostly. Always a few Ghosters drop in though.”

“Ghosters?”

“What we calls the tourists.”

“I see. Interesting term.”

I stepped down from the sidewalk onto the gravel and the two of us moved across the street toward the hotel.

"Don't s'pose you git scared a ghosts anymore, do ya?" Rusty asked looking up into my face.

"Not the regular, friendly, kind you seem to have around here."

"That's good. Me neither. You'll find that I'm pretty brave 'bout most things, though."

"What's with the dimming street lights?" I asked.

"They goes down on low at eight. That's when the Play starts out in the amphitheater most nights. Less the light the better fer that. Go down one more notch at ten after the show's over. It's like a signal ta the ghosts that it's okay fer them ta come out. Like I said, ghosts don't like the light and they really hates flash cameras."

Rusty's original pronouncement seemed to be accurate. He *would* walk me up the stairs to my room.

"Guess you'll be okay now," he said as I opened the door.

"I think I will. Thank you. It was very considerate of you to drop by and escort me like you did."

"You talk funny but you're still a okay guy. S'pose you're gonna do all the stuff tomorrow, huh?"

"Every bit of it. You like to ride the Stage Coach?"

"Locals don't often git ta do that. Takes up payin' seats, ya know."

"Meet me at the station at seven-thirty tomorrow evening. I'll see there are paid seats waiting for the two of us."

"Really! That will be great! Never seen the Raiders from the inside a the coach. Thanks. I'll probably see ya before then, though. Suggest ya try breakfast *early* at Kate's. In and out before seven or you'll get trampled by the Ghosters. Huckleberry hotcakes and sausage patties is the best."

"Tell you what. I really hate to eat alone. Can you meet me there at six and keep me company – I'll spring for the hotcakes."

He beamed. The boy didn't appear to be in any way deprived, but for some reason had attached himself to me. Maybe he was actually a midget who reported to the local mafia which was responsible for the recent problems. I can see I do need a good night's sleep.

"I'll see you at six then. Ma said you'd be nice. She reads your books. Says ya kin tell a lot about a person from reading what they write. I hate ta read. Won't catch me with my nose in a book during the summer time – no offence."

With that he turned and leaped his way down the steps to the landing – Tommy fashion I supposed – and was soon out of sight around the corner. I entered my room and closed the door behind me. The windows were still open and the cool night air had settled a pleasant temperature into the room. I was more tired than I had realized. It had been a long, difficult drive that morning and I had been on the go since arriving. The bed looked inviting.

During the meeting something about the pictures began nagging at the corners of my mind. As those things so often do, I couldn't immediately put my finger on it. I removed my shirt and shoes and got comfortable in a big chair from which I could look out into the night sky. I opened my briefcase on my lap and removed the folders with the pictures. Again I just paged through them. The old

photos were black and white. Those from about the mid-1950's on were mostly in color. I was drawn to those in color. What was it?

The costumes of the townspeople varied little from year to year. That seemed reasonable. It wasn't that, however. I examined the clothing worn by the ghosts. I had never known ghosts to change clothes and yet the pictures clearly depicted a variety of clothes not only from year to year but even day to day it seemed. Adam said the clothes in the closet could be expected to be exchanged in the near future. Ghosts wearing *real* clothes. Something didn't ring true. If my door was locked and not opened, and if the clothing was exchanged, then the ghost would have to have come through the wall – as would the clothes.

Real clothes going through real walls? I don't think so. Perhaps Tommy undressed in the hall, came through the wall unclothed, took the fresh outfit back into the hall through the door which he could open from the inside, deliver his used clothes back through the door – which he relocked from the inside – returned through the wall to the hall, dressed and was gone. That made sense in terms of ghostly substance – the ethereal spirit vs. the worldly, physical matter of clothing.

Those thoughts moved me to do two things. First, I looked in the closet and found the clothes were still there on hangers. I locked the door to the room and removed the key putting it inside the pillowcase, underneath the pillow on my bed. Then, from my small collection of master keys, I chose one that fit but could not open the door and put it into the lock, turning it half way so another could not be inserted from the other side. Diagonally, across the top corner of the door, I stuck a band aid – frame to door to frame – so if the door were opened it would come undone as a signal to me.

I checked the screens on the window – all hooked from the inside. Each door onto the balcony was secured with a slide latch from the inside.

I was ready to turn in.

* * *

The next morning my watch alarm went off at five thirty – time for a shower and shave. I first checked the door. It had *not* been opened. Then I looked in the closet. The clothes *had* been exchanged. The old ones were in a pile on the floor. I knelt down and smelled them. Crumpled and replete with teen boy perspiration odor.

“Ghosts that sweat?” I asked out loud. It seemed obvious to me how it had to have happened but I would leave that for later. I had an appointment with a stack of hotcakes and a round of conversation with young Rusty. Few things seemed to be hidden from him in that little town and I hoped that could be made to work to my advantage without having him forsake the Covenant – whatever that was.

The lad was sitting on the walk out front of Kate's when I arrived. He jumped to his feet greeting me with his ready smile. He, too, had changed clothes. Baggy brown pants, a white, full cut shirt, and bright red suspenders. The day before it had been black pants and a pale blue shirt. The bare feet seemed to remain the same.

"Hope you're hungry, Mr. Miller. It's a endless plate of hotcakes here. I may a forgot to mention that."

"I am and you did."

I waited to see if his immediately mounted frown would clear on its own. It did.

"I get it. You *are* hungry and I *did* forget to mention it. I may catch on ta your yankee talk yet. No offence about the yankee you understand."

"You will and none taken."

He smiled, seemingly having mastered my shorthand in one lesson. He held the door for me. I wondered if that stemmed from good manners, standard operating procedure around tourists, or as a prepayment for my getting him breakfast. I'd just let it go.

"Thank you. You are certainly a helpful and considerate young man."

"I'm glad *you* get that. Lots a folks around here don't."

He offered no more explanation and I wouldn't ask.

It was a seat yourself arrangement and Rusty steered me to a table by a window in the rear. It looked out over a flower garden and on toward the houses beyond.

"That's my house," he said pointing to one of the few two story cabins I had seen there.

"Big family?" I asked.

"I'm the middler. Big sister and brother, and then my little brother. I think God made me active like I am so I wouldn't get lost in between everybody."

"And I'll just bet you *don't* get lost!"

He grinned and helped me take my seat. Then pulled in across from me.

"The menu's on the wall. Since you're a writer and all I guess I won't need ta read it fer ya."

He looked up at me through the tops of his eyes to see if I realized it had been an attempt at humor. I smiled and reached across the small table and ruffled his hair.'

"A good sense of humor as well as smart, I see," I said.

"I'm smarter when I'm not in school. I figure it's them little desks that squeezes my smarts so hard I can't think straight."

I chuckled at the fleeting idea about where the seat of his intelligence must be. He smiled at my reaction but didn't press me for a reason.

Rusty, no more than fifty pounds drippin' in molasses – as I had once heard it put in those parts – put away six of the largest hotcakes ever known to man. I struggled to get my third one down.

"I told ma about you're offer fer the Coach ride and she said it was okay, seein' as how it was you. She warned me not to wear out my welcome. I'm not so good at judgin' that so I'll have to count on you to tell me straight out when it happens."

"I can do that. Glad she agreed. I probably should have taken the time to have asked her myself, now that I think about it."

"There she is," he said pointing. "Tuesday's wash day. She's hangin' it out now. That's my Sis helpin'. An that's Ricky, my little Bro up on the roof over

the back room. I keep tellin' him ta stay ta the south a the peek so if'n he takes a tumble he'll have the bushes ta break his fall. Kids!"

He shook his head and finished his second tall glass of milk.

"So, what is young Rusty up to on Tuesdays?"

"Hoopin' ten to noon, then free the rest a the day. Probably drop a line in at the Sandy and maybe take a swim. Gonna be hotter than usual today – Granny says."

"She knows things like that, does she?"

"Joints."

It was one of his concise, yet all encompassing answers.

"If you don't want to speak of this you don't have to," I began. "I hear one of your uncles died recently. I'm very sorry."

"Ya. Thanks. Hanky panky. Don't got it solved yet but I will."

"I don't think I caught his name."

"Red Barber. He used to kid me' cuz *his* red hair and *mine* was both white."

"Red hair run in your family, does it?"

"Just me and him. Well, me and him on the Barber side a the family. Then there's Boydie on the other side."

"Boyd the man who builds the cabin."

"Yup. A uncle on Pa's Ma's side a things. Bald now but as a kid had a head a curly, carrot red, hair I'm told. I gots lots a relations in these parts but then everybody's gots lots a relations in these parts. Gotta be careful who ya falls in love with, I'm told. Not sure why but has something to do with the kids I think."

"So, you're a Barber. *Rusty Barber*. That's a good solid name."

He nodded merely underscoring my wisdom in having come to that conclusion. He stood, signaling I imagined that he was both finished with breakfast and that he had sat still just about as long as his young restless system allowed. No ticket had been brought to the table so I approached the cashier and asked.

"Taken care of Mr. Miller. Adam has your tab. Come often and eat lots."

"Thank you. I'll do that. Everything was fantastic."

"We know, Sir, but it's always nice to hear."

I was growing to understand it was a self-confident lot that lived in the Hollow.

Outside, Rusty thanked me for breakfast and then galloped off toward home in search of his hoop. I made my way back toward the hotel. It suddenly hit me that the only three red heads I had run across in town *didn't* have red hair. It was enough to produce a street crossing's worth of chuckles.

In the hallway outside my room I examined the wall against which my closet sat. I found no secret door. I went inside and calculated the depth of the closet and then the depth from its front to the outside of the wall in the hall. The figure made the closet eighteen inches too narrow.

I opened the closet and pushed the clothing aside so I could examine the back wall. When I had been in a similar situation in an old inn up at Carlton

County I found a cleverly hidden release trigger on top of the ceiling molding. I ran my finger along it.

Click!

Snap!

A narrow door sprung open back into an inky, dark, passage. It was not made for easy access. I wasn't even sure I could navigate it sideways but I didn't need to. There were plenty of slender folks in the area who could. I closed the passage door and the closet then took a seat on the sofa and looked out across the town.

So, if someone fakes the clothing exchange, what else about the ghostly phenomena in Hickory Hollow might also be bogus? I had the feeling I had just cracked the very outer layer of the Covenant. Some things generally known to the townsfolk were not to be spoken of to outsiders and that specifically included *me* according to my young sidekick.

It muddied the waters but that was fine. Find the source of a murky stream and you'll find . . . well, at least it had the *start* of a fine, new, sage, saying. Perhaps later I will find an ending that will redeem it. Did Adam know about the passages and the clothing exchanges? I couldn't imagine that he didn't. If he did, then did the other men? Did the townspeople in general? I could forgive the augmenting of the lore in small ways for the sake of entertainment value. I even found it clever. Had that always been the purpose of the passages? Did they fulfill other functions as well? If so, were those as benign?

I heard the telltale Click and Snap in the closet behind me. I smiled, figuring that Tommy would soon have a spankin' fresh set of duds waiting for him right there in my room. I waited for the snapping sound that assured me the deed had been completed. Of course, stretching a point, it might be contended that it was the ghosts themselves who used the passages. That made less sense once I had it fully formed in my mind.

I opened the closet and as expected, there were the new clothes neatly hung on a hanger. I needed to let the perpetrator know that I knew. I waited a few more minutes and then opened the rear door and hung Tommy's clothes on a nail back inside the passage. As an afterthought I jotted a short message on a sticky note sheet: *"The collar needs more starch and the trousers' cuffs need to be let down. I'm a growing boy!"* I attached the note to the vest where it couldn't be missed and re-secured the door, then closed the closet smiling to myself.

I didn't consider myself a prankster but it had just been too good an opportunity to let pass. I went back to the sofa and prepared my laptop for service. As I was finally getting down to some serious note writing I heard giggling out in the hall. I got up and went to the door thinking I should get some sense of what it was before intruding. Perhaps it was the maid being made over by an amorous resident.

I cracked the door and peeked out. The lights had been dimmed since I arrived back there from the café. At the top of the stairs were the figures of two boys – Tommy and Larry, I assumed. They were horsing around – pushing and shoving. Upon closer inspection it became apparent that they were transparent.

I could see the wall behind them. I could hear their voices and their laughter. I opened the door and stood just outside it in the hall. The two figures became quiet and serious, and turned, staring at me. The older one began walking toward me. Perhaps coming out into the hallway in such a bold fashion had not been my best idea of the decade!

CHAPTER THREE

I took a pencil from my shirt pocket and tossed it at him to test his density. It went right through him. Six steps from me the two of them disappeared and the lights came back up. Hearing the conversation, several other guests had gathered in the hall. One clapped – for the ghost, I assumed, not for me.

“You saw the whole show?” I asked looking from one to another.

“Three times, actually,” a middle aged woman said as she flicked her long red hair and moved some closer to me from my right.

She continued her explanation without being asked.

“I had just come up the stairs and had the key in my door when the lights dimmed and I heard the giggling behind me. I was startled, but then that’s part of why I’m here – to get a few good, blood curdling, scares. I turned. It was the two boys standing there at the top of the stairs sort of wrestling, I guess. I watched as the older one turned and walked toward your door. Then he disappeared – they both did – but immediately it all started over again. By the time you came out into the hall it had just begun for the third time. It’s just like ghosts, really. They find something they enjoy and they repeat it over and over again like two year olds. I’ve seen it in the castles of Ireland and along the Rhine in Germany.”

“So, you’re what the locals call a ‘Ghostie’ – you travel from one ghost site to another?” It became a question in the end.

“Ghostie. Hadn’t heard the term. I like it. Yes. I suppose I qualify. I’m Ann and you’re Marc Miller the ghost writer.”

“Yes. I am. A Ghostie, also, now that I think about it.”

“I hope you’ll autograph a book for me later.”

“Be happy to. You write as well?”

“No. Though I suppose I have plenty of tales to tell. Maybe I’ll do my memoirs someday and include them all.”

“So, this appearance seemed genuine to you,” I asked.

“My yes. No substance – as you determined. Repetitive behavior. Appearing and disappearing in a flash. It was a genuine appearance, alright.”

She moved back toward her door and turned the key which was still in the lock.

“Later, then,” she said, graciously.

“Yes. Later.”

The others returned to their rooms as well. I walked the area looking for . . . I wasn’t sure what. I retrieved my pencil from the floor and returned it to my shirt pocket. I was aware of Ann’s eyes peeping at me from the crack along the side of her as yet not fully closed door but I didn’t let on. I wondered if it was a personal interest or something else. It interested me that I wanted it to have been personal. She was attractive even if some fifteen years my senior. I noted that although she used both of *my* names, she omitted her own last name. It probably held no meaning.

I returned to my room making a mental note to keep my camera on my person from that moment forward. I slipped in a new card and put the camera into my pocket. It was hard to keep my mind on writing. The town below was

filling with people – a few locals in period costumes but most in shorts, loud shirts and sandals ready to spend money for a good fright or two and all of the accompanying food and souvenirs that entailed. I decided a sunscreen concession would be a gold mine.

The cool of the night was still captured in my room so I closed the windows inviting it to linger there with me. I had not yet perused the thickest of the folders Sarah had provided so I settled into a chair and began paging through her notes. It turned out to be a chronicle of her personal encounters with the ghosts. Her first clear memories began when she was six. I turned to the end to get some idea of the time line. The last entry had been the week before. It was a work in progress, which surprised me, though I'm not sure why.

I returned to the beginning and settled in, enjoying her precisely executed English and subtle sense of humor. There were no attempts to explain the phenomena but the descriptions of the visions and her emotional responses were exquisitely detailed. Her handwriting was definitely Palmer Method from the nineteen forties – a requirement of all teacher training schools at the time she would have been in college.

Clearly the wide-eyed, spontaneity of the passages began to lag once she became an adolescent. What fun it would be to correlate her 'ghost book' with the entries in her diary. Something happened along the way that robbed the sightings of their wonder and mystery. Still, the chronicle continued. I had an explanation – one of those that provided a reason without a true answer. The Covenant!

By ten o'clock my mental energy had lagged and I put the half completed folder aside and rubbed my eyes. Why I didn't wear my reading glasses from the beginning of a piece was beyond me but consistently I forgot about them until my eyes grew tired.

I applied sunscreen and changed into walking shorts – brown to coordinate with my yellow, hang-out, shirt – and went down to the street, unsure exactly what I would do. I began by entering the shop next door – Ghost Central. There were posters and books by a wide variety of modern and period authors. They had all of mine. I was impressed. There were figurines, shirts printed with every ghost-related cliché known to man, wall plaques, and paintings of all the ghosts. I had not yet seen a clear portrayal of the Colonel so studied those present in the shop. He was a commanding figure in a light gray suit and knee high boots. He carried a saber at his side and wore a gray felt hat with a gently upturned brim.

He was depicted as a relatively young man – in his forties. My impression, based on no data whatsoever, had him pegged as twenty years older. There was a tinge of grey in his hair and his closely cropped beard. In one picture he stood with his wife – according to the caption – and in another with his children – two daughters.

The three Coolidge boys were represented in dozens of poses – leapfrogging, fishing, running, sitting cross-legged in front of their tombstones, and on and on. Interestingly some showed blue eyes and some brown. Thinking back to my recent encounter I couldn't recall eye color. The parents' eyes were

always painted blue. I chuckled as I examined one of the statuettes and saw the 'Made in Taiwan' label on the bottom.

I moved on to the candy store figuring that between my sweet tooth and that of my young friend, a renewal of my lemon drop supply was in order. I also left with a small version of the ghost done in white chocolate. I began munching. It was, without a doubt, as good a white chocolate ghost as I had ever sunk my teeth into!

A large map under glass on a wall between shops showed the paths taken by the train and the coach rides. It appeared that the terrain just to the east was far more rugged than what I had encountered on the way in from the west. A deep, narrow, ravine wound its way across the area and at one point there was a short train tunnel through the edge of a mountain. I located the bridge from which the conductor must have fallen. Both rides looked to have exciting potential. If nothing else the view should be spectacular.

As I stood there licking the candy from my fingers, Winkie approached me indicating I was to follow him. I nodded and we were on our way back to the hotel. Adam met me at the door and took me into his office through a door behind the front desk.

"Another accident," Marc. "Andy Bonner. A school teacher. The brake line in his car was punctured and he crashed into a tree as he was coming down off the mountain."

"The ghosts aren't very creative, are they, using the brake lining thing twice."

Adam didn't seem to know how to respond so I asked the logical question that he had not answered.

"How badly was he hurt?"

"Broken arm and pelvis. Medi-Vac copter flew him right to Ft. Smith. Probably not life threatening, but just terrible."

"I ask again, any connection with the other victims?"

"None that I can see. He's single. The Deputies at the crash scene found roses on the front seat. He's taught high school history here for about ten years. Not the beloved teacher Miss Sarah was but I doubt if it can be blamed on his students."

"You notified Sheriff Carter?"

"Right away. Told him you were here. He said to tell you that he'd drop in later on with a pack of spearmint gum."

I shivered. Adam's brow wrinkled.

"A reference to a boogiemer he and I once chased," I said without going into the details of the case involving the ghost of old Charlie Chance.

"Level with me here, Adam. Do you really suspect ghosts or real live human beings in all of this?"

"You have to remember that I grew up here in the Hollow. I learned to swim and fish not a hundred yards from this very spot. I kissed my first girl in the alley behind this hotel. I've lived with the lore all my life. It would be like not believing in summer or possum or love, for me to not believe in the legends. But am I sure? No, I can't say that. I know you aren't necessarily a believer in such

things. It's one reason we contacted you – to maintain an impartial position through it all."

"Well, thanks for keeping me up to speed," I said smiling, then remembered: "I meant to ask earlier, is Boyd back at work yet after his run-in with the chain saw?"

"He supervises every move of his crew. Doubt if he's doing much actual labor though. We almost lost him."

There was genuine concern in Adam's voice. I had heard it from him before but it tended to get lost in the enormity of the events.

"Would you object if Sheriff Carter put some plainclothes deputies here in town?"

"No. Not at all."

"Do we need Council approval?"

"No. They've pretty well given me *carte blanche* to handle this mess – bad choice of word perhaps but that's how it seems."

"This will seem like prying where I have no business but I need to know who the wealthiest person in town is."

"You could get that information from anybody who lives here. It's no secret. Dave Hall. At \$35.00 a seat in a five hundred seat arena, operating almost 250 nights a year, you do the math."

"My mind stopped calculating when it got to \$17,500 a performance," I said.

Adam raised his eyebrows.

"Let me give you my cell phone number," I said. "It will be the fastest way to contact me."

"I have that, Marc. We did a very thorough investigation before contacting you."

"My mother's maiden name?"

"Thompson."

"Indeed you did. I prefer to work under those circumstances. That way if you don't get what you want I can believe it's your own fault!"

It produced the first genuine and extended chuckle Adam had sent my way.

"You'll let me know immediately when Sheriff Carter arrives."

"Sure will."

"I'd like to nose around the amphitheater. Will that be a problem?"

"I'll have it arranged before you can get there."

"Thank you."

I went outside and stopped on the walk at the side street to the south. Winkie was following at a less than discrete distance. Company was good.

As I approached the structure I was impressed with how tall it was at the front – the back of the bleachers, I assumed. I cut across the wide, winding walkway that herded the visitors toward the entrances and was soon at the front gate.

The attendant opened it and showed me in.

"Welcome, Mr. Miller," he said.

He was dressed much like a train conductor with a blue suit and rows of brass buttons. The shiny, patent leather bill on his cap, reflected the sun.

"If I can be of help let me know, otherwise look to your heart's content. The guys will have the cabin finished by noon. Boyd's in charge down there. He's the one in the big, black, ten gallon hat."

I thanked the man and walked down the gentle ramp to the front of the bleachers. *Bleachers* did not adequately describe the soft, swivel chair seats with backs, which were attached every two and a half feet along the concrete under structure. The isles were wide. I saw no seat numbers so assumed it was a first come first seated arrangement. I counted. It had fifty seats across and ten rows high at a steep slope. In a half dozen 'crows nests' across the top, rear, there were places for spot lights and such. The grounds had been cleverly set up so the only place the full performance could be viewed was there from the bleachers.

I climbed to the top hoping to get a look inside the lighting boxes. They were larger than they looked from down below each with two spotlights – one with colored lenses on a rotating disk – and a chair for the operator. There was also a console with electronic dials and a set of headphones with a mike attached. It was clearly a far more sophisticated operation than grandfather had run fifty years before.

I sat and watched the workman go about their task wondering if they didn't get bored doing exactly the same thing day after day. Eventually I wandered down onto the field on which the play unfolded. I walked up to Boyd.

"I'm Marc Miller. Adam said . . ."

"Yes. Expectin' you. Look. Ask. Whatever. No secrets here."

It had been an odd phrase, I thought, that subtly suggested I was the enemy. I ignored the implication and continued.

"Can you give me a run through on this cabin thing?"

"Burns down every night as the finale to the show. Come mornin' we move in and vacuum up what ashes we can. Use that special truck over there. Then we use the little dozers ta pick up the rest and fill the dump truck – that's the dump truck over there. The clean up crew slicks up the grounds – gets rid a the remainin' ashes and such – and we lay the base pieces. Then it's just a matter of layin' up another cabin. Takes about four hours with my crew of ten to get the sides up. Another half hour to put the roof in place. We cheat on that. Have the two sections – front and back – pre-made. Bring 'em in on a flatbed with a boom and a few minutes and a few nails later it's all ready to be burned to the ground."

"Fascinating. You seem to have it down to a science."

Boyd nodded.

"Done today jist like it was fifty year a ago. Can't really improve on some things, ya know."

I nodded imagining he was probably right in this case.

"Takes lots of logs over a season I imagine," I said.

"Part of the state's forestry project to keep the woods open and light. We take every tenth tree. Could go on doing it for a hundred years and Mother

Nature'd never know we'd been here."

"Interesting. I understand you had a nasty run-in with a chain saw some time ago."

"Thought you'd git around ta that. Wanna see the scar?"

"No. I'll just take your word for it. Any idea what happened?"

"Somebody done cut through a link on the chain. I got it in the pick-up if ya want ta see it."

I nodded and followed him to his truck as he called out to his crew, "Don't like the look of log six on the right."

Clearly he took pride in his work even if it were to only be around a short time.

The chain had indeed been tampered with. Each link had two sides fastened in place with rivets through spacer tubes. On the link that broke it was clear one of the side pieces had been sawed completely in two. The force on the link when it was pressed onto a log quickly snapped it and the chain went flying right into Boyd's stomach.

"Just thankful it weren't a foot lower," he said making a fully serious – almost prayerful – reference to the wellbeing of his masculine apparatus. I winced and hurried on.

"Must have some secret for burning the place down so fast," I said, hoping to become privy to the inner workings of the process.

"Gas. Four inches under the cement slab that ya see there inside the cabin are gas pipes with little jets running up just ta the inside a the bottom logs. Once the Raiders toss their torches onto the roof – it's lightly soaked in gasoline by the way so it takes off right away – the gas is turned on and lit automatically inside. The gas makes the brightest fire without any dark smoke like soakin' the logs in diesel fuel would make. Them logs go in a hurry under them conditions."

"Ingenious. Like a crematorium."

He didn't catch my meaning so I repeated myself.

"Ingenious!"

He nodded. That was the fact and needed no further support from him.

"I understand that as the flames die down the ghosts of the Coolidge family are often seen lingering above the house."

"Always there. Right in the flames and smoke. Most dependable ghosts on the planet from the way the Ghosters tell it. None a them's never seen such loyalty nowhere else in the World."

The man made me believe that he was fully convinced it was the ghosts that appeared. I had to agree, I'd never, ever, under any circumstances, anywhere, witnessed such a relationship between men and ghosts. I was eager to behold the full spectacular for myself that evening.

"Thanks for the chat. Hope you're back to a hundred percent very shortly. By the way I met a young relative of yours I believe. Goes by the name Rusty."

A broad smile broke across his face. It seemed I encountered that reaction every time I had mentioned the lad's name.

"Reginald! He's somethin' else, ain't he?"

"Reginald? I had no idea."

"I probably let the cat out a the bag there. He hates that name. Please don't let on I told ya."

"No worry. My lips are zipped."

Boyd chuckled, shifting his gaze up into my face from where he had been staring at the ground.

"It gets worse," he said. "Might as well give you the whole shebang, now. It's Reginald *Humphries* Barber – his Ma named him after a couple a characters in books she liked as a kid. I always thought *Boyd* was bad 'til I heard what she done ta him."

I shook his hand and began walking the grounds. There was a pop-up sprinkling system in the lawn around the cabin. I assumed that served the dual purposes of keeping the backdrop for the play lush green and to dampen down the area prior to the show to help keep the fire contained. Apparently there had been some problem with the system since several of the black plastic heads had been replaced with chrome. It made me realize the hundreds of details Dave and his crew had to attend to in order to stage such a production.

Across the rear of the grounds was a fence – fort style with sharp-top logs set upright in the ground. Several openings had been provided – for entrances and exits I assumed. Behind the fence was a long narrow stage on wheels. It was probably moved in front of the cabin and used during the pre-show for the musicians and story tellers.

Convinced I had the general lay of the land and the particulars of the technology, I began the short trek back toward the main drag. It was after eleven and my three hotcakes seemed a part of my distant past. My stomach growled. Something else growled back. I turned. There he was, grinning from ear to ear with an impish aura – Reginald Humphries Barber the first. I sincerely doubted there would be a second!

"That stomach a yours needs tendin' I'd say," he said all quite seriously.

"Sure seems that way to me, too. How's yours doing, by the way."

"I'm a growin' boy. Need to take in everything I can keep down."

"Where's your favorite place for lunch?"

"Ma's kitchen."

It caught me off guard. I was prepared to be conned into shelling out for another meal.

"Let me rephrase it. Where would you suggest I go for lunch?"

"Sam's."

"Sam's? I don't know about Sam's."

"Most Ghosters don't. Jist by special invitation. In the basement under the leather shop. Only three basements in town, by the way – the town hall, the hotel, and Sam's Place."

"Why are you telling me about Sam's if I need an invitation?"

I suddenly smelled subterfuge.

"'Cuz me an Miss Sarah finagled ya one."

"I see. Then your presence here beside me is not pure coincidence?"

"You'll soon learn that nothin' I do is coincidence. I'm a thinker, ya know."

"Yes. I do believe that. So, when?"

“Right now. If’n ya don’t stop jawin’ we’ll be late.”

The entrance to Sam’s was down a flight of sunken, outdoor, cement, stairs at the rear of the Leather Shop. Inside were six, small, round, tables each set for two. The walls were irregularly shaped limestone blocks rising to a height of only about seven feet. Large beams held up the ceiling above. The muffled sounds of feet could be heard on the wooden floor upstairs. Sarah was already seated. Three chairs were in place at the table. Except for the three of us, it was empty.

Sam was in his early sixties and did his cooking behind a counter that spanned the back of the room – actually the front of the building but since we entered from the rear . . . well.

The story from Sarah was that he had been a chef in New York City and had recently retired back to his home town. He cooked for the pure pleasure he found in the activity and prepared only what he wanted to prepare. Guests had no choice. It would be fun. That day it was beef stroganoff.

“I washed my feet this mornin’ since I knowed we was comin’ to such a fancy place,” Rusty announced as we took our seats.

“What a nice gesture,” I said looking back and forth between him and Sarah.

“Rusty and I hatched this last evening,” Sarah explained.

“Yup. I wanted it to be a date fer jist you two but Miss Sarah said she’d feel better if’n I come’d along – a chaperone-like, I guess.”

Sarah rolled her eyes.

“Sam was one of my students, eons ago. He still owes me a book report and until I get it I’m feeling quite at ease imposing on him.”

Sam was listening and reacted with a smile but remained busy behind the counter.

“I can go help Sammy if’n you two has private concerns ta discuss,” Rusty offered.

I was surprised when Sarah took him up on it. He left.

“I was wondering how things were going with your . . . what *do* you call it? Investigation? Research?”

“I never know what to call it either and at this point I’m not sure just *how* it’s going. I loved reading your notes. You need to arrange them into a book.”

She nodded, graciously.

“Can you tell me anything about the Colonial’s family. I have seen pictures suggesting he had at least two daughters.”

“The oldest never married and taught in the old one room school house – where the library is today. The other married and had a son, I believe. I can find out for sure.”

“Her name – last name?”

“Benton, I believe. I’ll need to check that out. More and more I believe that God invented writing just for the benefit of us old folks with rippling memories.”

“And us not quite so old folks. Without my notes I’d surely starve. *Rippling memories*. May I use that?”

“Be my guest. I didn’t write it down so I’ll soon not remember it was my phrase in the first place.”

“I’m not sure how to ask this and please understand I mean no offense.”

“You intrigue me, Mr. Miller. Go on.”

“Reading through your notes I suddenly realized that much of the magic in your writing disappeared about the time you would have been a young to mid teenager.”

“I could point out that was *not* a question, but I won’t. I’m not sure how to respond. There are some things we – meaning residents of Hickory Hollow – are not at liberty to discuss. I learned of those things as a fifteen year old. Back then boys were told at younger ages. Girls were sheltered – the fairer sex thing, you understand. You are right. With that knowledge some of the magic disappeared. It’s all I am able to say on the subject.”

“I won’t press the issue and I believe you have confirmed my suspicions without ever once betraying the Covenant.”

“My! Not at all how I expected that conversation to turn.”

Rusty returned with Sam close behind.

“The aroma alone is worth whatever you charge, Sam,” I said. “I’m Marc Miller.”

I stood and shook his hand.

The food arrived. We ate. Rusty let the old folks do most of the talking as he wrestled with an unfamiliar number of utensils beside his plate. He watched us attentively and would, I was sure, soon be giving his own classes in multi-utensil etiquette.

I had never had more delicious food.

Rusty had fish to catch and friends to regale with tales of fighting his way through four spoons, three forks and two knives at Sam’s. I walked Sarah back to her place, a small clapboard structure just across from the library. Our conversation turned to Adam.

“He studied in England, I understand.”

“Yes. English literature and history. Naturally, I suppose he got off on a ghost kick while over there.”

“Ghost kick?”

“He did his senior thesis on the ghosts that haunt Irish Pubs.”

“How interesting,” I said.

“There’s a copy in the library if you’re interested.”

“Yes, I think I would be. I’ll stop by tomorrow. You are open on Wednesdays, right?”

“Right. However if you’re up to using the key stashed above the back door, you can let yourself in this evening if you want to.”

“Since I’m in the neighborhood. Yes. I’ll do that. Point me in the right direction if you will.”

“Fifth book case on the right, south side, about the third shelf from the bottom and perhaps a foot or less in from the right.”

“Astonishing. And what was that you were saying about failing memory?”

She smiled and I left in search of the thesis. It was exactly where she

indicated. I left the way I had come and returned the key to its safe place.

It was one o'clock when I entered my room. I checked the closet. The suit of clothes was back. To the vest was pinned a note. "Hope this is more to your liking. Light starch in the shirt collar and cuffs and the trousers legs are now one inch longer." It was signed, "Ma."

More chills. I chose to believe it was the beginning of a humorous relationship between me and some real live laundress / seamstress somewhere. I checked the garments. They had come back just as advertised. I smiled and closed the closet, then settled down with the manuscript. I had at least ninety minutes until the matinee at the theater.

The thesis was not an investigation of the possible existence of the spirits but an historical account of their presence. It detailed activities and behaviors attributed to them and created a classification scheme for sorting them into helpful, playful, benign, and malevolent. By far the largest amount of space was given to the playful variety. Although the bibliography listed references dealing with hoaxes, none were so identified in the actual presentation.

I was surprised I had not run across his piece earlier, but then, my interests were directed more toward the southeastern United States so I could see how I might have skipped over such a reference. Castle ghosts seemed banal and old hat, and held little excitement for me. That was not to say I wouldn't pack my bags in a minute if such an opportunity came my way.

Two forty five came in a hurry. I hadn't asked about proper dress for the theater in Hickory Hollow but assumed from the garb worn by the typical tourist, that my shirt and slacks would, if anything, probably make me *over* dressed.

Bart was waiting out front as I crossed the street. We entered through a side door. His system of traffic control was ingenious. Six entrances off the beautiful lobby, with a cashier at each, could fill the place in fifteen minutes. Patrons left through the rear where there was a smaller but equally stunning and plush lobby.

"Seats how many?" I asked.

"Three hundred – two on the ground floor and one in the balcony."

"Ticket prices?"

"For the main presentations – plays and such - fifteen rear ground floor. Twenty five front ground floor. Fifty balcony. For the minor things, slide shows, old fashioned silent films – all that takes place mornings – all seats are ten dollars. Always special rates for school kids and senior citizens."

"And you fill this place how often?"

"The word *fill* makes it difficult to answer. We run about six hundred through here a day. More if it starts raining."

He indicated the wide, winding staircase, carpeted in red to match the wall paper. Clearly, this was designed to be ghost friendly territory. I was soon seated top row center. The best seat in the house I was told. If the Colonial put in an appearance I would be able to witness it from there.

The playbill – outside – announced a melodrama in two acts and encouraged the audience to participate with boo's and hisses when the villain made his appearances and cheers for the hero. Sounded like fun whether the

Old Colonial showed up or not. Since the play was short there was a pre-show of jugglers, fiddle playing, and dogs that jumped through hoops.

The program sheet, like so many other things in Hickory Hollow, bore pictures of ghosts the tourists were likely to encounter. I imagined the idea was that you couldn't know it was a ghost unless you knew what the ghosts looked like.

With the preliminaries over, the curtain went up on *Despicable Darrel and the Widow Pureheart*.

The widow's beautiful young daughter, having rejected Despicable Darrel's amorous advances had just been tied to the railroad track as the theater lights flickered below and brightened to my far right in the balcony. As if on cue the patrons downstairs stood and turned to look up. There he was – Colonial Rankin – emerging *through* the outside wall in the front aisle upstairs. He paused and looked across those sitting in the balcony then out over the patrons below. There was a quiet agitation about his presence. He moved in a slow, deliberate manner while his eyes searched restlessly and his chin whiskers quivered. His right arm was held across his body, with his white gloved hand firmly gripping the handle of his saber, still in its sheath down his left leg. He gave every indication that he expected imminent trouble.

Then, from out of the darkness of the ceiling shadows above and to the left of the stage came a whooping young figure swinging on a rope directly toward the center front of the balcony. Everyone knew who it was, of course. The lore made it Tommy whether those witnessing the event would have otherwise recognized him or not.

He lit inside the railing and let the rope swing free. With his thumbs in his ears, his hands flapping, and his tongue sticking out, the impish young man – well, ghost – took several brazen steps toward the Colonial who drew his saber and began the chase. Up the center aisle and across the back of the balcony they went. The Colonial moved slowly enough so Tommy could turn, from time to time, and continue his taunting. At the outside wall to my far left, Tommy stopped as if to let the Colonial catch up. As the saber pierced the boy's chest, the lights flickered and they both exited through the wall – the solid wall.

After a long moment, standing astonished in silence, the crowd clapped and cheered. Some whistled. It was as if they expected a curtain call. There wasn't one and presently things returned to normal. Perhaps a third of the patrons left; they had seen what they had really come for. The rest took seats and once again became engrossed in the saga unfolding on stage. It picked up without missing a beat. The actors had clearly not been distracted.

I chose to remain and made notes on a small yellow pad I had stashed in my shirt pocket. Several things stood out to me. The first appearance of the Colonial as he emerged from the wall was strictly ethereal. His image was transparent and it remained that way until after the yipping and hooting Tommy began his swing from the rafters. When my attention was again directed at the Colonial – after Tommy's landing – the older ghost had acquired substance – an opaqueness that matched that of Tommy.

The balcony quivered as the chase played out. I felt the rush of air behind

my seat as the two passed me on the run. Then, in the flickering light as they approached the other wall, they both took on the translucent, then transparent aura as they slipped into and through the wall. I understood what had happened. I just wasn't sure how it had been accomplished.

When the play ended and the black-suited, dastardly despicable Darrel had been duly cuffed and dispatched to the poky by the white-clad, ever-smiling, young, sheriff, the patrons filed out. I sat and watched. When the balcony was empty I made my way to the Colonial's entry point down to my right. The wall was solid by any measure. I did the same at the spot from which they exited the room. Another substantial outside wall. I examined the floor and the ceiling with my eyes in the area of the ghost's departure and made several more notes. My interest was beginning to wander from my purpose in Hickory Hollow. I needed to focus.

Bart was waiting for me in the front lobby and introduced me to his wife.

"I love a great melodrama and that one certainly qualified as great. It's one of the few forms of dramatic entertainment that relies hardly at all on the author's words and almost entirely on the exaggerated emoting of actors, acting poorly."

"In other words it just takes a bunch of hams to pull it off," she said, smiling.

"*Talented* hams," I added.

The phrase produced an image in my mind of a chorus line of high kicking pigs. I thought better than to share that picture and enjoyed my little funny privately.

"Questions?" Bart asked.

"Lots! Just none for right now. Everything considered, it was well worth the cost of admission."

I chose not to clarify whether I was referring to the fifty bucks usually doled out for the seat I occupied or the fact it had been free. Bart didn't ask although I could see the wheels turning.

It was 4:30 so I had over two hours before the train ride. I left through the front door and leaned up against a porch post trying to be nonchalant as I planned my next move. Winkie was sitting on the sidewalk across the street, making no real attempt to hide his gaze in my direction. Within seconds there was a familiar husky voice at my side.

"Mr. Miller I'd like you to meet my big bro, Jerry. He'll probably let you feel his muscle if you want to."

The bicep was flexed in my direction before I had a chance to decline. I reached out, made the obligatory squeeze, and offered the expected, "Oh. My. Really been working out, I see."

It seemed a bit immature for a seventeen year old.

"Yes, Sir. All the upper body stuff."

"Boxer?"

"No, Sir. Jist enjoy workin' out. The girls love it – sweatin', no shirt, muscles – you must remember how it was way back."

I nodded and smiled ignoring what I assumed had been an unintended

slur against my age and physical condition.

“Gotta go, Squirt.”

He was speaking to Rusty. He ruffled the boy’s hair in a good natured fashion and trotted off down the street.

“Betty Sue,” Rusty said more resigned than upset.

“Girl friend?”

“ ’Fraid so. Don’t have much time fer me no more. Lets me help him work out. I’ll take *that*, I guess. Ya takes what ya can git once they start strugglin’ with the hormones.”

I snorted, reacting to Rusty’s unexpected analysis of Jerry’s condition.

“I have a question for you and it is in no way a complaint, okay?”

He looked up and nodded, his brow furrowed.

“Okay.”

“Why is it that you seem to always show up the moment I’m in-between activities?”

He grinned.

“Wouldn’t do me no good ta show up when ya was in the middle a somethin’, now, would it?”

He shook his head as if wondering just how dumb I could be. I had to agree.

“Makes sense, of course,” I said searching for a graceful way out. I’d change the subject as soon as I could think of one. As it turned out I wouldn’t have the chance.

It was a deep voice from behind that started at the very moment some small blunt device was shoved against my lower back. That it was a gun seemed clear. *Why* it was there, was not.

“Don’t make a move. I got some good advice fer you and I’m just gunna tell ya once. Are you listenin’?”

CHAPTER FOUR

"A-Advice is always g-good," I stammered.

"Then listen up!"

His face moved close to my left ear as if he were preparing to whisper.

"You. Me. N o w! Kate's Kafe. Supper's on me!"

I turned. It was Sheriff Carter.

Rusty had clasped his hand over his mouth choking back his laughter.

The Sheriff slapped me on my back.

"Good to see you again," he said offering his hand.

"And you, Fred. Heart attacks at my age are not really any fun; you understand that?"

He chuckled and raised his eyebrows.

"Adam said you'd be dropping by. I have a favor or two to ask of you so let's put supper on *my* tab."

"Your *free* tab, I assume."

"Always thinking like a cop, aren't you?"

"I'll let you two review old acquaintances," Rusty said. "Don't forget the coach ride at seven thirty."

"I wouldn't miss it for the World. Seven thirty."

I was amused at his comment about *reviewing* old acquaintances. That's actually how it too often was – a rehash of what had been without anything new.

Once inside the café, I gravitated back to the table Rusty had selected for breakfast. It seemed comfortable and was somewhat private there at the back of the room.

"So, anything from your investigations I should know," I began once we had placed our orders.

"Probably. The fire at the Bennings was definitely arson and was set by a rank amateur. Gasoline was used to soak the roof. Fires don't burn so well from the top down you know. If it had been set around the bottom the results could have been quite different."

I nodded and made a note.

"Then the conductor – Red Barber – no doubt that he had been hit on the head – rear center – before he left the train. Coroner says he was probably dead before he was pushed out the door."

"Jasper Oliver was clearly murdered by suffocation and the two brake failures both involved the lines punctured just enough to make them leak. Eventually enough fluid dripped out to render the systems useless. Again it looks like an amateur."

"Might be a professional brought in to make it look like some stumbling local," I said.

"That's a possibility that crossed my mind. I have nothing to tie it to, however. Have you run across any motive or motives?"

"I have some ideas but like you said nothing to tie them to. I wondered about somebody trying to force a buyout or to sweeten such a deal for himself, but none of the principle business men have even been approached about

selling. The way this community is set up it's doubtful if that would ever happen. It's an interesting combination of free enterprise and a commune here. Everybody shares in the overall take and yet anybody is free to be an entrepreneur, also. I've run across no grudges – no scores to settle. No one can suggest any connection among the victims – though you and I know there must be at least one."

"I've tried to think along those lines, too," Fred said. "I get about as far as Red and Boyd being cousins and it all comes to a screeching halt."

"I haven't yet determined what the Bennings do here," I said.

"He's the stage coach foreman – cares for the teams, does the upkeep on the coaches. His wife sells tickets, does the books, and such. No kids."

"So there are *several* coaches to ride, then. It makes sense. I just hadn't thought about it."

"Three, I believe, with one in reserve. One leaves every five minutes. That way they stay out of each other's sight. Gentle, more leisurely, family rides during the day. Evenings are the scary rides – fast and furious at times."

"You seem to know more about this place than I would have imagined?"

"I make it my business to know about things that go on in my county."

"But right down to the coach schedule?"

"Oh, that?" He smiled. "I was here last weekend with my two grandchildren. Actually, I'm probably more surprised than you that I remembered it that long."

We chuckled.

"You mentioned favors," the Sheriff said.

"What would you think about placing some undercover deputies on the grounds?"

"I've had one man here since the trouble began. Thought it best not to reveal that 'til I got a better handle on whether it might be an inside ploy of some kind."

"It's your call of course. I'd feel more comfortable with several more. I suppose it's more for quick response than prevention. I have no idea how to prevent a crime we don't even know is going to take place."

"I can put four more on eight hour shifts. Any suggestions about how to split their time?"

"When did the other crimes occur?"

"Interesting thought. Morning, actually."

"Even Red? I thought the train rides were just in the evening."

"Just the ghost sighting rides. Like the coach, there are lots of sightseeing train rides throughout the day."

"How about three of them from opening at nine a.m. to five, and then one more from five to one?"

"I'll arrange it to begin tonight."

"Excellent."

The rest of the meal was given over to small talk. The Sheriff caught me up on Tyke Rakes at the Academy and his new best friend Willy from Sandy Valley.* Seems they hit it off just as I was sure they would. It also sounded like

wedding bells were in the near future for both of them. [Tyke to Cindy and Willy to Annie in case you're wondering!] The kids sure did marry young in those parts.

Six forty-five found me at the train station. I selected the rear car and a left side seat. The ghostly action seemed to be initiated from the left and I figured it would take place somewhere in front of the last car.

All seats were filled on all tours. A young, barrel-chested man pulled in to share my seat. I introduced myself.

"Marc Miller."

"Donny Davis," he said, offering me his hand. In his palm was a deputy's badge. We shook. I hoped the pin on the back didn't puncture his flesh.

He handed me his card with his private cell phone number on the back.

"I assume you have mine."

"Yes, Sir."

"Probably should be, Marc, don't you think?"

"Yes, Sir. Marc it is, Sir."

"Taken this ride before?" I asked.

"Oh, yes Sir Marc. Lot's of times. Probably don't even remember the first time."

"I guess I hadn't thought it would be a repeat attraction for the area residents."

"Ma had seven brothers and sisters and Pa nine. Lots of uncles, aunts, and cousins to entertain."

"I'd think you'd be hard put just to remember all the names."

"At reunion picnics we all wear name tags. There are 64 first cousins alone. Strength in numbers, I suppose."

Each car – there were ten – had its own resident conductor who maintained a monologue about the countryside, the geologic features, and the history of the area. Whether that history was fully accurate was not even important. He spun a good yarn and kept us all smiling. It was dusk. Certain of the features were artificially lit so the tourist would not miss them: the hanging tree, complete with a dangling, quivering body; the entrance to the gold mine with crusty looking miners working the slough below the cabin; a small Indian encampment with three out of place tepees and a handful of genuine looking Native Americans; the swimming hole, featuring boys from about ten to fourteen swinging out and dropping into the water (the train slowed long enough for us to watch the rescue of a small boy by an older one); the moonshiners' still, complete with revenueurs sneaking up on the jug guzzling hillbillies; and the wood trestle bridge over 'dead man's gorge' – no longer an idle aphorism; and other attention grabbing features.

As we slowed to cross the bridge the conductor warned the passengers that just on the other side was the meadow in which the ghosts of Rankin's Raiders most often appeared. No promises were made but it peaked our attention and the car grew silent in anticipation.

A small boy in the front of the car pointed out his window and called: "There. Horses and riders coming right at us."

The Conductor went to his side and leaned down to peer out the window. He nodded.

"That's them, alright. Don't panic folks. They've never harmed this train. If you're sitting on the right side you may want to move into the aisle fer a better looksee. The riderless white stallion you see leading the way belonged to the Colonial, but of course since he's trapped forever inside the theater, his mount must ride empty saddled through all eternity."

They rode directly toward the slow moving train. The engineer repeatedly blew the steam whistle. What actual purpose that served was not clear to me. Perhaps to scare off the lead Stallion. Perhaps to alert the passengers. More likely just to add drama to the moment.

Clandestinely, I shot a series of pictures – cameras were not allowed on the rides. The reason given was that flashes would scare any ghosts that might appear and the owner of the railroad could not guarantee the riders' safety under those conditions. I figured there was some other reason.

It had all the necessary elements: darkness, a rolling bank of fog, and the silent, black and white images galloping fearlessly as if to do battle with the train. The horses and riders were transparent or at least translucent. At one point a yipping, stray, dog ran among them as they approached the train.

"It looks like they may go right through the train this evening, folks," the conductor said. "Be prepared to watch for them coming out on the other side."

It happened just as he had suggested it 'might'. They emerged from the right side of the train and galloped up the rise and on into the woods beyond. Cheers, clapping, and nervous laughter could be heard up and down the line of cars. I must admit it was an exciting show or appearance or event or demonstration, or whatever it may have been.

The only other event of any significance was passing the stagecoach as it moved along the road that ran for several blocks along side the tracks. The passengers waved back and forth. It was fun and an interesting way to help the tourists regain their composure and prepare for real life when the ride ended a few minutes later.

I asked Donny if it was pretty much as he had expected it would be.

"The Raiders come at the train from different angles on different occasions. I'd never seen it just like this before."

"Same size group of riders?"

He stopped to think.

"Not sure, though my inclination would be to say yes."

The train jerked to a stop in a knee-high cloud of hissing steam. We got off the train and went our separate ways. I walked the half block to the Coach Station. Rusty was perched atop a split rail fence, watching for me. He jumped to the ground and came on the trot.

"Ready fer our big adventure, Mr. Miller?"

"I sure am. Anything you think I need to know ahead of time?"

"Sometimes the ghosts a the James Gang tries to take over the coach. The driver and guy riding shotgun have always run 'em off up ta now, at least. Get ready for some flyin' bullets."

"I didn't know the James Gang ever rode this far south," I said, knowing full well there would be an explanation.

"Ghosts don't like the cold weather up north. You should know that. They drifted down here 'cuz a that."

[Like I said.]

The coaches really didn't resemble the stage coaches of the old west. They were more like narrow bleachers – comfortably padded and with backs – build into a sturdy, wooden, wagon. There were five rows of four seats each. They faced forward and rose by perhaps eight inches from row to row toward the back to provide straight ahead vision for all passengers. The back of the wagon was solid and did resemble the rear of a stage coach having a place for one or several shotgun guys to stand overlooking the passengers. Sides angled down in artistic curves from the back at seat height toward the front where the driver sat.

It sported smaller, wooden-spoke, wheels in front and large ones in back, and was painted red with black and gold trim. It was drawn by six beautiful horses. All in all, the presentation was impressive and even I was willing to believe we were mounting some authentic, rustic, conveyance from the past.

Rusty was unabashedly excited.

"I left my money at home in case there's a hold up."

"Probably good thinking," I said playing along.

"Ma says *you* don't believe in ghosts."

"I'm always ready to examine any proof that anyone has to show me."

It hadn't been a satisfactory response, I could tell, but he didn't press me for more. Rusty went right for the outside left seat high on the back row. I took a place beside him. It was interesting to watch the others select their seats. I had to wonder what went into their decisions. The same question often entered my mind as I watched folks search out tables in 'seat-yourself' restaurants. No real relevance here; just one of my many quirky interests.

Once everyone was seated, the slight, old, Levi-clad, driver with a scraggly beard, turned and gave his passengers, the once over. He repacked his cheek with chewing tobacco, took a practice spit, and with a quick slap of the reins had us underway. The younger man riding on the back with his shotgun at the ready turned out to be the counterpart of the conductor on the train. He delivered stories about many of the sights and spun tales at a mind-boggling rate. Before we rounded the first turn on the narrow, dusty, trail, he had us smiling and laughing out loud. He built the suspense gradually toward the likelihood the ghosts of the James Gang would attempt a hold up.

Along the way there were coyotes howling, bats swooping, and unexplained lanterns moving eerily alongside the trail with no apparent means of support. And it *did* seem eerie even knowing it had to be rigged. Then it happened! As we rounded a turn at a well lighted spot on the trail the coach came upon six riders wearing long coats and western hats. They sat some thirty yards away looking at us. Then, with no warning, gun shots rang out and flashes from the six shooters could be seen in the semi-darkness. The man behind us began firing – shot after shot after shot. One of the horseman slumped forward

in his saddle and the group turned and “road off like yella bellied cowards,” ahead with the coach in pursuit. (A bit “B” movie-ish, but it worked.)

They rounded a curve in a tight ravine just ahead of us and were out of sight for less than ten seconds. As we also completed that turn a bridge loomed ahead of us – a bridge with steep hills rising from beside the narrow trail. There was no sight of the riders. They were not on the bridge or on the straight stretch beyond it. They could not have climbed the hills. They had disappeared.

As the coach approached the bridge it slowed and crossed at a leisurely pace. The spokesman suggested that was the way it usually turned out – the whole Gang disappeared into thin air.

The dust that their horses had kicked up had been real. The smell of their guns firing had been real. The smoke that filled the air had been real. Yet, they had disappeared. Had it been a wonderful illusion or a fully bizarre appearance of apparitions? It was reason for me to revisit the site during daylight.

Rusty could have cared less whether it was real or unreal. He loved every dust-filled, grimy second of the encounter. His index fingers had fired a hundred rounds apiece at the bad guys. Afterwards, the shotgun man offered his appreciation to the lad for his good help. Rusty grinned, knowing it was offered in jest and yet clearly feeling proud of his efforts. At nine he still had the luxury of seamlessly fading back and forth between the real and the imaginary with no loss of wonder and excitement. I wondered when that stopped and why. I decided I really didn't want to know.

"Thanks fer the ride," Rusty said, looking up into my face as, back at the station, we alit from the wagon. "It's the most excitement I've ever had, I reckon. Where do s'pose those bad guys went?"

"You don't believe they just disappeared into thing air – the way I hear ghosts can do?"

"Never done heard a ghosts rilin' up the dust that a way. I figure the ghosts didn't come out so they had ta run in real guys on real horses tonight. Think I recognized one a the mares. I seen Georgie Benning ridin' it. The black and white. Not many a them here in the Hollow."

"So, how do you feel about them not being ghosts?"

"Don't matter none. It was a hoot, ya know. Still have ta wonder where they went to."

"So do I."

"Well, I got ta skedaddle. Got private stuff to do."

"Okay, then. It was good to have you along on the ride. See you tomorrow, I suppose."

It was to be a full evening. My next stop was the amphitheater. It was as if some huge magnet suddenly began drawing all the gaudy shirts in town down the street to the big show.

Dave Hall met me at the gate and escorted me to a reserved spot a little right of center, second row from the top.

"Best seat in the house," he said. "Hope you enjoy the show."

After minimal conversation he left me alone. I supposed he was busy with event details. Other eager patrons soon filled in the area around me. The lights

dimmed and the lead-in program began. There were fiddles and banjos and 'back-hollar' dancing. Story tellers prepared the audience for ghostly things without any real reference to the Coolidge's. Like the other entertainment I had experienced there, it was clean, fun, relaxing, and very professional.

The stage was pulled away by a team of beautiful white horses and the lighting gradually expanded from where it had been focused on the trailer to illuminate the larger area on which the story would unfold.

A narrator began the *Saga of The Haunting of Hickory Hollow*. He would set the stage for some part of the tale and then the actors would play it out on the field in front of us. The family arrived, the finishing touches were put on the cabin, wood was chopped and water carried, evening prayers were said and the Bible was read, the horse trader came by and Joel made the purchase, Clarabelle took the job at the hotel, the boys played together and managed a few song and dance routines in among it all.

The narrator told of Colonial Rankin's failed mission after he and his men had chased bands of outlaws across four counties without success. They returned, galloping into view from around the spiked fence at the rear. They stopped at the cabin and mistook the presence of several uniquely marked horses they saw there in the corral for those of the outlaws – proof of the desperado's presence inside the house. The gunplay began. The fire was started. A neighbor rushed up to tell the Colonial he had made a grave mistake. They rode away as the cabin became totally engulfed in flames.

Presently he could be seen standing in a set, which emerged dramatically from the darkness to the right and resembled the balcony of his theater. He put a pistol to his head and as the shot resounded through the amphitheater, the lights went out. Above the smoldering cabin rose the spirits of the five Coolidges. They moved from place to place as a family. The youngest descended to say good-bye to the family dog – an effective tear jerker of a scene as he knelt, hugging his beloved puppy one last time.

At the end, the parents gathered their children into their arms and the five rose higher and higher, fainter and fainter, until they disappeared. Briefly a spotlight came up on the fallen Colonel and then faded to black. The show was over. The bleacher lights came up. Everybody believed they had received more than their money's worth.

Again, I sat and let the others leave as I made notes. The noise followed the crowd up the street; the area became silent. Briefly, I heard a quiet, distant, *whir* but couldn't tell from which direction it came. I knew that sound but couldn't place it. The noise was soon gone.

I made my way down to the field and examined the embers from afar. The heat was still extreme. I walked to the balcony set. Empty – of course. I walked behind the cabin circling around toward the entrance. In the dark I stumbled over one of the pop up watering heads jarring my pad from my shirt pocket. I bent over and picked it up. In my experience those heads always retracted themselves once the water pressure stopped so I attempted an easy push to return it to its hole. It wouldn't budge. It was one of the chrome replacements I had noticed earlier so suspected there was just some problem there.

I didn't find Dave afterwards so left and walked back toward the little town's business section. Peeking into the two cafes I saw they were bulging with patrons. Pull the tourists in for a *fourth* meal – or at least some pricey dessert. How clever. How *ka-ching-ish!* I wasn't ready to turn in so took a seat on the edge of the raised walk in front of the hotel.

Fifteen minutes later Haskins exited the cafe across the street. I got up and moved to intercept him, hoping to set an appointment for us to talk.

"Mr. Haskins," I began matching strides beside him. "Pardon my intrusion. My name is Marc Miller. I'm also a writer. Here researching a piece on the local ghosts. I wondered if we could talk sometime."

"I suppose," he said, offering nothing more.

"I understand your interest is in the genealogy of the area."

"Yes. History professor. It's my specialty."

"Interesting. I'm wondering if you've located any relatives of the Coolidge family that live in these parts today."

"No. Only daughter that survived left shortly after the vicious massacre and was never heard from again."

"How about the Rankin line? Did it die out as well?"

"So far as I can tell, yes, it did. The Colonial's two daughters married but moved south. I found one branch in the Smoky Mountains several summers ago. Appears to be a dead end."

"I'd still like to see your work. Would you have some time tomorrow?"

"Breakfast – early – at Kates?" he suggested more than asked.

"Sure. Great. Six, six-thirty," I asked to establish a time.

"She opens at five-thirty. I'll be there then."

He turned north toward the Widow's house where he was staying and I stopped, realizing I really hadn't been welcome beside him. Five thirty would come early. I returned to my room seeing Winkie shadowing me across the street. It caused a chuckle. I wondered if he slept outside my room. He hadn't been half a block from me since I arrived. Eventually I'd want to know why and what connections he might have with others that felt the need to keep me under observation. Until then, I'd be content to wash the trail dust away in the shower and turn in for the night.

As I stepped out of the shower there was commotion in the street outside. I wrapped myself in a towel, picked up my camera, and stepped out onto the deck. There, coming down the street at a slow, unassuming, trot, were the brother ghosts – Tommy and Larry. They were tossing a ball back and forth between them as they went. From time to time they'd stop for a moment before continuing on west. They called to each other. I couldn't catch it all but heard enough to understand Larry was kidding his big brother about having caught him kissing a girl. Neither ever missed the ball. Neither ever seemed to touch the ground with his feet, either. Their images were ethereal – lacking substance. Again there was that whirring sound. What was that?

They disappeared at the end of the street and I went back inside. I wrote quick descriptions of both youngsters before the images faded from my memory. They compared almost exactly with the ones I had experienced earlier in the hall

– same clothing and faces as closely as I could remember.

There was a knock on my door. I opened it. No one was there. I stepped into the hall looking both directions. Still, no one in sight. The sound of laughing – big, full, bellylaughing – filled the hall. It seemed to be coming from the top of the stairs but no one was there. Then, as other guests gathered to investigate the commotion, an image began to form. It was soon apparent the laughter was coming from Tommy, bent over at the waist and thoroughly enjoying something.

When he/it saw/sensed us all standing there, he stood up and then bowed deeply. He waved a playful good-bye with his fingers close to his head and turned, leaping down the stairs. I moved to snap another picture at the landing. As Adam had suggested his head was against the wall at the point of the dent in the plaster that had been pointed out to me earlier. His image then moved on into the wall and – after a few seconds of humorous 'fanny waving' – he was gone.

Again the other residents applauded – as much a nervous reaction I surmised than in actual appreciation. I returned inside, suddenly realizing I was hardly clad for a social gathering. I removed the card from my camera and slid it into the laptop. I was surprised at how many pictures I had taken that day.

I contrasted those of the train Raiders with the ones of the James Gang. It was clear the Raiders had been something other than physical beings. At one point a dog had got mixed up within the galloping troops and it was plain that the images wrapped around the dogs body rather than making physical contact with it. Unlike that, there were several shots of the James Gang that showed the men moving overhanging branches out of their way as they galloped along kicking up dust.

My conclusion was that the James Gang had been flesh and blood actors but the Raiders had been something else. I turned my attention to the several pictures which included Tommy. At the theater where he challenged the Colonial, his image – that is his clothing and hair and such – remained the same throughout the sequence. The six shots I had of him swinging on the rope and running up the steps and across the back aisle showed a solid image. Once he reached his exit wall, however – after the lights flickered on and off – his image became transparent as it made its way through the wall.

It made me reflect on other possible ghosts I had observed. Could they change the opacity of their image, varying the degree of their transparency? I had no immediate answer though it seemed reasonable. It was a situation I had not needed to contemplate before. I had encountered images that did not show up in photographs when I was sure they had been within the camera's frame. It seemed in this current setting I was getting pictures of everything I had attempted to photograph.

Tommy and Larry together, were strictly ethereal – transparent. The laughing, leaping, and Tommy by himself, just a few minutes before, showed the same transparent presence. Tommy and Larry running the street were not only transparent but failed to use the solid street as a point of reference. The images floated a foot or so above the ground. In my experience that was not unusual.

The photos at the amphitheater were of poor quality. I used my night

vision lens for part of them and the regular lens for the rest. The images of the ghosts clearly lacked substance. In fact, the shots in which they hovered above the burning cabin showed a wrinkling effect – undulating images as if being affected by the rising heat waves. The Colonial at that performance was solid and I imagined had been played by an actor. I assumed his part of the program would have been included whether or not the ghostly images of the family had appeared.

Several of the pictures seemed to have been snapped by accident and I tried to recreate the when and where from their place in the sequence. Upon reflection, I recalled taking several shots of the sky, in the direction of the whirring sounds. No wonder they were basically black images. There was something strange about each of them.

It had been a clear night. The moon was only a slip in the sky and in the absence of its light the stars appeared to shine brightly. Each skyward picture, however, showed an area having no stars. Could I have put my finger over the lens? Large clouds, perhaps, unseen in the darkness. Could there have been a branch or other obstruction in the way? Those were possibilities. It was something to which I would return later.

I printed out close-ups of the boys' faces from the amphitheater performance, the street scene, and the hallway wrestling appearance. They remained somewhat distorted for my lack of heavy duty graphics software but one thing stood out. There was a good resemblance in all of those taken of Tommy to the face of Rusty's big brother.

What if Rusty's family – the Barbers – were descendants of the Coolidges? Would that somehow tie into the accidents and deaths? Was somebody out to do away with that family line?

What a fascinating idea. What might be the motive? There would most likely be a disturbed individual behind such a thing. One obvious choice would be a descendant of the Colonial. Motive? To take some kind of twisted revenge on tarnishing the Rankin name? That *would* be twisted but not at all out of the realm of possibility.

I began a list for my meeting with Haskins. I wanted to learn if any of the principle players – Adam Engle, Bart Franklin, Chris Gregory, or Dave Hall – had even any remote connection with the Rankin family. I was immediately struck by the similarity in the name Rankin and Franklin but at that point it was merely an item of interest.

Then, there was my question about the possible Barber/Coolidge connection. Suddenly, it seemed fortuitous that Haskins had happened along at the time of my investigation. I would also begin searches on some genealogical web sites with which I was familiar.

But first, I needed to salvage a few hours of sleep. It had been a long and eventful day. I was tired. Sleep came easily.

* * *

Haskins and I approached the front door of the cafe at the same moment. I held the door for him and he entered ahead of me without hesitation. I followed him to the table where he had been sitting the first time I saw him. We took

chairs across from each other.

"I appreciate your making time for me," I began in my cheeriest, early morning voice.

"What exactly do you want?" came his businesslike response.

"I'm particularly interested in two family lines; the Coolidge's and the Rankin's. From Rankin forward. I'm interested in a generation or two of the Coolidge line before it arrived here, as well as any descendants of Clarabelle, the oldest daughter."

"Like I told you. Not much to find. As far as I can tell the two lines are separate if that's one of your real questions."

His response implied a lack of trust. I ignored it.

"I suppose I'm also interested in how you came to specialize in the family lineage of the folks in this area – you being from Nebraska."

"It started as a random undergraduate assignment and my interest grew from there."

"What about the local relationships. I'm told there are lots of core families here."

"Core?"

"I'm sure that's the wrong term. I mean the extended families – just a few of them to which most everyone belongs."

"Yes. Well. That does seem to be true. Any in particular that you're interested in?"

"The Barbers and the Blackwells, for starters and then the four main business men in the town – they are cousins having the same grandfather as I understand it."

"An Adam Engle was that grandfather. There are so many Adam Engles in the past ten generations it makes sorting out the line quite difficult. That grandfather had a son, Adam, and three daughters. Each daughter had a son – now each is one of the business men you refer to – and Adam jr. had a son, the Adam you know. The old Adam was the patriarch and is responsible for commercializing the ghosts of Hickory Hollow."

"That seems to have been a good thing for the area," I said to test his reaction.

"Seems so. The place would probably have returned to the coyotes and razorbacks by now without it. The people would be spread to who knows where. Many of them, of course, would never have been born."

"And you would surely be pursuing some other line of work."

He looked me in the face for the first time. I couldn't read its meaning so went on.

"Then young Rusty Barber is old Red Barber's nephew, if I understand things correctly and the same holds true for Boyd Blackwell – he's the boy's uncle also, I mean. How do those two families hook up?"

"The boy's grandparents had a son and two daughters. One daughter married a Blackwell, hence Boyd. The son and his wife had Harlen - Red."

"And the Grandmother Barber's maiden name?"

"Oliver."

"Have you been able to find out if the oldest Coolidge daughter – Clarabelle, I believe – ever married?"

"I have located two Clare Coolidges who lived at the time the daughter from here might have been married. One lived in Kansas and one in Oklahoma. There is no birth date for the local girl so I have no way to verify either one was her."

"Either of those two related to anybody here in the hollow?"

"Can't say. There is a gap of several generations that I haven't been able to close. I hoped my stay here this summer might do that but so far no luck. I've read every birth certificate of these folks back five generations – most of those beyond two are actually entries in the front of family bibles. I assume that's how the Coolidges probably did it also but their Bible went up in smoke of course."

"Your name – Haskins – is that English?"

"Nebraskan, actually."

He smiled for the first time. I waited.

"My grandfather was an orphan found on the steps of a foundling home in Omaha. He was given his name by the Nuns there. The story goes it was taken from a brand of wooden matches."

It appeared our conversation had pretty well run its course. I had some new information. No way of knowing yet if it would prove to be useful.

"How long do you plan on staying in the area, if I may ask?"

"A few more weeks," he said. "Only so many folks to talk with around here and when that's done it's done. And you?"

It was first time he had seemed even remotely interested in anything other than his own work.

"Not sure. Researching a possible book. I write about ghosts and such."

"Yes, I know. Can't imagine why anyone would want to read about such things."

"Or come to a place such as this, I suppose," I added trying to point out his minority opinion without confronting him directly. He shrugged. I figured that was as close as he could come to admitting another's position might be correct.

We finished breakfast amid short lived bursts of meaningless conversation about syrup, stone ground flour, and sausage casings. Haskins – Henry, though he never suggested I call him that – was reserved and clearly uneasy in close quarter social activities. I hurried, thinking that would allay his uneasiness but in reality it was probably just to relieve my own discomfort. Few people would choose to spend time with Henry Haskins - Dr. Henry Haskins I assumed.

I excused myself and put his bill on my tab – amazing how easy it is to be generous that way when it's costing you nothing! As I approached the door I contemplated the probability that Rusty would or would not be waiting just outside. I went with 99.9 that he would.

* Tyke from *The Malevolent Ghost of Charlie Chance* and Willy from *The Kettles and the Keeps: Ghosts at War*.

CHAPTER FIVE

I had been right.

"So, did ya git Haskins ta spill his guts?" were the first words out of Rusty's mouth – well, *one* side of his mouth. The other side was engaged in a tug of war with a raspberry twister.

"I had no intention of having him spill his guts. What are you referring to?"

We walked together across the street toward the hotel.

"Figured he must be a big suspect or somethin' if you was meetin' with him."

"On the contrary. I hoped his knowledge of the family relationships around here might be of some help to me."

"You could a jist asked me."

"Okay, then, Mr. Know-it-all. What is your exact relationship to Boyd Blackwell?"

"His grandpa Barber is my *great* grandpa Barber. It makes him my Uncle-in-law or some such thing."

"You do seem to be head to head with Haskins on that. Do you recall your greatgandpa's first name?"

"Lex, Lex Barber. I like that name. Can't see why Ma didn't name me after him."

"Do you know your great grandma's maiden name."

"Gail, wait, what's a maiden name?"

"A woman's last name before she was married."

"Oh. I guess I don't know that. Her first name was Gail. Why's this name stuff important?"

"It may not be. I'm trying to establish some reason for the recent accidents and I thought if the victims were all related it might help. It seems to be a dead end, however. . . . You're not related to the Coolidge family – the ghosts – are you?"

"Is it the real ghosts – the dead ones – we're talkin' about?"

"Yes."

It seemed a strange question. I wasn't aware of a variety of ghosts that were not dead.

"No. I don't think so. Never heard no talk about it, anyways."

It seemed an uncomfortable topic and Rusty became thoughtful as we entered the hotel.

"If you're thinkin' it's Great Grampa's kin that's in danger, that puts me smack dab in the middle of it I s'pose."

"I doubt that. You're a kid."

He remained silent as we climbed the stairs. As I inserted the key he had an unrelated comment.

"You know that Winkie's been a followin' you, don't ya?"

"Yes I do. Why do you suppose he'd do that?"

I pushed the door open.

"Probably some connection with either Adam or Miss Sarah."

"You sure it's okay with your parents if you come into my room?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't it be? Got cooties?"

He smiled and bounced himself onto the couch. I left the hall door open, displeased with a society in which you had to consider such things.

"You mentioned Miss Sarah in relation to Winkie," I said.

"He spends a lot a time down at the library."

"Can he read?"

Rusty shrugged and moved to one of the chairs again repeatedly bouncing on it – some sort of quality test, I assumed.

"Ever been up on the south mountain – what's it called?"

"*Yates Mountain*. Winkie comes from up there, but that's probably why you asked me about it, huh?"

"Probably."

"Nope! Not all the way up to the top. Was chasin' a coon once and got half way up 'fore I knowed where I was. I skedaddled right back down."

"Why would that be?"

"It's the folk up at the top."

"And . . . ?"

I let it hang as a question.

"And, they put kids in soup and play marbles with their eyeballs. Not a good place to go."

"Does Winkie return up there?"

"Yup, but I don't reckon he wants it knowed around."

"What makes you say that?"

"The way he makes sure nobody's watchin' when he takes off up the hill."

"You've seen him go back, then?"

"Yup. Maybe the only one who has. Like I told ya, I tend ta git around."

"You and he get along okay?"

"S'pose so."

He looked me directly in the eyes as if it had been a test. I was puzzled but went on.

"I understand he doesn't speak, is that right?"

"Far as I know it is. Never heard him in my own two ears."

"But . . . ?"

His careful wording seemed to leave an opening for more.

"One time I was over at his place – goin' ta see him – hadn't seen him around fer a while. He didn't know I was outside. I heard talkin' inside his shack. I called out and he let me in. Nobody there that I saw. Jist seemed odd, ya know? Could a been his old wind-up record player, I guess."

"Did you ask him about it?"

"Nope. Figured it was his business not mine."

"He have a nice place, does he?" I asked, fishing.

"It's great! There's a solid dirt floor that never needs sweepin'. He made a fireplace out a stones just laid up without no mortar. Built the whole thing over a spring. Gots a little pool ta take a bath in and fer water to drink. He sleeps on two mattresses and makes his own candles out a fat from the café kitchens."

Gots two chairs – sort a like these big soft ones. I'd say it's about the greatest place I've ever seen."

What nine year old boy in any era would not have agreed with him?

"So you spend time with him – Winkie?"

"When I can. He's a loner but always has time for me. Goes up the Mountain for his girl stuff, I think."

I'd not pursue the topic with him. He wandered into the bedroom checking out the bed and looking down on his town from the window.

"Guess I better be goin'," he said at last. "Got stuff."

I filled his pockets with lemon drops and he was on his way.

What had I learned? Winkie was apparently gentle and allowed visitors – no, he allowed *Rusty* to visit. He spent time with Sarah at the library. He visited his people on the mountain and seemed to have normal romantic needs. And most importantly, unlike his hilltop relatives, Winkie apparently did *not* make soup out of children.

I needed to check my email and send out a few inquiries. I went back down stairs to the desk. A young man in his early 20's was working.

"Mr. Miller. Good Morning," he said as I approached.

"Good morning. Need an internet connection. How do I go about that!?"

He moved from behind the desk and led me to a table at the south end of the lobby.

"Plug and play," as they say. He pointed to a bank of connections for my laptop. Clearly WiFi had not reached those hills. I thanked him and got to work.

A half hour later, after I had accomplished most of what I had set out to do, Winkie approached me. He had always been hard for me to read – what was going on behind his face, I mean. At that moment, however, the book was open – deep concern and agitation. He pointed to my laptop and took a seat beside me. I slid it in front of him. To my amazement, he clicked up the word processing program and began typing.

"Come with me pleeze. Somebody is trying to kill Jerry. Rustys brother."

So, the man could write, type and appeared to be polite.

"Sure. Is he in danger this very minute?"

He shook his head, "No."

"Let me stash my laptop at the desk."

He nodded and I was soon following him out the back door. He pointed to my legs and made running movements with his fingers.

"Run? Sure, I can run if you don't go too fast."

He nodded and took off at a trot. We headed toward the creek and eventually to a log that spanned it. He slowed just enough to walk its length and then stopped, turning to encourage me to hurry, beckoning to me with his arm. I did my best and we were soon into the thick woods. He maintained a trot, darting this way and that in response to trees, brush and the like.

Five minutes later we entered a circular clearing perhaps fifty feet in diameter. In the center were two posts – like telephone poles. They were ten feet apart and rose to a height of some forty feet. The wooden beam that spanned them at the top supported a thick rope that dangled to the ground. At

the near edge of the clearing, was a platform – ten feet long and three feet deep, raised five feet off the ground with a railing across its front.

At the back of the clearing was a gigantic pine tree with many of the near-side branches cut off. There were two-foot sections of 2 X 4's nailed from its bottom to top forming a ladder ascending to a small platform forty feet above the ground.

I immediately believed that I understood what it was. Jerry, however, was nowhere to be seen. I asked.

"Jerry? You indicated he was in danger."

Winkie pointed to the rope and motioned for me to follow him to the posts in the center of the clearing. He indicated that I should stay right there. Like the tree, one of the posts had steps nailed to it. He soon reached the top where he slid across the beam to the rope and untied it letting it fall to the ground.

As he descended the pole I began examining the rope. I found what he was concerned about; the inch thick rope had been nearly cut through about three feet from the top. I began putting things together in my head.

My impression was that it was a practice area for the 'ghost' who swung from the rafters of the theater onto the balcony. The bottom of the rope was probably tied around the youngster's waist, he climbed the tree to the platform, freed himself from the rope and swung to the lower platform across the clearing – the one representing the front aisle of the balcony. If Jerry was involved it explained several things.

First, Adam's winks when he spoke about the ghosts. Second, Rusty's quandary when he asked me if my question had been about the 'real' ghosts? Third, why the ghost I had seen in the balcony had shown such a remarkable family resemblance to Rusty's big brother – it *was* Rusty's big brother. Forth, it brought into question the usefulness of my pursuit of the family trees trying to link Rusty's family with the Coolidges. Since Rusty's brother, Jerry, was playing the part of Tommy, my pictures of that ghost would have actually been pictures of Rusty's brother. The nature of the *Covenant* – or at least part of it – was beginning to take shape for me.

Apparently the town – how shall I state this – *augmented* the ghosts' appearances and *that* fact had to be kept absolutely secret. It may have been done just on a stand-by basis for when the 'real ghosts' didn't feel like showing up. That remained to be seen. Certainly it had not been Rusty's brother and other flesh and blood actors who were drifting along the tops of the flames leaping up from the cabin in the Amphitheater production. It had not been solid human forms in the hall outside my room at the hotel. The forms on the street were transparent and hovered a foot or more off the ground so that was not young Jerry with some other, younger actor.

The immediate question had two parts. *One*, who wanted to harm Jerry and, *two*, how did Winkie know about the condition of the rope.

With my pocket knife I cut the rope clear through so it could cause no further hazard. I spoke to Winkie.

"How did you know it had been cut?"

Clearly that type of question was not the direction to go with a mute. I

changed my tactics.

"Did you see someone cutting the rope?"

He shook his head, 'no'.

"Someway you found the cut. Do you inspect it regularly?"

He nodded pointing to himself and then from high in the tree to the platform in a swinging motion.

"You swing on the rope sometimes?"

He nodded and made a gesture that resembled tying a knot.

"You check the knot at the top of the poles before you swing?"

He nodded. I wanted his agreement with my impression.

"So, before you went for a swing today, you climbed up the pole to inspect the knot and spotted the cut rope."

He nodded.

"And you came to get me. I guess I don't understand why you didn't go tell Bart Franklin, the theater owner or Adam."

Winkie formed an 'A' with his fingers.

"Adam?"

He nodded then pointed to his mouth.

"Said – Adam told you . . ."

With the fingers on his right hand he made a walking motion across his left palm and pointed to me.

"Adam told you to follow me – yes I know. I've been aware of that."

During the following several minutes he was able to convey to me that Adam said in addition to looking out for my welfare, he should come to me with anything that seemed suspicious.

I had Winkie retie the rope – the now safe remaining rope – back in place. Where it had drug the ground before it now hung several inches above. Winkie would tell Jerry what happened. There seemed to be no tell-tale clue as to whom the bad guy might be. Someone able to climb the ladder to the top. That really didn't narrow the field – of course there was no field. I had no solid suspects. I was moved to wonder if there might be some jealousy over Jerry's position – another youngster who might want him out of commission so he could play the part. Was there an understudy?

I assured Winkie I wouldn't spill the beans about the ghost stand-ins and thanked him for his good judgment in coming to me. We walked back to town together. He went to find Jerry. I asked him to have the boy contact me immediately. I returned to my room, picking up my laptop as I passed through the lobby.

Fifteen minutes later there was a knock at my door. The handle turned and it swung open. There was Rusty standing in front of his big brother.

"Sorry about that," Jerry said. "Rusty don't understand about privacy – comin' from a big family like he does."

"Not a problem," I assured him. "Glad you got here so fast. Come in."

"I came along since I'm like your assistant," Rusty said.

"Well, if you're my assistant you have to promise not to talk about what goes on here."

Rusty mounted a serious face and crossed his heart.

"Have seats," I said, indicating the area facing the windows. They sat beside each other on the sofa and I took one of the chairs.

"Did Winkie fill you in on what we found at what I assume is your practice site?"

The boys looked at each other.

"I know it is you, Jerry, who play the part of the rope swinging young ghost in the theater. Your secret's safe with me. Let's get beyond that to the bigger problem of your safety."

"Yeah. Sure. You're right. So, what now?"

"Any idea about who might want you out of commission if not dead?"

Rusty looked up into his brother's face and reached for his hand.

"No, Sir," Jerry said, pulling Rusty close. "I had no idea anything like that was going to happen."

"Is there another young man who might want your part bad enough to pull something like this?"

"Oh, no Sir. We're like one big family here. That could never happen."

I nodded but didn't dismiss the possibility.

"Do you check the rope at the theater before each show?"

"Yes, Sir. Well, not me personally but Mr. Franklin does – Bart – last thing before they begin letting the crowd in."

"Have you noticed anybody following you out to the practice site?"

"No. All the town's folk know where it is. But it couldn't be anybody from here. Like I said, we're one big family. We all love each other."

Rusty, having been uncharacteristically quiet shrugged, silently, then addressed a thought to his brother.

"There was that day last week when we saw that lady, Ann, on the path on the other side of the creek – when we was comin' back from your practice."

"That's right. Friday. She was headin' back toward the crossin' log, meanin' she'd been up ta sumthin' on that side. It's not open ta visitors – not really closed but not advertised as anyplace ta go."

"Do you know how long she's been here? I thought rooms were only rented on a one or two night basis in the hotel."

"Came in on Thursday," Rusty said. "Not sure why she's stayin' so long."

"I'll check that out with Adam," I said.

"But she's been in the area even longer than that," Jerry added.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"She's been at the motel out at the four corners for at least the past two weeks. I seen her there at the pool."

He looked down at Rusty. "Tell Ma or Pa this and you'll be eatin' worms, got that?"

Rusty nodded. His look suggested he'd had to eat worms before. Jerry turned back to me.

"The motel owner's daughter and I sort of have a thing and I go swimmin' with her there sometimes. That's how I know Ann's been there. She spent lots a time sitting by the pool and swimming laps for hours. Made it hard to find private

time if you know what I mean."

I may have known. I may not have known. Things like that change from generation to generation.

"You need to share the attempt on your wellbeing – the cut rope – with your parents" I said. "Sooner the better, I'd say."

Jerry nodded. "Right away."

The boys left. Morning had flown by; it was nearly eleven. I went in search of Adam and found him in the lobby reading a paper by the east windows.

"Adam. Got a minute?"

I took a seat assuming he would.

"Sure."

He folded the paper and put it aside.

"Did Winkie fill you in on the latest development with the rope?"

"Rope? No."

"The rope, the one at the practice site that Jerry uses, was cut almost through this morning. Winkie found it and alerted me just as you had told him to do. It's been repaired and I've talked with Jerry. He has no ideas as to a possible perpetrator. How about you?"

"It seems that among other things you know one of our little secrets. I'm still completely stumped as to who might be behind it all. I just can't find a motive, can you?"

"There are several possibilities but no people to attach to them. I want to see exactly how the rope and projectors work at the theater. I assume you will arrange it for me with Bart."

"Projectors? So you know *two* of our little secrets. How?"

"The lights dimmed in the balcony just after the Colonel emerged out of the wall and again just before the two of them skedaddled back out the wall at the upper left of the balcony. At first I figured it was merely part of the eerie ambiance Bart wanted to create. But, as I thought about it something else made more sense. Project images of the appearance and disappearance – live actors could not penetrate the walls. Dim the lights just long enough for the flesh and blood Colonel to appear from behind a curtain or some such thing and take over from the image, and again, at the end of the chase to allow both actors time to move out of the way and let the projected image come up and show them moving through the wall."

"Very good! Yes, we use some techo-magic to enhance the presentation – but just when the actual ghosts don't appear, you understand."

I expected a wink but there was none. His thesis had been written from the viewpoint of a believer. His reaction only added interest to the situation. He called Bart. If I went to the theater immediately there would time for me to look around before the noon slide show.

* * *

"Bart. Thanks for arranging this tour," I said as he met me at the private entrance at the rear.

"Just exactly what do you want to see?"

"The spot from which Tommy's ghost – Jerry – enters the auditorium and

the projection methods for the entrance and exit up in the balcony."

"You have all that figured out, do you? Adam said you were good. He wanted to fill you in on it all right from the start but the rest of us were reluctant to share anything that wasn't essential to your investigation. I figured that *how* things were accomplished probably had little to do with the crimes."

"And you may be right. I just like to cover all the bases."

He nodded and led me to a door in the lower, back hall. Inside was a ladder ascending through a four by four foot duct – part of the air circulation system as well as the access route to the rope. Bart led the way up the ladder and I followed. I counted sixty rungs on the ladder which I figured translated into about forty feet – four stories which was nearly the height of the building.

At the top was a small platform behind the wall. The eighteen inch opening was to the left side so was completely hidden from the view of the guests. The rope, colored to match the light rose of the arched ceiling, was tied there, waiting for Jerry. It hung from a metal ring near the center of the ceiling. A black band some four feet from the end of the rope marked the grip point – a point predetermined to allow the young man to enter the balcony at precisely the proper height and angle. At best it was a dangerous stunt. I was surprised parents would let one of their children perform it. Perhaps, like events at gymnastic meets – many of which could also turn deadly – this one had been practiced so often it was deemed foolproof. In any event, I wouldn't try it.

We descended the ladder and made our way to the balcony. Several feet above the back row were a series of openings through which spotlights could be directed at the stage below. At the far right end was a door and steps leading up into that long narrow area. I counted six spotlights and a bank of audio and electrical controls.

"Every light in the place can be controlled from up here," Bart said pointing to the console.

He had soon shown me the projector aimed at the spot on the wall from which the 'ghosts' had exited the balcony and indicated another similar device was located at the other end of the control booth. There was a black curtain behind which the actors ducked as the lights flickered and they remained there until the patrons were gone. A similar arrangement was provided for the Colonial's entrance. Simple set ups for magnificent illusions there in the black painted balcony.

I was satisfied with what I had seen – impressed, in fact.

"I'd like to meet the man who plays the Colonial," I said.

"He'll be along any minute. Has to get sequestered before we let in the paying customers."

"I didn't realize the performance happened during the day."

"The rope? No. That's just second matinee and evening. There are brief appearances during each performance, though. Usually the Colonial. Sometimes Tommy and Larry prance across the stage. We work hard to vary the presentations so returning visitors will have fresh experiences."

"You must have an extensive set of sequences to project."

"We shoot new ones almost every week. Each year it has to be a

different set of kids – they grow, you know. The swinger trains for three years before it's his turn to perform. Jerry's one of the best we've ever had. Rusty keeps after me to let him go into training. I tell him to give it a few years and we'll talk. I'm afraid he's not going to have the build his big brother has."

We left the booth and stood looking out over the balcony and down onto the stage below. The white clad figure of the colonial made its way down the steps toward the front row.

"Charlie looks so much like the ghost, I'm never sure which one I'm looking at," Bart said in subdued tones.

There seemed to be no doubt that these men believed in the ghostly presences – or they were among the best actors I'd ever met. He continued to look the man over, then called out.

"Charlie. Good morning."

I wouldn't have believed it had I not been there. Perhaps I didn't believe it even though I was there. The Colonial turned his head in our direction and just as quickly vanished on the spot.

"Whoops!" Bart said. "Like I mentioned, sometimes even I can't tell them apart."

He continued as though nothing special had happened walking toward the center aisle. Another Colonial entered the balcony from the rear door.

"That's bound to be Charlie," Bart said loud enough to be heard by the man.

"Mornin', Bart," he said, tipping his white felt hat. "Gonna be a scorcher out there. Glad I'm in here."

"Charlie, I'd like you to meet Marc Miller. You know about his presence here, of course."

"Good to make your acquaintance," he said extending his hand.

We shook as Bart continued.

"Marc wants to have a few words with you. There was an attempt to harm Jerry this morning – his practice rope was cut nearly through."

"Oh, my. This is really gettin' serious. Can I help in some way, Mr. Miller?"

"Just looking for anything that might begin pointing me in some useful direction. So far I have nothing. Any suspicions on your part? Any suspicious people? I'll even take any wild guesses at this point."

"No. Nothing. Sorry."

"Do you see any connections between the victims?"

"Connection? All live here. All swore to the Covenant. All real good people. Don't see nothin' beyond things like that."

"If anything comes to mind let me know immediately."

"Yes, Sir. I will."

"How long you been Colonialing?"

Charlie giggled an old man's giggle.

"Never heard it put that way afore. Colonialing. Pretty good. Goin' on fifteen years now."

He leaned close and became confidential in both tone and manner.

"Sometimes I kin jist feel the old Colonial easin' right into my bein'. It's like we is fillin' the same space, ya know. It's a oddly feelin' but it's a won'erful feelin' – like he's givin' me his personal approval by doin' it, ya know."

I nodded, having no ready response. Bart spoke to Charlie.

"He was here a few minutes ago so you may not be needed. He usually sticks around you know. Marc and I may have scared him off. Never can tell."

"Nice meetin' ya Mr. Miller. I better git on down ta my hidin' place."

I watched him move on down the steps and across the front toward the outside wall. As he moved behind the curtain – which, in the dim light could not be distinguished from the wall – it appeared that he, too, had disappeared before my very eyes.

I thanked Bart and saw myself out the front door. The line was long with folks eager to get inside and experience the ghostly phenomena. Most of them clearly wanted to believe. I imagined they would.

"Kate serves hotcakes all day long, ya know," came a now familiar raspy young voice from behind me.

"Yes, in fact, I did know that but I had a big problem."

"Problem?"

"Yes. I just hate to eat hot cakes all alone."

"I could probably help out there."

Rusty was serious and I worked to contain myself.

"It's like you came to my rescue, young man."

He smiled but only briefly. I figured the problem at the practice site was wearing heavily on him.

"Let's get on in there then before it's overrun by outsiders."

We found a table, though not our favorite.

"How's Jerry taking the news about the rope?" I asked.

"Tamed his hell-bent natural tendencies, I'll tell you that. He's usually up to any dare ya know. I seen him walk away from two this very mornin'. I figure it's no shame when you're in shoes like his, ya know."

I nodded, supposing in some round-about way I had understood the boy's ramblings.

"Will he go ahead with his performances at the theater today?"

He nodded.

"Says he will. Thinks it's probably the safest place for him – there in front of hundreds of people."

"How are you doing about it all?"

"If I let myself think the bad guy is out ta git rid a the Barber clan, then I'm really scared."

"I can understand that. Of course we don't know that's what's happening. So far there's no reason to believe it."

He nodded as he swamped his hotcakes in syrup.

"Ya give Ann the third, yet?" he said looking up at me.

"The third?"

"The third degree. Ain't that how ya git confessions?"

"I'm not a cop, Rusty. I'm a writer, remember?"

"Oh, ya. I don't feel like a writer's assistant, though. I feel like a detective's assistant."

I nodded and began enjoying the fare, smiling to myself.

"Ya even talked to her yet," he went on pursuing it. She seemed to be high on his suspect list.

"For a total of perhaps a minute, casually in the hall, the first day I was here, I believe. I do plan on speaking with her at length later on. Her extended stay would seem to indicate some special interest in things here. She may have some useful information. Seemed pretty nice, I thought."

Rusty looked up, grinning.

"Pretty *and* nice, is what you really mean I s'pose."

"Yes, I suppose so. You have a good eye for the ladies, considering your age."

"Barber men has always been lady killers – it's a well knowed fact in these parts. S'pose we git some kind a jump on the actual hormones. My Ma was the prettiest girl in the county and she fell fer my Pa right off – so it's told."

"Is there a girl in your life?"

"Lots that'd like ta be. I seem ta be very attractive to 'em. Got no time fer that now. Figure I got a lot a jist plain livin' ta pack into my next three years – four at the most – before they take control a my life ferever."

The commentary was delivered without indication of any particular sadness about his eventual fate – just a matter of fact rendering of what his observations had suggested. I assumed his future would be a wonderful surprise for him.

We finished lunch and I returned to my room. Rusty had some serious hoop rolling to get accomplished before he dropped a line or two in the Sandy with one of his friends. I needed to speak with Ann, so I approached her door and knocked.

She seemed happy to see me.

"Marc. How nice. Come in. Business or pleasure?"

"I hope to make it both."

"I'm afraid I don't have anything to offer you in the way of a drink."

I offered her a lemon drop. It drew a chuckle but she accepted it.

"Have a seat. Nice view. Probably just like yours, come to think of it. So, what's on your mind?"

"There is no way to say this without sounding like I'm prying, because I am. I understand you've been here several weeks and just wondered what would keep someone like you around that long."

"Yes it does sound like prying but it doesn't bother me. I love the Ozark Mountains and I often return here this time of year."

"Return here from . . . ?"

"Syracuse. I'm a research librarian there. Same job for twenty-five years. Still love it though. I find my ruts are mostly comfortable."

"What kind of research?"

"Most anything – no specialty. I just finished looking into the ghosts that haunt the hotels up in Eureka Springs. I'll be heading up there in a few days to

check it all out in person. Like I told you before, ghost stuff fascinates me."

"You've stayed here in this hotel before, have you?"

"Several years ago – goodness, probably ten I suppose. Usually stay out at the motel at the crossroads."

"Done research about Hickory Hollow I suppose."

"About everywhere I visit, but yes, I've read everything that's available about this place – which isn't much, by the way."

She became confidential in her tone.

"I doubt if all the supposed ghostly goings on around here are legit, but they sure know how to throw a party, don't they?"

"I'd have to agree it's quite a production – ghostly or not. Have you met Henry Haskins? He's into genealogical research."

"I know who he is. Haven't really had reason to talk with him, I guess. I hear he's a professor."

"That's what I understand. Seems very knowledgeable. Sort of standoffish, I'd say."

Ann either had little to offer or she was being tight mouthed. She seemed pleasant and generally open, however.

"What do you know about the Coolidge family tree?" I asked.

"Not a whole lot. I have found out something interesting about Joel, the father of the ghost family."

"What's that?"

"He was running from the law when they arrived here. He had been accused – falsely it was later determined – of killing a man in Tennessee where they lived. He probably assumed that Rankin and his men were after him for that at the time of the cabin burning. He'd have had no reason to know who the Colonial was."

"I'm not sure what that adds to the current situation but it is interesting."

"The accidents and deaths, you mean?"

"Yes. You're aware of that, then?"

"The maids at the motel like to talk. I tip well. Maids always know the real story, you know."

"I suppose so."

"That's really about all I know other than the regular line of lore that comes with the territory here."

"I appreciate your time. Come to think of it, I guess I don't even know your last name," I said as I stood preparing to leave.

"Vargot. Ann Vargot – pronounced without the 't' with which it's spelled."

"Until later then," I said realizing it was a lame phrase but having nothing better to offer. She walked me into the hall. I went next door back to my place. Sitting on the floor back against the door was Jerry, the short length of rope from the practice site on the floor beside him. He jumped up as I approached.

"Got somethin' ta show you," he said.

I opened the door and we went inside. He held up the end of the rope that had been cut.

"Look here. See how it's frayed. Looks like it was cut with a saw or

something. Sure wasn't cut with the keen blade of a knife or ax."

"I see what you mean. Good eyes. Probably somebody who doesn't carry a pocketknife."

"Like a woman, maybe?" he suggested.

It appeared that his little brother had been holding up Ann as the main suspect.

"That could be, or maybe somebody from a city where pocket knives generally aren't carried. If it was an outsider, as I assume it was, he or she may have used a stolen saw. Can you ask around to see if any are missing?"

"Yes, Sir. Rusty really has a better line on stuff like that than I do. I'll get him on it."

"Caution him to be subtle about it. Sometimes he's pretty transparent in his approach."

"You mean like he don't hide his true intention good enough?"

"Well put. That's exactly what I mean."

Jerry grinned, openly pleased at the compliment and nodded indicating he would take care of it.

"I'll leave the rope here if that's okay," he said.

"Certainly."

He left and I took the rope into the bed room thinking I'd stow it under the bed. It was then I noticed the red flecks in the frayed edge. I brought it closer to my face to investigate. The flecks had an odor – cedar. I returned with the rope to the sitting room and sat at the table. With the point of a pencil I dislodged fleck after fleck onto a sheet of paper. It was saw dust and it was definitely cedar. More than that, it was dry.

It told me the saw had been used to cut dry, seasoned, lumber, not to cut into a growing cedar tree.

"The furniture shop," I said out loud.

I took an envelope from the desk drawer and slid the particles inside, carefully folding it so none would escape. With the rope in place under the bed I left for *Rupert's Rustic Furniture Factory*.

Rupert, as it turned out, had been the great grandfather of Kurt, the present owner/craftsman. The front third of the long, narrow, building was given over to the show room – filled with cribs, chairs, chests, small tables, decorative wooded boxes, lamps, hand carved mantel pieces, and such.

The rear was apparently the 'factory', with three younger men who worked the foot treadle lathes, saws and sanding machines. Kurt was in his late fifties, sported a never-trimmed graying brown beard – long enough to double as a loin cloth – and heavily smudged, half-rimmed, gold framed glasses.

After the introductions and obligatory Ozark small talk, I turned to the business at hand.

"I figure you can probably tell me what kind of wood this saw dust came from," I began.

Kurt took the envelope, opened it and sniffed. Red cedar. We use it to line the quilt chests and the top drawers of clothes chests. Comes from a grove up Yates Mountain. This here was kiln dried. Been cut about a year, I'd say.

Anything else?"

"You amaze me," I said mostly a sincere reaction though partly spoken to move the relationship forward. "I do have at least one more question; do you saw the cedar with a small saw?"

I indicated a length varying from a foot to two feet, thinking it would need to be short to have been carried up the pole. Kurt motioned me to the rear of the room where tool after tool was hung in place on pegs across the back wall. He pointed to an empty space, the silhouette of a ten inch keyhole saw painted there on the wall.

"Came up missin' this mornin' when my oldest son come to open up. Use it ta rough-cut the ornamental pieces. Turned the place upside down lookin' fer it. Jist ta'int here."

He shook his head. Thievery was plainly a foreign event to Hickory Hollow."

"And would that saw have been used on red cedar yesterday?"

"Yes, Sir. Last piece we worked on before closin'."

He didn't ask how I came to ask those questions of him and I chose not to take the time to tell him. I thought it was best that no one else became privy to the attempt on Jerry's life.

I thanked him and left, noting that I would come back for a small, magnificently carved, oval picture frame before I left town. (I assumed Bill Clinton would forgive me if I removed his likeness and replaced it with some more curvaceous creature – in fact, he might insist on it!)

My immediate problem was how to locate a stolen keyhole saw in Hickory Hollow. I walked back toward the hotel. Rusty came hooping along the street and spotted me.

"Got my assignment from Jerry. May take some doin' but I'm on it."

"The assignment has changed," I said. "The saw was stolen from the Furniture Store. It's about a foot long with a narrow, pointed, blade."

"You mean a keyhole saw?"

"Yes. That probably would have been a better way to put it."

"So now you want me to find it, huh?"

"That's the new assignment."

"Won't be easy. A thousand Ghosters in town today. Lots a cars and lots a luggage."

"I'd suggest you begin with those who have been here at least a few days. Somebody had to know about the practice site. That would have taken some snooping time."

Rusty nodded.

"You're pretty smart for a damnyankee. Got schools up there, too, I reckon?"

"Got schools. Yes."

The boy's naiveté about the larger world amazed me. Was there no TV in the valley? No picture books? No conversation with the visitors? Perhaps it was all part of the Hickory Hollow act – a thoughtfully fabricated and exquisitely dispensed mystique.

"Better be goin' then," he said. "I'll report in every so often."

He was *dead* serious – wish I had selected a different adjective. Chances of finding the saw were one in million but it was the most solid clue I had going and that didn't speak very well for the state of my investigation.

I returned to my room. The image of the 'first' Colonial that appeared in the balcony that morning haunted me – literally, I suppose! Bart and the old actor seemed to have just accepted it as fact. I remained skeptical (big surprise!), but was able to put it out of mind long enough to begin making notes.

By three my eyelids were fluttering and my head nodding so I moved into the bedroom and drew the drapes. They were heavy and thick and darkened the room almost completely. I lay down on the bed for short nap.

Sometime later I awoke, terrified and struggling. A heavy body was straddling me. Someone's hands were around my throat. I was being choked!

I reached toward the night stand beside my bed. There was a long, heavy, flashlight there. I could use it as a weapon. As I delivered the first blow to the side of my assailant's head the flashlight came on. It was pointed at my face however, which helped me not at all. In my mind's eye I saw my face turning blue and felt myself losing consciousness. Things went black.

CHAPTER SIX

Sometime later, when I realized my eyes had struggled open, I assumed I had not been killed. My hands went right to my throat. It was sore and I imagined bruised. I sat up on the side of the bed and remained there for a long moment, taking stock of my condition. Except for the neck and throat I felt remarkably well. I stood and walked the few steps to the window, blinded momentarily as I opened the drapes.

I went into the bathroom to give myself a visual examination. There were finger nail impressions – several of them having broken the skin – and a series of bruises resembling hickies. I mused at the idea that when a teenager, I would have worn them proudly and smugly refused to answer my buddies' questions about my night before with Mary Lou – from then on to be known as *the tigress*.

I applied a liberal layer of *Tri-A-Cillian* ointment as I continued to contemplate the event.

Questions began to form. Who had attacked me? Why? Had the person left me for dead or had something changed his or her mind? When it was learned that I was still alive would there be another attempt? Perhaps it had just been a warning and it had not been an actual, full-fledged, attack on my life.

The 'why' question was perhaps the easiest to answer. It clearly had something to do with my presence there in the Hollow. Someone didn't want me there. It was probably someone who knew very little about me – that is, if it had merely been an attempt to frighten me. *I didn't frighten!* Well, I suppose that needs to be rephrased; I had known fright on many occasions but it fascinated me and drew me into the scenario rather than driving me away.

It was the 'who' that concerned me the most. During the attack the person had been close enough for me to feel his breath on my face and yet I could recall no clue to the person's identity. The person seemed heavy but then as I imagined a sack of concrete lying across my mid section I assumed that would seem heavy also and it would be what, only about ninety pounds if memory served me correctly.

There was definite hand and arm strength. My attempts to pull away from the grasp had been totally unsuccessful. Again, however, I had been at full disadvantage – on my back, just re-entering consciousness, and struggling to understand my peculiar situation. I suddenly recalled an aroma – perfume or after shave or scented soap. I couldn't place it further than that.

Perhaps it was the blow that I had been able to deliver to the person's head that saved me. Maybe I had inflicted more damage than I imagined. I had to doubt that. I was swinging at an odd angle from which no real power could have been generated. I remembered yelling – to the degree I could considering the placement of his hands.

I looked at my watch. Four thirty. I had lost an hour and a half. Some of that had been spent napping. Some was the struggle and the rest represented the period of unconsciousness following the scuffle. I had been awake perhaps three minutes.

I checked my door and it was still locked from the inside. I went into the

hall. No one was there. Perhaps Ann had heard something. I knocked on her door. There was no answer. I wasn't surprised. She was there to see the sights and not sit alone in her small, shabby, over-priced, room. Then again, if she had been my attacker would she answer even if she were there? A swimmer. Arm strength. Perfume. I had to wonder.

I returned to my bedroom and opened the closet. The secret door in the back wall was closed so I had no way of knowing if it had been used or not.

I went down to the desk. The young man from earlier was there.

He looked at my neck and winced, but made no reference to it.

"Anybody go up stairs in the past hour and a half who had no apparent reason to," I asked.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"Any non-guest, I suppose," I said, trying to clarify the rambling question in my own thoughts as well.

"I've been here the past hour and actually nobody at all has gone up stairs during that time. Mid-afternoons find most folks out shopping or over at the theater."

"Do you remember if Ann Jargot left during that time?"

"No. No one's left either. You're the first to come down the stairs since I've been back. Were you expecting somebody?"

"No. Not really. Never mind. You've been helpful."

I left him fully confused but had no good explanation so crossed the room and took a chair by the east windows where I continued to replay the scenario and grappled with possible answers to my original questions.

Several minutes later, in the background, at the desk, I heard voices – more excited than I was used to there in that quiet community. I turned my attention to the discussion. A food delivery boy was saying Ann had ordered a spaghetti supper but he couldn't raise anybody at her room. He wanted the desk to pay the bill. The young clerk was trying to explain why he couldn't. I got up and walked to the desk.

"I'll pay the tab," I said. "Ten cover it?"

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

He left quickly as if fearing I might change my mind.

"Is Adam available?" I asked.

"In his office. I can get him. Just a minute."

He disappeared through the door behind the desk and soon reappeared with Adam.

I began without the customary small talk.

"Ann Jargot placed a delivery order but won't answer her door. In light of my own recent encounter, I suggest we investigate."

I pointed to my neck. Adam took a key from a hook on the wall and I followed him up the stairs. He knocked and called out, waiting only a moment before he turned the key and entered, again calling out. There she was, face up, on the bed. The marks on her throat resembled those on mine. What was going on?

"Call the Sheriff," I suggested, then, remembering I had the number on my

cell phone, I took it out and poked 22. I filled in the dispatcher and she said she'd pass it on immediately to the plain clothes deputies working Hickory Hollow. Five minutes later one of them appeared and took charge of the situation. The coroner followed within a half hour and the room was cleared by six o'clock.

The cause of death seemed straightforward – strangulation. She had died about the same time that I had been attacked – between three thirty-three and four-thirty. I shivered at the thought. I had to ask why it had not been me.

Rusty was waiting for me in my room, sprawled out on the couch.

"The door was open so I figured it was okay if I come in – close, like we are. I'm not light fingered and seldom damage things. Didn't even take a lemon drop – you can count 'em."

"You're always welcome to the lemon drops."

I tossed one to him. The throw was high and outside.

His catch was spectacular.

"You a ball player, are you?"

"Not really. Summer time is work time here in the Hollow. Not a lot of time to organize sports things."

"I guess you heard about the woman next door."

"Ann?" he asked, nodding before I could answer. "Hear she was strangled. Shouldn't say it but I'm relieved."

"How's that?" I asked taking a seat across from him.

He turned onto his side to face me.

"Well, I figure she ain't related to us Barbers and the bad guy killed her so it can't be just *us* that he's after, see?"

"I see. Yes. It does add an interesting aspect to things. I'm sorry you have to go through all this. I'm sure it must be scary."

He nodded, not willing to admit it in words but seemed relieved that I understood.

He noticed my throat.

"What in the *who* happened to your neck?"

He got up and came close to take a look.

"I had a brief encounter with somebody trying to strangle me."

"I'm sorry. Dumb thing to say, I guess. Does it hurt?"

"Yes. It hurts, but I'm just glad I'm still here to feel the pain."

He nodded, suggesting he understood my meaning, and returned to the couch, sitting up against the far arm.

"I didn't make no real progress on the saw," he said, looking me squarely in the face.

"It's probably a dead end," I said. "If the bad guy is smart he'd have gotten rid of it by now, anyway."

Again Rusty nodded then sprang to his feet.

"That gives me a idea. I'll search through the trash cans."

Before asking for my opinion, he was gone, pausing only long enough at the desk to acquire several lemon drops which he deposited in this hip pocket. He had taken me at my word about that. And, who knew? He may have just come up with a pretty good idea.

Sheriff Carter knocked on my open door.

"Fred. Good to see you. You've been filled in, I suppose."

"Yes. Ann Jargot," he said pronouncing it with a 't'. "Got any ideas?"

"I'm afraid not. I'd like to learn more about her. How about we look through her things together. It may provide something of value."

"Sure. Lead the way. What happened to your neck, by the way. Rope burns?"

"Attempted strangulation. Just before Ann died. It's confusing. Like somebody was just going down the hall strangling whoever he could find at home."

"Your door open?"

"No. I checked afterwards. The deadbolt was in place."

We entered Ann's room and began looking through her belongings. The Sheriff dealt with her purse and wallet.

"Ann R. Jagot. Any idea what the R stood for?" he asked.

"None, I'm afraid. I only spoke with her on two brief occasions. She said she was both a lover of the Ozarks and a ghost groupie. Been here several weeks – first ten days or so out at the motel. I haven't verified that with the motel but one of the local boys was complaining to me about how her constant presence at the pool out there cramped his style with the owner's daughter. I have no reason not to believe him."

"A New York driver's license. Syracuse address," he went on. "I'll run her through the files and see if we can locate next of kin. Any reason not to release the body to them?"

"If the coroner is convinced she died from being strangled then I see no reason not to. Look here," I said. A photo copy of pages from a genealogy book. And a family tree. Look at this. It all begins with Colonial Rankin."

"What do you make of that?" the Sheriff asked moving to my side to take a look.

"Don't know. Maybe just reflects her interest. She was a research librarian. Perhaps she was just very thorough in her preparation for visits like this."

The Sheriff's lapel phone buzzed. He answered.

"Sheriff. Talk!"

"It's Donny. I was just approached by Henry Haskins in front of the place he's staying. You better come along. It appears someone attempted to strangle him, too."

"Be right there."

He turned to me.

"You know the place?"

I nodded. He followed me down the stairs and across the street. Within five minutes we were at the Widow Crawford's house and up the walk to the porch where the deputy and Haskins were sitting on the steps. The Sheriff bent down to examine the man's neck and motioned me in closer. He rolled his eyes so only I could see. I looked. I nodded.

"Get a look at your assailant?" he asked Haskins.

“No, Sir. I was taking a nap in my room; the drapes were pulled. I awoke to being strangled. Somebody sitting on top of me. I was a boxer in my early years and landed a few good jabs and put everything I had left into an uppercut. It chased him away I guess.”

The Sheriff addressed the deputy.

“Take him to the aid station and have him looked after. I’ll call in another deputy to stay with him until we get a better feel for what’s going on. Get pictures of the man’s throat.”

He turned to me.

“You should have a body guard, too.”

“That would only complicate my life.”

“I’m going to pull rank and insist.”

I shrugged, not going to openly resist his wish on the matter. The deputy and Haskins walked west toward the first aid station. The Sheriff and I started back toward the main drag. Rusty came running up, a brown grocery sack in tow.

“Can I speak in front a the Sheriff, Mr. Miller?”

“Yes. We’re all on the same team. You know Rusty Barber, Sheriff.”

He nodded. Rusty stepped close and spoke in lowered tones.

“Got the saw. Bad news, though. *Really* bad news.”

He handed me the sack and I looked inside. It was the saw. Using my handkerchief, I took it out and smelled the blade. That clinched it for me. I asked Fred to smell it as well.

“An odd combination of aromas – cedar and musty rope?”

“You win the prize, Fred. That is exactly what we need it to be. Make sure that gets into your report.”

I turned back to Rusty.

“*Bad news?*” I asked.

“Yup. I found it in Winkie’s trash barrel but I can explain that I think.”

“How?”

“Well, after the bad guy cut the rope, he didn’t want ta be found with it so on his way back ta town he – or maybe SHE – stashed it at Winkie’s place.”

“Not bad detective work, young man,” the Sheriff said.

“Prints?” I asked.

“Probably none but I’ll have it dusted.”

“I don’t know,” I said, a thought bursting upon my mind. “If the bad guy didn’t take time to clean the teeth he – or SHE – may not have thought about wiping it at all.”

“Interesting. I’ll put a rush on it, then.”

“So is Winkie in trouble about it?” Rusty asked looking from one of us to the other.

“I’ll need to question him,” the Sheriff said. “Do you know where I can find him?”

In the same instant Rusty and I turned and looked down the block behind us where we knew he’d be. He was.”

“I kin go git him. He’s sort a backward ya know, so take it easy on him,”

Rusty said.

The Sheriff nodded and Rusty was satisfied that his intentions were satisfactory.

“Do you know why this saw was in your trash can?” the Sheriff began after Rusty handled the introductions.

Winkie examined it with his eyes and looked at Rusty, immediately signing to him as hearing impaired folks do.

“He says no he don’t but recognizes that it belongs to Kurt at the furniture factory.”

The Sheriff turned to me.

“When would the rope have been cut?”

“Anytime between when Jerry used it last and when Winkie found it early this morning.”

“He practiced from nine to ten yesterday mornin’,” Rusty offered.

“That provides a long window of opportunity,” the Sheriff said.”

“Most of that time Winkie was tailing me,” I explained. “He is my protector, assigned to me by Adam, the owner of the hotel.”

Winkie tapped Rusty on the shoulder and again signed to him. Rusty frowned and shook his head, energetically signing something back – something he plainly didn’t want the rest of us to hear. Winkie nodded, insistently, and pointed to the Sheriff.

“Winkie says he left Mr. Miller after the evening show at the amphitheater and didn’t get back to the hotel until about six a.m. I told him he shouldn’t tell you that.”

“No. That’s best,” I said. “If he has nothing to hide then honesty in such matters is important. I don’t suppose you have anybody to alibi for you during those hours, do you Winkie?”

He blushed and looked at the ground and after some hesitation signed to Rusty. Rusty made an awful face and spit.

“He was up the mountain with a girl all night. Evalou Yates.”

Rusty shivered after delivering the news.

“I may need to get her statement,” the Sheriff said. “Let’s just see how all of this unfolds over the next twenty-four hours.”

I pulled a five out of my pocket and handed it to Rusty.

“Go get the two of you a sack of lemon drops.”

“If it’s all the same, since *you* always have lemon drops, how ‘bout if we git raspberry twisters?”

“Whatever you want. Go! Scat! Be gone!”

They trotted off down the street.

“Did you know the little guy knew signing?” Fred asked.

“I didn’t know *either* of them did. I suspect Sarah had something to do with it. I have several things I need to talk with her about.”

“I’ll be on my way then,” Fred said. “I’ll let you know the minute I hear anything about the prints.”

We went our separate ways. It was seven-thirty. I walked the four blocks to Sarah’s place. The light was on so I knocked. The door was soon open.

“Marc. How nice. Come in.”

It was a cozy place – living room, kitchen and bedroom. The large stone fireplace did service to both the living room and the bedroom. The walls were log as would have been expected. She had pictures everywhere. It was light and bright and comfortably appointed with couch, chairs, floor lamps and a large braided rug. She indicated a chair and I sat.

“Coffee? Lemonade? Sandwich – I have ham salad made up and dark rye bread no more than three hours out of my oven.”

“Actually a sandwich sounds great.”

“Let’s move into the kitchen then. I always think the kitchen table is where friends should chat anyway.”

I nodded my agreement and followed her into the kitchen, modern by 1950 standards. I took a seat in one of the four chairs at the small, square, table.

“I assume this is more than a social visit,” she said as she worked at the counter.

“Several things have come up I thought you could help clarify. The signing between Winkie and Rusty for one.”

“I taught Winkie the basic alphabet soon after he arrived here. He never attended regular school but I’ve tutored him right along. He’s no *Brainiac* but he’s a whole lot smarter than folks think he is. He and Rusty have always been very close and he taught Rusty. Winkie has gone on to master a lot more than the alphabet signs. I’ve brought in books and he’s been a quick study. I’ve had trouble keeping up – often have to tell him to slow down or spell out some sophisticated sign I can’t remember. Rusty catches on right away, of course.”

“Has he been able to tell you much about himself? I’m not even sure what I’m asking.”

“He saw his parents die when he was in his early teens. He remembers speaking before that. He wasn’t hit by the lightning that killed his folks but his memory seems to be mostly blank until he showed up here about a year later.

“The members of the older generation up on the mountain still live their lives according to the superstitions. They believe that because of the way his parents died – struck down by a lightning bolt from God himself – that Winkie is the child of the devil or something close to that.

“Since he’s been here he hasn’t gotten into any trouble and has always worked to pay his own way. Several families offered to take him in when he first arrived but he either didn’t understand or his experiences in foster care up there had been frightening. He learned to read but never could grasp the process of making letters – dysgraphic, I think it’s called – a brain dysfunction. He took to the keyboard immediately. I have some poetry he’s written. I’ll get it out later.”

“A small saw that was used to cut into the rope at Jerry’s practice site was found in his trashcan. Any possibility that Winkie would want Jerry to be hurt?”

“Absolutely not! He’s a kind hearted soul. I hadn’t heard about the rope. Jerry is alright, I assume.”

“Yes. Luckily, Winkie reported the problem before Jerry went out to practice. Would Winkie do such a thing to gain attention – be the hero?”

“No. Believe me on his one. There is no chance of that. He loves Rusty

like a . . . brother . . . or more. He'd never do anything that he knew would hurt *him* even in such a second hand way."

"Does he try to speak?"

"Early on I tried to have him do that. He couldn't. In fact, he makes no sounds at all."

"Has he ever been seen by a physician?"

"I'm sure he hasn't. Medical services are hard to come by in these parts."

"You've met Henry Haskins?" I asked.

"Yes. Briefly on a couple of occasions. He came into the library looking for anything related to the family trees of the long time local residents. We have very little. He studied what we have. One odd thing. He never once asked me what I knew about the families. Maybe I rubbed him the wrong way. Just seemed odd."

"Great ham salad. Old family recipe, I assume."

"*Hormel* family I suppose," she quipped. "Came off a can. I'm glad you like it."

"What's the schooling arrangement here in Hickory Hollow?"

"Kindergarten through twelfth grade. The high school education leaves a lot to be desired. The state's television classroom program has helped greatly, especially in science and current events. They all graduate being able to read at grade level and have a basic grasp of the traditional subjects. It is not a high priority among the families. Rusty circulated a petition a few months ago to do away with fourth and fifth grades. He got some signatures if you can believe that."

I chuckled, adding:

"Things like that aren't limited to Hickory Hollow. Years ago a legislator in my home state introduced a bill that would have changed the mathematical value of *pi* to an even *three* in order to make it easier for the students."

Our initial chuckles grew into full blown, cheek dampening laughter. It was a good time.

"What about Ann Jargot? Any contact with her?"

"Yes. Over a period of several years in fact. She seemed obsessed with the Coolidge Family Tree. She contacted folks and made photocopies of the birth pages in the front of the family bibles. It's still the preferred method for keeping such records around here. Since I had arranged most of the interviews, I felt I could ask to have copies of the material she found. Begrudgingly, she let me copy it. It's in one of the folders I *didn't* give you."

"I'd like to see it."

"I can get it for you now, if you want. Unless there are other things on your mind first."

"No. That would be great if it wouldn't put you out."

"Two blocks on the arm of a handsome young man – how could that possible put me out. The town will be abuzz about it for weeks."

We left for the library – *arm in arm!* Curtains moved back from windows as we passed. Lights went out in some living rooms.

"This is the biggest hoot I've had since I got caught moonlight skinny

dipping with Elmer Rush.”

“Clearly an important childhood memory,” I said, smiling down into her face.

“Childhood nothing! It was last August!”

“I assume Elmer not only has good taste in ladies but also enjoys his social security check.”

“You assume right, though that *does* remove some of the pizzazz from the story.”

We went around to the rear where the key was stashed. As she reached for it I noticed the door was ajar. I pointed and put my finger to my lips. I pushed the door open enough to look inside. I entered with Sarah at my heels.

“Light switch?” I whispered.

She reached out and flipped it. The room was lit. No one was to be seen, still I searched out all the corners. The door had been jimmed. That didn’t help much. It could have been an outsider who didn’t know about the key – all the locals did – or someone trying to make it appear they didn’t know about it.

All four drawers in Sarah’s private file cabinet had also been pried open. A brief inventory revealed that nothing had been taken. The folder we had come to get was locked in the drawer of her large wooden desk.

She retrieved the folder for me and I did my best to secure the back door so animals would not wander in over night. She said one of Kurt’s boys at the furniture store would be happy to come over in the morning and get things back in order.

I walked her home and – hoping to ‘pizzazz-up’ her reputation a bit – administered a quick kiss to her lips.

“You are a doll, Marc. Thank you.”

“Thank you. I didn’t expect flavored lipstick.”

She giggled herself inside and I heard the lock click. I wondered if that were out of habit or in response to the rifling of the library. I dropped off the folder at my room and made my way to the amphitheater.

Avoiding the front entrance, I circled along the creek so I could get a side view of the big show. The preliminary acts had just wound down. The lights came up to illuminate the broader area and the play began.

I couldn’t see well enough so climbed a tree and found a more or less comfortable perch some fifteen feet off the ground. (Winkie took a seat against the trunk of another tree some thirty feet away. I felt well cared for!)

The play proceeded according to plan. Like most of those in attendance I was anticipating the final scene where the ghosts appeared in the flames above the cabin. It was at that point that several things suddenly became clear to me.

The smoke from the cabin was supplemented by smoke from metal canisters at the rear of the cabin. A half dozen tiny points of light became visible from my vantage point. They were, perhaps, a foot off the ground and all were hidden from the patron’s view by the cabin, a board fence, and a carefully positioned wagon. I imagined they were the chrome pipes I had mistaken for replacement watering spouts.

They were, in fact, projectors, each one providing a portion of the well

coordinated ghostly dance against the smoky haze above the roof. It was ingenious. It was convincing. It was not entirely honest. I had seen what I had come to see. Actually, I had seen the 'how' of what I had previously been sure had to be taking place.

I descended the trunk and dropped the final ten feet from the lowest branch. I beckoned to Winkie and he came to me. We walked back to town.

"You knew about the projectors in the ground, I suppose."

He nodded and smiled.

"Are you a part of the Covenant?"

He shook his head as if saddened at the thought of being left out.

"But the folks here seem to know they can trust you."

That returned a smile to his face and he nodded.

"Everybody seems to really like you. That speaks well for the kind of life you're living."

He signed something.

"I'm sorry. I don't sign."

With his hands he constructed six letters: T - H - A - N - K - S

"You're welcome. I understand from Sarah, that when you were young you could speak."

He nodded. His expression was not what I had anticipated. I thought perhaps it would suggest sorrow or bewilderment. It shouted pure, unadulterated, wide-eyed, terror.

"There are doctors that might be able to help."

He shrugged his shoulders suggesting lack of interest. I didn't pursue the matter. We were soon back on Main Street. It was going on ten o'clock. We sat down on the raised, wooden, walk in front of the hotel. Winkie kicked at the gravel in the street.

"Sarah says you write poetry."

He looked down and seemed embarrassed.

"So do I. Mine isn't very good but I enjoy it and I figure that's all that really counts."

He looked me directly in the face and nodded. It seemed an important moment to him.

"I'd love to read some of your pieces if you'd let me."

He nodded and smiled.

"Sounds like you may have a girl friend."

Again he nodded and smiled, more broad and sustained than before.

The crowd from the Amphitheater was making its way in droves west up the street – some stopping at the hotel, some entering shops and the restaurants, and the rest moving on to the parking lot ready to call it a day.

"Every day like this – wall to wall to wall people?" I asked.

He smiled at my expression and nodded. He pushed his palms in the direction of the people and motioned with his thumb over his shoulder.

"That's why you live across the creek."

He smiled and moved to give me a high five. Somewhat awkwardly, I accommodated him.

"I am getting pretty good at listening to you, aren't I?"

He nodded and patted my leg.

"I'm happy to be *your* friend, too, Winkie."

Jerry came jogging up to us; Rusty trailed a panting ten yards behind. Winkie frowned at them and pointed to his watch. Rusty fielded the communication.

"Jerry couldn't sleep and I don't want him out alone, considerin' somebody tried ta kill him off."

Winkie signed – vigorously – at Jerry. Again it was Rusty.

"I know it's too late but what's a brother supposed to do? Jerry's a hard headed so and so."

A flurry of signing moved between them before Rusty – looking up at his brother – delivered the decision.

"Winkie says he'll go with you and I have to go home to bed."

"That's cool," Jerry said. "I should have thought. That's not one of my best things, I guess."

He ruffled Rusty's hair and administered a crushing, one armed hug. Rusty seemed to appreciate every excruciating second of it.

"I'll be goin' then. Breakfast in the mornin'?" he asked – no assumed.

"Five-thirty sharp," I said.

In a confidential tone he directed his next comment to Jerry.

"Mr. Miller has a problem about eatin' alone, so's I'm like his mealtime support group."

Everybody chuckled except Rusty – well, Winkie went through all the appropriate happy movements, silently.

By nine, I was back in my room ready to look over the newest folder from Sarah. It was not the kind of data that could be ordered in any meaningful way as it was. There were over a hundred sheets – copies of the birth date pages from family Bibles.

The Barber Bible went back significantly further than the rest - eight generations to the mid-1800's. The 'record Bible' was usually passed down through the eldest sons so offspring of the female side of the family had to be constructed from other sources. As far as I could tell there were neither Coolidges nor Rankins in the Barber tree but then it abruptly stopped – or, more accurately, started.

If there had been such a record in the Coolidge cabin it undoubtedly went up in smoke.

There was a knock at the door. Not being properly attired for entertaining, I opened it just a crack.

"Jake Watson, Mr. Miller. *Deputy* Jake Watson. Sheriff Carter requested my presence on your tail, Sir."

I opened the door to a smiling young man - tall, well built, late twenties. He entered and locked the door behind him.

"Your welfare seems to be very important to the Sheriff," he said removing his hat and the wide, black, leather belt that cradled his sidearm. We sat.

"Fred's a worry wart," I said trying to play down the danger.

"It's what makes him a first class lawman, Sir."

"It's Marc. *Sir* gives me the Willies."

"I'll try to remember. Never guarded a celebrity before."

"There's very little celebrity here, Jake. *Irrepressible busybody* would describe me better."

"I understand there was an attack on your life."

I pointed to my throat. He had taken note of it earlier.

"While I was napping this afternoon. Someone with good arm strength. Apparently left after I hit him - or her - on the temple with a large flashlight. Actually, my prime suspect was Ann, but then a few minutes later she was killed in a similar manner in her room, on her bed."

"Well, Sheriff said for me to help in any way I can. Have a Masters in history. Was going to teach but got sidetracked during a sociology field assignment."

"Done much with *genealogy*?"

"Some. More with *Jeanie Watson*."

He smiled.

"Your wife?"

"Yes. Two years now. You married?"

"No. I keep intending to settle down and then another situation like this one comes up and I pack up and leave home. Not much of a life for a wife, I'm afraid."

"May I ask why you think Ann might have been your attacker?"

"Whoever it was smelled heavily of perfume; it could have been aftershave or cologne or scented soap – maybe even hair spray. Ann spends a lot of time swimming laps in a pool at the motel out at the crossroads so I assume she would have had good arm strength. The story she told was too pat. Among her things she had a detailed genealogical chart of area families suggesting far more than a passing interest."

"That reminds me," Jake said taking a sheet of paper from his shirt pocket. The sheriff said to give you this – Ann's middle name."

"I see. How very interesting. Rankin – that's the name of one of the main players in the ghost story around here – though I suppose you know that."

"The Colonial. I've heard the story. Haven't been down here except on patrol since I was a little kid. I remember the stage coach and the train rides."

"You're aware of the recent murders and accidents. I was trying to tie them together by family. My hunch was that somebody might be out to take revenge on either the Rankin line or the Coolidges. If it turns out the local Barber family is descended from the Rankins, then I may have been right. Ann would just be one more in that line to be murdered."

"You can't find a Barber-Rankin connection?" he asked.

"Not from this end. Perhaps now that we know Ann's relationship we can begin tracing backwards to find if the lines come together in her history."

"Makes sense." Jake nodded. "The way I understand it, though, the local lore says that it's more likely the Coolidge ghosts that are finally taking their revenge."

"One big problem with that theory? Why would the ghosts be concerned if I discovered that? I mean, it's in the lore already and there's nothing anybody can do about it – the Sheriff isn't going to round up the ghosts and put them in jail. You see, I think there has to be a more worldly connection to the killings. *Somebody* doesn't want me here. It may also be they didn't want Ann here. Maybe she was already close to finding out something and that's why she was killed. Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with the fact she's a Rankin. That may have brought her here, but it may have been something else entirely that led to her demise."

"You make it seem complicated."

"Possible scenarios – I've found it's the more the merrier to begin with. It's easy to weed out the useless ones later."

"So, where do you want me to start?" he asked genuinely enthused about the project.

"If you're volunteering, how about beginning with the Ann Jargot side of the equation and trace her family back in this direction?"

"I have a wireless internet laptop in the car. That should speed things along. I'll call Donny and have him bring it up."

"Donny. Yes. I met him on the train ride and he helped with the recent problem with Henry Haskins who said he'd also been attacked – attempted strangulation. Marks on his neck. Seemed scared out of his gourd. He's a professor from Nebraska here to work on the family trees of the current local residents. It's hard to believe that can just be a coincidence. Perhaps it's synergistic. With the three of us all here at once working on families, it may have stirred something up – freaked out somebody – or *something*. *Why*, I don't know but it seems reasonable."

Jake called Donny and ten minutes later the equipment was in my suite. We determined my printer was compatible with what he had and were soon set up on the coffee table in the sitting room. It was late and I was tired. The couch made into a bed and Jake made that his headquarters for the night. I retired to the bed room. I – now *we* – had a five thirty date for hotcakes. I hoped Rusty's nose wouldn't get bent out of joint over sharing our table with Jake.

It was unexpectedly unnerving to be there in my bed. I left one of the wall lamps on low. It effectively chased the shadows into the corners but provided little light. I resorted to my usual strategy when sleep would not come; I counted ghosts jumping over sheep. I remember nothing after number twenty-seven, though did note number fourteen could have made good use of some cling-free product on his sheet.

I couldn't have been asleep more than twenty minutes when I was awakened. I lay quietly needing to ascertain what had roused me.

There in the dim light it immediately became clear. The closet door swung open – slowly though not tentatively. The ghostly figure of Tommy stepped into the room carrying his freshly laundered clothes from inside, which he hung on a hook I had not previously noticed. Paying no particular attention to anything else in the room he methodically went about the process of removing his old clothes and getting dressed in the new ones. When he was finished he bundled up the

dirty things and tossed them onto the floor of the closet. He returned the hanger from the hook to the rod inside and stood there, hands on his hips, finally taking in the room with his eyes. I tossed a pencil at him – through him, as it turned out. My missile had in no way affected him – apparently, it had neither been felt nor seen.

He returned into the closet and the door closed behind him. It just closed! I was sure he had not pulled it shut. There was then the familiar click of the secret door snapping into place. I was alone again. Then, there was a second click and a third. Those were not familiar! They had not been muffled like the one from the closet. They had come from somewhere there in the room.

I got out of bed and turned on all the lights. The sounds had been unexpected and I had not been able to locate them. I searched the walls and visually inspected the ceiling. Not knowing what I was searching for made the quest difficult. In general, some sort of opening for a projector. The ceiling was made of wide planking supported by rough hewn beams. It possessed a million knots and other imperfections any one of which might conceal some small flip down opening.

I opened the closet door and things were as they should be – the pile of dirty clothes on the floor and the empty wooden hanger on the rod. That reminded me about the hook on the outside of the closet. As I suspected, there was no hook. Perhaps Hickory Hollow ghosts provided their own – some portable variety.

My view of the lad had been largely from the side – his right side – as he went through the process of changing clothes. It had not been Jerry's profile. It was very similar and teenage, but it was *not* his. The full front view near the end of the scene as he looked around the room had lasted no more than five seconds but again, it was very close to being Jerry, but it was not.

It set me wondering. Had the images I had previously seen there in the hotel actually been Jerry? I hadn't yet met the young man when I viewed them. Bart admitted making video recordings to augment the ghostly happenings but suggested each year they were remade with the new actors to keep the real and the projections identical. If this last sighting of mine had been a projection, why would it have *not* been one using Jerry?

One possibility would be that it was not a projection but the real thing – the ghost of Tommy Coolidge. If that were so, the resemblance was pretty much a lock on the gene pool. The Barbers and the Coolidges had to be related. That, of course, was my least likely scenario for what had just happened. I would pursue it in the morning.

The faithful sheep-jumping ghosts reappeared as soon as I closed my eyes. I chuckled out loud when I noticed that number fourteen had appropriately re-laundered his garment since his last performance. I remember little after that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rusty was sitting at his usual spot on the wooden walk in front of the cafe, his back against one of the posts. He was an interesting study in motion. When he sat, not a muscle seemed to move; his body was at rest. When he was not sitting, however, he was in constant motion. I had never seen him stand still. There was one exception: whether sitting or standing, his mouth was engaged most of the time. I envisioned him and his hoop carrying on a non-stop conversation up and down Main Street.

So, he was sitting quietly. His face lit up as he saw me approach and then turned serious when he determined Jake was with me.

"Rusty, old man," I began, softening him up for the introduction. "This is my friend Jake. I invited him to join us for breakfast. I was sure that would be okay with you."

Rusty stood.

"Mornin' Deputy. Glad to have you join us."

He held out his hand as he continued.

"I'll feel safer with you around. Got the constant Willies since the accidents begun befallin' my kin, you understand."

"I can understand that," Jake said, a puzzled look forming on his face.

"I'm intrigued as to how you knew I was a deputy."

"Folks in the Hollow keeps up with newcomers. Knowed who ya was before ya got unpacked. A college boy, I see."

"You see?"

"Well, I *hear*, really, I guess."

The boy smiled at his little joke and continued.

"Your tone and manner's Ozarks. Your words is college. Miss Sarah says I can learn ta talk like that. Can't fer the life a me understand why I'd ever want to."

It had not been delivered as a put down – just a statement of fact. Kate flipped the 'Closed' sign to 'Open' and we entered. Rusty led the way to the table in the rear and scooted a third chair into place facing the window. It became his chair and he explained why to Jake.

"I figure you can guard us better if you're back ain't to the front a the room."

"You think like a cop, Rusty. Very good."

Rusty acknowledged the compliment with a nod and pointed out the window.

"There's Mr. Haskins. Must be comin' fer breakfast. He's behind schedule this mornin'."

Jake addressed Rusty.

"Marc tells me you are his assistant in all this so I guess that makes you my assistant as well, if that's okay with you?"

The lad's face lit up.

"Yes. That is definitely okay. You need somebody on the inside like me. I was gonna offer if ya hadn't asked."

With that settled, we ordered.

"You do understand," Jake continued, "that anything you hear mentioned about the case is strictly confidential – you don't go telling *anybody* without permission from one of us."

"Yes, Sir."

He nodded in a way that left no doubt about his honorable intentions. Adam came in and approached us, pausing when he saw Rusty.

"Morning, Adam," I said. "Pull up a chair."

"Can't stay. Needed to pass on some information to you but . . ." He pointed to Rusty behind his back.

I stood and accompanied him some distance away.

"I hesitate to tell you this but feel I have to. Yesterday, immediately after you were attacked, I saw Winkie leaving the passageway door in the back hall."

He then decided he should back up and explain.

"You have discovered the secret door in your closet. I enjoyed your note about the starch. As you may or may not know, the passageway moves from floor to floor with entrances into all the Coolidge suites – top to bottom. It exits in the back hall. It assists us in giving our patrons a little extra.

"Winkie makes the pick ups and deliveries of clothing and such about noon each day. He had already completed that yesterday. But then, late afternoon I saw him leaving the door again. I didn't approach him about it thinking he may have forgotten something the first time, but then, when I heard about the attack on you and the terrible thing with Ann, I wasn't sure how to proceed. So, here I am, *asking*, I suppose."

"I'm glad you came to me. I'll pass it on to Jake – you know he's a plainclothes deputy here to watch over me, I assume?"

"Yes. Not much escapes us local yokels."

"Don't mention it to Winkie, now. We'll see how it all plays out."

"Okay. Fine. I'll be on my way then. Rusty seems to have become your shadow."

Adam smiled.

"That reminds me," I said. "Unless you have some reason other than my safety for Winkie to follow me, I imagine you can relieve him of that duty now that Jake's on board."

"I'll see to it. Are you making progress?"

"I'm finding lots of puzzle pieces. They are bound to fit together sooner or later."

I returned to the table and Adam exited through the front door. Hastings entered and took his usual place. The food had arrived and the others had begun eating.

"We waited on ya like one hog waits fer another," Rusty said, giggling and winking up at Jake.

"You two seem to have hit it off pretty well," I said as I began buttering and syruling my hotcakes.

Mouths full, both nodded and smiled at each other. Jake turned to me and spoke.

"I worked a while after you turned in last night. Went on-line and found some interesting stuff. Contacted the night desk in Syracuse and inquired about Ann Jargot. She has a record of a sort. Known as a 'crazy' up there. Stalked a college professor to the point he had to get a restraining order – which she broke. She's a research librarian, okay – that's true. What she apparently didn't tell you was that she is – was – the director of the genealogy section. She obtains grants to visit various parts of the country and do grassroots research – it was what she was doing here.

"Last summer she spent six weeks in Nebraska visiting college campuses. I have some of their names and I'll see if I can find out more details about what she was looking into up there."

"Nebraska?" I said. It raised dozens of new questions and possibilities. Had Ann and Haskins known each other before arriving here? Had Ann come here following Haskins or the other way around? There were many more but my concentration was broken by Rusty's concerned voice.

"Look there."

He pointed to the Widow Crawford's house. It was a block away but there was no need for a close-up to understand what was taking place. Winkie – in his red and black checkered shirt – was on the porch roof, entering a window.

"It's Mr. Haskin's room," Rusty whispered.

We watched as he entered and almost as quickly returned and jumped to the ground walking back toward the main drag. He seemed unhurried and had not behaved in a suspicious manner even while breaking into the room. Perhaps it was due to his slowness. Perhaps it was because he believed he had nothing to hide. I needed to speak with him.

We finished breakfast and got up to leave. Haskins motioned us over to his table. He scooted Rusty away with the back of his hand. I nodded and Rusty left.

"Are you close to finding the culprit that attacked me?"

It was a fully self-centered reference showing no concern for either my welfare or Ann's death.

"Quite honestly, no, but we are working on it. How's your throat, by the way?"

He lifted his beard and tilted his head back. Jake took a close look and frowned in my direction. I nodded and put my finger to my lips.

"We better be on our way, I suppose," I said. Then as a calculated afterthought, "Did you and Ann Jargot know each other before arriving here."

"Why no. Why would you ask such a thing?"

It seemed an odd reaction but then, Henry Haskins was odd!

"Just checking out all possibilities. One more thing. You know the young man called Winkie?"

"Yes. I know which one he is. Nothing more, really."

"Sometimes he runs errands for visitors. I just wondered if he had done that for you."

"No. Never. If it weren't for his black and red shirt I probably couldn't even pick him out of a crowd."

Interesting, I thought. He *did* know him well enough to remember that Winkie only ever wore red and black checked shirts. It seemed more than the casual interest that Haskins seemed to *want* us to believe.

We left and met Rusty outside. His arms were crossed as were his legs as he stood propped against a pole, looking the part of a brooding, young, James Dean.

"Don't seem like I'm really a deputy, you know."

Jake and I both noted with a nod in each other's direction that the boy had promoted himself in our absence.

"Haskins just doesn't understand about young people. He never had kids. You'll have to excuse him," I said attempting to sooth Rusty's hurt feelings.

He nodded and with obvious reluctance, uncrossed his appendages, apparently satisfied with my explanation. Winkie came up the walk across from us. I motioned to him as we crossed the street. He smiled as he joined us in front of the hotel immediately drawing Rusty close and ruffling his hair.

"Need to talk with you about several things. Got time now?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Let's use the hotel lobby, then," I suggested.

He signed to Rusty.

"He wants to know if he's in trouble."

"No. Just need to find out about a few things."

We entered and took seats in the southeast corner. The sun was just peeping over the mountain and its rays played off the morning haze.

"I have two things on my mind, Winkie. First, you were seen leaving the secret passage in the back hall late yesterday afternoon. I asked Adam and he didn't know why you would be using it at that time of day."

He began signing immediately.

"He says he had to do something for Bart Franklin but he can't say what without Bart's permission."

"I'll let that pass then. The second thing is that we just saw you go into and come out of Mr. Haskins' room through the window at the porch roof."

Rusty again interpreted for us.

"Miss Ann give him ten bucks to take a big brown envelope full a papers to him but not ta let him know about it. That was yesterday about two-thirty in the afternoon. With all the commotion here – you gittin' attacked and Miss Ann gittin' killed, and then with Mr. Haskins gittin' attacked – Winkie thought it was best not to try and deliver the envelope 'til early this mornin'. So he waited 'til the old man left his room for breakfast and then made the delivery."

I looked at Jake.

"We need to see those papers," I said.

He nodded. It'll take a while to get a warrant and then we'll have no assurance he'll actually give us the same papers."

"I think you need to take a short walk, Mr. Law Enforcement Guy," I said.

He understood and walked across the room. I peeled a ten of my own from my wallet and handed it to Winkie.

"Go back and get that envelope right now. It's very important. It may tell

us something about Ann's death or the attacks on Jerry and Mr. Haskins. We'll keep Haskins occupied if he leaves before you get back."

"Shall I go let the Widow in on it all, so she won't be worried if she sees Winkie?" Rusty asked.

"You go as a standby but don't approach her unless she discovers Winkie, okay?"

"Okay."

Winkie handed back the money shaking his head and the two of them left on a trot. Jake returned and took a seat.

"Sheriff Carter warned me you had ways of stretching the law in mostly reasonable ways. Shall I go ahead and get a warrant?"

"We really have no way of describing the envelope or its contents and we certainly don't have any legitimate grounds for a search of his room. He's one of the good guys in all this."

"I see what you mean. So, what's on the agenda for today?"

"I'll look over that envelop as soon as the boys return with it. That may modify my plans. I want us to go over Ann's room with a fine tooth comb. I'm sure Adam is chomping at the bit to be able to rent it. He's probably had to cancel a couple nights' reservations. I suppose you need to follow up on the Nebraska connection. Let's start by seeing if we can find a bibliography of things Haskins has had published. In light of the envelope escapade, Ann clearly had some interest in him and his findings. He says he doesn't know her. If that's true, it could be she located him through something he wrote. I haven't a clue as to what that might be."

"Great idea. I'll get on it as soon as I have a chance."

"Oh, that's right. You were placed here to ride my tail, weren't you?"

"Afraid so, Sir, er, Marc. I can 'laptop it' most anywhere, though – wireless and all."

"If you can break away from me long enough to go upstairs and get it, I'll wait here for the boys to return."

"I think that's reasonable. Just watch the Sheriff show up during the five minutes I'm gone."

He chuckled, stood, and left. He returned at the same moment the boy's re-entered the lobby.

"Got it," Rusty said.

"Got it where?" I asked not seeing it.

Winkie pulled it out of his shirt and handed it to me. He pointed out some printing along the upper edge of the front side. *Round Nine*. I nodded and motioned for them to take seats as I opened the unsealed flap on the envelope. Haskins had said he'd been a boxer so the round nine reference might mean he felt he was close to the end – there generally being ten rounds in professional fights. The end of *what* was not clear.

Jake pulled his chair close as I began sorting through the sheets. They were hand written notes in no apparent order. One was a partial family tree that suggested Andy Bonner, one of the current teachers in Hickory Hollow, and Ann Jargot, were first cousins. Their mothers were the daughters of Elmer Rankin. It

did not trace the family back further than that.

The rest of the material represented other bits and pieces of various branches of the local families. There were large red letters here and there which seemed to indicate connecting points from one sheet to another. It appeared to be a secretarial nightmare that needed to be drawn out on one very large sheet of paper.

"Should be a breeze to arrange," Jake said optimistically, apparently eager to get started.

I gladly deferred the project to him.

"Let's get copies made at the office then we can return the originals to Haskins as 'found' material," I suggested. "We need to get up to Ann's room and finish that ASAP."

"I'm with you," he said.

By eight o'clock we had the copying finished and the original back into its envelope. I wanted us to deliver the material in person because I wanted to press Haskins a bit in regard to his relationship with Ann.

Mrs. Crawford answered the front door and called up the stairs to alert Haskins that we were there. He opened his door and called for us to come up. It was a large, cluttered room. There were folders, book and loose papers everywhere. Except for his chair at the desk, the others were all piled high. I handed him the envelope.

"From the return address label it appears that this is your material," I said. "It was in Ann Jargot's possession."

He looked inside and nodded, then turned to sort through a pile behind him – the pile where it should have been, I assumed.

"We have two questions," I went on. "First, how could she have obtained the envelope and second, why would she have wanted it?"

"I have no answer to either question. As I told you earlier, I just haven't really had any contact with her. What was she?"

"A librarian, a genealogist, and a ghost groupie. Certainly she had some interest in your work. Her middle name is Rankin – the last name of her Grandfather. She's apparently a first cousin of Andy Bonner, a local teacher."

"Bonner. Yes. He is a Rankin. I haven't been able to find a connection with the Colonial Rankins, however. His grandfather moved into the valley during the late 1940's."

I was interested in how free he was with that information and how closed mouthed he'd been about other questions during our earlier meetings. I tried to take advantage of his cooperative nature.

"What about the Jargot family? Apparently Ann's father was the first Jargot in the extended tree."

"Well, let's see. If she was a cousin of Bonner . . ." He rummaged through a pile of folders, eventually opening one. "Jargot was a first generation Russian immigrant, I believe. There's no related U. S. family I've been able to trace."

"I figured Jargot was French."

"Probably was originally. Cultures mix, you know, *Mr. Englishman Miller*

living in the United States."

"Well put. You made your point."

The conversation was cordial but going in no constructive direction so I drew it to a close.

"Well, I knew you'd want your papers back. Hope they are in order."

"Yes. They seem to be fine. Thank you for their return. Like I said, I have no idea how they came to be in her possession."

"Well, thanks again for your time."

We left. Jake had questions.

"What's the possibility this Winkie character could be involved in some way. He's the one who discovered the cut rope. He was seen leaving the passageway just after the attack on you and probably the murder of Ann Jargot. Now this sneaking in and out of Haskin's window? He's lanky but obviously strong."

"Unlikely, I'd say, but can't rule it out of course."

Back at the hotel we went directly to Ann's room. While I began snooping, Jake got busy on the internet. It felt like an invasion of her privacy but I told myself it was for the greater good, so proceeded.

There were two CD's, which I could examine later in my room. Her laptop was well organized but used codes for file names – each nine digits followed by two or three letters – so other than just starting through all the files there seemed to be no good way to attack it. I interrupted Jake and asked him to take a look.

"If I had to guess I'd say its zip codes with people's initials after them."

"An interesting idea. I'm impressed," I said. "Any idea what Nebraska's code starts with?"

"Just a sec and I can find out. . . . Six, eight."

I scrolled down through the files. There were a dozen that began with 68. One jumped out at me – the three letters at the end were CVC. Could that mean Clarabelle Virginia Coolidge? I was guessing at the Virginia but it was her mother's name. I opened the file. I was right. Now it was Jake's turn to be impressed.

It contained a narrative of the family tree beginning with Joel's father in Tennessee and tracing it forward a half dozen generations stopping just short of any present day family information. Clarabelle had married and had two sons – one named Ralph Potter. According to a notation, it was his branch that was apparently traced on one of the CDs.

In the same zip code was a file initialed HHH.

"Henry H Haskins?" I asked out loud.

"Give it a click," Jake suggested having put his own laptop aside to look over my shoulder.

"*Howard* Henry Haskins," I said reading the first entry. "It could be our guy, I suppose. Lots of folks go by their middle names."

Jake nodded and we read on.

"I'll bet that's it," Jake said pointing to an entry.

At one point – on the way back through the generations – the Haskins name suddenly became Rankins. The name had been changed to Haskins in

the first decade of the 1900's.

"And all of this is important how?" Jake asked.

"For one thing, Haskins lied about the way he came by his name and his family tree having been broken by his grandfather's adoption. I have to wonder why he slipped me such an elaborate rouse. Other than that, I have no idea that it is in any way important. The accidents have all happened to the Barbers and I see no mention of that family anywhere. My first inclination was to go with the ghost lore – that the Coolidges were after the Rankins. But up to this point nothing suggests the Barbers can be traced to the Rankins."

"Dead end?" he asked.

"For now, unless there's something else in all of this. I'll turn it over to you. Feel free to pass the CDs on to the Sheriff's office if you want."

"I'll snoop in her laptop a bit longer," he said plainly intrigued by the adventure.

I went back to snooping in the real world. As I was going through the largest of Ann's four suitcases, I noticed the back lining was loose. I pulled it out from the top. There was a large white envelope which I removed. I sat on the edge of the stripped bed as I dumped its contents out beside me.

More single sheets of paper but these contained photocopies of newspaper articles – all about happenings in and about Omaha some twenty five to thirty years before. It produced a strange question in my mind and I turned to Jake.

"Find out where Ann was born," I asked.

He nodded and went back his own computer. I began examining the articles in more detail. Several dealt with bizarre crimes on and near a small college campus – Millville College. A professor came up missing and later was found drowned in a local lake. His body had been wired to cement blocks and sunk in sixty feet of water. Andrew Johnson. It rang no bells.

A half dozen articles later, however, the bells began to chime! The man hired to replace Professor Johnson was none other than Dr. H. Henry Haskins.

Jake interrupted my somewhat smug reverie.

"Council Bluffs, Iowa. Ann was born in Council Bluffs."

"As I recall that's all of ten miles east of Omaha, Nebraska," I said.

I went back to the Jargot family tree we had found in Ann's room earlier. It showed she had two older brothers – Winston and Purvis. Neither appeared on any of the material we had accumulated. It was way too much for me to hold in my head and lists on computer screens were too confined.

"We need one huge genealogical chart that will hold all of our information," I said running my fingers through my hair in exasperation. Meat wrapping paper should be big enough."

Jake called Donny who soon delivered a roll of white paper three feet wide and twelve feet long. He also produced masking tape, a hand full of markers, four pencils, and a pair of scissors.

"You two guys amaze me," I said realizing how focused they were on the necessities of the moment.

"We often amaze ourselves, Sir," Donny said, smiling. He winked at Jake.

"Anything else as long as I'm here."

"That should do it. Thanks," I said. "Things are staying calm out there in the streets are they?"

"Nothing unusual for a setting like this, unless you're referring the kid with the hoop. He plows through the crowds at full tilt never so much as brushing against anybody. Can't understand how he does it. Must be part bat!"

Jake and I smiled at each other. I shrugged. Donny left.

"We can tape the paper, double wide, to a wall in my sitting room," I suggested. Probably want to use pencil rather than marker to begin with. It's hard for me to visualize how to go about it."

"What do we want?" Jake began. "Sounds like we want to see if we can trace local families, Haskin's family, and Ann's family back to the original Coolidge and/or Rankin families."

I nodded.

"Then, I'd suggest we put the oldest folks at the top, the current folks at the bottom and using the material we have collected, try to fill the space in between."

He cocked his head and looked puzzled.

"Don't you suppose Haskins has already done all of this?"

"Probably. I'd just rather rely on our own detective work. Haskins has suddenly become a player in all this – he was attacked, Ann has shown great interest in him. I'm uneasy about him in some way."

"We can do this, then," Jake said confidently. "I've seen *your* handwriting. *I'll* make the entries. Let me lay in what we have for sure at both ends."

I agreed without answering. We returned to my suite next door. I went back to the rest of the material from the envelope that Ann had secreted in her suitcase. Why had she felt it needed to be kept hidden? Perhaps something else in the papers would explain that.

There was a smaller envelope among the sheets. It contained an actual clipping that was in poor condition. Carefully, I unfolded it. The date placed it some twenty years before the others and was from a newspaper in Fremont, Nebraska. The headline read, *Local Boy Dies in House Fire*. The boy's name was Ronald Haskins, age nine. The article went on to detail the brave attempt of his older brother, Henry, to rescue him, but in the end the extreme heat of the fire drove him back. It had been the Fourth of July and apparently the older, shake shingled home had been ignited by wayward fireworks.

An interesting piece of history but why did it deserve to be hidden? In fact, why did it deserve to be part of Ann's collection of clippings? It raised more questions and *that*, of course, was good. Until you find the right question, a solution can never be found.

So, what had I learned? Haskins was raised in Fremont, a small town not far from Omaha. He had at least one younger brother who had been killed at age nine in a house fire caused by misguided fireworks on the Fourth of July. Henry went on to become a college professor and took the place of Andrew Johnson who was apparently killed – murdered – by drowning.

"Jake. There was a drowning, probably a homicide of an Andrew Johnson

in the Omaha area about twenty years ago – maybe a little less. See if you can find out about it? Was it solved? Suspects if it wasn't. Things like that."

"On it. This is the greatest assignment I've ever had. I often have no idea what we're doing but it's a blast!"

"Well, here's some more fun, then. See what you can find out about Haskins' tenure at the college – Millville College, I think. Any irregularities. Not sure what to look for."

As he made a note we both looked up. There was a noise coming from the ceiling near the hallway.

"Rats?" I asked.

"Doubt it. Despite its rustic appearance this *is* a four star hotel," he said. "Four star hotels *don't* have rats."

I opened the door to the hall. The noise was louder out there. It was as if something were being drug across the upper side of the ceiling.

"I'm assuming this is double ceiling/floor construction," I said. "Separate beaming for the ceiling from the floor above to minimize sound transfer between floors."

"I imagine so. It sure seemed quiet to me last night."

"Suppose that's a large enough space to allow a person to crawl through?"

"On his stomach, maybe," Jake answered with a shrug, clearly guessing.

The commotion went on for several more minutes and then moved off over the rooms on the other side of the hall and was gone. We returned to the sitting room and continued working.

At eleven there was another commotion; that one was out in the hall. I opened the door. It was a new ghostly apparition standing there at the top of the stairs. It would have been a man in his early forties, dressed in pre-civil war clothing. He carried a long hunting gun. His words were garbled, hollow, reverberating – I'm not sure how to describe them. The message, however, was clear.

"Marc Miller. You must die."

He raised his gun in my direction and immediately fired. It was no *ghostly* bullet; the door casing splintered beside my head. Jake lunged for the man only to find nothing was there. The image wrapped itself around Jake's body and was soon gone.

"A ghost or a projection," I asked? "Your pick today."

"A *projection* that fires *real* bullets?" Jake asked by way of answering me.

"That any better than a *ghost* that fires real bullets?" I asked.

He nodded and shrugged indicating he got my message but had no useful response.

"I'll dig the bullet out and we can examine it," he said as he took out his pocket knife and went to work.

It turned out to be a lead ball something under a half inch in diameter. We went back into the sitting room.

"What an interesting experience," I said taking a seat.

"The man misses being shot to death by no more than three inches and he says, 'What an interesting experience'."

Jake was clearly still upset. Rusty rushed into the room.

"Heard a shot. You guys okay. I made the desk guy let me call the Sheriff or I'd a been here sooner. You okay?"

Jake put in a call to his office to make the explanations. Rusty came right over to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"We're fine. Bullet missed by that much."

I showed him with my fingers.

"Who done it?"

"Looked to be a ghost. My bet is Joel Coolidge though I'll need to go back through the pictures Sarah loaned me to make sure."

I took out the album and paged through it quickly.

"There he is, big as life – well, probably a poor choice of words."

It garnered a slight, quick, smile from Rusty.

"They been sayin' that whole family got riled up somehow and is out to skin our hides," he said offering an explanation.

"They?" I asked.

"Ya. They. Everybody who knows about that stuff. Always knowed they'd be gittin' their revenge someday. Guess that time finally done come."

He shook his head as if inevitable, terrible, things were soon to take over the Hollow.

"Ever know a ghost to fire real bullets?" I asked.

He thought.

"No. Doesn't make sense, I guess."

I nodded at Jake who had finished his report to the dispatcher. He took the ball from his shirt pocket and held it in out in his open palm toward Rusty.

"That's what went whizzing by my head a few minutes ago. Looks pretty solid and un-ghostly to me. What do you think?"

Rusty took it between his fingers and hefted it.

"Feels real to me. So if it wasn't ghosts who was it?"

He handed it back to Jake.

"Maybe somebody wanting to give the ghosts a bad name," I began.

"Or," Rusty continued, "Somebody wanting you dead."

His hand began patting my shoulder. I needed to reassure him.

"Come out into the hall. I want to show you something."

Jake accompanied us.

"The ball went into the wood at a 90 degree angle. That means it had to come from directly across the hall."

I marked the height of the hole with my finger on the side of my head and walked to the other side of the room. With a pencil I marked that height on the wall. Jake understood what I was doing and he traced to the right as I traced to the left.

"I think I got it, Marc." he said. "This small dark circle in the wall paper is actually a hole. Correct height. I can stick a pencil way inside."

I moved to take a look. So did Rusty. Jake held him up so he could see. A nice gesture, I thought.

I knocked on the door of the room into which the hole opened. There was

no answer.

"If you will, Rusty, go get Adam or someone with a key to this room."

He bounded down the stairs three at a time and was soon back with Adam in tow. I explained what happened and why we needed to look inside. Without hesitating he opened the door. Jake entered first, his hand on his sidearm. He flipped on the lights. The room had been reserved by a Donald Jones who had not shown up to use it. The area of interest to us turned out to be inside the closet. There it was – an ancient looking gun aimed through the hole, which Jake had found earlier.

"Shall I take it down?" Jake asked.

"No. Let's see if anybody shows up to claim it."

I turned to Adam.

"Any secret entrances into this room?"

"No. The passages just run between the suites on the east side of the building."

"We heard noise in the ceiling a while ago. I assume there is room for a man to belly between the ceiling and the floor above."

Adam looked uneasy. He hesitated. I pressed.

"Somebody just took a shot at me, Adam. I need answers."

He nodded.

"There is a crawl space that runs directly above the door to your suite. It is entered from the passageway behind your closet."

"Does it have an entrance into the closet here in this room?"

"No."

"We can go into its purpose later," I said, figuring there was no reason to give up all his secrets to the other two.

He nodded, clearly relieved at my response. We went back into the hall and Adam locked the door and handed me the key. I spoke, mostly for Rusty's benefit.

"I want you to notice that the trajectory of the bullet from the gun in the closet was preset by the orientation of the gun. It could only have gone one place. Also notice that because of the placement of this cement urn to the right of my door, there is no way anybody could stand in such a way as to have been hit by a bullet following that path. The bullet was clearly meant to frighten me as I opened my door, but not to kill me."

The grooves in Rusty's forehead smoothed as the realization sunk in. He nodded and smiled, very briefly. Jake positioned himself where I had been standing when the gun fired and he, too, nodded. Adam sighed.

I explained to Adam the ghostly confrontation Jake and I had at the time of the gunfire.

"You're describing Joel Coolidge, the father of the clan. It seems unlikely it was really he, considering it was a *real* gun that fired for him. I may be able to shed some light on it . . . later."

By later I understood he meant in private.

"Rusty, how about you and Jake go get the three of us a table over at Kate's – to beat the noon crowd. I'll be along shortly. A couple of things I need

to check out with Adam."

It required less than five minutes for Jake to install a wireless mini-web cam to watch the room door across the hall. The job received Rusty's approval and the two of them left. I motioned Adam into my suite. We sat and I let him speak.

"As I'm sure you've figured out, we use hologram projection to make Tommy and Larry appear out there on the landing. The crawl space above accesses the projectors although they are controlled from my office. To change the images, however, someone has to go up there and change the digital cards in the equipment. It was state of the art a few years ago, but such technology has grown rapidly since then. We don't, however have the program you described. We have Tommy and Larry rough housing and Tommy jumping down the stairs. Those are the only two programs we run at this spot. Similar programs are run on every floor outside the suites – each just enough different to keep them fresh in case several are witnessed by the same people."

"So, what we heard in the ceiling could have been – probably was, in fact – somebody changing the digital card."

"That's my best guess, considering the completely foreign scene you saw out there."

"Who's in charge of the programming – the photography – the making of the holograms?"

"Dave Hall has the expertise and writes the computer programs. Bart and his wife do most of the actual work with the actors and such."

"One more question. Do you have a holographic program that runs in the bedroom I'm using?"

His brow furrowed.

"No."

"Well, okay then. I guess we need to track down that Joel Coolidge program. How can we get that card? Better yet, first, how can we re-run the program? I assume they can only be activated from your office like you said."

"That's right. I can play whatever is in there right now if you like."

"I'd like you to see it. It might give you some idea about its origin."

"It can all be put on a timed computer program. I'll go set it to play in five minutes and then come right back upstairs."

"Let's do that, then."

Adam left and I called Jake's cell phone. He didn't like the idea of me being alone that long. Before I had hung up Donny came running up the steps to be Jake's temporary stand-in. By the time I had explained to him what was going on Adam was back.

We stood off to the right – well out of the line of fire even though the gun was a single shot, muzzle loader. Presently the ghostly figure appeared. It was the same one Jake and I had witnessed earlier. The hollow sounding voice was the same. The words were the same. Much to our surprise, the SHOT was the same!

It couldn't have been and yet it was. We hurried into the room and opened the closet door. The gun was gone. The room was empty. I waited for my heart

to resume beating!!!

CHAPTER EIGHT

By the time I joined Rusty and Jake at the cafe they were slicking up their pie plates.

"I gotta git to my hoopin', Mr. M," Rusty said as I took a chair.

"You go right ahead. Have to keep the customers happy."

He wiped his blueberry stained lips and left.

The waitress arrived with coffee and I ordered.

"Tried to get Donny to join us but he seemed to have business elsewhere," I said.

"I think his business is named Suzzy Mae. She works at the candy store," Jake explained.

"Sounds like business may be looking up for him, then."

"Oh yes. I'd say so."

I filled Jake in on what I had learned and on what had happened after he left.

"I knew I shouldn't have left you there alone. Any ideas?"

"Lots of ideas – that's never my problem. Good ideas? That remains to be seen."

"Another secret passageway out of the room across the hall?" he asked.

"No place for one. I looked it over carefully. I'm sure at this point Adam wouldn't hold back on something like that."

"Empty guns don't just fire themselves and then disappear."

"You're right. They don't. But this one did. When you examined it did you notice anything out of the ordinary?"

"I'm no expert on such old pieces so I probably wouldn't have noticed anything even if it had been there. No device in place to pull the trigger by remote control if that's your real question."

I nodded.

"Well, since I don't believe that ghosts fire real ammo, and since I don't believe a real gun could be carried off through solid walls by even the most talented ghost, there has to be some more mortal explanation."

"One thing is very clear," Jake said, pausing as the waitress delivered my Swiss steak lunch.

"What's that?"

"Somebody wants to scare you away from here."

"Or, make sure I stay around."

"What? I don't understand."

"Last night just after I fell asleep I was awakened to the image of Tommy Coolidge's ghost changing clothes in my bedroom. It was totally benign so I didn't bother you with it. Adam insists they have no holographic equipment in there, by the way. Anybody with anything more than the slightest knowledge about me would have to know that something like that would just intrigue me. Then the attack on my life, which, more and more I'm coming to believe may not have been intended as life threatening. Again, I've never backed off from things.

And now this – a gunshot set to come in my direction but arranged so it couldn't possibly have hit me. You see what I mean? Somebody may just want to be sure I don't pull out before I find whatever there is to find."

"When you put it that way, I understand what you're saying."

"I may be wrong about it all, of course, but right now that's what seems to make sense."

Jake nodded. "I still have to proceed as if they want to kill you. Oh, I found an odd slip of paper in one of Ann's folders," he said removing it from his shirt pocket and handing it to me.

"A credit card receipt for a room at Adam's hotel?"

I delivered it as a question as I eyed it front and back. Jake nodded.

"Look at the name. Look at the room number. Look at the credit card number."

I read out the information aloud.

"Harold Henry, room 311, card ending in 4321."

"Yes. See. Harold Henry could have been Harold Henry Haskins. The room is the one the gun was fired from. I'll bet the credit card is his as well."

"What's the date?"

We searched the slip. Why dates are always so carefully hidden on them I've never been able to understand.

"Here it is," Jake said. "Three months ago – about six weeks or so before Haskins arrived here – as *Haskins*, at least."

"Interesting," I said. "It raises some general questions but I don't seem to see it going in the same direction as you must."

"Here's another set of information," he said. "Ann always stay in the same room across the hall."

"Was she here at that time, too?"

"No. I didn't claim I had all the loose ends tied up. Like I have no idea why Ann had a copy of this credit card receipt."

"One thing I've learned through my years of investigating these things," I said, "is that coincidence is seldom coincidence. Let's keep it in the back of our minds. It may well fall into place later."

"Speaking of HHH," Jake said, moving his head in the direction of the door.

Haskins entered and took a small table near the front. Jake and I returned to our conversation, the focus of which was changed.

"I'll let you work on matching the number to Haskin's credit card. He always pays with one, here, I believe. Then, I want to retrace the stage coach ride on foot. Probably take an hour or maybe an hour and a half. Also, I think it's best if from here on out we share as little as necessary with the four principles in this town, Bart, Chris, Dave and Adam. It's not that I don't trust them – really – but gossip spreads like wildfire in this little community and could easily reach the wrong ears."

"And, you really aren't sure who you can trust," Jake added, underscoring what he sensed was, in fact, my basic concern.

I nodded, admitting it. I skipped dessert and we headed for the door.

"I'll meet you outside," Jake said, detouring toward the register.

Two minutes later he joined me on the walk as Rusty hooped by, waving and smiling in our direction.

"Haskins card ends in those four numbers," he said not nearly as smugly as I would have, had I found a way to obtain them.

"The lovely young lady at the register?"

"Marriage hasn't sucked all of my manly charms from my being," he joked.

So we had Haskins as the Mr. Henry who had been in 311 some months earlier. Why wouldn't the hotel staff have recognized him upon his return? A new beard, perhaps? Time would tell if any of that was relevant. We headed toward the stage trail. I shared my interest with Jake.

"These folks use an interesting mix of holograms and live actors to supplement the ghosts – providing *that's* not just unfounded lore. At any rate, the magic used here is top drawer. The one illusion I'm still having trouble with is the instantaneous disappearance of the mounted gang members who vanish in the narrow pass just this side of the trestle bridge. It is clear to me from the dust and other things that they are not projections. I want to pick a good vantage spot up on the hill there and see what transpires. The rides leave every fifteen minutes or so depending on the crowd size, I guess."

It turned out to be a good half hour's walk to the bridge. It was a single lane wooden structure that spanned a gorge – probably one hundred feet from end to end. It was at least sixty feet above a narrow, rampaging, branch of Sandy Creek below. We climbed the north hill as it provided more shade and cover.

Within five minutes my question was answered. As we heard the gunfire coming from the trail to the west, with the coach chasing the bandits, the floor of the bridge there before us raised like a hinged lid on a huge box. It resembled a large mouth waiting for its prey to come along the trail and be gobbled up.

From where we sat it was easy to see inside the opening. There was a gently slanting wooden ramp that led some ten feet below the surface of the bridge. Before we had time to actually contemplate it further the riders appeared. They slowed to a walk and entered the opening which immediately closed over them. The coach arrived and made its way onto and across the bridge. Once it was around the curve in the trail, the 'lid' was raised and the riders left their hiding place riding back west to make ready for another gun blazing encounter with the stage.

"That's *ingenious*," Jake said.

"It is indeed. Undoubtedly has nothing to do with the goings on here, but a fascinating illusion, nonetheless."

We continued on across the bridge and completed the circle back to the Stage Coach Station.

"That Winkie kid is still following us, you know," Jake said as we headed back toward Main Street.

"Spotted him myself just before we got to the bridge."

"You're slippin' in your old age. I had him pegged before we left the Station."

I smiled, willingly recognizing his superiority in such things.

"Since he's not there for my protection any longer it has to be something else."

"Reporting your comings and goings to someone?" Jake suggested more than asked.

"That or his own concern about something."

"I suppose he's a suspect in all this."

"Technically he is, I guess," I said. "I doubt it though, unless he's pulled the wool over my eyes. But then I've been taken in before."

"I suppose your list also includes Haskins and Ann?" he said.

"Motive? We have no motive for either of them? And, don't forget, Ann was dead before the gun firing incidents."

"Could have been arranged earlier and put on some kind of timer."

"A possibility. Not having the gun we can't establish that, however. If it was Ann, for whatever reason, all the bad stuff should now stop."

"That would sure be nice," he said.

I agreed, uneasy in the conclusion.

It was 1:30. We went up to my suite. While I made long overdue notes on my laptop, Jake pursued other leads on his. There was a knock on the door – a closed, locked door, at Jake's insistence.

He answered it with the caution of a seasoned lawman.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought this was Marc Miller's suite," came a familiar woman's voice.

I got up and joined Jake.

"Sarah. Good to see you. This is Jake my new friend and bodyguard at the Sheriff's insistence. Happens to be a first class research assistant as well. Sarah handles the library now after a thousand years teaching 8th grade here in the community. Come in. What's up?"

She handed me a folder. Jake re-locked the door behind her.

"I found references to nearly three dozen publications by Haskins – mostly genealogical in nature. One interesting piece on the Ghosts of Eureka Springs. It seems to establish him as genuine in terms of his stated reason for being here."

"Ann was also interested in the Eureka Springs ghosts. She mentioned it to me. Said she planned to visit there soon. Jake, how about seeing if you can find a hotel reservation for her up there – and cancel it, I suppose."

"Well, I need to be on my way," she said. "Reading with Winkie in ten minutes. Oh, yes, there's one more thing. Sam, the chef at the little place where we ate the other night, has been asking a lot of questions about you. Since he's seldom interested in *anything*, I figured it might be significant. He seemed really shook up over Ann Jargot's death, but then we all were. Murder and Hickory Hollow just don't go together and now that there have been three – well, it's understandable, I guess, is what I'm trying to say."

Jake opened the door and she left.

"That chef's last name showed up somewhere in all these family trees," he said.

"He was born and raised here. Lived most of his life on the east coast and just returned recently," I explained.

"I guess it's all the *recentlys* that bother me – Haskins, Jargot, now Sam."

"I can understand that. I suppose completing as much of the family tree chart as we can is a priority at this point."

"My thought, too," he agreed.

We worked on it the rest of the afternoon and by the time we looked at the clock it was after six. There were still several crucial omissions – dead ends – that were bothersome. The Barbers couldn't be connected to anything back further than a few generations.

As we stood back admiring our work we were both struck by something at the same moment – all the accidents and murders had been perpetrated against males – *Barber males*.

"I think we need to keep your plain clothes guys close to the Barber clan," I said.

Jake nodded and called the Sheriff, laying out the logic of our suggestion. He agreed immediately and said he'd try to get some help from the State Police in addition to what he was able to spare. We put together a list of Barber males and made a half dozen copies before going for dinner. Jake called the deputies on duty and they dropped by the cafe to receive their new assignments.

Rusty arrived in time for pie. I turned the conversation to the ghosts who ran down the street some evenings playing catch across the street. Rusty was true to the Covenant, I'll say that much. Unless I'd made a discovery some other way he was not about to reveal any of the secrets of Hickory Hollow.

"I hope they run tonight," I said. "Last time I wasn't really ready with my camera."

"Doubt if you'll see 'em tonight," Rusty said. "Too much wind. They don't come out in the wind. Neither do the Raiders at the railroad track."

"I didn't realize ghosts were bothered by such things," I said, hoping he'd pursue the revelation.

"Don't know much about such things," he said. "Jist know they'll likey not be runnin' tonight."

I let it drop. What he said lent credence to one of my more far out scenarios. It seemed another field trip was in my future. I had one more question first.

"How about the Coolidge ghosts at the amphitheater? Is their presence affected by the wind as well?"

"Never heard nothin' ta that effect," Rusty said, holding up his pie plate and licking it clean.

"Most folks don't lick plates," Jake said clearly more upset than amused by the boy's manners.

"Ma says it helps the dishwasher and since that's usually me, I always

give the plates and knives a real good lickin'."

With his mother as the authority on the matter of manners it seemed inappropriate to pursue it. They both amused me. I know manners are generally considered important but they *are* just arbitrary standards and it quickly became obvious at our table that what was considered right and appropriate varied greatly from family to family. With things such as famine, poverty, disease, and war to be concerned about, I choose not to use my precious little time on Earth worrying about tongues licking plates and knives.

"Where will I find your father this time of day?" I asked Rusty.

"He'll be at home. His night off. I'll take ya to him. Why you want ta talk ta him?"

"I thought perhaps he might have an idea about why it's just the Barber clan that's being attacked?"

"I already asked him. He don't."

"I'd like to meet him, anyway," I said.

"Sure. Jake, you're welcome to come, too. Ma and Pa say our home is always open to anybody."

Privately, I wondered how Jake felt about being an 'anybody'. I'd contemplate the ramifications of the concept later on.

We finished and left. Rusty had pointed out his house to me earlier. In five minutes we were there. I stopped to look it over. Rusty felt compelled to answer what he assumed were my questions.

"A two story log cabin. Not many exist at least in these parts. Kitchen, bathroom and sittin' room on the first floor. Three bedrooms upstairs. There's a lean-to on the back ya can't see from here. Doubles up fer a laundry room, store room, and sittin' place when I get in trouble."

"I can't imagine you getting in trouble," I said, reflecting on his generally helpful nature.

"Seldom on purpose. Mostly fer stickin' my nose in where Pa don't think it belongs."

We moved up the stone walk to the front porch. Rusty cupped his hands to his mouth.

"C O M P A N Y !" he called out by way of announcement.

His mother came through the open front door. Her smile made her otherwise plain appearance immediately attractive. She was slender with long black hair and looked uncomfortably hot in her period, floor length, long-sleeved, dress. Rusty handled the introductions.

"This here is Mr. Marc Miller – they spell Mark with a 'c' up Indiana way. This is his . . . assistant, Mr. Jake somebody."

"Watson," Jake offered with his hand.

"Mr. M wants ta talk with Pa. I'll go find him."

At the same moment Mr. Barber came around the side of the cabin and onto the porch.

"Gerald Barber," he said extending his hand.

Rusty repeated the purpose of our visit.

"Mr. Miller wants ta talk with you about the stuff happenin' ta the Barbers. I told him me and you had already had the discussion."

Gerald pulled his son close in affection.

"Rusty here pretty well keeps the World organized according to his take on things. He's a good boy but don't seem to understand he's still a kid."

He ruffled his hair and offered us seats with a sweep of his arm. We sat. There was a noise on the porch roof overhead, and almost immediately Jerry's face, arms and shoulders appeared, hanging upside down from the edge of the roof. He flipped himself to the ground making a perfect two point landing.

"Hey. Mr. Miller. Hi. What's up?"

Again, it was Rusty with the explanation. First to me.

"We Barber boys come an go through our window. Builds muscles. There is a ladder there at the end a the porch but its a whole lot more fun doin' it Jerry's way."

I nodded. Jake smiled. The parents shook there heads in unison. Then Rusty answered his brother's question.

"Here to talk with Pa about the bad stuff goin' on."

Jerry took a seat – cross-legged – on the floor of the porch. Rusty did his best to mimic him sitting as close as big bro would allow. Gerald began without further prompting.

"We've been racking our brains over it; I can tell you that, Mr. Miller."

"Marc, please."

He nodded.

"We Barbers actually have very few skeletons in our closets. No divorces back four generations – probably further but we don't have much information beyond that."

"It was going to be one of my questions. The family tree just seems to stop with your children's great grandfather."

I turned to Mrs. Barber.

"What about *your* family history?"

"I was a Engle – same family as Adam at the Hotel. I've never had reason ta look back further than my grandparents, I suppose. None a the Engle's seem ta be affected by this, though."

She was right. It had been one of those 'grasping at straws' questions on my part. I returned to Gerald.

"Any idea where the red hair comes from. Rusty, Red, Boyd and Andy all seem to have it. In fact except for Jerry, all the others that have been attacked have had red hair."

Jerry spoke.

"You know I play the part of Tommy Coolidge. His hair was brown."

He pointed to his own.

"Mine is really reddish brown. I dye it for the part. You thinkin' somebody has it out fer redheads?"

"It seems to be just redheaded Barbers in Hickory Hollow. But, none of that may have anything to do with anything. There are no arch enemies of the

Barber clan then, as far as you know – no Hatfield and McCoys stuff going on."

The parents looked at each other. Gerald hitched his head and the boys understood their presence was no longer desired. They stood and went around to the back of the house. Gerald spoke.

"Back when Millie and I was courtin' – about Jerry's age, I suppose – I had some pretty stiff competition from a older guy in tryin' ta win her hand. When Millie said yes ta me, Sam caught me in an alley and we had it out – fist to face. I suppose neither one a us won or lost but we was bruised and limped around town fer a week or more. He left and as far as I know, nobody even knew where he was. Then, a few months ago he showed up back here."

"You're suggesting some correlation between his arrival and the problems?"

"Just tellin' you the story. Like I said, Sam was probably ten years older than me and word is he come back here to retire. I've not spoke ta him since he returned."

I looked at Millie. She shook her head indicating that she had no contact with him either. I pushed a bit.

"Other than the love triangle, did Sam have problems with any of your other relatives?"

My question was met with an awkward silence as the two of them looked at each other. Millie patted her husband's hand and spoke.

"There's a unconfirmed rumor that Gerald's boy cousins took Sam to the woods and beat him silly fer attackin' Gerald. It was the next week he left here. I suppose, if that is true – and we don't know if it is – Sam might harbor some ill feelin's agin lots a us."

"Is there anyway that Ann Jargot or Henry Haskins fits into that story?" I asked, realizing those were still two, large, free floating, loose ends.

Again they looked at each other and shook their heads.

"No. Can't say I ever really had no dealin's with either one a them," Gerald explained.

"One final question and I'll stop bugging you. To your knowledge have any of you folks recently been threatened – been ordered to leave or to do anything else out of the ordinary?"

They both shook their heads. Their responses had been fully independent of one another.

"Well, I thank you for your time. If anything comes to mind, I assume you'll get in contact with me immediately."

"Yes, Sir. Immediately."

We were no more than twenty yards down the street before Rusty came running up to joining us.

"Secret grown-up stuff, huh?" he began, hoping to get some glimmer of the subject matter we had discussed.

"Yup!" I said in my best Ozarkian accent, closing the topic.

"I suppose you know where Dave Hall keeps his hot air balloons – blimps – whatever he has," I said.

Rusty looked up at me and zipped his lips.

"The Covenant?" I asked feigning surprise.

"He zipped his lips again."

"Well, I won't ask you to breach a confidence such as that. It would be better if I just asked him anyway, I suppose. I pretty well have it all figured."

"You're gonna ask Dave?"

"Yes. You think I shouldn't?"

"Oh. No. I just s'pose if you're gonna ask him and git the information anyway, I might as well tell ya."

"Only if you feel right about it."

"It's a valley across the hill to the east. It's hard to find. I can take ya, though. Been there lots a times. Love to see that big black ship take off at night."

He'd spilled a whole lot more than I'd asked for. Location, color, and time of use. It all fit with my preconceptions. If the riding Raiders at the train and the two boys running the main drag at midnight were projections – and not ghosts – there had to be a source from high above – a source that moved as the images moved. A big black blimp that roamed the sky at night would be the ideal solution. It also explained the whirring sound that accompanied those two appearances and the starless, oval areas in my night shots of the sky.

"It's pretty late now. Probably should wait 'til morning, don't you suppose?"

"I ain't afeard a the dark if that's what you're gittin' at," Rusty snapped back.

"I didn't mean to imply that. I just don't do trails so well in the dark, that's all."

He nodded.

"Old guys might have trouble. Okay. After breakfast then?"

"Sounds good."

"I s'pose ya don't really need me at breakfast no more since ya got Jake here."

"Oh, yes. It wouldn't seem right to begin the day without one of our great conversations, my friend."

He beamed and nodded and turned to run back toward home.

"Seems there are several investigations going on here," Jake said as we turned up Main toward the hotel.

"Like?" I asked neither affirming nor denying his suggestion though interested in his take on it all.

"Like who's wanting to get rid of the Barbers and just how much hocus pocus is being used to bamboozle the patrons who come here to see ghosts."

"That may be the first time I've ever heard *hocus pocus* and *bamboozle* in the same sentence," I joked. "Yes. Both of those and a third, I suppose. Are there actually *any* ghosts present at all?"

"If there aren't, how do you explain Tommy's appearance in your room last night?"

"Yes. That's one of the essential questions. The image was not that of Jerry – the one generally being used this year to match his physical presence in the theater. It's not the one that appeared in the hallway on two occasions – that more closely did resemble Jerry."

"So either an old image recording using some previous young man, or perhaps the real thing," Jake said, summing up what I had been trying to say.

I nodded and shrugged.

A stranger was sitting on the steps outside the hotel.

"Jimmy!" Jake called out. "You're gettin' in on this assignment as well, I see."

"Yup."

He stood to greet us.

"Me and Frank and Amy plus three from the State Police. Feels like somethin' really big is about to pop."

Our conversation was interrupted by a screaming boy rounding the corner onto Main Street taking the path Jake and I had just followed. It was Rusty. The three of us ran to meet him. I squatted down and he ran into my arms his face wet with tears. I could feel his young heart pounding against my chest.

"What?" I asked, pulling him close.

"It was the old Colonial himself that jist tried ta git me."

His chest heaved as he went on with his explanation.

"I was trottin' along there between the big bushes in front a the Chance place and he reached out and grabbed me. He had a rope – like a noose – and he was tryin' ta git it around my head. I kneed him where it does the most good and when he bent over I kicked him under his chin and took off back after you. Didn't want to lead him back to my place fer fear he'd hurt my family."

"You did exactly the right thing – *things*, actually. Did he try to follow you?"

"Hell, Mr. Miller, I wasn't about ta take time ta look back."

"I understand. Well, at least he's no where to be seen behind you now. I think we need to do three things immediately. First, Jake, how about going and seeing if you can find anything back there that may be helpful to us. Second, Rusty, I want you to meet Jimmy. He's another plain clothes deputy like Jake and he has been assigned to look after you."

Rusty wiped at his face with the back of his hands. I supplied a handkerchief which he took somewhat reluctantly, saying, "It's a wonder how much a guy's face kin sweat when he's runnin' so hard."

"It sure is," Jimmy said, extending his hand to shake. "I got a boy just about your age so I know all about that kind of sweatin'."

Rusty nodded and accepted his hand.

"You said *three* things," Rusty said holding me to my original statement.

"Yes, three. I got this terrible urge for a banana split at Kate's and you know how I can't eat alone."

He looked up at Jimmy.

"You up to a split? Marc's buyin'."

"I'm always up to a split. Sure."

We crossed the street. The crowd from the Amphitheater was still a good hour away. We had the place to ourselves. While we waited for the waitress I called Jake.

"Anything?"

"Unless the Colonial's ghost has taken to wearing red wigs, I think we're dealing with a flesh and blood villain. Caught in the lower branches of one of the rambling rose bushes Rusty mentioned. Also some blood on the ground. The boy's kneeling must have broken the assailant's skin – on his jaw or the inside of his mouth I assume. I'm on my way back."

"We're at Kate's Kafe contemplating the healing effects of a banana split."

"Hope there'll be one waiting for me. This cop work suddenly seems a whole lot more demanding than what I've been doing with you."

Rusty wanted to relive the attack one more time.

"This guy – and I know the Colonial when I see him – grabbed my left arm and dragged me in behind the rose bushes. He used his left arm ta hold me close against him while he tried ta get the rope over my head. I dropped ta my knees and slipped out a his arm. He grabbed me by the shoulder a my shirt – my right shoulder. When he pulled, it whirled me around so I was facin' him. That's when I got my best look at him. Jerry done taught me ta fight fair but he said when a bully's after ya, it's okay ta do whatever ya gotta do ta survive. So that's when I rammed my knee inta his nuts. It's amazing how something so tiny can hurt so much, ya know? When he bent over in pain – and he groaned pretty loud – I come up under his chin with my right knee as hard as I could. Jerry showed me how to do that, too. Calls it the double whammy!"

"Did he say anything – the Colonial?"

"Nope. Just groaned. Like I said, I run and didn't never look back."

"How was he dressed?"

"Like the Colonial – uniform, white hat, boots. He had long red hair. It was too red, come ta think of it. Not grey like the real Colonial's ghost has."

Once Rusty had finished putting away his own treat and cleaned up the leavings from both mine and Jake's, I pronounced him fit to travel. Jimmy would stay at his house over night and in the morning both Gerald and Jerry would get their own protection. I called the boy's mother and explained both the incident and Jimmy's presence. I had the feeling there would be very little sleeping at the Barber household that night.

The wind had kicked up and dust blew in grey spirals that chased each other in uncertain paths down the center of the street. It brought welcome relief to the lingering heat. We returned to my room.

As we entered, the door to my bedroom swung closed. Wind, ghost, or mortal visitor? Jake extended his arm and pushed me aside. He drew his gun and moved cautiously toward the door.

"Who's there?" he called.

There was no answer. He slowly pulled the door toward him peeking around the edge. He inched forward until his head was inside the room.

"Empty," he said.

I pointed to the closet and he nodded. He turned the knob and pulled the door open. He removed his flashlight from the rear of his belt and lit the area.

"Nothing here either," he said.

As he stepped back I entered the closet and opened the secret door. The passageway was lit. For the first time I saw the small bulbs strong along the back wall at the ceiling. I motioned for Jake and moved back so he could take a look. Moments later the lights went off.

"I assume that a ghost's need for light is minimal," Jake said, not entirely in humor. "Whoever it was moved quickly. This is a very narrow passage. No two hundred pounder could walk it."

He re-entered the bedroom, closing both doors.

"Let's look around and see if anything seems to be missing or out of place," I suggested.

A quick once over revealed nothing unusual.

"Not a thief, I imagine," Jake said pointing to the two computers and equipment still in place on the table."

I sorted through the folders trying to ascertain if any were gone. It was hard to tell. My best guess was that everything was there.

"Either we interrupted him before he had a chance to take anything or it was some kind of information gathering visit," I suggested.

Jake nodded then asked, "Did you say there are no passageways leading away from the rooms across the hall?"

"I checked it out. Measured. No room for such a thing. I did get an idea about that, though, while we were at the trestle bridge today watching it open its big mouth. Let's go over and check it out. Adam gave me a key."

I searched my several pockets and eventually found it back in the first one I had examined.

We were soon there and went directly to the closet. The door was in the center of the eight foot long by three foot deep enclosure. The gun had been mounted to the right of the door. There was a peep hole about five feet above the floor, easily spotted as the light streamed in through it from the hall. I moved to explore the left end of the closet.

"Hey. Look here," I said as Jake watched over my shoulder.

That end of the closet was draped in a straight, black, curtain, invisible under the usual lighting conditions. I pulled it back as light from Jake's flashlight flooded the area.

"A makeshift ladder cobbled up against the far wall," he said stating the obvious. "And a trap door at the top, I'll bet. Let me take a look."

I moved behind him and he climbed the first several rungs until in position to push up on the ceiling. It opened into an area almost three feet high – the area between the fourth floor and third floor ceiling. That was far taller than would be typical in constructing a dead air space to trap sounds. It had been engineered to provide room for a person to move from place to place.

"Is it floored?" I asked.

"Floored along what appear to be paths from place to place all over the area. Just to my right is a projector of some sort – probably the one used to bring Tommy and Larry to life out in the hall.

"Is the flooring dirty – dusty?" I asked.

"Interesting point. Some yes. Some no. I mean some have obviously been used recently enough to have had the layer of dust disturbed. Shall I follow the trail?"

"Not now, although we do need to learn where else a person could exit from, I suppose. Can you easily access the projector?"

"It's less than ten feet away. You want me to retrieve the digital card?"

"I think that's a good idea. Adam may have already taken care of that, but let's get whatever's in it anyway."

He inched across the floor toward the projector.

"How about over my bedroom. Is there a projector there, also?"

"Nothing there. Let me crawl over there though and take a closer look. Maybe holes or something to indicate one had been there."

A minute passed before he spoke again.

"Can't see hide nor hair of anything, Marc. Sure not what I thought I'd find."

A few minutes later he returned, descended the ladder, and we went back across the hall to my room.

"Will that card fit a port on one of our computers?" I asked.

"Standard card. Sure. Not sure how they *holographic it up*, if you understand my meaning."

"Let's give it a look see," I suggested.

"We got nothing, I'm afraid," Jake said after fiddling with it for a few minutes. "Requires projector-specific software, I assume."

I put the card in my briefcase and locked it for safe keeping. We took seats by the open windows. The breeze had cooled and the smell of humidity suggested rain might be in our immediate future. As we enjoyed the view, I made my cameras ready for the next day.

"So," Jake began, "It's your theory that someone was in the closet at the time of Joel's appearance and fired the gun. Then he or she went up stairs. After the gun was found and the commotion died down in the closet, the person returned, maybe to leave, but then decided to repeat the show for Adam's benefit. It means there had to be a second loaded gun – maybe a standby in case the first one had misfired. Also, some way to activate the projector short of being in Adam's office. Then he took off back up into the ceiling and made his way out taking the gun with him."

"Very good. The second chance to shoot was a nice touch in the end, making it appear that an unloaded gun could take another shot at me. Very ghostly!"

"So, tomorrow morning we take a hike to the balloon grounds?" Jake asked.

"We'll do that first thing. We also need to just walk among the people and

look for a damaged face."

"The one young Rusty smashed, you mean."

"That's right."

"Any suspects?"

"Not really and that bothers me. I guess we'll make the rounds of the basic group - Adam, Bart, Chris and Dave. Then there's Winkie I suppose and Haskins, and the old gentleman who plays the Colonial over at the theater – Charlie."

"And that chef guy, Sam," Jake added.

I nodded and yawned.

"Guess the old man's worn out," I said making ready to stand.

A shower and early to bed sounded pretty good to me.

"What the?" Jake said, jumping up and pointing to the deck just beyond the windows.

There he was again, Joel with his gun pointed right at me. A shot rang out.

CHAPTER NINE

Jake pulled me to the floor just as the shot flashed out of the darkness. The window shattered. The slug entered the back of the chair in which I had been sitting. I waited for a second and third, but my world remained silent.

When I again looked outside, the image was gone. The gun smoke lingered in the heavy air and wafted into the room. Cautiously, Jake opened the narrow door to the deck and looked outside.

"Nothing out here – like that's a big surprise," he said.

I called Adam, more to report the broken window than anything else. With rain imminent, it seemed important to get it fixed or at least covered for the night.

Jake dug into the upholstery on the chair trying to locate the slug. It was another half inch ball still warm to the touch as he rolled it from his palm into mine.

Fifteen minutes later there was a knock at the door. Jake answered it. Adam, Winkie and a four by eight sheet of plywood were waiting there.

"This is unbelievable," Adam said, surveying the scene. "We'll close it up for tonight and then have the glazer come and do a permanent fix in the morning. If it weren't for the rain coming in I suppose the screen would handle it."

Within ten minutes the panel was in place and most of the glass had been picked up. Winkie left to get the vacuum to suck up the remaining splinters. I would avoid it in bare feet regardless. When they were ready to leave I asked Winkie to remain for a moment.

"I can't help but notice the bruises on your face and jaw," I said to him.

He nodded and motioned to the computer. I brought up the word processing program and he sat.

"About an hour ago I was on my way to my place for the night. I just crossed the log over the creek when I think I got hit on the head from the back. All I know is that sometime later I woke up on the ground – I was on my back – and my nose and mouth was bleeding and I got this bad headache. I spit blood for an hour."

Jake moved to examine his head.

"Look here," he said to me. "A bruise on the back of his head four inches wide."

"You didn't see anybody?" I asked. It had been a dumb question in light of his description.

He shook his head.

"What did you do?"

He began typing.

"I come back here and knocked on Adam's door. I knew he'd take care of me. He has always took good care of me. Like he was my pa, you know.?"

I nodded.

"Looks like he did a good job. Still got a headache, I suppose."

He nodded. I examined his face. There were deep bruises on his cheeks and the underside of his jaw. I pointed it out to Jake and we dismissed the young man.

Jake locked the door and drew the drapes.

"Coincidence?" he asked as we continued to stand there.

"Certainly makes him a prime suspect," I said. "Problems though."

"Like what?"

"Remember Rusty's description of what he did. It was a single blow to the underside of the jaw with his knee. *That* one bruise on Winkie seems legitimate. The rest though? His cheeks and lips had been hit repeatedly – probably with a fist. And then there is the bruise on the back of his head?"

"Could have received it if he fell backwards after Rusty kneed him."

"Could have. Yes. Legally it looks like Winkie's in hot water. Logically, however, it seems unreasonable."

"What's your explanation?" He asked.

"I'd say the guy who attacked Rusty realized the problem his face would present so he set out to find somebody else to frame. Winkie is an easy target. Surprise him. Knock him unconscious with a two by four or some such weapon, put him on his back and while unconscious beat up his face and jaw to match the story he figured Rusty had probably already told."

"I'll buy that, for now. Fred is going to want a whole lot more though, you know."

"I know. I suppose getting a good night's sleep is the best thing we can be doing at this point."

I showered and went to bed. Jake did likewise. Unexpectedly, sleep came easily for me.

* * *

I awoke almost refreshed. As we arrived for breakfast the open sign was still swinging in the window. Rusty was no where to be seen. Neither was Winkie. I thought it strange but figured with the new protective arrangement at Rusty's house their morning routine might have been thrown off schedule.

We were perhaps half way across the room toward our table when Jake's phone rang.

"Jake here. Speak. . . . I see. . . . Just now? . . . Any idea since when? . . . We'll be right there."

I wrinkled my brow and cocked my head fully understanding breakfast had just been put on hold.

"Rusty is missing. We better get over there," he said.

I pointed to the rear door – it would save us a block and a half. Jake broke into a trot and I followed his lead. In three minutes we were at the Barber's cabin. His mother met us at the door and immediately began relating her story.

"Deputy Jimmy stayed the night in the livin' room downstairs. He says he was awake the whole time. When Jerry woke up this mornin' – about ten minutes ago – Rusty weren't in his bed. When he come down stairs I asked him about Rusty since *he's* always the first one down in the mornin'. He knows not ta leave without checkin' in with me first and since his talk with Jimmy last night he understood he was not ta leave the house today until the other deputy arrived ta stay with him."

"Where's Jimmy now?" I asked.

“He’s up in the bedroom looking around. Jerry’s with him. Gerald and Ricky, the youngest, left early this morning to get in some fishin’. All that was before any a this surfaced.”

We went inside and she pointed us to the stairs.

“The room on the left at the front a the house,” she said.

“Jake. Mr. Miller,” Jimmy said in greeting.

Jerry nodded in our direction.

“The screen has been cut, and from the outside, I’d say. Look here how the wire is pushed *in* along the gashes.”

Jake nodded, agreeing. It made sense to me.

“Do you remember anything,” I asked Jerry, grasping at straws, realizing teenage boys could sleep through world war three – well, at least until they got hungry.”

“Not a thing. I’m sorry. I got a terrible headache this mornin’ and my neck’s sort of stiff, but Jimmy done looked at my head and says he don’t find no bruises or nothin’ – like I wasn’t hit on the head and knocked out.”

Jimmy nodded suggesting that had indeed been his finding.

“What do you suppose Rusty’s wearing?”

“Around the house, here, we both mostly just wear cut-offs. He hangs his up on his bedpost when he goes ta bed. They’re gone so I reckon he’s wearin’ ‘em.”

Mrs. Barber appeared at the door.

“Anything?” she asked understandably worried.

Jerry showed her the screen and reiterated Jimmy’s earlier explanation as she began making the beds.

“What’s this?” she asked, picking up a washrag with the hotel logo on it.

“I never seen it before,” Jerry said accepting it from her.

I extended my hand and he gave it to me. It appeared clean, unused. I smelled it.

“Here’s your headache in the making,” I said.

I handed it to Jake who took a whiff and passed it on to Jimmy.

“Ether?” Jake asked.

“My guess is somebody cut the screen, came into the room, poured some ether onto the washrag and held it over Jerry’s mouth and nose until he was under. During the few seconds that you were able to struggle against the force you hurt your neck. He probably left the cloth across your face while he repeated the routine on Rusty with a second rag; that gave you a long whiff – long enough to leave you with a terrible headache. Eventually, when you turned over in your sleep, the rag fell away. The intruder – kidnapper, it would appear – dressed Rusty in the cutoffs and exited through the window and out onto the porch roof and down the ladder to the ground.”

“Why would someone take the boy?” Jimmy asked. “I mean if this maniac is out to do in the Barber men then why not just use the opportunity to kill them both right here in their beds?”

It hadn’t been put very gently but since it was what all of us had been wondering that probably really didn’t matter. The boy was gone and in light of

the other attacks – and my theory that somebody was out to do in the Barber men – this most recent event made little immediate sense.

“I’ll get an all points out among the deputies here in the Hollow,” Jake said. “Think I should extend that to the whole county?”

“I would. We suddenly have no idea what’s going on.”

“Well,” Jerry said. “At least we know it’s not the ghosts who come fer Rusty.”

“How do we know that?” I asked interested in his take on the situation.

“A ghost wouldn’t a needed ta cut his way *in* through the screen – just *out* so he could take Rusty with him. Never seen Rusty jist float through screen.”

“Interesting concept,” I said.

There was a knock on the door downstairs and Jimmy went to see to it. The rest of us followed. Two deputies had arrived for duty. With directions from Mrs. Barber, Jimmy sent one to find Gerald and Ricky. He explained the situation to the other.

“The plan was for one of us to guard each boy and the father. With Rusty gone, you’ll need to report for general duty out here. Go find Donny.”

Jimmy’s phone rang. It was the Sheriff. He was on his way and would direct the search himself.

A middle aged woman in period costume came up the walk and Mrs. Barber hurried to meet her, finally letting her tears begin. It was the minister’s wife who had already heard and had come to be with Millie. Jimmy handed Mrs. Barber a phone with instructions to call immediately if she was contacted by the abductor – in case it became a ransom case.

I doubted that it would, but then things seemed to be changing rapidly. With Mrs. Barber taken care of, Jake and I made our way back toward Main Street. Sarah was standing in front of the hotel looking up and down the street. We walked toward her. When she spotted us she hurried in our direction.

“Marc. I’ve discovered several things – both useful, I believe, but neither very comforting.”

“Let’s move on into the lobby where we can sit,” I suggested.

As we passed the front desk I asked the attendant if he had seen Winkie that morning. He hadn’t.

“Not sure where to begin,” she said as we found chairs in one corner. “You had mentioned your inability to find any connection between the original Coolidge family with anybody now living here. It triggered a memory from my college days, if you can believe that. For a time I was on a diary reading kick – diaries of folks who traveled these parts during the original settling by the white man. They often recorded births, deaths and marriages.

“It made me think it might be a useful, off the beaten path source for us – sounds like I’ve made myself a part of the team. So, I went online and reached a very helpful woman at the Nebraska State Historical Society. I gave her the information on Clarabelle Coolidge and Henry Haskins suggesting the logs and diaries approach. Not two hours later I heard back from her. She provided a lengthy family tree all set out in Clarabelle’s great, great, great grandson’s family Bible. He’d been a noted public figure in Nebraska, thus the Bible along with

other memorabilia at the museum.

She handed me a folder.

“Here’s the long version – I printed it out. The short version is that Rusty’s great-grandfather is a direct descendent of Clarabelle so they are Coolidges, not Rankins as we suspected.”

“One of the diaries described Clarabelle as a red-headed beauty so the genes seem to have been there right from the beginning.”

“Super work, my dear,” I said leaning over and planting a gentle kiss on her cheek.”

“Well, thank you, Sir, but that certainly had none of the passion of the kiss we shared on my porch the other evening.”

Jake’s eyebrows raised as he glanced from one of us to the other. We managed a smile in the midst of the crisis.

“I’ll explain later,” I said, then turned back to Sarah. “You indicated *two* things.”

“I received the other just a few minutes before six this morning. Bless her heart. I told her it was a matter of life and death and she apparently took me at my word – worked all night it seems. Anyway, it has to do with Haskins. Several things, actually. First, he is a descendent of Colonial Rankin. Second, the professor who was killed, the one whose position Henry assumed, was Ann Jargot’s brother. During the cold war he had Americanized his last name to Johnson.”

I had been sitting forward on my seat and I leaned back to digest it all. Jake interrupted my brief reverie. He had been working on his laptop while Sarah was relating her findings.

“I got lots of new stuff here – responses from my inquiries yesterday. One from the District Attorney in Omaha. She found a file related to Professor Johnson’s death. About six years after the fact, the DA’s office was presented with a series of documents that seemed to implicate Henry Haskins in his death. The leads were investigated but the trails had dried up over time and nothing panned out so it was dropped without any charges being brought. Guess who the source of the documents was?”

“Ann Jargot,” I said. It was not a question and I needed no verification. Jake nodded.

“There’s more. One of my university buddies teaches at a college out there and I asked him to see what he could dig up on Haskins’ early life. He verified that his younger brother died in a house fire on the Fourth of July. Here’s the kicker! It was apparently started by some wayward fireworks set off by *Henry*. When the brother died, he was nine – Rusty’s age.

“My friend dug further. Henry had a mental breakdown when he was seventeen and spent time in a psychiatric facility. I don’t know how, but my friend got hold of some of the therapist’s reports. You have to understand this friend of mine was the one who framed the Dean of Men for having an affair with the wife of the College President – so he has his ways.

“At any rate, the therapy report relates that Henry believed his younger brother’s ghost appeared to him and reported that he – the younger brother –

would never be able to find his final peace until the Coolidge family ceased to exist.

“Other information suggests the boy’s father had always been obsessed with his twisted image of what had happened at the shoot out and had manufactured a story that put the Coolidges fully at blame. Apparently mental problems run in the family.”

“Let’s make certain we have this all sorted out now,” I said. “The murdered Johnson was Ann’s brother. Haskins is a Rankin. The Barbers are descendents of the Coolidges. Haskins, through the manipulation of his sick family and his own twisted mind, may be bent on eradicating the last of the Coolidges – the local Barber family. By abducting Rusty it makes me think he has some special revenge in mind for the boy who is the same age as his brother was at the time of his death. This revenge could be Haskins’ sick vision of atonement for having killed his brother.”

“To play it out accurately, I’d think the vengeance should take place on the Fourth of July,” Sarah said, clearly hoping to buy some time.

“All the usual expectations go out the window when you’re after a madman,” Jake said, closing his laptop.

“When is Rusty’s birthday?” I asked.

“The last week of June – this month,” Sarah said.

“So, on the fourth, he’ll suddenly be a year too old.”

“Oh my! Well, what can I do?” Sarah asked.

“Have you see Winkie this morning?” I asked.

“No, but then I’ve had no reason to, I suppose.”

“If you do, contact me immediately.”

I scratched my cell number on a scrap of paper and handed it to her. She nodded. I could tell she didn’t see it as a meaningful assignment so I added:

“Mrs. Barber needs a lot of support right now. Perhaps you could go assist with things at the house.”

With that, her face brightened. Sarah was a woman of action and anything less was unsatisfactory. We stood and she left. Sheriff Carter entered and made his way directly toward us. We took seats. I let Jake fill him in on the details as we thought we knew them.

“Jake, keep somebody at the Barber house and get someone over to this Winkie’s place. He may be suffering medical complications from the blows to his head.”

It was something I had failed to consider. He turned to me.

“Is Haskins staying here at the hotel?”

“No. He’s rented a room across town.”

“A rented room means we can bypass the search warrant. We only need the owner’s permission to enter. Will there be a problem with that?”

“I’m sure there won’t.”

Jake left to see to the Barber house. Fred and I took the short cut through the café to the Widow Crawford’s house. We were soon at the door and, using her key, immediately inside Haskins’ room. It looked just as it had looked the one time I’d been there.

On the way, Fred had called for several deputies to meet us and they arrived just as we began looking around.

“Read every slip of paper in here, guys. If anything even smells like it might help us find where he’s taken the boy I want to know about it – immediately.”

He turned to me.

“Ideas?”

“He has a history of mental illness – that doesn’t mean he’s crazy, now, of course, but we have to consider that possibility. He is apparently well organized and I imagine has spent years working out every detail. It may well be that for some time he has been waiting for this particular summer – the summer Rusty is nine, his brother’s age at the time he died.”

“But there is still a younger brother as I understand it,” Fred said.

“I know. It’s the flaw in my theory. If he’s after the last of the line then it makes no sense that he’d select Rusty.”

“I suppose we aren’t even certain it is Haskins who is the bad guy,” the Sheriff said, frowning. “Both he and the Winkie character seem to also be missing. From the reports I’ve seen, Winkie seems to have more strikes against him than Haskins. Any chance they are in cahoots on this thing?”

“Winkie could probably be *used* – he’s not real bright but he seems committed to right rather than wrong and he clearly loves Rusty. If he’s involved, he was either tricked into it or was coerced by some kind of threat to somebody he holds dear.”

“Does the boy feel the same toward Winkie, would you say?”

“Yes. Definitely, yes.”

I continued to snoop as we talked. At the moment I opened Haskin’s aftershave to take a whiff, one of the deputies called out:

“Sheriff. Found a box under the bed filled with what looks like wigs and false beards.”

“And,” I added, “This aftershave is definitely the aroma I smelled on the person who tried to choke me in my bed.”

“It seems that Haskins suddenly stands alone at the top of the list,” the Sheriff said.

I nodded immediately more troubled than I imagined I would be.

Jake was coming up the walk as Fred and I left the house.

“Got a deputy at the Barber’s place. Donny checked out Winkie’s place and reports that nobody’s there. Mr. Barber and his youngest boy are safe and are frying up a batch of fish for all those who could stick around to enjoy it.”

We returned together to my suite. I called Sarah.

“Got a problem. I wonder if you can shed some light on it for us.”

“I’ll try.”

“Rusty’s younger sibling – that *is* a boy, right?”

“Yes and no.”

“You’ll have to explain *that* one,” I said.

“It *is* a boy but it’s *not* really his brother. It’s the son of Mrs. Barber’s youngest sister. The Barber’s took him as an infant and raised him as their own.”

“Special circumstances?”

“Unmarried mother. Not tolerated around these parts.”

“A non-Barber cousin, I take it.”

“That’s right.”

“Rusty know?”

“I’m sure he does. Nearly impossible to keep a secret in these parts.”

“Unless the Covenant is involved?” I let it hang like a question.

It was met with silence.

“Thanks for your help. It ties up one very important loose end.”

We hung up and I related the new information to the others.

“So, your point is that Rusty *is in fact* the last in the Barber line,” the Sheriff said.

I nodded. He looked at Jake.

“We better make sure the other Barber men are all safe and sound,” the Sheriff suggested.

They made a series of calls to the deputies that were assigned to the various men. Everyone was accounted for. None of them had seen either Rusty or Winkie since the day before.

“You know,” I began, thinking out loud, “Haskins’ brother died in a house fire. The log cabin burning would seem to be a likely place for him to take his final revenge.”

“That’s still half a day away,” Jake said.

“If that *is* his plan, then Rusty is probably safe until then.”

“But we don’t know that for sure,” the Sheriff said.

“And that’s why we need the search to continue,” I suggested. “And remember, we really have *three* missing people here, any one of whom might be in danger. I think it’s time to bring in the big four and pick their brains.”

The others agreed and calls were made. We decided to meet in Adam’s office there in the hotel. A half hour later we had gathered. I summarized the progress of the investigation and what was known about the most recent happenings. Then the Sheriff spoke.

“We need your help. Where might Haskins be holding the boy?”

Adam began.

“There’s the basement under the hotel, here. It’s seldom used. Left over from the previous building. No one ever has reason to go down there.

“The miner’s cabin above the set along the train track,” Chris said. “It’s a full cabin, not just the front and sides that are seen. Years ago it was a stop along a pack mule ride we had. Haven’t done that for twenty years, I suppose.”

“The hills are honeycombed with caves. The possibilities are endless,” Bart added clearly agitated.

“We’ll begin with what we have then,” the Sheriff said. “I’ll need one of you men to assist a deputy with each search party. I have two dozen volunteers from my department and the State Police. They should have gathered at the east end of Main Street by now. Let’s go.”

“May I suggest that a deputy accompany Dave in his blimp and see if they can discover anything from above,” I said.

"Yes. Fine," Dave agreed.

The Sheriff nodded.

"I'm going to stay behind in case either Rusty or Winkie tries to contact me," I said.

"Okay, but Jake stays with you," Fred said.

"I understand. That's fine. He and I can explore the basement here."

Jake and I returned to my room as the others made their way outside. I led him out onto the deck.

"How easy would it be to get up here from the outside?"

Jake looked things over.

"Probably could be done but not easily. You're thinking about the gunman, of course. Once up here I suppose a properly trained person could quickly repel himself down to the ground."

"So, if last night's shooter had hidden himself out there while we were away from the room, he could have fired the shot and then used the rope for his escape," I said thinking aloud.

Jake nodded, then added, "Or, more simply, after the shot while our attention was focused out here, he could have entered your bedroom and escaped through the secret passageway."

It was my turn to nod. Perhaps it was that jostling of my brain that triggered another thought.

"Hey, I think I snapped some pictures in the direction of the deck as you pulled me to the floor. Remember, I was working with my cameras at the time."

We returned inside and I removed the card from the camera. Jake slid it into his laptop and soon had three interesting images arranged side by side on the screen.

"See what I see?" I asked.

"Probably not," Jake said grinning as he studied them. "Looks like the ghost of Joel Coolidge as I've come to know him."

"The railing. The figure is blocking it. If it had been a projection, *that* would not have been the case. We would have been able to see right through the image."

"What about ghosts? Do you see through them?"

"In my experience the things that may have been ghosts took on a generally solid appearance."

"So, it could have been a ghost, then?" he asked not really playfully.

I nodded and shrugged. It was as much of an honest answer as I had for the young man.

I picked up a camera and flashlight and we went in search of the basement. It was entered through the back hall. The door appeared to have not been used in years – perhaps decades. Together we managed to open it leaving it that way in case we might need to beat a hasty retreat.

There was a light switch but it turned nothing on. The beams of our flashlights revealed no bulbs in the ceiling. We entered a single, huge room with cement pillars planted every ten feet as supports for the new hotel. The floor was quarried stone slabs. A quarter of them had been uprooted to allow for the

pillars to be planted – probably in deep holes drilled with huge machinery.

The cob webs were so thick they cast shadows as we shined our beams at them.

“I guess let’s begin by doing the periphery once,” I said lighting the closest wall and making for it.

We moved west then north then east. In the center of the East wall there was a large, metal, door, looking to have long ago been rusted shut. Jake pointed to the dust on the floor in front of it. The door had recently been swung open. I examined the huge hinges. They were still wet with an oily substance. I pointed it out. Jake smelled it.

“WD-40. Exactly what it’s made to do, cut through tight, rusted, spaces.”

We hesitated.

“Are we going to open it?” Jake asked.

“I’d like to. Would feel terrible though if it caused harm to Rusty or Winkie.”

Jake nodded.

“We can douse our lights in here and just nudge it open a crack. If they are in there, I imagine they have light.”

“Good idea. Let’s do it.”

We studied the handle – a half inch rod some three feet long top to bottom along the right side. The hasp lock was hanging open. We clicked off our lights and positioned our hands on the handle. With less effort than I expected the door moved quietly. There was no light inside.

That posed a quandary. If our voices or the other noise we had been making had been heard, lights would have surely been turned off when we were heard at the door. We pulled it open just far enough to allow us to slip inside. Jake pushed on my side signaling that we would split up and step apart. I moved to the left and soon saw his light flick on. He moved it around the opening – a long, narrow hall-like tunnel that seemed to go on and on forever in a straight line to the east.

I turned my light on as well and joined him. We walked a few steps into the tunnel and stopped.

“Clearly nobody here,” he said. “What’s your take on this?”

“Not sure. I’m surprised Adam didn’t say something. I’ll see if I can reach him on my cell phone from down here.”

I had no luck. The question became whether to follow the tunnel or return to the hotel.

“I’m going to assume that Adam knows where the tunnel leads,” I said. It’s probably better to have that information before we go any further. Let’s go back to the hotel.”

We were soon back in the lobby. I placed the call again. Adam *did* know of the tunnel. It had slipped his mind. In the early nineteen hundreds it had been an elegant, underground, hallway that hotel guests used to walk to the first Amphitheater that stood a block or so beyond where the new, larger facility now stands. Water leaks, humidity and other problems had caused it to be closed during the 1940s. He said there were several small rooms off to the north of the

hall, spaced a hundred feet or so apart. They had served several purposes through the years – areas for cocktails to and from the big show, a brothel, and the local bomb shelter during the forties and fifties. It had been modified so it now surfaced just inside the main gate at the Amphitheater.

I called Fred and asked him to station a deputy at each end of the tunnel and send a small search party through it. He agreed. None of the other search groups had turned up anything.

The day wore on and by late afternoon I was beginning to panic. The men continued to circle overhead in the blimp but reported that with all the visitors milling about on the ground it was impossible for them to be of any help. They landed at five.

At six Fred arrived at my suite with Dave Hall.

“Mr. Hall is wondering if his show at his Amphitheater should go on as scheduled or be called off this evening. I wondered what your feeling was.”

“My gut tells me it is all going to come to a head at the moment the log cabin goes up in flames during the performance. If the show doesn’t go on, Haskins’ plan will be spoiled and he may go berserk. I don’t want the boys in his presence when he snaps.

“What I would like is for you, Fred, and me to have open phone lines to the special effects guy at the show with the authority to call it all to a halt at a moment’s notice.”

Dave nodded.

“Yes. Certainly. Boyd Blackwell runs the show. No special effect happens until *he* flicks the switch.”

“That includes the fire and the gas?” I asked.

“Yes, Sir.”

The conversation provoked a question that had not occurred to me before.

“How do the actors survive the fire? I mean they go inside the cabin, the Rankin riders begin shooting, and the cabin goes up in flames. I watched from the south side and I didn’t see them leave through the rear.”

Dave explained.

“The floor of the cabin is a concrete slab painted to look like dirt. There is a trapdoor in it – a metal door – that leads down a flight of steps and into a tunnel that runs back behind the back fence. It’s the east end of the old tunnel you found up at the hotel. They are safely watching from the wings before Boyd lights the fire.”

It was a useful explanation but added nothing helpful to sort through the multitude of data swirling in my head. Fred arranged a three way set of phones for us to use on site.

During the next several hours Fred positioned deputies so they had the cabin and the stage area in clear sight. Each had been given a flare gun. If they so much as suspected something was wrong they were to fire it and the production would go on hold until it was investigated.

The time came. The flatbed wagon was drawn into place by a pair of beautiful Clydesdales. They were unhitched and led away as the pre-program began. The performers were unaware that anything out of the ordinary might be

taking place there in the amphitheater. The program went on as usual and was well received by the hundreds of enthusiastic on lookers.

The program ended and the wagon was pulled away. The main event began. The Coolidge family arrived in a covered wagon – probably not an authentic piece of history but as a concept it carried the appropriate meaning: a family hoping it was on the move to greener pastures.

The cabin remained in the background darkness, covered in a black canvas sheet until the narrator explained that the family had erected it during the first several days. The final several rails, representing the fence for the little corral, were put in place by Joel and Tommy. A well was dug in time lapse fashion. Finally the cabin was unveiled. The family danced and played stringed instruments and sang traditional songs.

The story progressed, presenting the Coolidges as a close, loving, hard working, family. Prophetic Bible passages were read by Joel around a campfire at night. Knowing the story in advance, as virtually all the viewers did, infused even the simplest interactions with great emotion. The women sniffled and the men cleared their throats. It was a five star production from script through execution.

“Execution,” I said out loud, the word sending chills throughout my being.

Jake and I were at approximately the same spot where I had been the night I returned to watch the production from the side. We moved in closer, stopping just inside the cloak of darkness outside the reach of spotlights. It put us half a football field away from the cabin.

The horse traders arrived and Joel dealt for three mares. Jerry led them into the corral and, after evening prayers, the family went inside for the night.

As a full moon lit the area from above – a large white sphere lit from below by a spotlight – Rankin and his men rode up, spotted the horses and true to the narrator’s description began shooting into the cabin. The periphery of the lighting shrunk to an area closer to the cabin and Jake and I inched as near as we dared.

“Are the actors all safely out of the cabin?” I asked into the phone.

“All out and accounted for,” came Boyd’s deep voice.

“I guess it’s a go for the fire, then,” I said.

“Go it is,” he repeated.

The effect was that of an interior fire spreading out a front window and up the logs to the roof where it raced to engulf the wooden shingles. The smoke was released from the canisters behind the cabin. It was a perfectly produced effect. The crowd was hushed. Many got to their feet as if feeling the need to rush out onto the field and help.

Without warning, a single, unscripted, figure came running out of the passageway at the lower center of the bleachers. It appeared his hands were tied in front of him. It was a voice I did not recognize. It shouted, anguish – terror – in its tone.

“Rusty is in the cabin! Rusty is in the cabin! Stop! Stop!”

“Stop it NOW!” I shouted into the phone.

“I kin shut off the gas and smoke but the logs and roof is already a blazin’,” Boyd called back.

By then, Jake and I were at a full dash toward the cabin. The heat was tremendous. The running, screaming, figure pushed open the door. Flames rushed out at him. He put his still tied hands up to his face and entered. Several moments passed. Then he reappeared, backing out, bent over, and dragging the figure of a youngster.

We arrived as the man collapsed coughing and wheezing twenty feet from the blazing cabin. I rushed to assist the child as Jake attended to the man. It was Rusty, his mouth taped shut and his arms and legs bound in rope. I picked him up and moved him another thirty feet from the cabin.

I pulled the tape from his face and took out my pocket knife to begin working on the ropes.

"Is Winkie okay?" were the first words out of his mouth.

"Winkie?" I said, turning to look at the figure Jake had just placed on the ground beside him.

It was Winkie. He appeared to have only minor burns on his face and hands.

"He looks okay to me," I said.

"He looks *great* to me," Rusty said sitting up.

"He looks pretty good to me, too," Winkie choked out, his face wet with tears and his stomach convulsing in sobs.

That's right! *He* had been yelling as he ran. Winkie was speaking.

With the final strand cut, Rusty was up and kneeling beside his good friend and savior. He bent to the ground administering a full body hug that lasted through a deluge of tears from the two of them.

The drama, however, was not over. A spotlight operator picked it up first.

Out of that same passageway, slowly backing onto the field, arms raised above his head, moved Henry Haskins. In front of him, side by side, were two figures – immediately recognized by everyone in the Amphitheater.

Colonial Rankin, with the point of his sword at Haskins' throat, and Joel Coolidge, his musket aimed at Haskins' head, had clearly joined forces. They backed him closer and closer to the burning cabin. Haskins, unable to see where he was going was forced – screaming – through the cabin door. Rankin and Coolidge followed him into the flames. The cabin collapsed.

Most of those present that evening will swear that although Haskins backed through the *open* door, the other two walked right through the *solid*, flaming, log, walls. I am one of those who will swear to it!

EPILOGUE

The next morning the principles gathered in the living room of the Barber home. There were loose ends to tie up and questions to be answered. In addition to Rusty and his family, also present were Sarah, Fred, Jake, Adam, Bart, Dave, Chris and Winkie.

The night before Winkie had pretty well diagnosed his own recovery. He remembered the brilliant, shimmering, flash of lightening as it struck his parents and set the brush around them on fire. It had been a horrifying experience – one he never wanted to relive by having to tell the story over and over to others. His mind rushed in to help him, and made him mute. The night before, when he arrived at the amphitheater and realized the cabin was already on fire, his mind set his speech free as a part of his desperate attempt to save the person he loved the most in the whole world. But the story gets ahead of itself.

I laid out what I knew and what I suspected for those who were gathered there.

“Haskins had become my main suspect from the moment I examined the marks on his throat after the alleged attack on him. Strangle marks leave a definite pattern – thumb impressions in the center of the throat up high and finger impressions along the sides. His marks were upside down – the thumb marks were at the bottom. He had made the marks on himself; it is the pattern one would most often leave behind from a self-administered strangulation attempt – a top to bottom reversal of where they would be placed on someone else.

“The gun arrangement in the closet across the hall bothered me. It seemed clear that Haskins had occupied that room some weeks before and had time to set things in place, including the trapdoor, ladder, gun mount, and holes in the hall wall. But that long ago he had no idea I would be there. It had to have been set up for somebody else. Since Ann always stayed in the same room, and since the angle of the gun could just have easily been arranged to shoot at her door, I have to assume she was the original target. When I arrived and Haskins felt threatened, he changed his plan. The current room rental was on Haskins credit card under an assumed name. He made sure it would be available for him to use coincident to Ann’s arrival.

“Why did he not kill me in my bed? He could have. He was strong and had me at complete disadvantage – half dead before I awoke to realize what was going on. To protect himself from suspicion – I suspect – he concocted the idea of the three strangulation attempts. It also provided a quick and neat substitution method for killing Ann. There is another possibility I’ll relate later.

“Since he had gone to the elaborate gun-in-the-closet plan to do in Ann, we know he had felt threatened by her for some time. Whether that was because he thought she was onto his plan to eradicate the last of the Coolidge line or that it harkened back to her contention that he had killed her brother is hard to know. Either way he saw it as a serious enough threat to make plans to end her life.

“Was Ann here to kill Haskins and take her revenge for her brother’s murder? I don’t know. If I were betting, I’d say yes. I doubt if she would have held enough compassion for the Barbers to tell the authorities about his plan

against them if she had discovered it. Plus, *that* would have robbed her of her one chance for her personal revenge. The gun found on Haskins' body was, interestingly, registered to Ann. That tends to muddy the timeline of the attacks.

"One possibility would be that she invited Haskins to her room to kill him, he wrestled the gun away from her, and killed her silently – by strangulation. Then, taking advantage of the unplanned situation, he came and attacked me and then marked himself, again, to stay above suspicion. He kept the gun – untraceable to him – for his own possible use later. That may or may not be what happened.

"I must admit I had to wonder why Winkie kept following me even after it was my understanding Adam had relieved him of that duty. As I came to know him better, I believe I figured it out. Since Rusty was with me so often, and since Rusty is clearly such an important person to Winkie, he felt the need to stick close in case any trouble came my way. It was, I see now, as much an effort to keep Rusty safe as to protect me. I thank you for that, Mr. Wilbur Winkler.

"I can't explain the appearance of Tommy's ghost in my bedroom, but I will give Haskins credit for somehow arranging it. You folks in Hickory Hollow will, no doubt, have a different explanation.

"Why didn't Haskins complete his mission to kill off the entire, male, Barber line? I imagine that between the incident with Ann, the clear presence of a growing contingent of law officers, and my snooping, he panicked and his twisted mind decided that to kill the end of the line – Rusty, according to the information he had – would be adequate atonement for what he had done to his brother. The correspondence of the ages between the boys undoubtedly played some part as well."

The Sheriff had just a few things to add.

"The search of the rubble verified there was just *one* body in the cabin. It was Haskins. The deputies who were posted in the actor's exiting tunnel confirm that no one other than the actors left through it. The prints on the keyhole saw were Haskins. Finally, with Rusty's help we found the room in which Haskins detained them. It was an intentionally hidden area with its door made to resemble the stone walls of the halls. We just flat out missed it during our search and Adam had no knowledge of its existence."

When he finished, Rusty related the story of his abduction:

"When I woke up I was terrible cold an shiverin'. The place was dark except fer a coal oil lantern hangin' on the wall. I was layin' on my side on the floor – it was rock hard and wet. It smelled awful. I seen that my legs was tied up with clothesline rope. I couldn't move my arms and figured they was tied behind me like my legs.

"I did like Tonto on the Lone Ranger and didn't move a muscle. Just laid there 'til I could figure out what was goin' on. Across the room somebody else was all tied up but he was sittin' up and his hands and legs was out in front a him. At first my head was all foggy but when it cleared out I seen it was Winkie. I wanted to call out but knowed I didn't dare.

"Over by the door was Mr. Haskins. I didn't recognize him first off 'cuz he didn't have no beard. He was sittin', too, writin' in a book. When he wasn't

lookin' my way I moved my head up and down tryin' ta let Winkie know I was okay. After a few tries he nodded back at me. I pretended to be asleep for a long time trying to think of a plan. Since Haskins wasn't tied or nothin', I figured that fer sure he was the bad guy and that he was likely plannin' to kill me off. I wondered if Jerry and Ricky was okay. I couldn't figure why Winkie was there. I found out real soon, though.

"Hankins come over to me and kicked me. I was surprised by it and opened my eyes so he knowed I wasn't asleep no more. He sat me up against the wall across the room from Winkie – he was rough and grumbled stuff I couldn't make out. Then he stood in the center a the room and said if I tried to escape or give him any trouble he'd kill Winkie. He said the same to Winkie – he'd kill me if Winkie done that.

"Right off I understood why Winkie was there. It didn't seem fair to put him in such awful trouble so I decided I'd just wait and see what happened. If Winkie hadn't been there I'd a tried somethin' you kin bet on that!"

"I didn't know where we was and I know *every* place there is around these parts – well, I thought I did anyway. I was hungry and thirsty but knew better than ta ask – 'cuz a what he'd said he'd do.

"Winkie wears a ol' watch with a big, brass, band. It got broke while we was climbing up the cliff under the train bridge not long ago and was left jagged. I kept tellin' him to get a new one or he'd cut himself. I seen he was usein' it ta try to cut the rope around his legs.

"We was tied good an proper, though. T'wasn't jist one length wrapped round and round. It was a half dozen short lengths, each one tied up tight with double knots. He'd have to cut through all six and not let Haskins see what he'd did. I got scared for Winkie in case he got caught. Come to think of it I should a been scared fer me, I guess, in light a what Haskins had said would happen if Winkie done somethin'.

"I could tell he wasn't makin' much progress. What's sharp enough to cut flesh ain't necessarily sharp enough ta cut rope ya have ta understand. I knowed he wouldn't give up though.

After a real long spell – half a day, I guess – Haskins started lookin' at his watch a lot. Then, he come over ta me with a roll a duct tape and wrapped it around my head, over my mouth. Lots a times! I was afraid I wouldn't be able to breath but I could – through my nose.

"He took out a gun – a hand gun – and showed it ta Winkie and told him if he left the room or tried ta follow him, he'd shoot me in the head. Then he picked me up and put me over his shoulder, he blowed out the lantern and turned on his flashlight. We left the room. He was mumbling about the cabin. I could tell we was in a underground tunnel – water was dripping an such. Since I was facin' behind him I couldn't tell where we was goin'. After a minute or so I heard the crowd down at the Amphitheater – I know their sound. Different crowd every night but the same sound. It got louder.

"I knowed about the tunnel the actors use – been in it a hundred times. Me and Ricky smoked our first cigarettes in there. Guess I should a left that part out. Anyway, finally he stopped and turned around – I guess to see if Winkie was a

followin'. It was the first time I could see where we was goin'. We was up against a big, iron door in a stone wall. Then he turned back around and opened the door.

"The crowd noise got louder in a hurry but it was muffled like when somebody talks with there face in a pillow. It was still dark but we kept going on down the tunnel. Then he stopped and stood up against the wall like he didn't want nobody ta see us. He set me down on the floor in front a him. There weren't nobody there ta look. But then there was. The far end a the tunnel lit up some from a hole in the ceiling. I knowed where we was 'cuz I seen the actors goin' down the steps from the cabin. The last one pulled the trap door closed and it got dark again, except fer their flashlights disappearin' ahead a us.

"Haskins waited about a minute I'd say. Probably long enough fer the actors ta get out the far end. Then he put me back on his shoulder and took me up into the cabin and layed me on the floor in a back corner. He didn't even look at me or nothin'. He just turned an went back down through the trapdoor in a hurry.

"The flame lightin' gadget under the window lit and the front cabin wall that's soaked with gas caught fire and followed the gas right up and out the window. It got hot and hard to breath. I knowed I was a goner and I started prayin' so my family wouldn't be so sad about it. I remember seein' the flames start enterin' from the roof above me and I closed my eyes – well, first I peed my pants and *then* closed my eyes.

"The next thing I remember is hearin' a strange voice yellin' my name and then the door opened and I knew somebody was tryin' ta git ta me. I did my best to scoot like a caterpillar toward the door but the way I was hogtied I couldn't budge. I prayed who ever it was could see me through all the smoke. 'Bout that instant most a the smoke stopped. I said, 'Thank ya Lord.' Then, I felt him grab the back a my collar and begin draggin' me toward the door.

"I reckon y'all know the rest."

Aside from Rusty's, there were no dry eyes in the room. He looked around.

"Hey. Guys. This is me. I'm okay. We should all be happy."

He stood up and walked over to Winkie, sitting beside him on the arm of his chair. He wasn't quite finished.

"We gots lots and lots a secrets here in Hickory Hollow. Some we tells and some we don't. I think it's time now I tell my own big secret."

He looked at Mr and Mrs Barber. They looked at each other and then nodded their approval in his direction.

Rusty reached out and took Winkie's big hand in his. They smiled into each others faces as Rusty began.

"The thing is, Winkie here, is my *real* pa. When he was thirteen – marryin' age up on Yates Mountain – he fathered me. His Ma and Pa got killed a few months later. When his people marked him as the Devil and sent him away, his wife's family wouldn't have nothin' more ta do with the new little baby, so they handed me over to Winkie. He'd been comin' and sittin' outside Miss Sarah's class room window, learnin' what he could, for a couple a years before all a that.

I guess by then he knowed he could trust her. So, he give me over ta her and she worked things out with my Ma and Pa Barber ta take me in an raise me up. I think they's doin' a pretty fine job."

Usually in these settings, at the end of a case, was the one tying up the lose ends. This time it was I who had the final questions. I turned to Sarah.

"But you said *Ricky*, the youngest, was the adopted son here."

"He is – *also*. Joel and Millie have the biggest hearts you'll ever meet. When Ricky was three, his natural mother tried to get him back through the courts. Her request was denied. It was probably through those records that Haskins came to know Ricky wasn't the true end of the Coolidge line."

Joel explained further.

"Our relationship with Rusty here was done on a handshake. There's no paper trail he could trace, I guess you could say. Probably why Haskins assumed Rusty was a Barber by blood."

"So," I began thinking out loud, "Haskins came to know about the close relationship between Winkie and Rusty but he didn't know the *how come* behind it."

The locals in the room nodded in unison.

Several minutes of small talk ensued. Eventually I stood.

"I suppose that pretty much sets things in order around here," I said making ready to leave.

"Except fer one really big thing," Rusty said, still holding Winkie's hand.

"What's that?"

"Well, I never been allowed to kiss my real Pa in public. I think it's time we change that rule."

Without waiting for agreement or permission Rusty leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. Winkie slid him off the arm of the chair and onto his lap, planting a kiss on the lad's forehead. It was gentle. It was unhurried. It was loving. Winkie encircled his precious package with his long, strong, arms and drew him close – just the way it should be, between a son and his Pa.

An **Ending** Is Always a Beginning