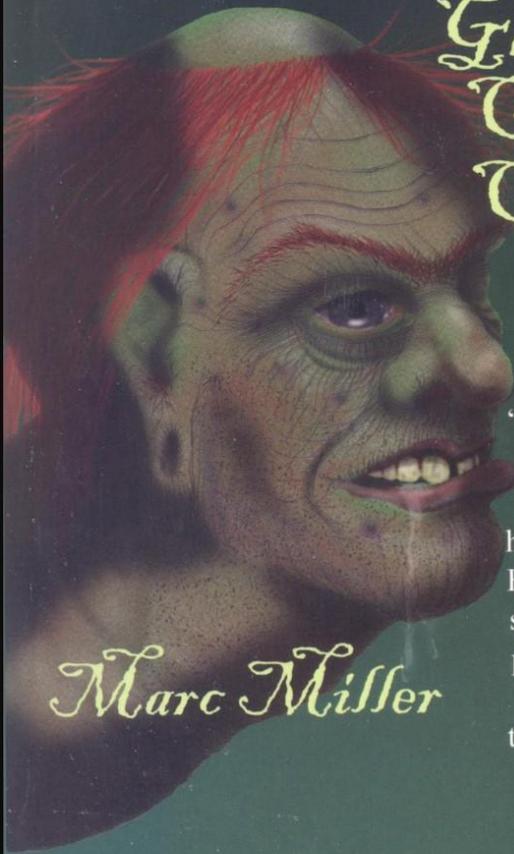


Marc Miller
Ghost Writer

The Malevolent Ghost of Charlie Chance



Marc Miller

“Bein’ possessed
in the *Darkness*,
like he was, he
had the black gift.
He could suck the
soul right out of a
person then shred
it and blow it to
the seven winds.”



THE MALEVOLENT GHOST OF CHARLIE CHANCE

Book Two in the
Marc Miller, Ghost Writer series.

By
Tom Gnagey

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Family of Man Press

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DEDICATION

The
Marc Miller novels
are dedicated
to
all those who believe in ghosts
but wonder if they shouldn't,
and to
all those who don't believe
but wonder if they should.

- MM

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CHAPTER ONE

The Ghost of Charlie Chance

By day, the beautiful rolling campus of the century old, Ozark Hills Academy was widely considered one of the most picturesque spots in northwest Arkansas. By night – at least so it was told – the angry Ghost of old Charlie Chance stalked the grounds, gathering souls for his collection of the uninvited.

That students were actually killed was open for discussion. That they were found dead was a reality. Local lore had it that the student's souls were sucked from there beings before meeting their physical demise and that during that excruciating, fatal, process, their spirits disintegrated and were windblown to the four corners of the Earth. What remained were bodies with no souls to depart them! To those who lived in the nearby Ozark Mountains, that was clearly a fate far worse than mere death itself.

The partings, as they had come to be called – and never refer to them as deaths or murders – always occurred after midnight during the dark of the moon when a warm wind was blowing directly out of the south. It was a combination of events known in that area as The Devil's Darkness.

Also, attributed to The Devil's Darkness was the belief that on such nights the Devil freed to the breeze one evil soul and directed it to possess the being of a newborn child.

It was on such a night during the summer of 1836 that Charlie Chance was born in those hills. By the time he was four, what everybody knew had to be, had been well established; Charlie had been possessed during The Darkness. The lore goes on to relate that he grew into a

grotesque looking, backward, reclusive person with Devilish powers, and that he was so frightened of outsiders that, to keep his land safe, he often felt compelled to kill them – the way only the Devil's own can kill.

It was on his hilltop farm in 1904 – the year after his death – that the academy was established. His one room log cabin was preserved and still stands as the centerpiece of the grounds.

Ozark Hills Academy was a unique institution for the time – for any time, I suppose. Most boys in those hills were not educated beyond eighth grade – many not beyond fourth. They were needed to help their parents eke out an existence on the rocky, infertile, farms or run the marginally successful businesses. A school-based education was not considered essential for those pursuits.

Harvey James, a foresighted educator from Vermont who fell in love with the Ozark Mountains and its people, understood that for the area to grow and compete in the world of the twentieth century, education would be essential. He tried unsuccessfully to convince the local populace of the fact. But Harvey James was not one to give up.

He developed the concept of a boarding school that would not only take boys through high school but move them through the first two years of college as well, making it a six year academy. He added two innovative concepts to his plan that allowed it to take root and grow successfully there.

First, the required school week was only three days long. During the other four, the boys could return home to help with the family farm or business. Second, the boys worked at jobs at the academy, earning money while they attended. The more days each week they stayed to study, the more hours they were allowed to work and earn, and the better their grades the higher their hourly wage.

Harvey was a tireless fundraiser and somehow managed to assemble a body of benefactors that kept the academy afloat. By 1934 when he died, there were 97 full time students, one dormitory, a six-room school building, and a staff of five teachers. His son, Benton, carried on the traditions of the program from then until his death in 1974. The present Headmaster is David James, Harvey's grandson,

and the Academy now boasts 200 boys and 50 girls. There are three dormitories, a new school building, several workshops, and fifteen teachers.

Although the residents of the several counties served by the academy are grateful and supportive of its efforts, old Charlie Chance would not be. It is told that he was against both new buildings, which he thought spoiled the wilderness, and the kids that buildings inevitably brought with them.

Why old Charlie's ghost only gathered a few souls each year rather than doing in the whole lot was not fully accounted for in the lore. Some stories held the Devil had him on some kind of quota and if he should overstep it his spirit would be returned directly to hell. Others surmised that soul sucking required tremendous energy and that it took many months for a spirit to recuperate after such an undertaking. Regardless of the superstitions, the fact was that only two or three souls were typically dispatched to the great beyond in any year. They were always male and usually students.

The lore also suggested that within days or sometimes only hours of a parting, the ghost of hunchbacked, old, Charlie Chance could be seen at dusk carrying a lantern and walking with a cane north across campus toward his cabin. The light would flicker out and he would disappear before reaching his apparent destination.

Why would young people risk attending an institution with such a reputation? The area, although as pristine and gorgeous as can be found anywhere, remains poor and for most of its young people the Academy represents the only possible way to an education – the only possible way out of the valley and the stifling life it decrees. Besides, they are teenagers and feel themselves invincible the way everyone does at that age – well, most everyone, but that is getting way ahead in the story.

It was the promise of learning more about the legend of Charlie Chance that had prompted me to accept the Headmaster's invitation to present a weeklong series of lectures and Q&A sessions on the art of writing.

My name is Marc Miller, Ghost Writer. It is three o'clock on Sunday afternoon, June first.

After a day long journey, I am at last at the base of the

narrow, gravel access road, which weaves an unfriendly, circuitous route up to the Academy. It sits atop the flat, wooded, crest of the highest hill in the area.

Previous experience in those hills taught me to take such climbs slowly and in second gear to keep from overheating.*

The parking lot – tiny, I thought for a school with 250 students – had been carved out of the hillside below the main campus. I parked, wondering why there were so few other vehicles. Even though I consider myself a fit and trim 36-year-old I found myself puffing a bit as I reached the last of the fifty rock steps that lead on up the hill to the campus.

I stopped to survey the area – more accurately, as I stopped to catch my breath, I surveyed the area. The buildings were rustic, most made of logs with updates on the windows and roofs. They were set just inside a grove of oak trees that encircled the outer rim of the ridge. The school and shops stood there beside me to the south and the three large dormitories loomed beyond, setting the limit of the campus to the north. Nestled among the tress on the east and west perimeters were three story residences for the staff. In the center of it all sat old Charlie's cabin. Flat stone walks crisscrossed the grounds but none led to the cabin.

A boy raced across the closely cropped lawn toward me from the north. He slowed and then stopped a few yards away flashing a wonderful, broad smile. He looked to be fifteen or so – perhaps older after close-up inspection.

“Mr. Miller, is it?” he asked.

“That's right, Marc Miller,” I answered extending my hand.

As we shook he introduced himself.

“I'm Tyke Rakes, president of the Junior class, older than my stature would suggest and delighted to meet you, Sir. I'll be your go to guy while you're here. Got you set up in the guest room in the new boy's dorm – that's really the new dorm for boys and not a dorm for new boys, but we call it the new boy's dorm. I'm babbling but I'm nervous meeting you. Cindy says I always babble when I'm nervous.”

“Cindy?”

“My girl.”

“Tyke?”

“William Oliver, actually but I’ve always been called Tyke.”

“Guest room?”

“I’ll take you to it. You’re a man of few words, Sir. We’ll get on fine because that’ll give me time to ask you all the questions I have. Luggage in your car?”

“Yes. Three bags in the trunk of my red Chrysler down in the lot.”

Tyke raised his arm into the air and two more youngsters sped out of the shadow of the dorm in our direction.

“Mike and Tom will get your bags if you’ll trust them with the key,” he said as his way of preparation and explanation.

“Any reason not to trust them?”

“Oh, no, Sir. I didn’t mean to imply that. Honest, dependable, hard working. Freshmen but I assume you won’t hold that against them.”

The boys arrived and Tyke gave the instructions.

“Down in the lot you gunna find a red Chrysler that belong to Mr. Miller here. Three bag in the trunk. Y’all be careful now and don’t put no marks on neither the car or the bags, ya hear me?”

The boys nodded. I handed over the keys and they continued on the run down the steps.

I had to ask.

“You seem to have two distinct speech patterns.”

“Yes, Sir. One’s fer down home folk, hereabouts. The other is preparing for the outside world and for my writing. I have to be careful with whom I use which or I’ll end up gittin’ my behind whopped fer bein snooty, if’n ya kin un’erstand?”

I put my arm around his shoulders and chuckled as we started across the lawn toward the new dorm for old boys or whatever.

“I do understand. I find the Ozark version of the English language fascinating. There’s a comforting softness and clearly reasonable efficiency in it. Perhaps you can help me hone my vocabulary so my writing will more accurately reflect the local usage. I’m not sure how you can turn the two

on and off so easily.”

He shrugged as if it were not important enough to pursue and pointed toward the building on the right ahead.

“Second floor, far end room. One of the few with a door and its own bathroom. The one on the back has a better view of the valley to the north – and it is really beautiful – but I figured you’d like to be able to look out on the campus toward Charlie’s cabin. I assume you’re really here to write about him, aren’t you?”

“I can see there will be no secrets from my go to guy. Yes, I must admit that old Charlie was the bait that lured me here. Who will be my best resources about that?”

“I’ve been preparing notes since I heard you were coming. There are some others down in the town that would be considered the real experts, I suppose – Doc Johnson, for one – old as the hills himself – doubles as coroner. Headmaster James would be another one but he doesn’t like to talk about it let alone have somebody spread the legend all over in a book. I don’t know how he’ll take to it and frankly, I was surprised he finally allowed us to invite you, given your reputation for stirring things up wherever you go.”

I smiled to myself at his assessment of my influence as being so chaotic.

“I made my position clear to Mr. James when he first contacted me. It was my impression, however, that was why he had invited me. I could be wrong, I suppose.”

Again, Tyke shrugged his shoulders.

“Maybe he thinks you can do something to stop the partings. There aren’t many folks here-about that would think you should be messing in it. It might even anger them.”

“Is that your friendly warning?”

“More like my friendly concern. The kids who go here would sure like it to stop, of course. I know they’ll help. You just say how.”

Tyke’s enthusiastic presence sobered as he continued.

“We all know the odds when we come here. It’s something we all just live with. It’s never spoken of among us. It becomes a choice for us between probably something good happening for us if we come here, and definitely nothing if we don’t. I don’t mean that we don’t love the folks here because

we do. And we'd do anything required of us if any of them needed our help. But most of us have no future here – no chance to grow beyond what everybody has just always been.”

“You implied that it was the students who suggested that I come?”

He perked up.

“The Writer’s Society. Every summer we get to have a guest lecturer and every year we submit your name and every year somebody else turns up, instead.”

“I am honored, then. I usually figure such invitations are based mostly on the fact that I don’t charge a fee.”

“I know. That’s pretty nice. We appreciate it.”

“Why do I get the idea you know a whole lot more about me than you have shared?”

“It’s true. I admire you so I’ve looked into things. Born and lived most of your life in southern Indiana. Attended Manchester College and received a Master’s degree from Indiana University with a post graduate fellowship at Columbia. At last count, I found twenty-one short stories, four articles, and thirteen novels to your credit. Never married – and that bothers me, I’ll admit.”

Suddenly uncomfortable, I removed my arm from around his shoulder

“Should I ask why?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything bad by it. Sorry if it sounded that way. It’s just that marriage and family is so important to those of us from around here that I feel sad you don’t have that.”

“William, Oliver, Tyke, Rakes! I like you. I’m honored that you have entered my life.”

“Me, too,” he said directing his wonderful smile up into my face. “Well, you know what I mean.”

He twirled his finger in an irregular circle as if to untangle and appropriately reorganize his previous phrase.

We had soon climbed the steep, wide, bare wood, stairs to the second floor. My room was the first door on the right in the corner. It was, perhaps, fourteen by fourteen with single, uncurtained, windows on the south and east. There was a set of bunk beds against the inside wall, a dresser, a

study table with chair, and an overstuffed easy chair, which sat by the south window. Several colorful, rag, rugs were scattered here and there on the wide, plank floor. Grotesquely flowered green wallpaper hung above the dark wood wainscoting. The bathroom was . . . well, handy, might be the term. A stool and sink had been installed in one corner of the room. I assumed daily sponge baths were in my immediate future. Apparently, Tyke saw me contemplating the situation.

“The shower room’s down the hall. I’ll show you. No girls allowed in this building so don’t be concerned about being modest coming and going. None of us are.”

I smiled at his innocent forthrightness.

He showed me how to raise the windows and insert one of two sticks – short or tall – to prop them open.

The boys with the bags arrived and insisted on helping hang things in the open closet and arrange them in the dresser drawers. They chuckled openly at my silk, bikini, underwear – quite obviously not standard issue at the Academy. Suddenly my dress slacks and Hawaiian shirts seemed out of place.

I liked the homey feeling of my little room. It was the epitome of simple efficiency – one step up from a monk’s cubicle and probably one down from a cell in a federal prison.

“Electricity?” I asked.

“Under the table. Just one outlet. I can find extension cords if you need them.”

“Perhaps one that would reach the big chair by the window would be helpful – for my laptop.”

“Sure. Mike. About eighteen feet so we can lay it back out of the way.”

Mike left on the run. Tom continued to stand by the door.

“I think that’s all, Tom. Thanks,” Tyke said.

“Yes, Tom, I appreciate your help,” I added, wondering, but then thinking better, about tipping him.

The boy turned and ran down the hall.

“What’s with the running?” I asked, my furrowed head probably cocked.

“Efficiency! It’s the way here at the academy. Students always run from place to place. Time is our most valuable

asset here. Getting from place to place eats into that, you see. Well, that's the Headmaster's line, anyway. I think he assumes if he keeps us guys worn out we won't have the energy to think about sex. He's wrong of course – we're teenagers. By the way, Headmaster James would like to meet you over supper. It's at five in the dining room in the basement of the old boy's dorm next door. Old boy's means – well, we've just been through the flip side of that I guess. Anything else I can do for you right now?"

"Seems you have things well under control. I'll eventually need a schedule of things I'm expected to do. I guess I need to know how to get hold of you."

"I'm right next door. I devised this twine signaling device."

He went to the south window.

"Just pull it like this, and it rattles a can in my room."

"Ingenious."

"Any time, day or night. I could stay in here with you – on the top bunk – but I figured you'd want your privacy."

"Next door should be close enough. Thank you."

"I'll be back just before five to get you for supper. Showers are the fourth door on the right down the hall here. They run nice and warm this hour of day. Solar heated in tanks on the roof. By morning it's lukewarm at best this time of year and I won't even go into January mornings."

He shivered and left, running the six strides next door to his room.

After an eight-hour drive – most of it on dusty, gravel roads – a shower sounded pretty good.

It was, but if that water was the best the system had to offer, I was definitely glad it wasn't January.

I put on a new set of clothes – wishing I'd have brought jeans – got my laptop and printer set up, and was sitting in the chair by the window assembling my camera when Tyke reappeared knocking on the frame of my open door. I motioned him inside and asked a question.

"Why no doors here in the dorm?"

"We're a family here and families don't close each other out."

"I see. That makes sense, I guess, this being an all boy

place of residence. I assume there is minimal stealing, then.”

“Stealing? No, Sir. There is no stealing. You have to understand the Headmaster has just one consequence for breaking the rules – you get sent home forever.”

“Even the first time?”

“Rules wouldn’t be made in the first place if they weren’t intended to always be followed, so of course, the first time!”

He looked stunned that I would even ask such a question.

“I assume the rules are pretty sensible then – not overly strict or unreasonable?”

“Oh, no, Sir. Sensible, reasonable, fair. The Headmaster is a fine man. He’s been like a Saint in my life.”

“Many get thrown out?”

“None since I’ve been here.”

“Sounds like you guys really appreciate what you have at the Academy.”

“Absolutely, and most are also acutely aware of what they’d face back home if they messed up!”

I nodded that I understood although I was sure I probably didn’t.

“I assume it must be getting on toward supper time,” I said, folding my laptop and preparing to stand.

“Yes, Sir. Ten minutes. I thought if we arrived a bit early I could introduce you to Miss Hawthorne – and some of the other teachers.”

“Miss Hawthorne sounds special.”

“She’s single and looking, and you should be, too.”

“Cupid! I see.”

“Well. She’s a great lady and I hate to see her all alone. She’s smart and sort of pretty for an older lady. She has a great sense of humor and is the best teacher we have here.”

“I will certainly be happy to meet her. Does she have a first name?”

“Katherine.”

I played with name. “Katherine. Kathy. Kate. Katy. A nice name as well.”

Tyke smiled and nodded apparently pleased with his

match making skills up to that point.

I finished buttoning my shirt, which again reminded me of my outsider clothing.

“Will I seem totally out of place wearing these kinds of duds?”

“No, Sir. The staff dresses up like that sometimes. The Headmaster always wears slacks unless we’re working the fields.”

We continued to talk as we made our way down the stairs and across the lawn to the next building.

“Work the fields?” I asked.

“We grow most of our own food here – the fields below the parking area. I’m sure you saw them on your way up.”

“Oh. Yes. Largest garden I’ve ever seen, I’m sure. You eat pretty well here, then, do you?”

“We sure do. The Girl Twos are cooking tonight. It should be fantastic!”

“Girl Twos?”

He explained.

“High school goes Freshman, Sophomore, Junior and Senior. Then the first two years of college are called One and Two – repeating freshman and sophomore would be too confusing you see.”

He stopped to sniff before we entered the building.

“Swiss steak, new peas and Harvard beats. Probably mashed potatoes with red gravy but that’s always hard to smell. Next to ham and yams it’s my favorite supper. By the way, we say grace before meals. I hope that won’t offend you.”

“Why would you think that would offend me?”

“In your books, it’s hard to tell if you’re a praying kind of man – I guess, I’m saying I don’t think you are.”

“I will never be offended by another person’s religious beliefs – unless they are outright hurtful to others. In fact, I’m always fascinated to learn about what people believe. It’s the way my own have a chance to grow.”

Tyke grinned, apparently satisfied with my explanation, and we entered the huge basement dining room. Only a small portion of the places were set.

“Not expecting many for supper, I asked, puzzled.”

“It’s intersession. Four times a year there’s a week off so kids can go home and help with planting or hoeing or harvesting. This is FHI – First Hoeing Intersession. There are only about fifty of us here – all taking your seminar. The other guys all live in this dorm so you and I have the other one to ourselves.”

“Fifty stayed behind for this? You’re telling me I may be to blame for the eventual conquest of Northwest Arkansas by the dreaded Weed Army?”

“Yes, Sir. Probably just that, Sir. With General Chickweed shouting out orders and young Trumpet Vine bugling charge!”

It was offered with a grin and a chuckle – probably less than it deserved. It had been a good line delivered with quick wit. He steered me in the direction of ‘old Miss Hawthorne’, who, as it turned out had probably not yet seen thirty-five. Tyke’s assessment of her looks had been accurate – sort of pretty.

“Miss Hawthorne, I’d like you to meet Mr. Marc Miller, he’s single, too.”

“I’m delighted to meet you,” she said offering her hand but remaining seated. “William seems obsessed with getting single adults married. His freshman year he cajoled two of our teachers to tie the knot. Just want you to know what you’re up against.”

I took a seat.

“The lad’s told me several things about you,” I began, “but he left out what you teach.”

“Everything remotely related to English – literature, grammar, speech, drama, creative writing.”

“And let me guess, sponsor of the Writer’s Society.”

“Guilty. Mr. James will be joining us shortly. Have you met him yet?”

“No. Several phone conversations and half a dozen emails constitute the full measure of our relationship.”

“You’ll like him. As genuine and compassionate a human being as you’ll ever meet. His sense of humor could use some work but William and I keep chipping away at that, don’t we?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Well, I should go be with the other kids.

I'll wait for you out front after supper. I assume it will take you a good deal longer than it will me. I'll introduce you to Cindy."

"Fine. Thanks for all your help."

"My pleasure."

He left and took a seat very close to a dark haired young lady several years his senior. There was no greeting kiss and, in fact, no physical contact of any kind. I was surprised.

"That would be, Cindy?" I asked, attempting to segue into a conversation with Miss Hawthorne.

"Yes. Cindy Adams. She's a One – that's college freshman most places."

"Tyke explained that to me."

"They seem to have a good relationship," she said. "Two of our most dependable students – both leaders within their classes. She's president of the Writer's Society and he's Secretary."

"Not openly affectionate, it seems."

I was fishing.

"There is no physical contact in public between boys and girls here. That kind of affection is reserved for private times. It's not that it's disallowed altogether, you see. Girls are a relatively new addition to the academy – first enrolled about ten years ago. The rules established at the time were probably an overreaction in anticipation of those sorts of problems, but still seem to be working fine. I suppose a kiss is more meaningful and precious when it is a rationed commodity."

She smiled – almost sadly – making me wonder if she had experienced many kisses in her time. I nodded, not certain that I agreed with what seemed to be her initially reasonable statement about affection. I was saved from further discussion by the arrival of the Headmaster, David James. I stood as he approached.

"Mr. Miller, I assume," he said one hand out to shake and the other immediately on my shoulder. "I know that I'm glad to meet you and time will tell if I'm going to be glad you're here."

It sounded like a sense of humor to me. If not, perhaps I had just been put on some sort of probation. We sat. David

was a tall, big boned man, with wispy, white hair which found itself in a constant struggle with the man's right hand in its quest to find a mutually suitable resting place.

"You've met Miss Hawthorne, I see."

"Yes. Tyke – I guess you call him William – made a point of the introduction."

"If that lad had his way he'd have us all happily married off by the time we were fifteen."

He chuckled. Again, it appeared like a sense of humor to me.

"Have a good trip up and down these Ozark hills?"

"Beautiful country. Treacherous roads. It was a mixed bag. Clinched teeth magnificent, you might say."

"You sound like a writer."

He sat back and slipped his thumbs inside his belt.

"I can't imagine living anywhere else – the geography, the beauty, the wonderful people. I'm blessed my grandfather stumbled onto this area."

"It seems you've built an extraordinary institution here on this hilltop."

"My grandfather's inspiration, my father's sweat, and my inheritance," he said, playing down his own obvious contributions.

He took a sheet of paper from his shirt pocket and smoothed it out on the table between us. It seemed like more fanfare that should have been necessary, whatever it contained.

"Your schedule."

He chuckled and raised his eyebrows glancing across at Katherine.

I studied it for a few moments, then smiled and looked into the man's face. There was but one entry, Two or three sessions per day, Monday through Friday.

"Looks flexible, I'll say that much."

"My grandfather's motto was, flexibility in the service of education. Concepts, kid's needs of the moment, and meaningful content guide us around here, not schedules. Education has to seize the opportunities of the moment. You can't put off an eclipse of the sun until after the multiplication tables, and you can never know ahead of time which of life's

events will be the most meaningful to your students – so you do your best to make room for as many as possible. It fascinates me how kids often know best what they need to be exploring at any given moment – and, how so many adults fail to understand that. Standardized tests boggle my mind. The idea that every student needs to know the same things as every other is inane. I even know of schools that only teach to those tests. It leaves the individual child’s needs completely out of the equation. About as sad a statement on the condition of education as I can imagine.

“But I ramble on. My wife says I tend to do that whenever a real or imagined soapbox is at hand.”

At that moment, I figured that I just might never leave that place. It seemed idyllic. I supposed I should reserve my final opinion until I witnessed how it actually worked.

Grace was said, short and sweet, but it clearly served at least one purpose – the signal for an eating frenzy! The wonderful meal was served and savored. Conversation flowed easily among the six of us – three more staff members arrived. As Tyke had predicted, it took the old folks far longer than it had him. I assumed he and Cindy were finding ways of enjoying their private time and that it had, in fact, been his hope I would dawdle over dessert – strawberry shortcake. I did. The others left, leaving David and me alone. I had questions.

“Charlie Chance,” I began. “You understand that’s my second interest here – after the kids.”

“Yes. I suppose Tyke told you about the latest parting.”

“No. He didn’t. When was it?”

“March twenty-fifth just past. It was Tyke’s cousin – Jeff. They were close. Jeff was a senior. Tyke marched into my office one day soon after that and, assuming I would not agree to his request, implied that he would camp out in my bedroom if necessary until I agreed to invite you here. It was both the saddest and the most humorous five minutes of my life. You are more important to him – well, to all of us, I guess – than you can possibly understand.”

“No pressure here, you’re saying!”

He shrugged and for the first time his imposing presence wilted. I continued.

“Ghostly vengeance of the lore, or some well veiled mortal objective?” I asked, probably too cryptically.

“My bloodline runs as much Vermont skeptic as Ozark believer, Marc. It may be why I’ve been so reluctant to have it all investigated – not wanting to be proved wrong on either count. That’s not an answer to your question but it’s the best I can do.”

“One’s best is all I can ever ask. Any pattern to the victims – age, gender, family, anything?”

“I guess I’ve never looked for a pattern. I’ve never done much of anything about it. Like I implied, I don’t like to consider it – all boys, mostly students in attendance here.”

“Is there a list of victims – one going back to the first?”

“No actual list. My wife and I can put one together and I can verify dates and such from the permanent records. It will take some time.”

“Is it something you could let Tyke and Cindy undertake? I have the feeling the lad is going to insist on being a part of all this and I’d like to get him constructively occupied.”

“Oh, you’ve got that right. I’d not be surprised if you found him camped out on the upper bunk in your room.”

“He did make that offer.”

We were both able to smile at it.

“I see no reason the two of them couldn’t do that. What information will you need?”

“Names, ages, dates of death. Also, health at the time. Do you keep such records?”

“Every student receives a physical exam on his birthday – more often if indicated, of course.”

“Good. All of that, then. Can the two of them have access to that kind of information?”

Certainly. I’ll just show them the only places they are to look in the folders and that will be that.”

“Trustworthy, then?”

“Absolutely. We all are. It’s the foundation of our relationship. No one here would consider being otherwise.”

“Are you sure you should turn these kids loose out in this big, ‘Don’t trust anybody’ world we live in today? Won’t they become disheartened by what they find out there?”

“They do surprisingly well. We only allow one object of pity in our philosophy and that is for the self-absorbed takers of the World – those who seek money and stuff for themselves, over improving the human condition for everybody. Our kids peg them in a hurry out there, and compassion rather than disillusion becomes their response.”

I had always pictured Eden as existing in a valley. I wondered if I had been mistaken.

“I need both you and Tyke to get on that immediately. I’ll also need you to try and find some connection – something that would dictate their required demise.”

“I know my kids very well so, at least back as far as I go, I’m probably the one who can spot something. I don’t know about those that came before my era here.”

“We’ll concentrate on the recent ones, then. Tyke said something about a local physician who he thought knew a lot about the partings.”

“Doc. Johnson. Must be the oldest living doctor who’s still practicing – and that’s not to be construed as an endorsement of the quality of his services. I doubt if he’s read a professional journal in twenty-five years but he survives on his substantial intelligence. Still, he’s good for sore throats, broken bones and stitching up gashes. I like the man. He has always supported our work up here. He’s been on our advisory board since I was a boy – going on five decades, I suppose. Tyke probably was referring to the fact that Doc functions as the coroner in these parts so he has examined all of the . . . dead kids . . . at least since I’ve been on this watch.”

“Cause of death?”

“Natural causes, often of unknown origin.”

“Not very scientific.”

“On several occasions the state pathology lab has said they had nothing better to offer. They mentioned possible asthmatic-like asphyxiation but it was offered more as an unexplained guess than anything substantial. No marks of any kind on the bodies. Nothing unusual left in the blood.”

“Tyke said he has taken some notes that may be a starting place for me. I have no idea from where they may have been dredged. I’ll look them over this evening and see if anything jumps out at me.”

We met Tyke and Cindy outside and engaged their help. They wanted to begin that very minute so after Tyke got his notes to me they accompanied David to his office. I found my way back to my room, decided that I felt enough like family to leave the door open, slipped out of my shoes, and took a seat in the chair by the window to begin reviewing and making my own notes.

I assume it was the gradual lowering of illumination there in the room that eventually prompted me to look up. It was going on eight and the last light of daylight was slipping away to the west. I stood and stretched, surveying the shadowy grounds below.

There it was! I swallowed hard and felt the telltale chill beginning its trek up my spine. Below me, just north of the school building, I saw the lone figure of a hunchbacked, old man, carrying a lantern and walking with a staff north toward Charlie's cabin. A few moments later the lantern went out and the figure disappeared. Family or not, I closed my door.

The Specters of Carlton County, The Family of Man Press, Kindle/Amazon

CHAPTER TWO

I am always suspicious when the object of my research appears on cue. I'm also always uneasy, because it often foretells trouble in someone's immediate future.

I hadn't had the wits about me to take pictures. It was fully unexpected and the whole experience was over in a matter of a few seconds. If it had been planned for my benefit how was it known I would be looking out the window at that precise moment? I had not even known! Perhaps Tyke was right. My very presence just tended to stir things up.

Tyke stuck his head in at ten p.m. to say goodnight and to tell me breakfast was from six to seven – a come when you please affair. We made a date for six thirty.

I was just smoothing down the bedspread the next morning when he returned talking, clearly ready to begin the day.

"We figured we needed to set a time for your first presentation so everybody will be in the cafeteria at eight for a two-hour session – that's the best room that's big enough to hold us all. What you going to do first?"

I fluffed my pillow and set it in place on the bottom bunk.

"I always like to begin with a question and response session. That way I can get a feel for what direction the group wants things to go. That be okay?"

"Sounds great. I'll let the others ask some of their routine, predictable, questions before I begin with the really meaningful stuff," he said, grinning and watching to make sure I understood it was a joke.

“How did your big job go last night?” I asked as we left the room.

“Cindy and I got a lot done and even managed to do some of the research in the records.”

I shook my head and chuckled as he continued.

“Actually, it’s going pretty fast. The records are alphabetized by last name so we can’t be as efficient as if they were in order by date of enrollment but we got a huge chunk finished. If you don’t give humongous assignments, we’ll work again from ten ‘til two – the time I figured you’d begin the second session unless you want to change it. It’s your deal. I just feel more of a need to be organized than anybody else around here.”

“Sounds good – ten and two, daily. The completion of assignments will be mostly voluntary. I can’t possibly look over fifty written responses after every session.”

I needed to ask one thing before we arrived in the cafeteria. I tried to be nonchalant.

“Anything unusual reported around the grounds last night?”

“No. Like what? Did you see something? Did you see Charlie? You saw the ghost of Charlie Chance didn’t you!”

“Whoa there! It was just a general question. I declare, Tyke, you do run with an idea like a . . . well, like a writer!”

“Compliment or complaint?”

“Both, this early in the morning. If and when I see anything I will tell you about it, if and when I think it’s appropriate.”

“Gottcha! On the other hand, being the open, honest lad that I am, should I see anything – anything at all – I’ll let you know right away.”

“Sounds like a fine arrangement to me and by the way, I don’t budge so much as a millimeter under the pressure of guilt.”

I got the now familiar combination grin, nod and shrug. We had an understanding.

Clearly Miss Hawthorne had been apprised of my breakfast schedule and Tyke steered us toward the same table, then took his leave to be with Cindy. I opened with a business level comment.

“I suppose you know that one of my interests here is the Legend of Charlie Chance.”

“Oh, yes. Tyke has made that perfectly clear.”

“I understand that some in these parts will be offended by my investigation. I wondered if you would be one of them.”

“No. If there is any way to put an end to all this, I’m for it. You’re right, though, many will be upset. The general belief in this area is that you don’t mess with the spiritual realm and when you do, only worse things will happen. If word gets out – and it will get out – you can count on a visit from Reverend Abernathy.”

“Clergymen always intrigue me and for some strange reason I always seem to get to meet them.”

“He’ll tell you to leave. I assume you’ll politely tell him you aren’t ready to do that. He’ll excommunicate you on the spot.”

“I thought you had to belong to something before you could be excommunicated from it.”

“There is no logic in Reverend Abernathy’s version of religion.”

“I see. That’s often the case, I find, and I intended no put down by that statement. The two – logic and religion – seem to be incompatible on a number of issues.”

“Are you a religious man, Marc?”

It was not the question I expected, but, there in the seat of honesty, I felt compelled to be forthcoming – well, up to a point.

“If by religious you mean that I have, and steadfastly live my life according to a set of positive values and work to improve the human condition each and every day, then, yes, I am a religious man.”

She didn’t press the issue further. Perhaps it had not been an answer she had expected.

“There’s a square dance here tonight,” she announced out of the blue. “It seems we are expected to attend together.”

“I haven’t square danced since I was a teenager. Still, it will be my pleasure to risk bodily injury with you this evening.”

She nodded, pleasantly, and provided the necessary information.

“Here in the cafeteria at six. I’ll borrow some appropriate clothes for you from Jim – teaches history and is about your size. Somebody will deliver them.”

“Do I see Tyke’s hand in all this?”

She put her napkin up to her face, pretending a fan.

“Why, whatever do you mean, Mr. Marc Miller? Do you not think we southern girls are clever enough to carry out such subterfuge all by ourselves?”

“Hearing the words girls and subterfuge in the same sentence always sends chills up my spine. I usually run. I see I’m not.”

She chuckled and patted my hand.

“I think we’ll have a good time,” she said, closing the subject.

* * *

The first session went well. Quality questions flowed freely. They forced me to think. I liked that. I felt immediately at ease. I was always amazed when people took notes about what I was saying – as if it might actually be worth hearing. What if it weren’t? What if it just led potential young writers astray? I had never allowed depressing thought to remain within my being so they were immediately dispatched to the dungeon of uncomfortable feelings.

David sat in on the last half hour of the session and stayed after the others left.

"I'm impressed with the quality of questions your students ask," I said, as I gathered up my things.

"Formulating the appropriate question is the essence of education, I believe. It was my grandfather's belief so that's probably why it is mine. We base our facilitation on it."

"Facilitation? I'm unfamiliar with the term in reference to education."

"And isn't that a shame. We think in terms of facilitating growth rather than teaching information. Teaching implies the imparting of knowledge. Facilitation implies helping the students find ways of coming by knowledge. Learning has to be a life-long endeavor so learning how to learn and how to find information is one of our top priorities here."

"I like it," I said.

"I could tell. Your approach with the youngsters fits

right into how we do things here. They were very comfortable with you."

We walked toward the door.

"I'd very much like to have a look inside Charlie's cabin if that's allowed."

"Certainly. It's never locked although I doubt if it's entered a half dozen times a year. Let me go with you. Perhaps I can answer some of your questions."

We walked across the grass toward the cabin.

"I have to ask why there are no walks leading directly to the cabin."

"Out of deference to Charlie. My great grandfather recognized this school would not have been Charlie's choice use for his property. The stories all agree that he hated people in general and kids in particular. They tell of him burning down buildings that were built closer to this hill than felt comfortable to him. So, no path to the cabin."

"Fascinating. Great-grandfather wasn't one to trifle with the spirits, then?"

"I doubt if it was as much that as it was his respect for human dignity. He tried not to encroach where he wasn't welcome both geographically and philosophically."

"Did he write – your great grandfather?"

"Never published but there is a bookcase filled with his handwritten manuscripts on every imaginable topic. Probably several wonderful volumes of wisdom to be culled from those sheets if someone were up to the task."

"If you're asking if I'd take it on, I'll have to be honest up front and say no. I have my own literary niche. It might be interesting to nudge young Tyke toward those shelves, though."

"What an interesting idea. Thank you. Whatever he decides to be, he will be the best there is at it. Bright. Dedicated. Tireless. Positive. Everything a parent would want in a son. Everything the World needs in the sons of every generation."

"You have a family, I assume."

"It's just Mary and me. We were never blessed with children. I guess the James tradition here at the Academy will stop with me."

It was a difficult, immediately saddening, statement for him to make. I moved on as we approached the cabin.

"Oak logs," I noted. "Unusual, isn't it?"

"Very. Oak needs to cure a long time and then is hard as nails to work with. Strong, though. Take a tank to knock it down even today. Those are Charlie's hand cut cedar shingles still on the roof – apparently, several layers had been put down over time."

"The cupola on top intrigues me," I said.

"The lore paints Charlie as a suspicious, frightened, man. I have to assume the cupola was a place from which he could keep track of what was going on in all directions from inside."

"The notes Tyke prepared for me – very professional, by the way – suggest he was backward, mentally handicapped even. But this structure tends to suggest just the opposite."

"Wait 'til you see the inside."

David opened the door and motioned me in ahead of him. The only light came from the four windows in the cupola above. There were no windows in the walls and only a small one in the door, covered with a wooden flap that opened down from the top on leather hinges. The door was two inches thick and had a wooden, latch-string type latch typical of the day. It also had a four by four timber that fit across the door from the inside into metal brackets on each side. No unwanted intruder would gain access.

The inside was not much larger than the room in which I was staying. In the center was a ladder on wheels. It extending up into the cupola where it rode a metal rail on smaller wheels. One step was flat, some eight inches deep, apparently, the place he stood while looking out the windows above. He could rotate the ladder by hand from up there so he had a 360-degree view. There were thick, wooden, shutters that could be pulled up to cover the windows. The ceiling of the cupola was a collage of mirrors which directed light down into the room increasing the efficiency of the small windows by many-fold. Each lantern was also outfitted with mirrors so a tiny flame would light the entire area

Along the east end was a large stone fireplace with a stone oven and a griddle-like, slate slab on which stove-top

cooking could be done. I had never seen anything like those two innovations. The fire boxes below each provided independently controlled heat. The oven had been fitted with a metal door apparently rescued from a cast iron, wood burning cook stove.

The pointed ceiling was, in fact, double, with nearly a foot of space between, adding heat saving insulation in the cold months. It could be vented to prevent solar heat build-up during the hot summer periods. Those features along with the ten-inch log walls represented a marvel of ingenuity for the day – most certainly Charlie's original creation. It was unbelievably cool in there.

The water delivery system was also innovative. From an opening beside the wooden sink were a series of small, hollow wooden cubes perhaps six-inches square. The top on each was open creating a vessel that could hold water. Each cube was wired to a rope – apparently, a closed loop that ran down into a well of some kind. As the wheel – over which the rope ran – was turned, the wooden cubes dipped into the well and brought fresh water up into the cabin where they could be tipped and the water poured into the sink or other receptacles.

"A well this far up on the mountain?" I asked David.

"A cistern, actually. Run off from the roof was piped into a fifteen-foot-deep hole, four feet in diameter and lined all around with small slabs of limestone. Behind the stone, he had first plastered a thick coat of red clay, making it nearly impervious to water."

"This is known how?"

He smiled.

"I was a very nosey, very active, very independent minded lad with lots of time on my hands."

David pointed to a pull-up door in the floor. I opened it revealing a two by four foot opening and a ladder descending into the darkness. He handed me a flashlight – apparently kept in the cabin – and I looked inside. It was a six-foot diameter hole, again, lined with limestone but had shelves on the three sides away from the ladder. It was a natural refrigerator – surprisingly cold.

I closed it and stood there, looking around in amazement.

"So, the moron was a genius. How could that have been overlooked by his parents and neighbors?" I wondered out loud.

"I suppose when you are ostracized from the time you are a toddler because you're possessed by the Devil, any intelligent acts you demonstrate would be interpreted as the work of Satan himself."

I nodded and raised my eyebrows indicating I understood, then added:

"No wonder he was reclusive; he was given no choice to be otherwise."

David nodded.

"Tykes notes suggested he was hunch backed. Is there any truth to that as far as you know?"

"Apparently, it is true but probably not due to the usual natural causes."

"How so?"

"One story tells about a night when Charlie was nine or ten. A group of boys, took him from the hayloft where his parents forced him to sleep. They attached a long rope around his ankles and dangled him off a cliff, tying the other end to an overhanging branch of a tree growing near the edge. They left him there. The knot on the branch had not been securely tied and as Charlie struggled to swing himself up so he could grab hold of the rope and climb his way out, the rope came undone and he fell some fifty feet into the rocky valley below. He broke his neck and shoulders and smashed his face and skull. No physician would treat him – afraid for their souls if they did. As his body mended itself, it drew him into the shape of a question mark. His head and face were severely deformed."

"Lore or fact, do you think?" I asked.

"I tend to believe it. Similar stories come from several sources. People were terribly cruel to folks who were different back then."

"Back then?" I asked, indicating that in my experience such treatment had most certainly not stopped.

"Well, yes, I understand, but the witch trials and such, is what I was referring to."

I nodded continuing to walk from place to place

examining and admiring things.

"It was his fortress, wasn't it?"

"It was indeed. In here he was safe from everything but fire, I suppose."

"And I'm not so sure he couldn't have survived that," I added, the wheels turning in my head.

David didn't press me on it and I didn't offer. I finished snooping and we went back outside. In front, some ten yards to the south was a wooden structure about six feet tall and three feet square. Each side was constructed of a series of open, horizontal louvers, slanting down toward the inside.

"A lye box?" I asked, never having seen one so large.

"Good for you," David said. "Not many folks know one on sight."

It was used for making lye, an essential ingredient in producing soap. In principle, it was simple. Wood ashes were piled in a water tight box near the bottom. It had a single cane spout protruding from the base of the box. The tall, louvered sides of the structure gently gathered in the rain which dripped down soaking the ashes and slowly leaching out the lye. The lye laden water was then caught in covered buckets from the spout and later boiled down to the proper consistency, cooked with lard and other ingredients, and poured into bar frames to harden"

"That old yellow soap could take the hide off a mule," David said. "I have to wonder how anybody had skin left by the time they were ten."

I had an answer so I shared it.

"From what I understand this variety of soap was just used for washing clothes and dishes. Actually, people didn't start using soap for bathing until early in the twentieth century. Regular bathing was thought to be bad for one's health. About that time some ingenious, Bible waving, entrepreneur came up with the slogan, 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness' as if quoting the good book itself, and the rest is Leaver Brothers' history."

"Interesting. And all these years I pictured old Charlie enjoying his daily bubble bath."

"In the sink?"

"I see what you mean. I hadn't considered that problem."

"May I accompany you to your office and see how the kids are coming with the research?"

"Certainly."

We began walking toward his residence – not where I would have headed to find a Headmaster's office. He made conversation.

"I am intrigued with the assignment you gave the group at the end of your session this morning – 'Write a page about how life would be different in this area if Charlie Chance had not been considered a child of the Devil'."

"It's like an inkblot. A topic with no one right answer, no one correct direction. It's really more of a logical, cause and effect exercise than one in creativity. The best creative writing always keeps one foot in reality, otherwise it's not believable enough to keep most folks comfortable."

"And here I thought you writer people just sat down and began spinning yarns on yellow pads."

His office had a private entrance on the north side of the first floor. Tyke and Cindy had devised an efficient system. He handed me a half dozen sheets of paper.

"Nearly finished, Sir er Sirs," he said. "Looks like there are only about seventy-five years of folders here but what we're finding suggests that won't present a problem for us."

"What do you mean?" I asked as I began perusing the sheets.

"The first parting seems to have taken place fifty years ago. We haven't found any before that – not yet anyway."

"What an interesting observation. Let's go ahead and play it out, though, just in case," I suggested.

Tyke smiled at Cindy who returned it. She spoke directly to me.

"It's exactly what Billy said you'd say."

"Billy? Oh, Tyke, William, Billy, I see."

"She's the only one who's ever called me Billy."

They were delivered as the words of a love-struck puppy.

I tried to move the conversation back to the case at hand.

"I see a clear pattern of names here. Rakes, Purdy, Yates."

The others chuckled in unison.

"What?" I asked, realizing there was something I didn't know.

David explained.

"We have 250 students here. I'd guess all but maybe thirty-five have a last name that's on that list of yours."

"Lots of cousins here, then, is that what I'm to believe?"

"Lots!" Tyke said, emphasizing the point with raised eyebrows. "An even dozen William Rakes', alone."

"How confusing that must be."

"Not really," the boy explained. "It's why we all have nicknames. Not another Tyke Rakes anywhere I know of – anywhere of which I know, that is."

He shrugged, sheepishly.

"I liked it better the first way," I said, playing with him.

It was worth a chuckle all around.

"I can see the names will be meaningless to me, then," I said. "I'm going to leave them with Mr. James."

"I'll do what I can. You know how unpleasant this is going to be, reliving that terrible time for each of them?"

What could I say? I nodded and frowned, then addressed Tyke.

"In terms of the question I posed to you early this morning. Any scuttlebutt?"

"Maybe. Let me walk you outside."

He closed the door and indicated a rustic bench under a nearby tree. We sat. He turned himself toward me his feet on the seat, knees pulled up toward his chin.

"Sightings of Charlie are not spoken of by most of the kids here. They've been taught at home that it's bad luck – like it's sacrilegious – to speak of it."

"Not you?"

"My upbringing was pretty different but we can go into that another time. I'm sure several of the guys saw something last night about sundown. I've been talking around about how pretty the sunset was last night and I can tell it sparked something very unpleasant in a couple of them. I won't press them because I don't trample on other's beliefs, but from their reactions I know what they saw."

"You are a sleuth, par excellent!"

"I assume that is almost Latin and means something like 'top of the line'."

"You assume correctly on all counts. Had Latin?"

"No. But I've studied a Latin Phrase Book. Helps a lot with science vocabulary."

"Have any idea what the guy's vantage points may have been?"

"Two were playing Frisbee in front of the teacher's residence – that's clear across campus to the west. They'd have a clear view of the cabin from there; I assume we are speaking of that area in this non-conversation about the non-sighting of the non-Charlie's ghost."

"Okay. You got me. Yes, I saw something from my window about sundown. It appeared to be the figure of a bent over old man, carrying a lantern and walking with a staff from south to north toward the cabin and directly toward my vantage point. It disappeared from my view about thirty feet before reaching the cabin."

"Wow! Real, you think?"

"Real something, I'm sure of that."

"Ya. Dumb question. How do you tell a ghost from something else?"

"If I can shake its hand I assume it's flesh and blood. If I can't find a hand to take hold of, it's clearly something else."

"You've shook hands with ghosts?"

"What did I just say?"

"Oh, ya. No hand, no shake. This is getting great!"

"I'm intrigued by your apparent lack of fear in all this."

"So am I, now that you mention it. I do feel a rush. I guess I just choose not to define it as fear. Maybe we should camp out down there by the cabin."

"I wouldn't advise that. I'm always more afraid of the non-ghostly elements than the spirits, and we really don't know what we're dealing with here."

Actually, it hadn't been a bad idea – for me, though, not for Tyke – a potential prey. It gave me an idea.

"I assume there is a pretty good gossip line between here and town, isn't there?" I asked.

"Fully dependable, I'd say."

He smiled knowing something interesting was afoot.

"You need me to feed it something, right?"

"You have to stop being a step ahead of me or my presence here won't be needed. But, yes. It tinges on a falsehood, however, and I'm not sure you'll want to participate."

"Tell me what ya have in mind and we'll see."

"I want to get word out that I'm disappointed that I haven't seen the ghost yet."

"So, if it was faked by somebody they will think they need to do it all over again so you will see it."

"Right."

Tyke thought for a moment. Clearly it was a lie. He found a way.

"You can tell me the lie I suppose, and then I would just be truthfully repeating what you told me."

"That's pretty marginal, isn't it?" I asked, not wanting the lad to compromise his beliefs."

"Something or someone killed my cousin, Jeff, and that was in no way marginal. I can do this."

"Perhaps you should talk it over with the Headmaster first."

"Perhaps. That will be my decision. The sooner the better, I assume."

"ASAP, as they say."

"I better get back inside so Cindy doesn't forget what I look like."

"As if that will happen. I've seen the way she looks at you."

"Yeah. Is that awesome or what?"

Tyke floated back inside.

It was just after eleven. Lunch was at twelve. I had some time so went back to my room. If things worked out as I hoped, the ghost of Charlie Chance would walk again that night. Two things would be different. I'd be on hand there in the shadows of the cabin with tape recorder and camera. Tyke would play my role in the guest room window. I had concluded that it had been my appearance there that was the trigger for the event. That correlation would have to hold whether it was old Charlie himself or an imposture. I have found that such coincidences rarely turn out to be just

coincidences.

As I was inserting a new cassette into my tape recorder – old fashioned perhaps, but I tended to stick with the tried and true – there was a knock at the open door. I looked up from the chair and saw it was Tom from the day before.

“Hey. Tom. Good to see you. Business or pleasure?”

“Business, at least at first. There is this telephone message for you from the office.”

He entered and handed me a slip of paper. It read: “12:30 today. My Rectory. The Right Reverend Christian Abernathy.”

“Thanks for being my messenger. How things going today?”

“Well, I can tell ya I never done heard so much enthusiasm over one assignment like’s goin’ on over the one you give out this mornin’. Everybody’s into it.”

“I can’t tell if you’re saying that’s good or not so good.”

“Oh, it’s good. One person says one thing and then another says why that can’t be and then they think up somethin’ else. It could leave your head spinnin’.”

“I’m glad there’s some interest in it. By the way, I’ve never been down to the town and I seem to have a 12:30 appointment with a Reverend Abernathy. Where will I find him?”

“His office is in the back a the church – a black door. Knock then go on in.”

“And how will I find his church?”

“Only one in town. Tall white steeple. You’ll see it when you git ‘bout half way down the hill. Just keep it in view and you can’t miss it.”

I smiled. It would be hard to argue with his last sentence so I assumed it would not be a difficult instruction to follow.

“That’s some camera you got there on the desk. Probably cost more than my daddy earns in a year.”

“What does your daddy do for a living?”

“Farms. Land been in our fam’ly for a dozen generations. Pitiful land but it’s ouren. Ya clings to what ya has, pitiful or not.”

“You plan on farming it later on?”

“No, Sir. Not sure yet what I’ll be a doin’ but it won’t be no farmin’ you can be sure a that.”

“Brothers and sisters?” I asked.

“More than you’d care to count. Me and Mike – you met him yesterday – are the only ones here. The rest is all older. My five sisters is married and has kids. Two brothers married and has kids.”

“I’d say a large family – did I count nine children?”

“Nine livin’. My parents lost the two oldest in the flood back twenty-five year ago. Then Jeremy, he died a the black throat when he was ten. He’d be the youngest.”

“Did any of the others attend the academy?”

“No, Sir. Daddy was agin it but momma insisted on it for me and Mike. In these parts wives got their ways of gittin’ what they want, if ya know what I mean.”

I nodded, supposing I did know but was surprised it would be such a general, matter of fact, topic among the children. I was ready for a change of topic. Mercifully it arrived.

“There’s Tykie an Cindy comin’ ‘cross the way.”

He pointed out the window across my lap.

“They kiss in the shadows, ya know.”

“Well, I guess I suspected as much. Do you have a special girl?”

“A what?”

“A girl friend.”

“Oh, no Sir. I mostly just watch ‘em play volleyball and then I go takes a cold shower.”

I tried to contain my chuckle. It came out a snort and I feigned an itchy nose as cover. He waved and Tyke waved back.

“Tykie’s about my favorite cousin. He never puts me down. Lots – well, none here – but lots a folk around these parts are leery of him since the incident.”

“Incident?”

“I shouldn’t a said nothin’ ‘bout it. Not my place. I’m sorry, Sir. I guess I better be goin’.”

He left the room and left me wondering. The incident. Something that made others leery of him. That was a fully unexpected piece of information. I watched as Tyke broke

into a trot in my direction. Apparently, girls were not required to run – nor, I guess, boys if they were escorting one. Seemed sexist to me and perhaps lent some credence to Tyke’s comment about the Headmaster’s veiled purpose for the activity.

Tyke was soon at the door, knocked, and entered without waiting for permission – another custom I assumed somehow related to family. He wore his usual grin.

“Finished. Still nobody before that fifty-year mark. That will tell you something, huh?”

“Perhaps. Good work, by the way. Now we wait to see if Mr. James can find a pattern.”

“Like what?”

“Never know ‘til I see it. Something that ties all the young victims together.”

“It could be random, couldn’t it? Just anybody from the school who was handy when the . . . whatever or whoever decided it was time to . . . it’s hard to say those thoughts out loud.”

“I understand. I understand the last one was a cousin of yours. Close?”

“Yeah. Very close. Slept in the same bed for three years. That’s pretty close.”

I didn’t push. I figured it best if Tyke’s story came out on his own time schedule.

“There’s things about me you don’t know. Not pleasant things. Nothing I’m ashamed of but lots of folks hold things against me.”

“I never like folks to tell me ‘things’ before they’re ready to,” I said rushing to make it legitimate for him to apply the brakes if he suddenly thought better of it. “It puts a strain on the relationship. I suppose that was said as a caution from one friend to another.”

“Thank you – for the caution and the friendship. I’d like to tell you.”

He took a seat on the floor under the window and began.

“I’m next to the last in a family of six kids. One day my little brother and I were skinny dipping in the creek about a mile from home. A stranger came by. He was all nice and

stripped down to his long johns and got into the water with us. I had one of nature's private calls so I got out and went into the tall grass to take care of things. It probably took two – maybe three minutes. When I got back the man was doing something unspeakable to Bobby. He had his hand over his mouth so he couldn't call out.

"I picked up a 2 X 4 that had fallen off a tree house that had been there forever and I hit the man as hard as I could to the side of his head. He fell off into the water and just floated there. Bobby and I dragged him up on the bank but he was dead.

"Well, I knew I couldn't tell anybody what he'd done to Bobby or no girl would ever take him for a husband. But I figured any man, even one as despicable as he, deserved a Christian burial so we pulled him into the weeds and ran home to tell Daddy what happened – well most of what happened. I said he was trying to hurt Bobby.

"It turned out he was a banker from up in Huntsville and his family's lawyer was soon out to get my hide. Daddy passed me around among our kinfolk and they pretended I was their cousin from down Little Rock way. The lawyer never found me but not even my own kin really wanted a murderer living under their roof. Mr. and Mrs. James – the Headmaster – heard about me and wanted to help. I was way too young to enroll up here so they just took me in and raised me up like I was their own."

"Adopted you?"

"Oh, no. Nothing official. Just a deal between daddy and them. I go back to be with my family sometimes, but I'm so different now. I really try to fit in and I know they still love me but it's always a strain. I'll keep going – they're my family. But it's more like my life has left me in-between families – not really a true part of either one. I suppose that's hard for others to understand."

"I'm sure I can't fully understand, but I appreciate that you felt comfortable sharing it with me."

"If you're not comfortable having a murderer for a friend, I'll understand and I'll find somebody else to be your guy while you're here."

He stood up as if expecting me to reject him. I also

stood.

“Is there some rule around here that keeps guy friends from hugging each other?”

His sober expression quickly went through puzzled on its way to elated relief.

“No, Sir. There is definitely no such rule here.”

I opened my arms and we had a long hug between friends. It felt just right.

We walked down to lunch together. The story had given me a crazy, farfetched, out in left field, idea – just the kind I had never been able to resist. Suddenly there were several people I felt the need to meet. There would also be a good deal more research to keep Tyke and Cindy involved. (Perhaps I should rephrase that but I won't.)

CHAPTER THREE

Having survived the drive back down to town, and having spotted and then kept in view the church steeple as per Tom's directions, I was soon approaching Reverend Abernathy's office door.

It was black, as Tom had suggested, but on it, painted in silver, were stars, moons, and other celestial bodies. I felt I was about to enter the realm of a long-robed wizard rather than a protestant minister.

I knocked as instructed and then opened the door into a small waiting room. Before I could take a seat on the backless, plank, bench, the office door opened and a diminutive, tousled haired, red cheeked, man appeared. He was dressed all in black – suit, shirt, tie. No robe. No pointed hat.

"Miller. On time. Good. Come in."

It had not been intended to be a cordial greeting, but then I had received worse in my day. He pointed to a chair for me as he took a seat behind a large ornate desk that made him appear all the smaller. I sat, taking the small tape recorder from my pocket, clicking it on, and placing it between us on the front of his desk. He eyed it in an unfriendly manner but did not comment.

"You a Christian?" he began.

"That would be my business and not yours, I believe," I responded cordially, as I smiled and settled myself into the big, fully uncomfortable, chair.

"Makes no never mind, I suppose. Either way you must leave now."

"By whose authority?"

"God's own!"

"And you know God's desires better than I?"

He was obviously not used to being confronted and had not been prepared for that kind of conversation. I went on the offensive.

"Why is it you don't want me here? Do I frighten you in some way?"

"I'll do the talking. You listen."

"I haven't willingly succumbed to lectures since I was a school boy in the principal's office, so if that is to be the arrangement, I will take my leave."

I picked up the recorder and moved it toward my pocket.

"At least hear me out, if you will . . . Sir."

I hesitated creating a dramatic moment as if contemplating his request. I would stay of course, but figured being in the driver's seat with Reverend Abernathy was probably a rare enough event to savor. I returned the recorder to the desk and sat, nodding my agreement.

"The soul you've come to confront is the Devil's own, you know."

I made no indication of a response but found it interesting that he equated ghost with soul. He continued.

"It's been intractable for more than a hundred years. When it gets riled, it does terrible things – destroying souls of the righteous."

"Not to mention killing off innocent, young, men," I added, to emphasize a side of the issue he seemed to have willingly overlooked.

"The body is nothing. The soul is everything."

"You make it sound as though others have come before me to confront whatever this is."

"I did myself as a young clergyman. He took my wife and son."

"He?"

"The ghost of Charlie Chance. Stop playing games."

"I'm sorry for your loss, however it may have occurred."

He looked me in the eyes and after a long, silent, moment nodded. I assumed it was as close to a thank you as

I would receive for my concern and compassion. I continued.

"So, let me understand. Your position is that we allow this reign of terror to just continue like it has over the past fifty years."

"Two a year is better than ten," he said laying out the compromise with which he seemed willing to live.

"And wouldn't none a year be better than two?"

He raised his eyebrows and squirmed ever so slightly, twitching his lips.

"I don't presume to know as much about things around here as you do," I went on, "but I am interested in why you think your god allows this to continue."

"To keep the power of the Devil before us – so we never lose sight of the eternal battle between good and evil."

"So, he – your god – is willing to sacrifice young lives and souls to make that point to people who clearly already believe in that eternal contest?"

"You are exasperating, Miller!"

"Thank you!"

"It was not a compliment!"

"I suppose that's a matter of perspective, isn't it?"

"Listen to my final word, Marc Miller. Be gone from this county by sundown today or consider yourself excommunicated from the Legion of God's Children."

"I have absolutely no idea what that jumble of words could possibly mean, Sir – though I have no doubt you do. Regardless, I will be staying. I have a story to write. If it turns out to be the story you believe it to be, I assume you will be pleased to have it circulated far and wide. I can only assume that since you don't seem to want me to search out the truth, you must have grave reservations about your own belief."

I stood, retrieved my recorder, and offered the man my hand. It was ignored. I nodded and left. The Reverend was stewing in anger. Clearly, unlike me, he did not welcome inquires into his beliefs. He had no desire to investigate other possibilities and to grow beyond where he was. I wondered if David might agree that kind of person could also be added to the student's legitimate pity list.

While off the hill, I took time to drive the town. Five hundred ten, the population sign read. I counted fewer than

twenty on the streets, and only enough houses to accommodate perhaps a hundred. Maybe the boarding school residents were included. Maybe the city limits extended ten miles in each direction. Maybe my flight of fancy was getting out of hand.

I spotted Dr. Johnson's office, upstairs over the grocery store on Main Street. With its rustic, outside, stairway, it reminded me of Doc's office on Gunsmoke. I wanted to know more before I met with him so wound my way back up to the Academy. It was nearly time for my two o'clock session. My plan was to let the kids do most of the talking. I only hoped I could maintain my focus on the ideas they would have to present.

* * *

The afternoon session went well. The youngsters were enthusiastic and their presentations and discussion suggested uncommon creativity coupled with a non-defensiveness rarely seen among adolescents. I figured that indicated well engrained, positive self-concepts – nothing I would not have expected had I taken time to extrapolate from the Academy's philosophy.

My assignment for the next morning's session was for them to each write a page long descriptive piece in which no complete sentences were used – only fragments. It forced them to concentrate on the words and word combinations needed to convey what the human senses and mental processes could capture. Also, of course, they had to know what a complete sentence was in order to avoid using any.

Tyke was immediately at my elbow.

"Now what? Four thirty. Half hour 'til supper. Work or play?"

He was, of course, confronting me with a series of sentence fragments.

"Showing off?" I asked.

"You got it, huh? Very good. Should have known. Maybe this is a good time for me to collect those duds Mr. Bridges has for you for the dance tonight."

"Probably so. Thank you. Bring them up to my room if you will and I'll share my evening plan with you as I change."

"This is great!"

He was off on a trot toward the large, staff residence on the west side of campus.

Katherine walked me outside.

"Fascinating session. You really should be a teacher. The kids can't get enough of you. Wish I could command their attention that way."

"I'm still a novelty. You're old hat. From what I've heard from the kids, you're selling yourself short."

"I'll see you at supper, then?"

"Certainly. Who's cooking? That sounded like something one cannibal might ask another!"

She giggled

"Freshman boys. It should be quite an experience."

* * *

It was! Tacos and raspberry ice cream. All food groups seemed to be represented, however, and that was the requirement!

I went over my plan with Tyke. I was depending on his gossip line to have seeped into the proper place, the report of my great disappointment about not yet having seen anything, hoping in that way to force a repeat performance.

I would sequester myself at the cabin and Tyke would appear as me at my window at exactly 8:25. The sun would be gone and there would be just a slip of the moon in the sky. There was no lighting of the central campus after eight except on special occasions. I had my night vision camera equipment ready. My intention was to get some pictures and then confront whatever – whoever – it was.

The square dance was fun. I had forgotten how much energy teenagers had. It was one time when the no touching rule was relaxed and the kids took full advantage of it. Kathy, as she preferred to be called out of earshot of the students, wore me to a frazzle. It was comfortable being with her and we enjoyed the time together.

At eight o'clock I excused myself to pursue the next activity on my agenda. I gathered my camera and jacket from my room and made sure the light was left on to give the illusion I was there the whole time. I made my way to the cabin and found a more or less comfortable spot on the ground between the south log wall and the low bushes that

surrounded it. I had a clear view of the southern approach. I checked the time. 8:06. Low lying clouds drifted across the area – many, just feet above the ground resembling transparent, misty, fog. Not what photographers wished for.

If my hunch were correct, I needed to confront the image just before it reached the lye box – a point ten yards south of the cabin and approximately the spot from which it seemed to have disappeared the night before. I had seldom been so close to the spot on which I fully expected an apparition to appear. The anticipation sent a playful chill through my body and I had to consciously control my breathing. My senses had moved to high alert. Of course, it might all be for naught – there was no guarantee it would reappear on my command. I waited. It grew darker and cooler. 8:25.

Okay, so perhaps there was reason to believe it would reappear on my command. Suddenly, there it was some sixty feet away. The lantern was suddenly lit, creating a golden glow against the green grass and encircling the figure in the heavy hung haze.

I took a dozen pictures. It was definitely the figure of a stooped, deformed, old man. From that close I could see his unshaven face and his stocking cap. His cane was more a bulky walking stick gripped shoulder high. He moved slowly, swaying from side to side, looking more at the ground than ahead.

At last I felt the time had come. I stood continuing to shoot pictures from my hip.

"Charlie Chance, I assume," I called out, though quietly.

The figure stopped and turned its head to the side so its eye would be able to get me in sight.

"I don't want you here, Mr. Miller," came his surprisingly quick and calm response.

He adjusted his head as if trying to improve his view of me. It was a believable image – solid, yet ghostly. Not a projection. I walked toward it, feeling no inclination to respond to his statement though feeling my heart pumping hard within my chest. The voice was legitimately old - nothing theatrical about it.

He began moving in my direction faster than before.

He stopped beside the lye box and pointed at me with his walking stick, shaking it as he spoke.

"Death be to you if you stay. Death be to you!"

A sudden burst of fog encompassed him and he was gone.

I walked right through the spot on which he had been standing. He was definitely gone. My flesh crawled.

I heard the snapping of twigs in the grass behind me. Had he merely changed positions and was now approaching me from the rear? Was death to be mine sooner rather than later? Would ghosts snap twigs as they walked? I brought my camera up to my face and slowly turned around taking pictures into the blackness as I did.

Click! Click !

Snap! Snap!

Click! Click !

Snap! Snap!

I could see nothing in the direction of the crisp, cracking sounds, though they continued. I looked over my shoulder to make sure the sounds were not merely some kind of distraction. I turned and moved toward them wishing the moon were in something more than the last vestige of its cycle. The clouds parted, briefly lighting the area just as I came face to face with the source of my concern.

"Tyke? What on earth are you doing out here?"

"Right after I made your appearance at the window I got this uncontrollable urge to come down and see things for myself. I know I shouldn't have but something got into me. I'm just a little kid, remember."

"You haven't been a little kid since you were four. Did you see anything?"

"If you're referring to Old Charlie and his lantern, yes I saw him. It was him, okay."

"You sound so sure."

"I'm sure, alright! I haven't told anybody this – but then I seem to be telling you lots of things I've seldom told anybody else."

We began the walk back toward the dorm as he continued.

"The night before my cousin's parting he and I were

down here sitting on the slab step at the cabin door. Jeff got a note that afternoon. It was left on his pillow. It looked like it was from a girl and said if he'd be down here at nine that night he'd be in for a good time and that he should bring a friend. It said not to tell anybody else. We thought it might be some kind of boy girl stuff, you know, so we came. It wasn't boy girl stuff. While we sat right here waiting we saw Old Charlie coming right toward us – like he appeared right out of the fog. I've never been so scared in all my life. We jumped up and high-tailed it back to the dorm."

"Did the image speak that night?"

"Yeah, he spoke. I'll never forget that. He said, 'Your parting is near. Your parting is near'. Twice just like he repeated himself tonight.

"We didn't know if he meant Jeff or me or both of us so we decided we wouldn't go anywhere but to classes, meals, and work, for the rest of the week; that way we'd never get out of each other's sight. We took turns sleeping and staying awake so we could keep watch over each other.

"It was on Sunday night that we saw Charlie. Tuesday was Jeff's birthday – and the Dark of the Moon. He went to town for his physical with Doc. after classes that afternoon and returned about an hour later. I had told him that I'd wait for him in the cafeteria but he never showed up. The mailman found him along river road the next morning."

"You say he returned. I'm confused. Did you see him?"

"No, I didn't, but several kids saw him get out of Doc's car and come running up the steps from the parking lot. They were on grounds detail, fixing the stone wall above the lot."

"They spoke with him?"

"I don't really know. They would have been too far away without yelling back and forth. I can ask."

"But they were sure it was Jeff?"

"Yes. Red ball cap and yellow shirt. That was like his trademark."

We reached the dorm and started upstairs.

"Tell you what," I said. "I think I'll take you up on your offer to stay with me. Will your roommate be okay with that?"

"Jeff was my roommate. I'm in there alone now.

He brushed at the tears that suddenly surprised his cheeks.

"It's really sad, you know?" he said looking up into my face, fully unashamed about his reaction.

"I can only imagine."

We reached the second-floor landing. I put my arm around him and pulled him close to my side. He was content to stand there, still, for a long moment. Then, we moved on into my room. It was a little after nine.

"We need my chair," he said looking around and shifting gears. "If the two of us are going to be in here we need another big chair so we can have our conversations."

I was quietly amused but nodded my head, mounting a serious expression.

"Let me help," I said, trying to sound supportive if not enthusiastic about the idea.

The chair was soon moved and with a little rearranging, a cozy conversation corner was set up, centered on the south window. Tyke returned to his room to gather a few necessities of life, which included his own pillow, a stack of books, a light that clipped onto the upper bunk, a pad and pencil, and, of course, a picture of Cindy.

As he placed her picture on the dresser he spoke as if thinking out loud.

"She's not really beautiful, you know, but I think that's good. Beauty can get in the way of what should really be important in a relationship."

I had to kid him just a bit.

"Like hugging and kissing?"

He spread his wonderfully natural grin back over his shoulder toward where I had taken a seat.

"Well, that of course, but I think you know what I really mean."

"Yes, I do and I think it's pretty mature of you to realize that."

"I've always been mature for my age – as a person I mean, not necessarily as a . . . well, body, I guess is all that's left. I always had to be careful not to upset the grownups around me. Daddy was quick with the switch and then when he sent me away, I felt like I was beholdin' to the goodness of

those that took me in."

"Where is your little brother?"

"He's home. Be here next year, though. Hasn't had much schooling so he'll be pretty far behind. I've fixed it with the Headmaster so he will be my roommate. That way I can help him with his studies."

"Pretty nice."

"Ya. It will be great to be back together. It's been hard being apart. I hope daddy will let him be at least a Four Dayer."

"Four Dayer?"

"We have to stay here at least three days a week. I'm hoping he can stay at least four since he'll be so far behind. I'll be running the candle shop next year. Johnny will work in there with me. I think it's going to be about the happiest time of my life so far."

As he worked to find a satisfactory way to fasten his light on the bunk he continued to make conversation.

"So, am I in here to protect you or so you can protect me?"

"Well, if either of us needs protecting, it will be nice to have the other one handy, but as I understand it, no one has ever been abducted from the dorm or harmed while they were inside, right?"

"I guess that's right. Since nobody talks about it, it's hard to know for sure."

"Why isn't it talked about? I'd think it would be among the most important things on everybody's minds."

"Have you ever heard of the self-fulfilling prophecy?"

"Yes. That people tend to become like others treat them. If you treat someone like they are smart they tend to try and live up to that and if you treat them like they're dumb they often end up living down to that."

"It's how most of the people around here think about the supernatural – if you talk about how bad those forces are they will become that way. Nobody calls it a self-fulfilling prophecy, you understand, but it's the same idea. So, nobody speaks of it."

"I see. Have you ever thought about old Charlie Chance in those terms – the terms of the self-fulfilling

prophecy?"

"No. Not sure what you mean."

"Well, from your notes – a fantastic job, by the way – and other bits and pieces I've been able to pick up, several things about his early life seem obvious to me. He was born during the Devil's Darkness, right?"

"Right."

"And the lore has it that a child born during that event runs the chance of being possessed by a demonic soul, right?"

"Right."

"And the people around here at the time of Charlie's birth truly believed that,"

"Yes. Most still do, in fact."

"You?"

"I want to be able to say no, but I'm still not as secure about such things as you are."

"My point is that since it was believed Charlie probably had a demonic soul, they treated him that way – it didn't matter whether he actually had it or not. He is described as reclusive. Why wouldn't he have been? Can you imagine any of the parents letting their children play with him? He's called backward. If that means uneducated, it certainly follows again. I can't see the social system back then allowing him to enter a school."

"I see where you're going. He became reclusive and dumb because that's the only way he had been allowed to be. And, why wouldn't he have grown to be a pretty angry person who hated other people – other people had never been nice to him. Fascinating stuff, Marc . . . er, Sir, sorry."

"If you insist on calling me Sir, I may self-fulfill myself right into a big head about my own importance. I'd be far more comfortable if you'd call me Marc."

"Well, I can't do that when others are around – they would consider it disrespectful. But I'd really like to call you Marc, Marc, when we're just hangin' like friends, like this."

"It's a deal then. Here, it's Marc and Tyke. Out in public it will be Sir and Mr. Rakes."

"What?"

"That only seems fair. We are both human beings and

as such are equals. If I have to be Sir or Mr. Miller, then you should have to be Mr. Rakes."

"See. You rile things up wherever you go. I love this!"

"Self-fulfilling prophecy?" I asked joking.

"Only if your mother rewarded your socially destructive tendencies, I suppose."

It was good for a long, wet faced, tension releasing, laugh between us. I opened my brief case, rescued two Baby Ruth candy bars from my sizeable stash, and tossed one up to Tyke who was by then reclining on his side on the top bunk.

"Wow! Not many candy bars in my life, Sir, Marc."

"I've been Knighted! Things just keep getting better in your presence."

He smiled at my attempted humor but clearly his attention was focused on the candy. It was hard to believe a boy his age had lived such a sheltered life. Perhaps sheltered was entirely the wrong way to characterize it. I'd have to think on that. I had something else on my mind anyway.

"I have a puzzle for you, Tyke."

It got his attention.

"You've been in Charles' Cabin?"

"Several times."

"How would you characterize it – describe it in just a word or two?"

He thought as he chewed.

"Fortress-like, no, mini-fortress-like"

I nodded. He and I were on the same wave length.

"And what does that mini-fortress not have that one would typically consider a necessity for a fortress?"

"Not sure."

"Let me back up a step. What is the purpose of a fortress?"

"To protect those inside from the bad guys on the outside."

"And how would that protection have been accomplished back in the mid to late eighteen-hundreds?"

"Guns, I suppose."

"Now, back to my original question. What's lacking in the cabin if it had been built as a typical fortress?"

"Yes! No places to shoot a gun from – well, from which

to shoot a gun."

"Now try this. If a man had as his goal to kill off those who got too close – and that is the reputation I read Charlie had – would he build a cabin without gun ports of some kind?"

"Certainly not. I sort of see where you're heading but go on."

I nodded.

"Clearly, back then, outsiders could fire into those ten-inch oak logs all day and never damage the place. He was safe from that. But, if bullets couldn't get him, what could?"

Tyke put down his candy bar and turned onto his back to think. Suddenly he was back on his side.

"Fire. Burn the place down. Oak makes a wonderfully long lasting, very hot, fire once it catches."

"You've seen the gadgets and such inside the cabin. Was Charlie dumb or smart - in terms of intelligence, I mean, not necessarily book learning?"

"Smart. Wow! Probably very smart, in fact. So, your next question is going to be why would such a smart man build himself into a prison that could be set afire and barbeque him."

"Yes. That would be the question."

"He wouldn't, I'd guess," he said, sitting up and dangling his feet over the edge.

"And if he wouldn't, and yet it seems that he did ..."

I dropped it so Tyke could continue.

"There's something we don't know about. Like . . . like . . . like an escape route!"

"That's my best guess, too. First thing in the morning we'll go investigate, if you're willing."

"Am I! Might as well go right now. I'll never get to sleep."

"Well, I will, and for me it's time to turn in. As long as you won't be sleeping anyway, here's one more thing for you to think about. If he wasn't prepared to fire at his enemies, what kind of man was Charlie? And, extrapolating, what kind of ghost would he have?"

"I took a headset radio from my case and handed it up to him. Probably a music station on there somewhere. Just don't burst an eardrum. I'm out of this conscious realm for

about eight hours."

"He accepted the headset with wide eyes. I wanted to just give it to him but thought I needed to consider how that would make him different from his peers there. I'd sleep on it, as they say. I did.

* * *

Apparently – his protests to the contrary – so did the young Mr. Rakes. I shook his shoulder for a good sixty seconds before I sensed any genuine commitment on his part to join me back in the real world. I pocketed a thermometer and flashlight for later use. Once he was dressed we headed for the cafeteria.

We were finished with breakfast by six-twenty and were inside the cabin by half-past. I lifted the door in the floor leading to the cold cellar – the refrigerator of old – and handed Tyke the thermometer and flashlight.

"Take this down the ladder and we'll leave it there for a few minutes. How cool would you guess?"

He descended the ladder.

"No higher than forty degrees, I'd say. That's cold."

While we waited, I drew a container of water from the cistern. My assumption was that all things being equal the temperature of water coming from a hole in the ground, should be pretty similar to the air temperature in the refrigerator – another hole in the ground. I was sure, however, that was not what we would find.

"Looks like it's leveled off at about forty-one," Tyke called up at last. "May eventually drop just a bit more."

"That's close enough. Come on up and bring the thermometer."

The shivering young man was soon by my side. I set the thermometer down into the container of water.

"Looks like fifty-six, fifty-eight, and stopping at sixty-one," Tyke said, leaning down and providing a blow by blow account of the thin red line's progress.

"Sixty-one minus forty-one looks like twenty degrees – quite a difference," I said.

"Two things," Tyke began.

He crossed the room to a ten by eighteen-inch wooden duct that originated from the floor above the refrigerator hole

and exited through the roof. It was built against the east wall and had a small door that opened down near the top. It was opened and closed with a long, thin, wooden, handle that hung down and lay flat against it.

"I put my hand up inside this thing while I was down there and it's sucking air out of the cold box – hole, fridge, whatever – at like a zillion cubic inches a second. I could hear it. Then I figured if that was happening, it had to be getting air from someplace so I looked around. Down at the bottom of the wall behind the ladder – the wooden wall – there's like a grate. It had air rushing in as if there's a fan behind it. Can't be a fan, of course."

He pointed it out and I climbed down to take a look. Both things were just as Tyke had reported.

"Are there caves, around here?" I asked.

"Hundreds. These limestone hills are honeycombed with them."

I bent down under the ladder to further investigate the bottom of the south wall. As I stood up my back brushed against the ladder that slanted overhead.

"Hey," Tyke said. "The ladder moved when you pushed it."

I turned around and pressed against it with my hands. It did indeed move, eventually all the way back to an upright position against the front edge of the opening.

"And look there!" Tyke said excitedly, looking down into the hole from above.

He pointed to my left. The center of the wooden wall – made from upright two by eights – had come ajar. It was a narrow door that opened out of the hole back into a dark tunnel that looked to be five feet high and two and a half feet wide. Air rushed into my face. I pulled the door closed and reset the ladder, then climbed back upstairs and closed the trapdoor.

"That old bird had the first air conditioned house in the state, I'll bet," Tyke said clearly impressed. "The tunnel must connect to the caves deep in the ground. It makes the cold air available and this duct, here, acts like a chimney and sucks it through the hole and out over the roof. When he wanted to cool the room he opened the little door at the top."

"And why the top not the bottom?" I pressed.

Tyke thought only a moment.

"Because he realized cold air dropped down. If it had opened near the floor only the lower few feet would be cooled but coming in from up near the ceiling the whole area was cooled. This man was not dumb!"

"I think we've pretty well established that."

Tyke grew excited.

"We need to follow that tunnel and see where it goes," he said. "It's likely his escape route – the one we said we knew had to be here."

"Yes, to all those things," I said. "But we will need more time than we have now. Class begins in less than an hour. We'll need a huge ball of twine and flashlights and batteries or candles. Of course, this find stays just between you and me for the time being. Can you agree to that?"

"Sure. This is the greatest thing ever! There are humongous balls of twine in the rug shop. I can take care of that. What's it for, by the way?"

"We'll tie one end here to the ladder and unroll it as we move along the tunnel so we can find our way back. There will probably be forks down there. The more I think about it this may really be too dangerous for you."

"Not on your life! Marc, Sir, friend, please."

"You beg so well."

"It's always been one of my strong points. I can add the hound dog eyes if it will help."

He demonstrated. Who could resist?

"Okay, but I guess somebody needs to know what we're up to in case something happens. David, er, The Headmaster, I assume?"

It was really a question looking for Tyke's input. He nodded. The plan was set.

"Immediately after the morning session, then," I said.

My heart was already thumping beyond what was reasonable. Tyke's enthusiasm was contagious. Once again, I hoped I could keep my mind on the seminar.

We started back across campus toward the dorm.

"All this gives me such a different perspective on old Charlie," Tyke said. "It's like in the past twelve hours he's

gone from the worst, dim-witted, villain ever, to somebody I really feel bad for – respect even. Somebody I would have liked to have known. Just think about the terribly unhappy life he must have lived. No family. No friends. No feminine . . . well, you get my point. It doesn't seem reasonable that the man who we are coming to know – or his ghost – would be capable of killing children. If we find out that's true we will have to set the record straight."

"That's why I write the books."

"Oh. Yeah. That's good. But then, if that's right, who is it we have been seeing? Who has been handing out the terrible threats? Who is it that is doing – committing – the partings? If it isn't being done as Charlie's revenge, then why?"

"Lots of answers to find. And those do seem to be the questions at the top of the list."

Tyke trotted off in the direction of the workshops to get the twine and flashlights. I went back to my room to prepare for the session. I had a troubling thought. There could be a flip side to Charlie's architecture that would turn Tyke's current positive theory about him upside down. While his would-be assailants boldly approached his cabin in the clearing, Charlie could have moved out through the tunnel and taken up a position behind them in the woods from where he could have easily picked off the unprotected lot there in the open with a squirrel rife. Good Charlie? Bad Charlie? The story was far from being written.

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CHAPTER FOUR

At the conclusion of the session I motioned David toward me as I put things back into my briefcase.

"This may be a request for your permission but since I'm clearly going to do it anyway I guess I'll phrase it as straight forward information."

David smiled and shook his head.

"I'd love to live inside that head of yours for just one day," he said.

"Some, I've known, would say there's plenty of room in there for both of us."

His smile broadened.

"Tyke and I have found an escape route old Charlie built into his cabin – out the cold hole and undoubtedly hooking into a cave somewhere. I want to follow it for a few hundred yards - if it's really that long – and see what it may tell me."

"You'll need twine," he said making no effort to talk me out of it."

"Tyke has that covered."

"And flashlights and extra batteries."

"Tyke has that covered."

"And, let me guess. The lad flashed those hound dog eyes in your direction and you agreed he could go along."

"Yes! Tyke had that covered as well."

We chuckled.

"I'm sure he's safe with you. Has he told you he lived with Mary and me for five years?"

"He mentioned it in passing – suggesting sainthood for

you in the process as I recall."

"He's like my son. He makes good judgments. He will do as you tell him to do. Be careful."

I nodded. He wasn't finished.

"Funny. I stand here wondering whether it will be safer down there for you if this whole thing is caused by ghosts or by men?"

"Perhaps it's a sad commentary on the state of humankind but I'd go with ghosts, anytime."

David shivered his shoulders.

"You're going now?"

"Yes."

"You'll let me know the minute you're back!"

It had been a directive not a question.

"Yes. I figure one thirty at the outside."

"Dress warmly. These caves hover between forty and sixty-degrees year 'round."

"You seem to know the caves," I said, really fishing.

"As a boy. Wasn't supposed to but my best friend and I did lots of exploring. Kissed my first girl in a cave just off the parking lot. The entrance is completely hidden by trees and bushes."

"Was it good?"

"The cave or the kiss."

"Both, if you're going to give me that range of options."

"I turned my ankle showing off for her and discovered I had no idea how a guy went about the process of kissing. All in all, not an ego building afternoon for a thirteen-year-old."

"But you didn't give up."

"On caves, yes. On kissing, no."

Like Katherine had said when she was first describing David to me – passionate and genuine. I did, however, find more of a sense of humor than she and Tyke suggested. Perhaps he felt less need to be aloof with me.

Tyke had been waiting more or less patiently at the back of the room giving us grownups some privacy. He approached as David left. Well before he arrived, he had already begun talking to me.

"So, he knows about our adventure?"

"Yes."

"He didn't say I couldn't go?"

"An interesting and appropriate use of two negatives in one concise question."

"Session's over, Sir, Marc. Can we keep to topic, here?"

"He didn't say you couldn't go."

"Yes!"

He did that pull thing with his right arm that guys do in such situations. Then he went on.

"I took the supplies to the cabin – flashlights, batteries, candles and matches, two, thousand foot balls of twine, two small shirt pocket size yellow pads, and lunch."

"No dancing girls?" I kidded.

"Figured they'd catch cold down there."

He paused, apparently considering the image that conjured up in his teen-boy psyche.

"I want to change into jeans and get my jacket. You'll need one, too," I said, picking up my briefcase as we began moving toward the door.

Briefcase dropped off, pants changed, jacket and camera secured, we were soon at the cabin. It was dark inside. Since our visit the shutters had been raised over the windows in the cupola. Tyke climbed the ladder and lowered them. The can, into which I had poured the water when we were measuring its temperature, was sitting upside down on the mantle. The four by four used to bar the front door had been laid across the trapdoor.

"I assume you're not responsible for these modifications," I said pointing from one to the other.

"No, Sir." He looked around, wide-eyed (as it is often written).

"We can call this off," I said probably in the tone of a suggestion.

"Not on your life. This is just beginning to get good. I can see a whole chapter on this."

He moved the short, fat, beam to one side and opened the trapdoor. The supplies were in a gunny sack. He sorted through the contents until we were each outfitted with a flashlight, a pad and pencil, and a candle and matches for our rear pocket. He secured one end of a ball of twine to the

ladder, hefted the sack over his shoulder and motioned me on ahead.

We soon entered the narrow, low, tunnel. It had been hand carved, much of it out of solid limestone. The chisel marks still graced the walls and ceiling. It sank at a twenty-degree slope and extended in a straight line south for about twenty feet. At that point we came upon another wooden door. There were dozens of one inch holes bored in it and the breeze flowing through blew the ball cap off Tykes head. It was barred closed from our side using an arrangement similar to that at the cabin door. We lifted the four by four out of place and set it aside. Surprisingly, the door was not difficult to open. I expected the hinges to be encrusted with a hundred years of rust.

The door was soon open. It was narrow - just wide enough for us to move through. We entered a cave, which was a good deal larger in both width and height. Our lights seemed to grow dim as they worked to illuminate that greater expanse of blackness. Stopping to explore the area with our eyes we could see that its irregular shape bent at a ninety-degree angle coming from our left and continuing straight ahead for another twenty yards or so where it forked east and west.

We moved ahead. Some ten feet into the cave – up the right wall – we came upon a set of steps carved into the limestone. It appeared they led nowhere. I climbed them until I could touch the ceiling. There was a wooden trap door. I pushed it open and moved up several more steps until my head was inside the opening above. Another clay sided hole with another wooden ladder. That ladder was more nineteen ninety than eighteen ninety in vintage suggesting regular, recent use.

I climbed the ladder with Tyke at my heels. Still another trap door. That one opened down. I slipped the latch and let it open just a crack. I knew where I was immediately – looking out the horizontal slats from the inside of the large lye box. I closed the door and we went back down the ladder and then the steps back into the cave.

"Looks like the ghost has an escape route as well, huh?" Tyke said, characterizing well what we had just found.

"It walks up beside the lye box, somehow sprays a cloud of fog and enters this tunnel through some door arrangement on the box," he went on, explaining his theory, which coincided with mine right down the line.

"That's the way it looks, for sure. That top trapdoor opens from the underside, though, so it either has to be opened prior to the escape or there is an accomplice down here," I added thinking out loud.

"An accomplice with a fire extinguisher, maybe?" Tyke said leaning down and picking up the ubiquitous, red, firefighting device sitting there against the wall.

"Prints!" I cautioned and he set it down."

"Sorry. Wasn't thinking."

"Let's go on a little further," I suggested.

My shadow readily agreed but stuck closer than before.

At the fork we had to make a decision. The left route began a steeper decline. I was afraid we would not be able to climb back up its slick surface. We turned right. It continued the more gradual descent and led us through several larger rooms, one with a sizeable underground pond fed from a tiny waterfall screaming down from a crack high in the wall. Where the excess water went, we couldn't determine. Blind frogs croaked and albino fish swam in the frigid water.

"It's like Journey to the Center of the Earth," Tyke said, standing in awe of the scene.

"Care to take a skinny dip?" I joked.

He shivered at the thought.

"Look here," he said bending down and picking something up.

"A spearmint gum wrapper."

I took it from his palm and examined it. I smelled it.

"Here. Take a whiff," I said handing it back to him.

"Spearmint, for sure," he said looking a bit puzzled.

"Which means?"

"I'm not sure. Oh! Since it still carries the smell it was thrown down here pretty recently. Things just got really scary, Marc!"

I put the wrapper in my pocket.

"Are you up to another hundred feet or so?" I asked.

"Hey. I'm with you. Being scared never stopped a teen

age boy from doing something really dumb."

I smiled. He had offered it all seriousness. We moved around the pond and into the narrowing tunnel at the other end following it some fifty feet.

"Here's an interesting development," I said pointing the beam of my flashlight to the edge of an abrupt drop off ahead of us.

"A ladder?" Tyke asked walking ahead and moving his light from place to place to get the whole picture.

"Looks like it to me. And it certainly hasn't been down here since old Charlie's day. Look here. SEARS."

We directed our lights down below. It was a twelve foot drop into a large room. The breeze was suddenly strong.

"First or second?" I asked Tyke, pointing to the ladder.

"Be the first into the unknown or stay up here by myself with the spearmint chewing ghost? Hmm. I guess I'll take the plunge."

We were both soon on the floor of the room below.

"It seem warmer here, to you?" I asked.

"Yeah. Lots. And smell that?"

I sniffed but didn't immediately detect anything.

"What?"

"Cedar. We must be near an opening."

We walked across the room – probably seventy feet end to end. It was a blank wall with a low, narrow tunnel off to our left. The wind rushed in rippling my hair. Tyke retrieved his cap in mid-air and slipped it in behind his belt for safe keeping. We bent down and entered. It curved to the right and then back toward the left. As we rounded the final corner the area grew light enough to make out faint images – the floor, the walls, boulders. We went on another thirty feet and found ourselves standing in another big room with light coming through several jagged cracks high on the far wall.

We walked toward the lowest spot of light. It was a narrow slit of an entrance – or exit depending on your perception. We squeezed through and found ourselves in a thicket next to the parking lot.

"I'll be a . . ." Tyke said, looking around. "I've been over this area a thousand times and never found this."

"Sometime, when you and David . . . the Headmaster,

are alone, and he's in a good mood, ask him about Kissing Cave."

I chuckled out loud. Tyke didn't understand but enjoyed the moment with me, as if anything connected with kissing had to be interesting.

"Look at this," he said. "No more than ten feet of twine left on this second spool. We've come two thousand feet. That's 666 yards – about an eighth of a mile. So now what?"

"Lunch sounds good to me," I said patting my stomach.

We found a shady spot with a couple of chair-high boulders and enjoyed sandwiches, jars of ice tea, and apples. It was good to sit and relax even though the trek through the cave had not really been physically strenuous.

"Ready for the journey back the way we came," I asked at last.

"Oh, yes!" came his enthusiastic response and he jumped to his feet.

Back inside we had a surprise awaiting us. The ladder had been pulled up. We could see the last few rungs overhanging the cliff.

"I think you better leave the cave and go back around the outside," I suggested understanding something untoward was taking place.

"And leave you in here with the bad guy all by yourself? I don't think so," came his insistent response.

It posed a dilemma. The 'bad guy' – as Tyke characterized who or whatever it was – could do whatever he was going to do inside or out. Perhaps we would be better off together. I backed off from my directive.

"Okay. First things first. We need that ladder."

"I think I can climb up there. Lots of foot and hand holes along the right side. See! Probably used back before the ladder was brought in."

"Give it a shot, I guess. Not sure I can follow."

He gave me a look.

"When I make it up there, I'll slide the ladder back down."

I felt dumb that he had to point out the obvious.

He was up the wall like a Billy goat, not being nearly as careful as I would have liked – but then he was seventeen.

Most guys don't begin to comprehend the term 'careful' until one day they all quite unexpectedly find themselves using it with their own children.

Within a few minutes, I joined him – my effort having been less the Billy Goat and more the Nervous Nellie. The situation posed several questions. Was our presence known? If so, was the displacement of the ladder intended merely to frighten us or to keep us from coming back? If our presence was not known, why would it have been moved? To deter others, who might stumble upon the cave, from gaining further access?

Regardless, it had been done during the few minutes since we were in there – fifteen at the most. Perhaps we had been followed through the tunnels. By whom? I realized I was being more cautious than I would have been had it been a solo venture.

We retraced our path back to the pond. The waterfall was running blood red. Tyke took hold of my belt from the rear and I felt his warm breath on my neck – at least I hoped it was his warm breath. I checked. It was. I started breathing again.

We moved on. I had the twine in my hand and was just following it – not rewinding it. Suddenly it came loose – became limp. I pulled gently and a few feet came toward me. The line had either broken or had been cut. I was betting on cut. We kept going. At the first fork, I noticed the string was running down the wrong tunnel.

"Which way do you think we came from?" I asked.

Tyke pointed, verifying my impression. I dropped the twine as it had become useless. We turned, following the northerly tunnel and soon found ourselves at a familiar landmark – the steps, which led up to the lye box. We went on to the door that led into the final leg of the tunnel to the cold hole. The door would not open.

"Didn't we leave this door open?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"Yes, Sir. Could it have blown shut?"

"The door opens in. The breeze could have blown it open, maybe, but not closed."

"I was afraid you would say that," came Tyke's quiet

reply.

Suddenly, a hideous laugh rang out and echoed through the cave. Tenor and old. Tremulous in character. Crazy in mood. It was impossible to tell where it was coming from. It went on for the better part of a minute and seemed to be coming closer. Then it spoke.

"I will kill you Mr. Miller. I will kill you Mr. Miller."

The phrase was repeated over and over again – matter of fact and monotonous in delivery.

I nudged Tyke back toward the steps, which led to the lye box. He scampered up, opened the trap door, and disappeared into the structure above.

"I found the door latch," he whispered back to me.

"Exit!" I said, climbing the steps behind him.

I turned to look back. The flickering of a lantern was moving my way out of the darkness. The laughter began again. I wanted to turn and confront it. I directed my flashlight at it. It was gone. I exited the area up the ladder, closed the trapdoor and joined Tyke outside.

I looked around.

"Anybody see us come out of this thing?" I asked.

"I don't believe so," Tyke said. "I've been looking."

I clicked the door closed and started up toward the cabin.

"You're going back inside that thing after all this?"

"I want to check that door at the end of Charlie's tunnel."

"Are you crazy?"

"Probably stark, raving, mad, but I want to see it. Feel free to stay here, come with me, or leave entirely. I'll understand."

"I think I'll stand guard out here."

"Fine. It should only take a couple of minutes."

I went inside. The trap door had once again been weighted down with the section of four by four from the front door. I shoved it aside with my foot – no small task considering its considerable weight. I opened the trap door, descended the ladder and opened the door in the south wall. I lit the area ahead and inspected it before entering. No sign of anyone. Interestingly, the door at the other end was standing

wide open.

I walked toward it – quietly and slowly – trying to see beyond the opening out into the cave. Nothing. No flickering light. No laughter. No threats. I closed the door and secured it with the four by four. It had to have been opened from the inside sometime between when we began moving to the ladder and when I re-entered Charlie's tunnel. It would seem that we may not have located all the entrances and connecting passages.

I returned up inside the cabin, closed the trapdoor and went back outside. There was Tyke, face down in the grass, a bloody gash across the back of his head. I knelt, feeling his neck for a pulse. Yes. Not strong but regular. I called the office on my cell phone and David arrived on the run a few minutes later.

I had already pulled Tyke into a sitting position against the north side of the lye box – the only semblance of shade in the area – and was dabbing his face with a handkerchief dampened with water from the cabin.

David knelt down and put his hand on Tyke's shoulder. Tyke roused, squinting at the two of us.

"Seems you were hit from behind with the proverbial blunt instrument," I said.

He felt his head then looked at his hand. It was bloody. He looked at me.

"Last time I go on a date with you!"

I had to chuckle. It was a good sign.

A pickup headed across the lawn in our direction. I was concerned that it was coming so fast.

"It's Tom," David explained. "I figured we'd need to get William down to Docs."

"Good idea."

I turned to Tyke.

"Can you stand up?"

"Still seem to have two legs. Let's give it a try."

With David on one side and me on the other we pulled him to his feet. Tom wheeled around and backed up to us – handling the truck like a pro. Tyke fainted. The three of us got him into the back of the pickup and David held the boy's head in his lap."

"Easy does it," were David's only instructions to Tom as he climbed back behind the wheel and put it in gear. I sat in back by the tail gate.

Ten minutes later we were parked, rear end first, at the bottom of the outdoor stairs that led up to the doctor's office. David gently gathered Tyke into his arms and carried him the twenty steps to the upper landing. Tom and I followed both realizing it was something David felt he had to do.

"Doc," David called out, as he gentled Tyke onto the waiting room couch. "Doc?" He knocked on the door to the exam room, then opened it, again calling out, "Doc?"

About that time, Doc entered from outside, puffing.

"Can't take them stairs like I used to," he said, standing with his hands on his hips, catching his breath.

He was a small man and did indeed look old as the hills.

"What's going on here?" he asked. "Saw you drive up. Was on my way to Gracie's for lunch."

David did the talking.

"The boy was apparently hit on the back of his head. He was unconscious, then came to for a few minutes but fainted again when we helped him to his feet. Gash on the back of his head. Deep. Nasty. Lost lots of blood."

"Bring him in and lay him on the table on his stomach."

The doctor went to a sink in the corner of the exam room and washed his hands, returning to eyeball the boy as he dried on a white towel.

"A Rakes, right?"

"William Rakes – called Tyke by most," David answered.

The doctor nodded as if that refreshed his memory and leaned down to examine the wound.

"Splinters. Bark chips. Clean, otherwise. Not going to give him a local unless he regains consciousness. Have to shave some of his hair. He'll hate that, I'm sure. "

He chuckled a high pitched old man's chuckle then began humming as he went to work.

Eleven stitches later the gaping wound was – well – less of a gaping wound. Doc's needle point would certainly not place at the County Fair. I hoped baldness didn't run in

the boy's family. Doc opened a bottle of ammonia, poured some onto a cloth and put it to Tyke's nose. He was awake in seconds.

"Doc. Oh, yes. The heavy-handed ghost. Gee Whiz, my head hurts!"

He struggled into a sitting position holding his temples. Doc did the little flashlight-in-the-eyes bit, then went to a glass front medicine chest.

"Here's a box of pain pills. No more than twelve a day. You'll probably have trouble focusing your eyes for a time. Wouldn't try to read. No running or rapid movements for the next twenty-four hours. You'll be fine in a day or two. My advice is that you find some pretty young lady to take care of you."

He chuckled again.

Tyke insisted on riding in the back on the return trip up the hill. I was again impressed with Tom's expertise and mentioned it to him after we were parked behind the dorm.

"Bin drivin' since I was eight. Always come natural to me."

There was a rear access road I hadn't known about. It was used mostly for deliveries, pickups, and yard work.

"Do you think you should come back to your room at the house," David asked as Tyke gingerly slipped off the tailgate and onto the ground, shaking off the help that had been offered.

"Doc said to stay quiet. Thanks, but I can't afford to sleep. Don't really need to. I'll be fine. I'm sure Mr. Mar. . . Miller has things for me to do."

"Okay. I'll trust you to follow Doc's orders."

He hugged the boy and left. Something about it tickled Tom to the point that he laughed out loud.

"What" I asked, smiling, immediately figuring it was probably none of my business.

"Just really nice to see Tykie git a big hug. The Headmaster don't give 'em out much but we knows it's different between he and Tykie. It's just nice, that's all."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Almost two, Sir," Tom said. "You gonna teach us in jeans today. That'd be awesome, ya know. More like you

belong here."

"Yes. Looks like jeans, indeed. I may be a few minutes late due to all this. I don't know if we can keep the incident quiet but I'd sure like to."

"Nobody hear it from me."

"You can honestly say I'm not in class because I have a headache," Tyke said.

"Sounds like you've agreed to take it easy."

"I really don't want to be alone but like you said the dorm seems safe."

"Maybe spending the rest of the day at home really wouldn't be such a bad idea. Is there internet access there?"

"Yeah. Right from my room."

I took out the pocket pad Tyke had furnished for our adventure and wrote several notes.

"Some research if you're up to it. Can you read my scribbles with those crossed eyes of yours?"

He smiled and nodded.

"This could really be interesting, huh?"

"I'm hoping it points us in some direction. You know how sorry I am about what happened. Next time you droop those hound dog eyes in my direction I must remember to be stronger."

Tom left for the cafeteria. I helped Tyke across the campus to the Headmaster's residence and explained the situation to Mary. It was ten after two when I walked through the door making my apologies for being late.

They giggled.

"What?"

The term was becoming a habit with me.

Katherine responded.

"I imagine it's just that you look a bit different this afternoon. It's a good look, just not what we're used to."

"Sorry about the muddy jeans. I've just been on a small adventure. So, how about this afternoon we pool our creativity and write an adventure story. We'll need four characters and a setting into which to place them. Finally, we'll need some natural disaster about to occur and we'll be on our way."

It was lots of fun. There would be a nun, a bank robber, an Olympic gymnast, and a six year old boy, all finding

themselves in a narrow gorge as the dam breaks up stream.

We finished at four thirty. I went back to the dorm and left an uncomfortable layer of grim in the shower. Tyke was waiting for me in his chair as I dripped my way back into the room. He talked nonstop while I dressed. Partly it was just Tyke's enthusiasm. Partly it may have been the hit on the head. Largely, I thought, it was fear. Fear has a way of loosening tongues in the strangest ways as if a barrage of words may keep the bad thing at bay.

"The Headmaster made tonight Hat Night in the cafeteria. Usually hats aren't allowed in there, but until we can figure out how to explain my bleeding bald spot, it's going to be hats at meals."

We made our way to the cafeteria. Several offered Tyke their condolences on his head ache. He accepted their good wishes without comment. He picked at his food. I, however, was famished, so cleaned up both our trays.

Afterwards, outside, he spent a few minutes with Cindy. I was close enough to watch but not to hear. He took off his hat and bent down. She winced, clearly wanting to do much more than the rules allowed. They said goodbye and he returned.

"I need to be de-conditioned, I think," he said.

"I'm not sure I understand the jargon."

"Like a kid who's afraid of dogs is placed closer and closer to a dog until he can feel good about reaching out and petting him – get rid of his fear. I think I need to go back to the cabin and spend some time. We can talk it all out. See if we can figure what happened down there."

"I'm up to it if you're sure you are."

"Won't know 'til I try I guess. Maybe we can circle it a few times, nonchalant-like, first. Is it five thirty yet?"

"On the dot," I answered, a bit puzzled at the question.

"Will you help me out of this t-shirt? It feels like its still 110 out here."

With care, I helped pull it over his head and handed it back to him. He slid it through his belt.

"I don't understand your reference to 5:30."

"Oh. Sorry. You'd think I'd been hit on the head or something. After five thirty guys are allowed to go bare-

cheded anywhere on campus. I think it would only be fair if the girls could, too, but for some reason the headmaster won't go for that."

His grin returned. I responded in kind.

By six we were closing in on the final small circle around the cabin.

"Let's sit on the step."

"Okay. Probably cooler inside, though. Charlie's AC you remember."

He nodded but sat anyway.

"Gives me the Willies being here," he said, beginning to think through what had happened there earlier.

"I was checking to make sure the door to the lye box was closed and looking to see how it opened from out here. I heard something behind me and remember thinking I was going to turn around and see if it was you. I don't remember anything else."

"You didn't see anything, then."

"Not a thing. What did you find down there, by the way?"

"More game playing. The door from the cave into Charlie's tunnel was wide open. The beam from the front door was back over the trapdoor. Nothing else, I guess. It's all a good news – bad news story, you know."

Tyke turned his head toward me and frowned. I tried to explain.

"The bad news is that we got the beejeebies scared out of us down there and that you got hurt. The good news is that who or whatever we're dealing with, seemed to be with us most of the time down there and never did anything more than try to scare us. It had plenty of opportunities to do us in if it had wanted to."

"Do us in, feed us to the fish, and nobody'd ever find us," Tyke added a bit sarcastically.

"Right. So, doesn't that seem like good news?"

"My mind says yes but my head says no. I need another pain pill."

"I'll get water from inside," I suggested.

"No. I'd rather you stayed here just now. I'm well known for my skill at swallowing pills dry."

After a series of disgusting noises and contortions resembling a cat coughing up a hair ball, the pill was gone. Clearly, he felt some pride in the accomplishment. He continued.

“What do you really think is going on here?” he asked.

“Can’t be sure. It’s always a fascinating call at this point. We might be dealing with a ghost. We might be dealing a man or men. Or, we might be dealing with both.”

“That’s not really very reassuring, you know. What did you mean, both?”

“Well, let’s say there is Charlie’s ghost and it has built up a malevolent reputation down through the years. Let’s also say that somebody decided they could use that story – lore, whatever – to their advantage, for some as yet unknown purpose. It could be that the two things are intermingling, you, see.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts.”

“I’m an open-minded skeptic. True, I’m a whole lot more skeptic than open, I suppose, but I try to lay out all possible scenarios whether they fit my preconceptions or not. Sometimes things happen for which I can find no explanation. I’m content to just leave them that way – as unexplainables. Most people seem to feel better if they devise some other worldly explanations. It just seems like an unnecessary extra layer of non-explanation to me – explaining an unexplainable something by referring to forces that occur in a realm that is itself unexplainable.”

“You could damage a boy’s religion talking that way.”

“That is never my intention. But you asked.”

“That’ll teach me!” he said grinning in my direction. “Tell me this, then. If this – I don’t know what to call it – force, that could have hurt us down there didn’t, but then up here I did get hurt, does that mean the up here force may be different from the down there force?”

“We will certainly never try to diagram that last sentence. Surprisingly, I understand what you asked and it is one of the important questions. There is another possibility that clouds the whole picture.”

“Oh, goody!” Just what I wanted to hear.”

“It could be that whatever harmed you did so in a panic.

Its plan might have called for the use of the lye box for escape after doing things inside the cabin. You were in the way so all it could think of was to get you out of the way.”

“That makes sense. I like it in fact. It takes away most of the underlying malevolent intent of the force.”

Except that in the cave it said it was going to kill me, I thought to myself, then spoke.

“I’m interested that no weapon was left behind,” I said. “Even more, perhaps, that if it were a panic driven, spur of the moment attack, that the . . . force . . . had a weapon with it.”

“Charlie carries that cane thing.”

“And if what I saw counts, that cane thing is actually a sizeable walking stick about five feet long and perhaps two or more inches thick. It would be a formidable weapon.”

Tyke raised a very basic question – one I had faced many times before.

“Would a ghost carry something that had physical mass – I mean wouldn’t a ghost’s walking stick be from the ghostly realm as well? And if it was, I can’t see how it could cause physical damage. Did that explain what I meant?”

“Certainly. A Ghost supposedly goes through walls like we go through fog. The clothes it wears and things it carries would have to be of the same ethereal stuff if they were to be able to follow the ghost through solid matter. If the stick were that unsubstantial, how could it have caused the gash in your head?”

Tyke nodded.

“Well?” he asked, expecting an answer.

He had once referred to himself as more organized than most folks. I had to wonder if that were at least partially in the service of making himself feel secure. Tyke liked answers – black and white answers, answers that left no wiggle room. I didn’t have those kind.

“I don’t know. My best hunch is that a ghost’s sword could not penetrate human flesh.”

He nodded again and stood.

“There’s some really interesting data I collected in the family tree assignment you gave me this afternoon. How about we go back up to our room and go over it?”

Our room, I thought. David was right. Give the lad a

bunk and he would be yours forever. I stood and looked around. The sun was low out of the west casting the long shadow of the teacher's residence clear across campus, encompassing the cabin on its way.

"Sure. I just need to take one short peek inside. I'll leave the door open so I'll never be out of your sight."

Tyke stood and turned toward the door taking several steps backwards. He nodded. I pulled the latch string and shoved the door open.

It was the last thing I expected. There, halfway down the ladder into the lantern lit cold hole was old Charlie. He turned and looked at me across the creepy darkness as if he had been waiting for me. He raised his cane, smiled, and uttered just one strangely out of place word: "Beholdin."

The back of my neck was fallen upon by an army of prickles. I gulped. He pulled the trap door shut after him. I rushed over to reopen it and confront whatever it was. The door had somehow been locked from below. I felt a presence behind me. I stood up and took a deep breath in preparation to turn and face it. I felt a hand on my shoulder and sudden, cold, sweat on my brow.

'How had it gotten by Tyke,' I wondered, fearing for the boy's safety.

CHAPTER FIVE

There came a voice from behind me – tremulous and tenor.

"My pants are wet. How about yours?" it said.

It was Tyke. His hand on my shoulder was trembling. I turned and put my arm around him thinking to myself that the lad was well beyond the allowable limit for scaring the bejeebes out of me.

"I'm pretty sure he or it wasn't expecting me – well, us as it turned out," I said. "I thought you were staying your distance."

"I figured we'd come this far together, I shouldn't abandon you now."

"We could coin a new phrase here," I said smiling, hoping to lighten the situation.

"What's that?"

"Wet pants loyalty."

It received a snort – nearly a chuckle. I was satisfied.

"When you were exploring the cold hole earlier did you notice any way of locking the trapdoor from down there?"

"Guess I wasn't looking. No. It's locked now, though, right?"

"It's locked."

"What did you really come in here for," he asked as we moved back toward the door.

"Some sort of hiding place – big enough to hold a man for a short time. I figure he had to have been in here somewhere while I went down into the tunnel. When I entered the cold hole, he left and ran into you – unexpectedly – out by

the lye box. Just can't figure where he could have been."

We both scanned the room but saw nothing obvious. We closed the door behind us and walked back toward the dorm. It was hot and the wind from the south, though brisk, did nothing to cool us. I commented on it and Tyke was ready with a response.

"Dark of the moon tomorrow night. With this hot, southerly, wind you know what that means."

"The Devil's Darkness?" I said since he didn't seem able to speak the words.

"Right. It's the scariest time there is around here. It's when all the partings have taken place."

"Let's take a detour over to the Headmaster's house and see if he has found any patterns in the data you and Cindy put together. Unless you feel compelled otherwise, let's keep this last incident just between us. Don't want the panic level to be raised beyond what it already is."

He nodded. We were soon there. David and Mary were sitting on the front porch looking west toward the sunset. Tyke gave Mary a kiss on the cheek. She returned it.

"How's the head?" she asked trying to take a peek without being overly obvious.

"Hurts. I'll be fine. You folks okay?"

"Fine," she said. "It was really nice having you back in your room this afternoon. We miss you, you know."

"I know. Me, too."

David broached the topic that was on my mind.

"I can't believe there have been 119 deaths in the past fifty years. I found what may be a pattern – though it makes little sense. They each died soon after their physicals."

"On their birthdays?"

"Not usually. Doc called them in to check out some other thing he'd been following in each one – heart murmurs, diabetic tendencies – things like that. Doc may be old but he does stay on top of things. He loves the kids."

"So, they may have each actually had a physical problem severe enough to cause their death?"

"It's never come up before so I've never discussed it with Doc."

"Seems I need to spend some time with him and his

records tomorrow," I said.

"I'll arrange it. Ten fifteen or so?"

"That will be fine. Yes."

"There is something else," David continued. "Mary remarked that it seemed to her the ancestry of many of the deceased students could be traced back to three or so families."

"Interesting. Back to what point in time?"

David looked at Mary who handled the answer.

"I haven't traced it specifically, understand. It's just my impression from what I know about the families. It's like a hobby for me, you might say. But, they are families that moved into the area around the same time – about seventy years ago; Jacco Fazio, Bertrand Overstreet, and Johnny Lightfoot. I'll look into that further if you'd like."

"Yes, I certainly would like."

I turned to Tyke.

"Any of those names turn up in the family tree searches you did his afternoon?"

"Bertrand Overstreet was my great grandfather – my mother's granddaddy. That suddenly seems mind-blowing terrifying."

Mary shuddered and frowned. She held out her hand and Tyke grasped it, tightly, as if considering it his lifeline for the moment.

"Probably the sooner the better on that, Mary," I said.

She nodded and stood, preparing to go inside and get to work. Tyke met her with a long, meaningful, head on her shoulder, hug. She looked at David over the boy's shoulder.

"He can stay here tonight, can't he?"

"Certainly. I suppose that's up to him. It might be best, here, though, son."

Tyke looked at me.

"Who'll look after old Sir Marc, if I'm over here? I think I better stay with him. We're sort of into this together, you understand. Like he pointed out, nobody's ever been harmed while they were in the dorm and I promise I won't leave."

David looked at me and I shrugged signaling it was his call, not mine. He stood and put his arm around Tyke.

"Okay. But you won't leave the building and you'll stay

within Mr. Miller's view at all times."

"Yes, Sir."

David turned back to me.

"I'm going to suggest something I've never suggested before. Close your door tonight. There's an old master key hanging on a hook inside the closet – up above the front opening. Lock yourselves in."

I nodded and looked at Tyke waiting his confirmation. He also nodded. He and David embraced, briefly, and we were on our way back to the dorm. There in the twilight I could see the light was on in our room. I might have left it on. I didn't think so. My quandary was soon over as the light went out. I didn't say anything to Tyke. We climbed the stairs and entered the room. I flipped on the light and closed the door behind us more quickly than seemed reasonable to Tyke.

"You did that as if you're really expecting something to happen."

I had no useful response so borrowed a page from the boy; I grinned, nodded, and shrugged. Tyke found the key and locked the door, handing the key to me when he finished.

"There's an old trick that was always used in the mystery movies of the early nineteen-hundreds."

I took the key back to the door, inserted it and turned it crossway in the lock.

"This way no one can insert a key from the outside."

"Cool! I love those old detective movies. Charlie Chan, Sam Spade, the Lone Ranger."

I had never thought of the Lone Ranger as a detective but upon reflection I suppose he was.

"You want the lower bunk?" I asked. "Might be easier on your head."

"No. Once I'm up there I intend to stay. It'll be fine."

We sat in our respective chairs.

"So," I began. "Shoot!"

"Shoot?"

"I can see the old question wheels spinning ninety per in that head of yours."

"I suppose the gash gives you more direct access?"

He smiled.

"Now, that's more like the old Tykie, I'm used to."

He nodded as he began.

"It seems to me if somebody had a grudge against my great grandfather, that person would have died long ago. Does that seem to require some kind of ghostly revenge? And, what purpose could it serve? Revenge is usually to hurt the original guy that done you wrong. How could killing off later generations of kinfolk meet that test?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Clearly the formulation of questions was more important at that moment.

"Why would the bad . . . force, I guess we decided to call it . . . why would it use the kid's trip to Doc as a signal to go after them? Maybe thinking the natural death thing would seem more legitimate. But then how does the force make it appear like natural causes? Maybe it is, and the whole supernatural element – like you called it – is an unnecessary layer. Can people be scared to death, I mean really scared to death? At some level, all of us around here believe in the spirit-sucking story. Could it be that when the force confronts us we tap into that terrible fear and just die? I've heard that's one theory about how voodoo works."

He paused to look out the window into the growing darkness.

"Since lots of us – well, them, I hope – are related in some way, could it be we all inherited some medical defect that the force is capitalizing on?"

That was one theory I had not considered. It was interesting, although there seemed to be three genetically different families with three greatly divergent ethnic backgrounds. A shared gene seemed unlikely.

Tyke put his finger to his lips requesting silence and he pointed toward the door. I strained to listen. I heard it, too. A rustling; no, more like a soft scraping; no, it could not really be characterized. The door moved in ever so slightly near the bottom. There was more of that quiet noise. I still couldn't place it. A light flashed briefly under the crack at the floor. I stood and walked to the door, not at all sure what I would do. Tyke followed, fingers-in-my-belt close behind.

I whispered close to his ear.

"Can you look under the door?"

He nodded and got to his knees. The sudden change

of direction clearly caused pain in his head. I had not been thinking, but the deed was done. He looked for some time, moving along the crack from side to side. I helped him up and motioned him to come with me back away from the door so we could talk.

"Strange," he began in a whisper. "Some kind of white cloth stuffed in there but just across the middle foot or maybe fifteen inches. The hall seems dark, just like I'd expect it to be.

My mind began spinning worst case scenarios. What if the crack were being stuffed so some kind of gas could be shot in under the door? What if it was oil soaked and put there to ignite and set fire to the place. I took out my phone and called David for backup.

"I'll be right there!"

Tyke watched out the window as David came running across the campus. I turned off the lights thinking that if someone broke in we'd have a better chance of escaping that way. I motioned Tyke to stand behind where the door stood when it was open. It was the safest place in the room. I picked up my closed briefcase to use as a weapon. I had to begin packing some sort of protection.

We waited. Presently I saw the light go on under the door. It rattled, briefly. That was followed by shuffling feet and several voices speaking at once. There was a knock at the door.

"It's the Headmaster, Mr. Miller. Things are okay out here."

I unlocked the door and opened it just a crack in case he had been forced to say that. Everything seemed normal. I opened it the rest of the way. Tyke stepped out from behind it.

"What's going on?" Tyke asked.

"Well," David began. "It seems that Tom and Mike, here, took it upon themselves to sit watch at your door this evening. Apparently, the rumor mill has been working overtime up here on the hill."

Tom stepped into view, baseball bat over his shoulder, waving sheepishly from beside his head. David kicked a pillow aside – one, which the boys had apparently propped up against the door so they could be comfortable during their watch. Mike was wielding a spade and a matching, sheepish,

look.

I sighed. Tyke sighed. The three came inside.

"Well, I must say I'm impressed by your courage and dedication to a friend," I said looking from boy to boy. "Next time, just give us some warning. You had us scared to death – poor choice of words – really scared in here."

"Sorry."

"Sorry."

"Okay, then," David began, "Enough excitement for one night. Back to your rooms. Let's try this again."

He raised his eyebrows in my direction and pulled the door closed after him. He hadn't been gone sixty seconds before there was another knock.

"It's Tom and Mike," came Tom's voice through the door.

Tyke opened the door a crack revealing two heads, one above the other like two thirds of the three stooges.

"The Headmaster didn't actually say we couldn't be here, so we'd feel better if we stayed. Is that okay?" Tom asked looking beyond Tyke to me.

Tyke turned his head toward me, awaiting my decision on the matter.

"The more the merrier, I suppose. Do you snore?"

"No, Sir."

"No, Sir."

Then be our guests.

They nodded and Tyke closed the door shaking his head.

"They are good friends – not always real sensible – but good friends."

"I can see that."

"For all the problems I've had in my life, I've really been pretty fortunate, you know."

"I'm glad you can see it that way."

"I'm going to take another little golden pill and hit the sack," he said. "I probably won't be able to sleep, but Doc said to rest."

"Yes, and if you can't sleep to the same extent that you couldn't sleep last night, I predict you will be well rested by morning."

Tyke grinned and was soon up in his bunk. I followed suit, hoping the next day would begin providing some answers.

A new twist played through my mind. During the first several encounters with Charlie, he was insistent that I leave or die. But the last time there was an entirely different aura to his message. Beholdin' had been his word. My translation into the King's English made that something like, "Thank you, I'm in your debt." And he smiled. He had most certainly never smiled at me before.

* * *

The problem had apparently not kept me from a good night's sleep. I awoke at five a.m. and was immediately faced with three new problems. Tyke, Tom and Mike – three, dead to the world teenagers, none of whom were of a mind to open their eyes. I ignored Tyke, stepped over the two, ever vigilant, guardians of our well-being, sprawled there on the hallway floor sawing logs, and made my way into – and quickly out of – a chilly shower. Tyke's admonition about always using those facilities in the p.m. had been correct.

By the time I returned, the two stooges had crawled off to who knows where and Tyke was sitting up on his bunk, legs dangling, eyes still closed.

"Headache or sleepy?" I asked.

"Both. More ache, I suppose. Like I would imagine a hangover might be."

"I can only imagine," I said. "Never had one – don't drink."

I ran a glass of water at the sink and took it along with the box of pills to Tyke. I noticed his eyes were tearing. I pointed to my own cheeks.

"Pain or sad?"

"Pain! Feels a lot like I've been hit over the head with a walking stick. Oh, wait! I have – or may have been."

He could smile and handed down the pill box and empty glass.

"What's on the agenda for today?"

"Rest for you, and Doc Johnson for me."

"You sick?"

"Sick of not finding clue one, yet. I hope he can point

me in some useful direction."

"You'll like him. He's always there for us whenever we need him. But seriously, what can I do?"

"See if Mary can use your help drawing up those family trees and make sure you're with somebody at all times."

"Worried?"

"Cautious. Your main job right now is to recuperate."

He nodded, though he was clearly less than happy with the turn in our conversation.

After breakfast, I returned to my room while Tyke, escorted by Tom and Mike, went to assist Mary. I sat by the window and made notes, from time to time looking down at the grounds below. It gave me an idea.

There was an hour before my session. I dropped my briefcase off at the cafeteria and then walked across campus toward the steps that led down to the parking lot. Rather than descending them, I circled right – to the west – along the ridge of the steep hill that ran down to the lot. I continued south until I reached a spot at the edge of the grove of trees. From that position, there was a clear view across the parking lot to the place where Tyke and I had exited the cave the day before.

I wondered if it would be worth someone's time to stake it out – see if anyone actually came and went from the cave. Perhaps an activity to keep Tyke occupied while I went to see Doc Johnson after the session. I took a seat and enjoyed the view. Nothing happened while I was there.

, * * *

The session drew to a natural close a few minutes before ten. At the group's request, the afternoon get-together would focus on the student's questions about things I had written – why I chose to one style over another and things like that. I was looking forward to it.

Tyke reminded me about my appointment with Doc, as if that were necessary. It really indicated his desire to accompany me. I didn't give him that option but did suggest he stake out the cave entrance. I took a camera from my briefcase and showed him how to use the telephoto lens. If he saw anything he was to snap away.

"Can Cindy go along?"

“That’s your call, Tyke. But it has to be an all business venture rather than pleasure.”

“I understand. Kissing with eyes open, not shut.”

He grinned the grin of an imp, knowing he was pulling my leg.

“On second thought, perhaps you should take Tom and Mike, instead,” I added playing his game.

“They would certainly be less kissable. But I jest! I doubt if there is any way I will be able to shake them. They seem to have become my dedicated body guards.”

“Just hope you can keep them awake!”

He grinned and draped the camera strap around his neck.

“Be sure the Headmaster knows where you will be.”

He nodded.

By then it was straight up ten o’clock. My appointment was for ten fifteen. I hurried to my car and cautiously rolled down the hill toward town. When all was said and done, I entered his waiting room with thirty seconds to spare. I took a seat.

There were three doors. One, I knew from the day before, led into his examination room. I supposed the one on the wall to my right led to his living quarters toward the front of the building. That would leave the one toward the rear for his office. I was, I realized, far too proud of my deductions as the door to my right opened revealing his living room, beyond. He crossed the waiting room motioning me into his office at the rear. Was I good or what!

It was a secretary’s nightmare. Doc was clearly a piler not a filer. There were a half dozen chairs arranged in a semi-circle at the front of his desk. He positioned two so they were facing each other and we sat.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, looking at his watch as if to indicate it was all an imposition. Not the picture of patient, old, Doc I had received.

“I suppose you know I’m a writer.”

“Yes. Yes. A writer here to stir up the Charlie Chance saga.”

I thought saga had been a strange choice of words but I nodded my agreement and went on.

“It’s what is referred to as the partings that I’m here to discuss, mainly. I understand that as coroner you have examined most of the bodies.”

“Yes. You want my opinion about the cause of death. Well, it’s all in the reports. Absolutely nothing wrong with most of them other than that they are dead, of course.”

“I understand you’ve used the state forensics lab in some of the cases.”

“Every once in a while, just to keep me sane. It’s good to have those experts verify my impression on such strange happenings.”

“I can imagine. Yes. I was wondering if you see any pattern to the youngster’s physical condition. I understand you keep close tabs on their health.”

“Pattern? No. I’ve wondered that myself. Every time it happens I wonder again.”

“Have you considered some genetic facet to it?”

“Genetic? No. Why would you bring that up?”

“Well, all the victims traced their ancestry back to one of three men.”

He shifted his position and became thoughtful – immediately more interested in either the topic or me – perhaps both.

“Is that so? I had no way of knowing. Interesting. Perhaps genetic, then. Fascinating. Never heard of any such thing, though. Surely, they haven’t been the only offspring of the men down through the generations. Must be that the vast majority lived out their natural lives.”

“I have some research assistants looking into that right now. Could be a recessive, I suppose.”

“You go into these things with both feet, don’t you, son?”

“Nothing half way. I don’t believe in presenting anything less than the most reasonable, thoroughly researched, facts in a case I’m writing about.”

He shook his head, making me think he was still considering my previous comment rather than my answer to his last question.

“Which way do you tip the scales – physical malfunction or malevolent spirit?” I asked, getting to the point.

He crossed his legs and folded his hands onto his knee.

“My granddaddy was a partner in a rope manufacturing business up at Yates Corner. Made a great deal of money. The operation had pretty well petered out by the time my daddy came of age. He and my mother moved down here – no idea why. I was born and raised here. Daddy wanted a doctor, a lawyer, and a minister in the family so he and mother kept having kids until there were three boys. I was the eldest and wanted to go to sea but my lot was medical school.

“Not much that goes on within fifty miles that you don’t know about when you live in these parts. Gossip is our major form of entertainment. I grew up with the Charlie Chance stories. I believed them as gospel as a kid – we all did. There’s still a part of me that does.

“When it comes right down to it, I don’t have it all laid out in a neat set of answers. Charlie was a vengeful demon, plain and simple. Hard to believe his spirit would be any different.”

“You believe spirits walk our physical world?”

“Like I said, I was raised here. I can say it makes no logical sense and yet when push comes to shove I do lean toward a yes on that one. They’re trodding the earth inside each of us while we’re alive. Why not continue hanging around after we’re dead?”

“So, your conclusion regarding the partings is . . .”

“If you’d see one of the bodies you just might believe the soul had been sucked out of them, yourself. Eyes bugged out, mucus membranes dry as the desert. Capillaries burst in their cheeks and forehead. My vote has to go with Charlie.”

It wasn’t the response I expected from a man of science. I wanted to know more about him.

“Did you come back here right after your internship?”

“Served two years as physician with a deep-sea exploration ship before landing here. Loved the sea but couldn’t beat the sea sickness. Been here fifty-two years. Need to be looking around for a youngster to take over I suppose but kids these days have no dedication to patients – it’s all how much money they can make and how early they can retire.”

He shook his head, clearly – well, it wasn't clearly anything. It could have been disappointment or it could have been disgust.

I had learned nothing of any value and wondered if it had been the quality of my questions or the direction of Doc's answers. I'd try one more time.

"Any advice for me as I search for the truth in all this?"

"Leave! You're just getting all these people's hopes up about something you can never solve."

I would hit him with the same parting shot that I used with the Reverend.

"So, you believe the folks around here should be content to just continue losing two or three wonderful youngsters every year and do nothing to try and stop it?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe it's God's way of sanitizing the next generations."

"Sanitizing?"

"He may know things we don't about evil intentions – spiritual aberrations – things that run through their minds and souls."

His conversation was degenerating into esoteric nonsense. Perhaps it was a deterioration of logical process attributable to his eighty plus years. If I wanted to pursue the topics further with him, it would probably be better served at another time, when his grey matter was fresh and alert.

I stood and offered him my hand. He stood and, unlike the Reverend, accepted it. His grip was surprisingly firm and strong for his age.

"Thanks for your time, Sir. And, thanks for your help with the Rakes boy, yesterday."

"His headaches will likely be worse the next twenty-four hours. He can double up on the pain medicine during that time."

I nodded.

"I'll pass that on to him. He is certainly a fine young man – clearly one of this county's best."

Strangely, Doc raised his eyebrows. Again, perhaps a generalized response due to his age. Perhaps he felt my short tenure there didn't give me the right to make such

judgments. Perhaps it had indicated his agreement.

I left and stopped half way down the stairs looking for the café he had mentioned the day before. It sat less than a block away – a 1940's diner in a shiny old aluminum railroad car. What fun! I walked to it and entered at 10:35. Too early for lunch, I figured, but then it was conversation I was after anyway. I approached the counter and slid onto a chrome stool with a red leatherette seat. A sixtyish looking woman with bright red, tightly curled hair and mountains of makeup was elbow deep into the sink behind the counter.

"Breakfast, lunch, or coffee?" she asked delivering the briefest glance in my direction as she dried her hands and arms.

"Coffee. A roll if you have one."

The coffee arrived in a low, thick, cup, also typical of the forties. The cold roll was on a heavy, matching, plate.

"What a wonderful place you have here," I began, looking around.

"Coffee's a buck. You kin have as much as you kin drink. The roll's a buck twenty-five."

She ignored my compliment and waited impatiently for the cash not ever really looking at me.

"I don't suppose you get a whole lot of strangers in here, do you?" I said, pressing for a conversation.

"Nope. Had one in February, as I recall."

That seemed to have found a quick dead end. I handed her a five-dollar bill. She put it in a cigar box and gave no indication I would be receiving change. That was okay.

"The population sign says five hundred folks here."

"Was once."

"Probably includes the kids up at the Academy?" I said giving it the tone of a question.

"Don't really matter none. What's here is here."

I nodded as if it made sense and sipped at the coffee. She delivered a knife, fork, and small dish carrying a slab of butter. She surprised me by taking the initiative in the conversation.

"You're that writer guy?"

"Well, I'm a writer guy. Marc Miller – Marc with a 'C'."

"Into Charlie Chance I hear."

“Yes. Seems like a very interesting story. I want to learn everything I can about it.”

“Be careful. Some don’t want nobody lookin’ into it, you know?”

It sounded like she was genuinely concerned for my welfare. I wondered if I would have heard that, had the room had been filled with the regular crowd.

“You think a writer might be in danger, is that what you’re saying.”

I knew I had pressed the limits.

“Just sayin’ to be careful. You ain’t touched the roll.”

She brought more coffee, even though I hadn’t downed much of that either. I buttered the roll, seeing some humor in my acting upon her observation. She leaned in, confidential in her manner.

“I always thought there was somethin’ fishy about them dead kids, bless their souls. It just ain’t natural for such things to keep goin’ on. Have you met the Reverend?”

“Yes. He not so politely told me to butt out.”

She folded her arms and nodded emphatically as if that should impart some important insight.

“Are you saying the Reverend may be involved in it somehow?”

She raised her eyebrows as if, again, that should be a sufficient answer. I took a bite of roll. It was wonderful.”

“Very good. You make them?”

“Yes, I do. Momma’s recipe. Her momma started this place back in the forties. Still use mostly family recipes.”

“This is your home, then.”

“Fifty-nine years.”

“Most folks don’t seem to like the idea I’m here snooping around.”

“My nephew was the last of the partings. I’m fed up with it. He was a great kid – kind, smart, would have done big things in his life.”

“Jeff Rakes was your nephew. Then you’re also related to Tyke – William?”

“Another nephew on my momma’s side. She was a Rakes.”

“And your last name. I don’t believe I caught it.”

“Cuz I didn’t throw it.”

I assumed it was said in good humor although I couldn’t tell if I were going to get an answer or not. She sighed.

“Chance. Charlie was some great, great, great, uncle or cousin or something. Nobody’d ever talk to me about it so that’s all I know.”

“Does it cause problems? Sorry, that was out of line. It’s none of my business.”

“Oh, it’s okay. No problems anymore. Some teasin’ as a kid but that’s just kids. If it hadn’t been that it probably would a been this kinky red hair. I owes that to the Chances as well, the way I hear it.”

“Do you see Tyke or his family often?”

“Seldom. Tykie more than the others. They live way out on Sandy Creek. Forty acres out there that’s worse than useless. Just the parents, little Johnny, and one a the older boys with his wife and passel a kids. Them Rakes men sure does make lots a kids. It’s a family that stays to themselves, mostly. Dirt poor. Not much for mixin’ with others.”

I nodded and directed the conversation back to Charlie.

“You got a theory on the Charlie Chance thing?”

“I’ll just say this one thing. If the Reverend didn’t have the dark side of the spirit world to hold over us, he wouldn’t have nothin’ at all. It’s like Old Charlie works fer him. I hear he even keeps a calendar marked nine months in front of every dark a the moon. He preaches right from his pulpit for couples to do without relations fer the two weeks on both sides so there won’t be no more Charlie Chances born in these parts. Right from the pulpit he says stuff like that!”

She shook her head in disbelief. I finished up and prepared to leave.

“Ya got two seventy-five commin’,” she said, reaching into the box and counting it onto the counter. I picked up the two bills.

“You gonna be see’n Tykie?” she asked.

“In about ten minutes, providing I don’t fall off that road on the way back up to the Academy.”

“I’ll send a roll up with you then. He loves my rolls.”

“How very thoughtful. I’ll see that he gets it.”

With sack in hand I left the diner and headed toward my

car. The sack was plainly too heavy. I looked inside. There were six rolls. What a sweet woman, I thought.

Without really looking ahead I strolled leisurely down the sidewalk taking in the old storefronts. The Main Street remained unpaved. It was covered in hard packed white chat. Even the towns in that area were rural by design. Something about my time with Gracie had served as a pick me up. I felt good – not confident – not safe – not anywhere near successful – but I felt good.

Well, kiss all that goodbye! When I arrived at the spot in front of Doc's office where I had parked, my car was gone. The area wasn't empty, however. Stuck into the gravel, dripping in blood, was a walking stick, five feet high and two inches thick.

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CHAPTER SIX

I looked up and down the street but there was no red Chrysler in sight. I looked around for people who might have seen something. No one. I placed a call to David and explained my situation. He dispatched Tom and I was soon back in the parking lot – so was my car, sitting in the very spot where it had been parked earlier.

“Can you tell if it’s been hotwired?” I asked Tom.

He grinned.

“I was hot wiring daddy’s tractor when I was six to haul us kids down to the swimmin’ hole. Always got a switchin’ but figured it was worth it.”

The car wasn’t locked. He looked under the dash. He looked under the hood. He scratched his head.

“No signs of it, Sir. Usually be wire left dangling or at least scratches on them prongs. Nothin’ there. Somebody must a had a key.”

“Is Tyke okay?” I asked.

“Him and Cindy’s been up yonder in the grove lookin’ out this way ever since you left fer town. Me and Mike stayed our distance but the Headmaster said fer us to keep an eye on him. They’s usually kissin’ up a storm when they’s out alone like that but not today. Maybe kissin’ aggravates a headache. I sure wouldn’t know; I kin tell ya that much.”

“Not much kissing going on in your life, you say?”

“I’ve practiced on punkins but it’s bound to be some different with a girl. Didn’t move my parts romantically, if you know what I mean.”

I figured that was probably good, actually, but chose

not to pursue it. I smiled and looked up toward the grove. Tyke was waving. He pointed to the stairway, and fifty steps later we were together at the top.

“You playing games with me?” were the first – almost stern sounding – words out of his mouth.

“Games? I don’t understand.”

“Driving up here, parking, and then walking back down the road toward town.”

“I did that?”

He looked puzzled.

“Yes. Didn’t you? What?”

“It was not I. He looked enough like me to pass for me though did he?”

“It was your car and you’re outfit. I suppose I didn’t do a close inspection of any kind. I sure thought it was you. What’s going on?”

“Have you guys eaten, yet?” I asked being obvious about changing the topic as a private signal to Tyke.

“You guys go on ahead,” he said to the others. “I’ll catch up.”

Once they were out of ear shot he was ready for all the details.

“So?” Give! What’s going on?”

“Someone took my car while I was in you aunt’s diner. From what you’re saying, it sounds like someone drove it back and parked it, posing as me. Down in town it was replaced with a bloody walking stick shoved into the gravel.”

“Blood? This is getting way too serious don’t you think?”

“Too serious? You want me to pack my bags?”

“Well, no. But it seems to be getting scarier hour by hour.”

“Did your surveillance turn up anything?”

“Afraid not. And, I really did keep my eyes peeled the whole time.”

“So Tom told me.”

Tyke grinned.

“I assume he was disappointed. He seems to get all his romantic kicks second hand from spying on me. I got to find him a girl.”

“Or, an interactive pumpkin!”

“What?”

“Private joke, I guess.”

I handed him the bag.

“From Aunt Gracie – apparently enough for your friends as well.”

“She understands how things are up here. Not many frills or extras like this. She’s a good woman. Never married. All alone at her age. That’s just sad.”

“What about Doc? Is he married?”

“Nope. Rumor has it he and a woman up in Yelp have had an ongoing . . . relationship . . . for lots of years. Don’t know her name. Supposedly there’s a son. Probably about your age. Don’t really know if any of it’s true. I’m starved. Can we go eat? Senior girls this noon. They are the best cooks on the mountain.”

Tyke went to sit with his friends and I pulled in at the staff table. Kathy was nearly finished but seemed happy to see me. David had just begun.

“I need to speak with the law,” I said. “Who is it and how do I go about it?”

“Sheriff Carter. Good man. Ten years on the job. Some say he’s in Reverend Abernathy’s pocket. I doubt that. He’s Doc’s cousin – lots younger, of course. It’s nothing for there to be a twenty-year span between oldest and youngest in the families around here. Miss Hawthorne knows him somewhat better than the rest of us.”

He addressed her directly.

“How old would you say?”

“Fifty-five.”

She turned to me.

“I’ve dated his son off and on. Jerry is thirty-four. I know the family well. I’d bet the Sheriff is free of anybody’s influence – well except his wife’s.”

David spoke.

“Let me use that fancy phone of yours and I can see what we can do about getting the two of you together.”

As it turned out, Sheriff Carter was within easy driving distance. Apparently, he was eager to speak with me as well. A one o’clock meeting was set. I figured it would contain still

another invitation to head back to Indiana.

The remainder of lunch passed with small talk – everyone wanting to deal with the main issue of the moment but no one prepared to open up the topic. I figured that was their business.

It was just after twelve. I took Tyke aside and asked if he felt well enough to continue his vigil. He said yes and unrolled a large piece of paper on which he and Cindy had begun plotting the family trees of the deceased students. So far Mary's impression was holding up. They all had come from one of the three great grandfathers.

"Stick with somebody else at all times and don't follow your own nose on anything. Come to me with it. Understood?"

"Yes. I understand, Daddy."

His attempt at humor also indicated his willingness to be careful. It made me feel suddenly old. I was old enough to be his father. Ugh! I went back to my room and made notes from my window seat. I figured I would see the Sheriff arrive and I would go down to meet him.

The windows were open but even the steady southerly breeze did little other than keep the room filled with hot air. David needed to look into tapping the cool air from the caves for these buildings. Looking at the calendar reminded me it was just one night away from the dark of the moon. That along with the warm breeze out of the south defined the Devil's Darkness. I shuddered at the thought. If there were to be another loss of life I would feel fully responsible. I had stirred things up!

For no apparent reason an image flashed in my mind. It was related to something I had seen just prior to discovering that my car was gone. What was it? Oh, yes. I saw Doc Johnson coming out of an outside basement door at the rear of the building that housed his office. Innocent enough, I figured upon reflection. It was probably a storage area for supplies although he didn't seem to have anything with him. Maybe he had dropped something off. That must have been it; you can't remove supplies unless you've previously put them there.

Sheriff Carter arrived early. I hurried down stairs and

across the campus to meet him. He looked imposing in his brown uniform and wide brimmed hat. I'm sure I've never seen a side arm as large as the one he carried.

"Sheriff Carter. I'm Marc Miller. Glad to meet you, Sir."

"Fred, Fred Carter."

He extended his hand. So far so good, I thought. He had brought neither a rail nor tar and feathers unless they were somehow contained in the small brown paper bag in his left hand.

"I guess I haven't thought far enough ahead to find a place for our get together," I said looking around.

He pointed.

"The steps at Charlie's cabin are still in the shade. I'm not much for chair and table meetings."

"The steps it is then. I certainly appreciate your taking time to see me."

"First things first," he said as we made ourselves comfortable.

Here it comes, I thought. My invitation to skedaddle.

From the small paper bag, he took a book; it was a copy of my latest. I was puzzled.

"My wife says if I don't get your autograph, I'll be sleeping on the couch for a week. So, in the interest of my happy home, would you be so kind?"

"Certainly."

I fumbled for a pen.

"Her name?"

"Jennifer. She's a big fan. Sends you an open supper invitation any evening you're free."

"How sweet. It's hard to know what my schedule will be but if I can make it, I'll call ahead."

I handed the book back to him and he deposited in the sack without reading what I had written.

"Well, who goes first, here?" I asked.

"You're company in these parts. Shoot!"

"My interest is perhaps too general to formulate into specific questions. Basically, I guess I'm wondering if any of these deaths – the partings – have been investigated as homicides and if they have, what was found."

"I'll answer your question but first let me toss out some

bits and pieces of background information to help set the stage.”

I nodded. It was probably what I really needed the most at that point.

“You’re sitting smack dab in the middle of Superstition Central, USA. I went five years to college over in Fayetteville. It’s where I met Jennifer. She grew up in Tulsa. After a few months back here – I was a deputy then – her take on it was that whenever it became a contest between facts and superstition or religion around here, facts lost. It was a pretty accurate observation. We aren’t dumb and you’d be hard put to find a more caring, loving lot of folks anywhere in the world. But we do tiptoe through life on superstitions feet.

“We need answers and when none are readily available we are often too willing to accept the first one that comes along – provided we trust the source. When that source is either a preacher or a doctor, we rush in to believe their answer regardless of any illogic that may be attached to it. Facts that contradict long held opinions are worse than suspect and the person standing up for them is more or less blacklisted – shunned would be a better word.

“Educators’ positions come in about fifth around here, somewhere after Aunt Suzy and Grandma. Writer’s probably don’t even make the cut.”

He smiled and continued.

“In each of the cases I’ve know about – the partings as they are referred to – the coroner has declared them due to natural causes. That doesn’t leave much of a crack through which law enforcement can snoop around. Privately I’ve looked into a half dozen. There just are no clues that point to any kind of foul play.”

“I understand the state forensics lab has examined some of the cases, is that right?”

“Yes and no. From time to time Doc submits his examination reports to them for their opinions.”

“So, the bodies themselves have never been examined by any outside agency?”

“Only one to my knowledge. A boy by the name of Butler. It was about ten years ago. Same results, though. Heart failure in his case. I have a complete file on him back at

the office. I assume you'd like to see it."

"You read my mind. What's your gut instinct on it all? Ghosts, humans, or both?"

"Both?" You suggest a strange partnership."

"Wouldn't really have to be a formal partnership. It could be a situation in which one is taking advantage of the other's activities."

"That puts a sizable dose of complication into the pot."

"Think about it. How often do your cases involve one party trying to make it appear that someone else is guilty?"

"Way too often. I'm seeing how you're thinking. Somebody – some flesh and blood somebody – might be taking advantage of the legend, the superstition, for their own ends. Any idea about those ends?"

"None whatsoever! Nothing I have found so far points to anything useful. Both Doc Johnson and Reverend Abernathy have told me to leave. I'm quite sure that I've even been excommunicated by the Reverend by now. At least Doc didn't threaten not to treat me. There is one interesting development. All the dead youngsters going back fifty years have one of three great grandfathers in common."

"Names?"

"Jacco Fazio, Bertrand Overstreet, and Johnny Lightfoot."

"Nothing rings a bell for me aside from the fact those are all outside names. You won't find a half dozen families in the county with any of those names today – no Fazios and only one Lightfoot. None of them are the old families around here – Rakes, Yates, Purdy, Carter."

I nodded that I understood.

"I'm having family trees drawn up right now and by this evening we should have all the relationships down in black and white. My! Something just hit me. Any chance somebody would go to such extremes to keep outsider families from getting a foothold around here – contaminating the gene pool?"

"That's hard to believe, especially considering how many generations have been involved in all this."

I nodded and fed him another concern.

"One more thing. I understand that a few of the deaths

included in the list of supposed partings were not students. Do you know anything about them?"

"All those were back before my time with the department. I'll run a check – discretely, of course. Now that you're here we don't need it to appear that anybody else is stirring things up."

It seemed unanimous – Marc Miller stirred things up!

"Your turn, I suppose," I said.

"I guess you've answered all my major questions in the course of our discussion here. I suppose I do wonder if any part of you really believes in the supernatural."

"I've been known to check under strange beds before turning off the light at night," I said, offering a smile.

It really wasn't an answer but since it was the best I had for myself, it would have to do for him as well!

We stood, each dusting off the seat of our pants, and shook hands.

"Tell Katy I said hi. Thought she'd be a Carter by now. Not sure what's held it all up so long."

He tipped his hat and turned to leave, then turned back toward me.

"I take it you're not going to report that incident with your car."

"You mean the one where my vehicle had a mind of its own and took a joy ride all by itself?"

"That would be the one, I suppose."

"Surprised you even know about it."

"I know about things if they happen in this county."

"Would it serve any purpose to report it?"

"Probably not. Would be the first 'partially stolen' vehicle on my watch, though, I can tell you that. Be careful."

He smiled and walked off toward the steps to the parking lot where he was intercepted by Tyke and Cindy. He administered a foot off the ground, whirl around twice, embrace to the girl. I figured they probably knew each other. I followed, wanting to speak with Tyke. By the time I arrived the Sheriff was well down the steps.

"So, family friends?" I asked pointing after the Sheriff.

"My Uncle Fred on my father's side."

I nodded.

“That make you Cindy Carter?”

It was a question because the relationships in that part of the country boggled my mind.

“Right. My Dad’s Ferval Carter – Bet you’ve never heard of a Ferval before.”

“I must admit that’s a first. How do you keep track of relationships? I mean everybody seems to know to whom and how they are related. You hold classes to learn this stuff?”

She smiled assuming it was rhetorical. I wasn’t sure it had been but I went along.

“What’s the ‘cousin marrying rule’ around here?”

Tyke answered it as the serious question it was to him.

“Law says it just has to be more distant than first cousin. Generally, most families follow the third cousin rule. As far as we can trace it, Cindy and I aren’t even cousins. Our kids are going to be Einstein brilliant.”

“I see. I guess I hadn’t realized you were that serious.”

“Marrying serious, you mean? We’ve agreed to wait until I can’t wait any longer. Need to get our education well on its way first.”

I was not about to pursue Tyke’s ability or inability to ‘wait’ so moved on to my reason for being there.

“See what you can find out about the half dozen or so victims that were not students here at the Academy. See where their family trees lead. Also, I need the medical history on the Butler boy who died. It would have been about ten years, I believe.”

Tyke jotted notes and we headed back toward the cafeteria together. My preparation for the session had been minimal. It would focus on questions about my writing technique. I expected to learn as much about it as the students!

The session could have gone on all afternoon but we stopped at 4:15 with the promise of taking up from there the next morning.

I passed on the Sheriff’s greeting to Katherine – Katy – and she seemed pleased. She sighed.

“I thought I’d be a Carter by now, you know,” she said.

I chuckled unexpectedly and immediately explained that Fred had made the same comment.

“Sometimes it seems Fred and I are closer than Jerry and I – well, don’t take that the wrong way.”

“Have to sic Tyke on Jerry,” I said. “If anybody can instill the desire for marriage I think it’s that boy.”

“He been working on you, too, has he?”

I just nodded, not really wanting to pursue it in the presence of a woman who was apparently just experiencing a momentary detour on her way down the aisle.

I did need to speak with David so stood, preparing to go find him. Tyke and Cindy approached.

“Awesome session Mr. Mar-miller,” Tyke said still searching for what he felt comfortable calling me.”

He giggled and Cindy gave him a strange look.

“You want us back on the hill this evening?”

“If you’re up to it. I suppose it would only be fair to take a few minutes break now and then, for more enjoyable pursuits.”

“We can work that out,” he said smiling into Cindy’s face. “We like to kiss with our eyes open anyway.”

Again, it was a topic I wouldn’t pursue. He, however, was not finished.

“We can trade off with Tom and Mike, I suppose, if they can keep their eyes off us.”

The two of them giggled like eighth graders heading for their first make out party. That a.m. cold shower was looking better and better.

I found David in his office. After the friendship setting small talk, required in that area as the prelude to all conversations, we sat and got down to business.

“It’s personal,” I began. “Not to you but to the Academy so if you’re reluctant to discuss it, I guess I’ll understand. I’m interested in how you support this place financially.”

“That’s an open book. We’re a not-for-profit concern. We have three main sources: the cabin industries we have here for the kids to work in, contributions from a great number of sources, and a unique life insurance plan my grandfather set up.

“We manufacture three main product lines: rag throw rugs, hand carved wooden coat hangers, and candles. They are sold throughout the central south and nationally in several

catalogs. We just try to cover expenses and payroll. The students get paid minimum wage – a little more for better grades. They work ten to twenty hours a week depending on the number of days they are enrolled in school. They can work up to four hours for every day in classes. During the past ten years there's been a sizeable excess profit from that source and we have been portioning it out among the neediest of the student's families.

"Contributions are just that – a dozen businesses and about as many individuals. It goes into the general fund."

"Any outstanding contributors?"

"One. It's done anonymously but I'll share it with you, in confidence, considering the situation. Doc Johnson gives us a large sum every year. It varies greatly – between one hundred thousand and three hundred thousand dollars."

"Where does an old country doctor come by money like that?"

"Investments, he says. I know it seems strange but it's from Doc. Who's more trustworthy than the old doctor who has always provided us with free medical services?"

"Always?"

"Since the year he began his practice here."

"I'm not downplaying how wonderful that is. I'm just struck by how unlikely it is. A beginning physician already having investments substantial enough to provide hundreds of thousands of dollars a year?"

"I know."

He shrugged.

"What about the insurance thing?"

"It's a commonplace retirement ploy now but was a brand-new concept when grandfather devised it. The gist if it is this. When a student enrolls, we take out a life insurance policy on him with the school as the beneficiary. Each student agrees that once he begins earning a living he will take over payments and continue to keep the policy up to date. There comes a point when the cash value of the policy reaches \$30,000. Some portion of that can be taken as a loan and the general growth plus the amount left in the account earn enough to pay the low policy loan interest rate forever. So that loan is taken – say \$25,000 – and is given to the school

as a donation. With, say, thirty-five students graduating every year, somewhere down the line that begins bringing in about \$700,000 dollars a year. Then upon their deaths – hopefully after long and happy lives – whatever is left on the policy – usually about fifty thousand – comes our way as well.”

“A farsighted approach to financing the place, I’ll give him that. This next question is going to seem crass, I’m afraid.”

David interrupted me.

“Then let me just answer you. Yes, for the youngsters who have been killed the Academy has received the full amount of the life insurance policy and sadly that has been bringing in some \$150,000 a year.”

“Thank you for that,” I said. “It seems you are financially solid then. Your budget is what, something right at two, two and a half million a year?”

“Right on. You’ve been putting a pencil to it, haven’t you?”

I nodded.

“May I ask about staff salaries?”

“Average about thirty-five thousand a year plus room and board if they want it. About half choose to live down in town. We give a three hundred dollar a month off-campus stipend to them.”

“And you?”

I was uneasy asking.

“Mary acts as the school secretary and book keeper. She receives \$1,200 a month. The school pays \$1,000 dollars a month into my retirement portfolio but I draw no salary above that. We are both on the school’s, fully paid, major medical plan.”

“Fascinating stuff, I must say. I assume a dedicated staff to work for that amount of money.”

“This is not Indiana, Marc. Our salaries are on a par with the public schools in the area around here.”

“New topic,” I said.

“The half dozen victims that weren’t students – you have their names?”

“Probably not. I imagine Reverend Abernathy knows. He keeps track of such things with an almost perverted

tenacity. He'll be here for supper this evening. Once a week he joins us for supper and delivers the longest ten-minute sermon you've ever experienced."

"Long winded?"

"Oh, no. He's good about stopping after ten minutes. It's just that it feels like an hour. Only put up with it because the parents demand it. Religious training is very important in these parts and Abernathy is all we have. It'll probably seem almost pagan to you, Marc, but it's the way religion is out here. Fire and brimstone, heaven and hell, a vengeful God who's always got his eye out just waiting for you to slip up."

"No love preached there, you're saying?"

"Pretty strictly old testament."

I nodded that I understood. David continued.

"We do what we can to model the loving alternative in everything we do up here. We never put the Abernathys of the world down, mind you, we just model alternatives."

"You're a Christian?"

"Yes. I'm one of those who needs a specific peg to hang my religious hat on. Christianity serves me well."

"I'm happy you've found that. I'm even looking forward to hearing the Reverend this evening, although he may insist I leave since I believe I've recently been excommunicated."

"In all seriousness, Marc, it would be best if you listened from the wings, so to speak."

"Sure. I keep being told that I've already riled up things too much around here. I appreciate that heads up. One last thing; I'd like to get on the internet. May I do that here?"

"Sure. William's room has a good set up. You'll have more privacy in there."

I was soon set up at Tyke's computer. David left. The room intrigued me – it was in such contrast to the starkness of the other facilities I had seen there. There was the computer with scanner and printer, cowboy wallpaper and bedspread, a Star Wars light fixture, a library of books, model planes hanging from the ceiling, drapes on the windows, a ten-speed bicycle hung by its front wheel from a hook near the top of a wall. There was a wooden box filled with toys. It was not the room of the dirt-poor boy he had been with his original family. David and Mary had gone overboard for him. I could only

speculate on their motivation. Perhaps they wanted him to experience how life was beyond the tiny world in which he had grown up. Perhaps it was compensation for their inability to have a child of their own. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps! It was really none of my business.

I had soon sent a lengthy email to an insurance expert I had met on a previous case. Several hunches had begun to gnaw at me and I needed to check out possibilities. For some reason, Tyke's wonderful room left me feeling sad. Perhaps because he'd given it all up to go be a regular student with none of the frills he had clearly become used to. Again, it was just a perhaps.

As I closed the door and entered the second-floor hall, Mary met me. David said you had inquired about the non-student partings. I obtained this list from the church secretary down in town. She said don't ask how she got them so I didn't."

She handed me the sheet of paper.

"This is great. You people move with the speed of . . ."

"Civilization?" she added for me, smiling and taking my arm as we made our way down the wide staircase.

"We have to present a way of life here at the school that is acceptable to the parents. Too civilized, as you implied – too worldly, they'd say – and we would have no students. Their present ways are the right ways to these folks. It isn't our intention to put that down. We do present alternatives, subtly. Maybe possibilities would better describe them.

"Poor little Tyke suffered culture shock when he first arrived here. At eight he was frightened by the TV and had nightmares about the phone ringing. He did like the big sink – the bathtub – and was captivated by the indoor plumbing. He adjusted but I'm sure he's really more comfortable living with the simplicity of the dorm than he ever was here. It was so hard to give him up that day he moved over there, even though I still see him a dozen times a day. Now, for the first time, really, I have to worry about his safety. His lineage puts him near the top of the list for a parting."

I tried to steer the conversation into less emotionally laden topics.

"Is this your home territory, Mary?"

“Bentonville, way up in the far northwest corner of the state. Only a two-hour drive, but a world away culturally. My father was a doctor up there. My brother and his family still live there.”

“You met David how?”

“U of A in Fayetteville. Love at first sight. Have lived happily ever after. Everything that every little girl dreams of. Well, almost. But then Tykie has pretty well made up for that.”

She squeezed my arm and looked up into my face.

“I’m frightened, Marc. I’d like you to tell me it will all be okay.”

“I can say I believe it will, but that is no promise. If you want a bodyguard, I’m sure Sheriff Carter will help us find one.”

“Can’t really do that for Tykie and not for the rest.”

“The rest. Interesting. Just who are the rest? I assume you’re referring to the others here who have a connection back to the three great grandparents.”

“Come into the office. I have it sketched out.”

There were just two others – Scooter and Stretch Purdy.

“Scooter’s a Twoer and Stretch is a Freshman. First cousins. Both, also, trace back to Overstreet.”

“Any oversized rooms in the dorm?”

“Some corner rooms with two sets of bunks, if that’s what you mean.”

“See if David will fix it so those three boys can share a room together for the next several nights, and then see if Carter will provide a male deputy to stay with them. We are getting down to the wire as it’s said. Time to get fully serious.”

She nodded and I left for the dorm. What I saw upon entering my room left me limp and immediately tearful. Somebody was lying on the top bunk covered from head to toe with a sheet – I had to assume it was Tyke. The sheet was pulled up over his head as boys will do when needing to tune out the world. There was a dagger extending from the middle of his back, piercing the blood-soaked sheet. I saw no indication that the boy was breathing.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

I pulled down the sheet so I could search for a pulse. It was soon clear I would never get one. My hand slipped in to find Tyke's neck; instead, it found a pillow. I pulled up the sheet from the front. Two more pillows.

Three pillows? No Tyke. Good news!

I looked for a note. None was to be found. I grew weak in the knees and went to my chair and sat down, wiping the premature tears from my cheeks. It had been a warning but its meaning seemed ambiguous. Was it a threat against Tyke – he being in line for a parting? Was it a threat against me – I having come and riled things up? Was it a message about what would happen to Tyke if I didn't leave things alone? Initially, at least, I assumed the one who left the dagger would not have known on which bunk I slept and probably not even that Tyke was staying in my room.

One thing seemed clear. Somebody – or thing – didn't want me poking around. I was suddenly sure I had made the right decision in arranging protection for the boys. Since I doubted that ghosts left real daggers behind, I knew – perhaps for the first time – that I was up against a flesh and blood, air-breathing, hate filled human being. That was far scarier to me than ghosts! Of course, it didn't rule out concurrent ghostly activities.

Why? What was threatened by my presence there? The truth about Charlie Chance? The truth about the Ghost of Charlie Chance? Something else? Something connected with the school? Something to do with Abernathy or Doc Johnson? Perhaps I had not yet met the person or people

involved.

It may have something to do with the caves. There could be some illicit activity going on in them. What could that be? I had no idea. Perhaps it could be something that required cool temperatures.

A frequent motive for keeping a ghost story alive (so to speak) was publicity to bring in the ghost groupies that followed such supernatural goings on. But, there seemed to be no tourist industry in the county. The town didn't even have a motel. I wondered if one were in the planning stages. My mind was scattering. Focus!

The last two incidents involved blood. Who would have access to blood. Physicians. Farmers. Hunters. That tack was going to be of no help there in the shotgun tottin' Ozark Mountains. Maybe Sheriff Carter could make some sense out of the dagger. I didn't think of daggers and rural areas as going together. Actually, I didn't think of daggers and the 21st century as going together.

I called the Sheriff and he agreed to come and take a look. I called David and explained the situation. I gathered Tyke's belongings and moved them to the room David designated as our new safe room. It was at the opposite end of the second floor from mine. David was locating the boys and making arrangements for them to resettle.

I covered the dagger and bloody sheet on the top bunk with a blanket in case Tyke popped in before the scene was cleaned up. The Sheriff had been delayed and could not arrive until after supper. I closed and locked the door to preserve the evidence and went in search of sustenance, hoping to eat and be gone before the Reverend arrived. My timing was impeccable. I left through the west door as he arrived through the south.

I made myself comfortable on the hall floor, just outside the cafeteria door, ready to eavesdrop on his presentation. I gave him high points for volume and emotion. Nothing else even made it onto my rating scale. Clearly my scale must have been considerably different from that of the local folks.

If, as a kid, I had heard the things he had to say, I would still be having night terrors. The students, however, listened attentively, sighed a group sigh when he finished, and

then stowed away the grub as if nothing at all had been mentioned about hell's fire and sin defined as all the things that were normal and natural to the human species from which they had to abstain. The crowning moment of illogic in his sermon came as he insisted that thinking about sex was every bit as bad as having it. Hmm. As a teenager, who had no way to keep from thinking about it, and knowing that was just as bad as – translation: no worse than – having it, would I abstain or at least enjoy my ride to perdition? It would have been no contest.

Oh well, the religious life of these folks was really none of my business. My focus needed to be on whether the Reverend Abernathy would be capable of perpetrating such heinous crimes in the service of maintaining the lore. It seemed quite clear to me that he was an 'ends justify the means' kind of person. If it took such terrible acts to meet his divine ends, then he would most certainly commit them and feel justified by God's own sanction. That didn't pinpoint him as my bad guy; it just suggested that his psyche was put together in such a way that he could be.

People, like him, who claimed to know the only Truth, always scared me because they felt that by having the truth it gave them the right to do terrible things to those who didn't acknowledge it – the Spanish inquisition, the Salem witch trials, gay bashing. Every generation seems to have its targets. And every new generation looks back and can't imagine why their fathers could have possibly been so ignorant.

My mind seems to prefer philosophy to research just now. A diversion from my current dead end, no doubt.

I went outside and circled back around the front of the building. Sheriff Carter and David were heading in my direction. I stopped at the dorm door and waited. We went right up to my room. I unlocked it and we entered.

It should have been no surprise. In fact, it should have been expected. The top bunk was made up neat as could be, the blanket sporting the finest hospital corners a head nurse could ever want. The dagger was gone. There was no blood.

"Well!" I said realizing it was hardly an auspicious beginning for my presentation.

The sheriff pulled back the cover.

"This the one you draped over it?" he asked.

"No. Actually, the one I used was green not blue. Undoubtedly collected some blood in the process."

He tipped the mattress off at an angle and examined it closely with his eyes. He put it back in place and removed the bottom sheet, holding it up for the two of us to see.

"A tiny slit. See! No more than half an inch. Cut clean as a whistle."

He pointed to the same position on the mattress. There was an identical slit.

"Be hard to leave this building carrying a bundled blanket and a pillow that was losing its feathers. I imagine we'll find those things stashed somewhere close by. Probably won't prove anything, of course."

There was never so much as a moment's indication from either of them that they had not believed me, even in the face of no real evidence.

"Can you describe the dagger?" the Sheriff asked.

"Well, let's see. I called it a dagger because it was so long and narrow. The blade was thin and probably ten or maybe even twelve inches long. It went clear through the pillow and a good three inches of the blade still showed above the sheet. The handle was ornate, carved and painted in bright green, red and yellow. I'm not sure what the design might have been. Lets' see."

I closed my eyes to try and recall the image.

"Maybe flowers. Wait! A dragon. A slender green Dragon on a red background. Yes."

"Sounds Oriental," the Sheriff said.

David picked up the pillow that had been used by whom ever made up the bed.

"Tykie's pillow," he said. "The only thing, besides the cutoffs he was wearing, that he brought with him when he arrived at our place."

The Sheriff reached out and David handed it to him. He turned it over.

"Blood," he said pointing to a small spot in the center of the pillow case. "Dry."

"Probably find it to be Tyke's," I said. "The gash on his

head, you remember.”

They both nodded. The Sheriff looked around the room.

“Entrance would be no problem. Any of these old locks can be opened with one of two master keys. Anybody quick with a nail file could probably get in as well.”

There was a knock at the door and we turned in unison to look. It was a young, deputy.

"Headmaster," he said smiling.

"Terry! You look great in that uniform."

They shook hands. David then explained for my benefit.

"Terry is a full-fledged six-year graduate of the Academy. Then took a two-year program in law enforcement at the University. You've been back here on the force for how long now?"

"Coming up on six months, Sir."

"Like it?"

"Love it!"

The Sheriff chuckled.

"What else could the young man say, standing here in front of his boss? Terry's a good deputy. Once we get him married off and settled down, he'll make one of the best."

In the Sheriff's mind marriage and deputy performance were somehow tied together. I'd yield without question to his take on it.

"So, my assignment here, Sir? Betty said I'd be here indefinitely so I packed extra sox."

He patted his hip pocket. I smiled to myself.

"I'll let David and Marc fill you in. Your orders will come from . . ." He looked at David.

"Marc here knows a whole lot more about such things than I do."

"Okay, then it will be Marc. I failed to introduce you. Marc Miller this is Terry Carter and yes he is a nephew; even so, he's the brightest addition to my staff in years."

Terry swallowed and his stand out ears turned red. He was plainly not ready to receive the compliment. As an afterthought, Fred felt the need to clarify.

"It's about Charlie Chance. You okay with that, Terry?"

"Yes, Sir. Never seen him but feel like I know him. Aunt Sally knows all the stories. Heard 'em dozens of times. Want me to catch him?"

He smiled.

I assumed it was intended to be humorous. Either that or it didn't take much to be the brightest of the sheriff's brightest.

We walked down the hall to check out the safe room. I explained what I expected of the deputy. He would maintain his station at the hall side of the door. A chair was borrowed from an unoccupied nearby room and set directly under a light in the ceiling.

"I'm a reader. Need light so my peepers don't crap out on me 'fore I'm thirty."

He chuckled, enjoying his little joke. The others said their good-byes and left. I filled him in on the recent events.

"You may know the boys: Tyke Rakes, and Stretch and Scooter Purdy."

"Sure. Sent Tykie on his first snipe hunt."

First, I wondered? Just how many snipe hunts does it take for a boy to realize there is no snipe to hunt? Perhaps Tyke had taken Cindy with him the second time. Joke on Terry!

I was interested in his Aunt Sally.

"So, your aunt knows lots of stories, does she?"

"Yes, Sir. Likes the ghost tales best. Used to scare me outta my skin when I'd stay over at her place. It was great?"

"She's been around here for a long time, I take it."

"She'll be 88 come the fourth of July."

"Either your parents had you at a ridiculously old age or she's your great aunt."

"Great aunt, though mom and dad still do go at it like rabbits."

The openness among the children in those parts about their parents' private times was new to me and – I had to admit – a bit disconcerting. That was clearly my problem, however, and not theirs.

"I'd really like to meet her. Is that a possibility?"

"Sure. She's old but she's one who will talk to outsiders. I'll just need to call Sam and he can run down the

street and talk to her and then call me back. About as simple as it gets around here."

The call was made and soon returned. Terry drew me a map as I scribbled a note to Tyke so he'd not think I had abandoned him. Five minutes later I was in my car, gritting my teeth down the hill to Aunt Sally's.

The sun, low behind her huge, Victorian, home, cast the house as a dark, looming, silhouette against the reds and pinks of the evening sky. Such a grand structure was fully out of place in that little town. It had to have an interesting story.

An old lady, presumably Aunt Sally, was standing – proudly erect – just inside the screen door waiting. As I started up the long walk in her direction she came out onto the porch to meet me.

"Nobody left here to chaperone us so we'll sit out here on the porch in plain sight."

Eighty-eight and still concerned about a chaperone. Maybe it was something in the water.

I extended my hand.

"Marc Miller. Thank you for seeing me. I understand we are both story tellers."

My attempt at leveling the playing field seemed to have been accepted.

"It's old Charlie Chance that's on your mind, is it?" she said taking a seat in a rocker and, by gesture, offering me a wood-slat chair.

"That and just things in general around this town during your life time.

"Born eighty-eight years ago, his coming fourth of July. Been a snoop ever since. If it happened with ten miles of this place I know about it."

"How about beginning with some of the town's leading citizens, then."

"Got three, I'd say. Dr. Johnson, Reverend Abernathy and Jake Yates."

"I guess I haven't yet met Mr. Yates."

"He's the trash man. Keeps us nearly fly free in the summers. Can't say that for most places in these hills."

How refreshing that status was bestowed according to useful contributions rather than other, less substantive things

like family name, money, or college degrees.

She moved on from Jake, apparently having passed on the single important piece of information about him.

"The Doc and the Reverend both grewed up here. Doc's some ten years older. Always a puny kid. Never could hold his own with the other boys. Glasses before he was ten. Gawky kid, you know what I'm meanin'?"

I nodded.

"The kids picked on him unmercifully. He was always gettin' beat up and nobody'd ever admit to it. He'd accuse them with raised fist and righteous indignation, mother at his back, but they always had a couple of kids to swear they was all elsewhere at the time.

"Nobody left from that gang to pick on him anymore. Everybody likes old Doc, now. He done good things for this town. That flag pole over in front of the Mayor's office – Doc paid for it. The covered pavilion at the park – Doc paid for it. The wood pier and the floatin' platform out at the swimmin' hole on the Sandy – Doc paid for it."

"A good man as well as a good doctor, then, it seems."

"That's right. I know'd he had it in him from when he was a little tyke. Jist never had the body to promote it."

I loved the way she used the English language and wanted to take notes but thought better of it.

She switched to the Reverend though not by name.

"The other one's a whole different story. Meanest little kid you ever did see! I seen him kick his own mother's shins. I think he killed my cat but never could prove it. My cats all hated him. He was always so mean to pets.

"His pappy had money and thought his son was too good for the Academy up on the hill so sent him off to boarding school up in Missouri – the whole town breathed a sigh of relief at that I can tell you. He'd been born just a week after a Devil's Darkness and there was some talk about him in light of it."

She raised her eyebrows and nodded, rather emphatically.

"Well, I'll tell you no one group of folks was never so surprised in their lives as when he showed up back here at twenty-five ready to claim the church. Old Reverend Bush

died off a year or so before, so it was up for claimin' you see."

I didn't fully understand but wouldn't press for a full explanation.

"He's been the Reverend here ever since. I've seen him take the rod to boys who done things nowhere near as bad as what he done when a youngster. He's a man a God so we got to respect him. Don't mean we got to like him."

There was so much in that last passage that I wanted to pursue but didn't. Did ministers have the right to physically punish children? Was respect just freely given and not earned – in some way deserved just because of position regardless of his personal traits? Churches were somehow claimed by ministers rather than congregations seeking clergymen to serve them? This culture had facets to it that were as foreign to me as any I'd ever encountered.

She paused. I wanted her to continue so I asked a general question.

"This town always about this size?"

"Peeked out at five hundred back in 1946 after the war. Dwindled down gradual like to what ya see today. About a hundred, I imagine."

"I'm intrigued as to how the businesses stay afloat with so few residents. Not many places this size can boast a doctor and a minister. How in the world do they support themselves?"

"Well, the Reverend's living on his inheritance – enough to raise up a whole new generation or two on, I hear. Doc made some money somehow while he was gone to college. Gone twelve years. Can't possibly be twelve years of things to learn after high school, you know. Must have done something during that time to make it."

"The Reverend and Doc friends are they."

"Hate each other's guts is more like it. I swear to my time that if one calls snow white, the other'll swear on his mother's grave that it's black. That's how it's always been between them."

She left little doubt about their relationship.

"What about the Sheriff? You didn't list him on your most respected list."

"Hain't from here. Lives over at Elton the county seat.

Yes. He's a good man. Went away to college, too."

She shook her head, clearly mystified.

"Can't understand that – going away to college to be a sheriff. Makes no sense, you know."

"How does he get on with Doc and the Reverend."

"Fred gets on well with everybody. Even tempered. Odd to see him carryin' a gun. Can't imagine him ever usin' it. A gentle man. Good father. Just three kids though. I'd a thought he and his wife would have been good for a dozen. Hard to figure sometimes."

"Okay, now for Charlie," I said, figuring I had heard more than I could readily digest about the social history of the area.

She became immediately serious and leaned forward in her chair.

"Pure evil!"

She sat back as if having finished with the only truly important part of the story. But this was Aunt Sally. She didn't stop! She began rocking, slowly. Her voice dropped half a register and her pace slowed as she continued.

"Born of the Devil's Darkness he was. Some thought him to be the devil incarnate. Scared little kids who'd venture near his place up on the hill. He was the semblance of a monster in a person, hunched, carried his head sideways so's he could see where he was goin', walked with a limp. The sightings tell of him carrying a lantern night and day and using the trunk of a sapling for a walking stick. Had the strength of five men.

"Bein' possessed in the Darkness, like he was, he had the black gift – he could suck the soul right out of a person then shred it and blow it to the seven winds. Painful. Terrible painful having your soul sucked out like that. There is no life without a soul so his victims dropped limp right there and then. Dead in the worst way. Dead without no soul to set free."

I wondered how she would react to Tyke's theory that old Charlie might really have been a nice, bright, guy, just trying to avoid conflict.

"Have you visited his cabin?" I asked.

"No, Sir and I'd advise you to stay your distance as well."

"It's too late for that, I'm afraid. I've examined the place thoroughly and I'm taken by the high level of intelligence needed to have constructed it – wonderful inventions and conveniences I've never seen anywhere else. It's so hard, you see, for me to think of him as backward – as he is so often characterized."

"Backward he was – moron on worse. If his cabin seems to show different you can bet it was the Devil himself who built it."

It sounded like logic but, of course, being based on lopsided assumptions, it suggested nothing of value. It just assumed that since he was dumb he couldn't have built it, rather than examining the equally plausible assumption that having built that magnificent structure it proved that he could not have been dumb. I'm sure that having the Devil to fall back on was a fully reassuring option for Aunt Sally and one that made further consideration of possibilities a fully unnecessary pursuit.

"What's your take on old Charlie since he died – the ghostly aspects that have been reported."

"True."

Again, it was pronounced as the definitive answer. Anything that might follow was merely icing. It followed.

"More deadly than in life but then it's so much easier for ghosts to get around you understand. They don't have to be seen to be there. They just plays with us when they comes visible. God's ghosts let themselves be seen when they need something. The Devil's ghosts only come out when they're itching to do harm. See old Charlie's Ghost and you can count on he's up to no good."

It was the first time I had heard ghosts classified as to types, in that way.

"Have you seen Charlie's ghost?"

"No, Sir, I have not. Righteousness is my armor."

It was too esoteric to pursue.

"Any thoughts on why he's allowed to do such terrible things to innocent youngsters?"

"God's fight is with the Devil himself, not the Devil's accomplices."

She had it all wrapped up in a pretty neat package, I'd

give her that. I shouldn't have pushed, I suppose, but I did.

"So, even a righteous person, as you mentioned, can expect no Devine protection from the Devil's accomplices."

"Well, that's not what I meant. God is all powerful."

"And yet the children keep dying."

"To prove the power of the Dark Side. To keep us ever mindful."

It was no answer and I had the idea she realized it, perhaps for the first time. I liked helping people consider things from different perspectives but I never felt comfortable thinking I had rocked someone's basic beliefs – unless they were clearly harmful to others.

"Thought much about the upcoming Devil's Darkness," I asked.

"Reach its peak tomorrow night. It's a powerful south breeze. That's a bad omen, Mr. Miller. Bad things are going to happen. Really bad things."

"Through Charlie?" I asked.

"Oh, yes."

"He will take another youngster?"

"Oh, yes."

"Is there any way of knowing who that will be?"

"Male. Between fourteen and nineteen. A good boy. The Devil won't destroy the soul of a bad boy – he's content to wait for it to come down his shoot and join him on its own, you see."

"Most of those targets would seem to be up at the academy."

"Most."

"I've read that some have been taken from elsewhere though."

"Maybe a half dozen. Usually older and too backward to be up on the hill."

That was a new twist. They hadn't qualified to get in. I could not imagine that there were entrance qualifications. I thanked her for her time and information and walked back down the walk to my car. I turned and waved. She waved back. So did someone from a third floor window. I thought she said she lived alone and yet – plain as could be – there he stood waving well beyond what seemed reasonable. He was

partially hidden behind a curtain but my impression was male and either very old or very young. It was an odd impression.

I drove back to Main Street. Something was nagging at me about that room in the basement of Doc's building. I parked a block away on a totally deserted street and walked to the rear of the long building. A set of three cement steps led down to the door that opened into the half-buried basement. Well, not for me did it open in, but that was how it worked. I looked through the small window but could see very little. Boxes, a table, some chairs stacked as if in storage, a metal cylinder perhaps eight feet long and two and a half feet wide. I assumed it was packaging from some expensive piece of equipment. It appeared there were drapes on a track that could be pulled to section off an area near the door. Maybe it had at one time been an extra examination room.

For all my peeking I learned nothing but still snapped several pictures. I returned to my car and was soon back at the campus. It was dark. The narrow, sliver, curved slit of light in the sky hardly qualified as a moon. During the next several nights it would be gone entirely. The wind had picked up and whipped at my shirt tail as if trying to rush me off the grounds and inside the dorm.

I looked up and saw the light in the window of the safe room. There were figures mulling around inside. I had not yet met Scooter. I entered the building and climbed the steps, stopping at my room just long enough to drop off my camera and briefcase.

I walked the hall to the other end.

Terry was not in the chair at the door. I looked inside. The light was on but no one was there. Uneasiness grew in the pit of my stomach. I went in and turned around, wondering if the malevolent force had struck again. I knew I had seen figures in there less than five minutes before. It already had that teen-boy, lived in, look with clothes strewn everywhere. My pulse increased and I went back into the hall.

I heard a strange, eerie noise and walked toward it cautiously. The sound had a human quality to it – almost melodic as I grew closer. Like nothing I had ever heard before. Otherworldly? I couldn't be certain. I approached the open doorway from which it was coming. The room was lit.

Carefully I looked around the corner and immediately felt like the nine-year-old who became frightened at the ghost story he was telling at the campfire.

Three young men, showering, and singing at the top of their off-key voices. Undoubtedly, I would not have known the song had it been rendered in the best of form. I was at the west door to the shower room. I had always used the entrance on the east.

The deputy saw me, waved, and came over.

"Evenin' Mr. Miller. Thought I'd get 'em corralled in here early before the water started coolin' down. It pretty brisk by mornin'."

"So, I've been warned. Things going okay, then?"

"Yes, Sir. Tykie give me one of your books to read. Only two chapters into it but didn't want to put it down. The boys have been playin' three handed checkers. Bet you've never played three handed checkers have you."

"I must say I've never even heard of it. Three handed? Doesn't seem possible."

"I'll let them show you how it's done. I think it must be a game somebody invented right here. Nobody's ever heard of it anyplace else so far as I've been able to tell."

"Hey, Mr. M." came Tyke's cheerful greeting as he turned off his water and shook his hair like a wet puppy. He took a towel from a peg and approached, drying as he came."

"You know my new roomies, do you?"

Before I could answer he donned an impish grin and introduced them from across the room.

"Well, the naked one is Scooter and the other one is Stretch."

He broke into laughter, the two of them both still dripping wet.

"I'll just assume Stretch is the tall one," I said shaking my head.

Deputy Terry soon had them herded back to the room. On the way, Tyke whispered to me.

"Anyway I can get my pillow? Feel lost without it."

"I'll bring it down before I turn in."

He nodded, looking me in the eyes and smiling as if quietly acknowledging that some confidential piece of

information had just passed between us.

“Anything I can do for you gents this evening?” I asked.

“Dancing girls and pizza,” Stretch managed with a smile.

“Belly dancers,” Scooter added nodding to the others.

“Scantily clad, belly dancers,” Tyke said summing up the normal night time mentality in a boy’s room.

I made it an obvious point to ignore them.

“What’s this Terry tells me about three-way checkers?”

“Ya, great fun,” Tyke said. “It’s three-man checkers, actually. Wanna play?”

“Probably not time for a game, just a quick rundown on procedure. I’ll never sleep ‘til I know.”

“Okay. It’s like this. Gotta play on a small table so the players can walk around it, like this one here. Ya all stand – one at Black, one at White and one to the side of the board with no guys to play. Like I would make a move here from the Black half of the board. Then we’d all shift one spot to the left. White would come to my place, I’d move to the side of the board and the guy who started out at the side would go to White. He’d make the next move for White, then we’d all shift again. You don’t have to jump if you don’t want to. The idea is to be the one who makes the winning move at the end. You try to set things up so the other guys can’t win. Takes a lot more smarts than just plain old checkers.”

“I can see that. Intriguing. I’ll have to try a game or two before I leave. Any idea of its origin?”

They all shrugged.

“Never wondered about that before,” Stretch said.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “I better be on my way. Lots of thinking to do.”

“I got the family trees finished,” Tyke said. “Can I show it to you out in the hall?”

“Sure.”

We stepped out into the hall. His tone became hushed.

“You know those non-student partings? Well, believe it or not they were also all related back to one of the three great grands – five to Lightfoot and one to the Italian guy.”

“Good work, my boy! Anything else come up? I’m still not where I need to be in this thing.”

“Nothing really. Mary was going to do a search of the medical records. She may have something for you from that by tomorrow.”

“I’ll take this diagram with me, if you’ve finished.”

“Yeah. Sure. The pillow?”

“Right away. Wait inside, though.”

I turned to Terry.

“If you need anything or start to nod off, come and get me. This is serious business – deadly serious business.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I delivered the pillow and four Baby Ruths, and was soon hunkered down in my comfortable window chair, laptop on my lap (imagine that!). There were lots of notes to make from lots of sources. I would be busy late into the night.

It was going on two when I next realized the time. I stood to stretch and work my tired neck muscles. As I began getting ready for bed, I heard Tyke’s loud, disturbing call getting closer as he cried out.

“Marc. It’s Terry. He’s been strangled with a rope right there in his chair.”

I hurried down the hall after Tyke. There sat the Deputy, a length of rope drawn tightly around his neck, head leaned back over the chair, his bleeding mouth gaping open. At the darkened west end of the hall a door creaked.

“What’s that,” I asked.

“The fire escape door,” Scooter said. “Somebody’s a goin’ or somebody’s a comin’.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I took out my pocketknife and cut the rope. I put my hand to his neck. There was no pulse.

"CPR", I said.

The three boys picked him up, laid him on the floor and began the process with no further instruction from me. I was impressed. I held his wrist, waiting, hoping, for a pulse to begin.

"Come on Terry," Tyke said.

They rotated positions every few minutes. I was reminded of Three Man Checkers.

"Got it!" I said at last. "Got a pulse here. Lay off a minute and let's see if it sustains. It's still coming – stronger in fact. Good work boys!"

It was smiles all around – well, except for Terry who opened his eyes and grimaced in pain.

"My head!" he said reaching to feel it.

He winced as he touched the top of his head. Scooter pulled back the hair and examined the scalp.

"Huge bruise. Not bleeding but it looks like raw liver."

"How would he get bruised by being strangled?" Stretch asked.

"He wouldn't," Terry answered. "Oh, my throat – my neck – is sore as 'H, E, Double Toothpicks'. I was hit on the head at least twice, I'd guess. I felt the first one and recall trying to get up to defend myself. That's all I remember. I must have been whopped another time."

"Your neck's raw from the rope," Tyke said.

"What rope?"

"The one used to strangle you," I explained showing it to him. "I imagine the plan was to knock you out first to make it easier to strangle you. What I can't understand is why it was tied. That's not how it's done. You wrap the rope around the neck and hold it tight until the victim is dead. Tying it serves no purpose."

"Maybe ghosts don't know about that," Scooter said, looking up and down the hall.

I handed my phone to Tyke.

"Headmaster and Doc, pronto."

I turned back to Terry who remained on his back on the floor.

"I see you wear a lapel radio. We need to notify the Sheriff."

He pressed the button and relayed the message.

"I can't focus my eyes," he said squinting and slowly turning his head from side to side, testing his condition."

"Probably a concussion," Tyke said. "Best if you keep your eyes closed 'til Doc gets here. I suppose we could move him to a bed though couldn't we."

"Good idea," I said. "Easy does it. Hold his head and neck straight. There could be something damaged."

Terry was soon on a bottom bunk. I addressed the three boys.

"Your first aid skills are impressive. I assume you acquired them here at the Academy."

"First course a kid gets when he arrives," Tyke explained. "Actually, it's a series of three. Three more if you want them. I did. Doc usually teaches them."

"It sure paid off in a big way here tonight."

All three nodded. Tyke felt the need to explain further.

"The school knows that lots who start here won't last through the first semester – it's just how it is; they're needed back home. So, they want to be sure we have something practical, important, to take away with us if we leave. With medical services being so scarce around here, first aid is one of those important things."

"I assume you guys are familiar with firearms."

I pointed to Terry's weapon.

"Huntin' guns. Not hand guns," Stretch said. "Hand

guns ain't no good fer huntin' anything but people, and we don't hunt people out here like they does in the cities."

The innocent truth in his statement sent a mammoth chill through my body.

"Terry. I'm going to go snoop around. Show Stretch here what he needs to know in order to use that gun of yours. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I should come with you," Tyke said, offering no explanation as to why.

"Okay, but I'd suggest pants and shoes."

"Pants yes, shoes no. Didn't have my first pair of shoes until I came to live with Dave and Mary. Oops! I'm really sorry guys. But it's what I've always called him when we're alone at our house. I meant no disrespect."

It had clearly been a faux pas of some magnitude, but the others just shrugged and nodded. I borrowed Terry's flashlight and we headed toward the fire escape door. I had to wonder why the intruder stopped short of harming any of the boys.

"By the way," I asked, "What alerted you to Terry's problem? I assume you were all asleep."

"Darndest thing, actually. It was like we all heard it at once. Like someone knocking on the door frame. Maybe it was Terry. Must have been him before he went unconscious."

Tyke pointed, directing me to the door. It was opened out, swinging in the gusts of a strong southerly breeze.

"I assume it's always open," I said

"Unlocked, you mean? Yes. We never lock anything around here. The outside doors on the buildings don't even have locks on them."

We moved through the open door out onto the landing and looked down onto the darkened campus.

"It's black as ink out here, Marc." Tyke said, clearly spooked.

"Go on back inside if you want. That's okay."

"And leave all this fun? Not on your life – bad choice of idiom I suppose."

"Let's go down the stairs and look around, then."

A familiar set of fingers latched into my belt and we descended the steps. I felt sure there would be nothing to find

unless the attacker wanted us to find something.

Tyke pointed over my shoulder at the cabin. A light was suddenly on, showing through the cupola windows.

"You sure you're up to this?" I asked as we began walking across the lawn toward the cabin."

I assume he may have nodded. He said nothing but stuck with me.

The cabin door was closed and had been so well fitted to the frame that no cracks of light were visible. I pulled the latch string and pushed it open about a foot. A single lamp had been lit over the sink. I opened it further, somewhat cavalierly, not really expecting to find anything of consequence.

My, how wrong could I have been!

There, again, in the dim light of the cold hole, with just his head above floor level and his right arm grasping the knob to pull the trapdoor closed behind him, stood Charlie – well, it's the only descriptor I had. He was breathing hard. Would a ghost breathe hard? Would a ghost breathe at all?

He had five carefully chosen words for us.

"I could have killed him!"

He giggled his eerie giggled and had the door closed and locked before I could reach it. I turned and ran to the lye box. That door was also locked. I began thinking out loud.

"If we run down to the cave entrance off the parking lot we can certainly get there as soon as he can. But that is probably just what he would expect. There are most likely other exits from the cave. I'm afraid we've lost him."

"And that's bad?" Tyke said his voice rising through the phrase.

I felt his hand trembling against my back.

Tyke blew out the lantern and I closed the door behind us. We started back across the lawn toward the dorm.

"Why so cordial in one appearance and then back to his scare tactics the next," I said out loud not expecting an answer.

"Games?" Tyke asked. "I've heard ghosts like to play games."

Before I could formulate a response, a lone figure topped the steps from the parking lot. It carried a flashlight.

"That better be Doc," Tyke whispered.

I shone our flashlight up to illuminate our faces. The figure responded by doing the same. It was Doc. We waited for him and as we made our way to the dorm I filled him in about what had transpired.

David was just entering and we climbed the stairs together. As we neared the room, Scooter, in an almost comical attempt at lowering his voice, called out.

"Who goes there?"

David responded.

"Headmaster."

The boys had stood a mattress on end to cover the entrance from the inside and held it in place with a dresser. Once those obstructions had been removed, we entered.

Doc went straight to Terry. Tyke went straight to David standing by his side, arm around his waist. David's big arm pulled him close and he administered a kiss to the top of the boy's head. A wonderful father-son scene.

The other boy's were clearly embarrassed, and turned away.

Doc's verdict was clear and concise.

"He'll be fine. Would be dead without the boys' assistance. Nice work. Maybe we'll make a doctor out of one you some day."

Tyke beamed up into David's face. Something more than pride passed between them.

"The Deputy here won't be able to work for at least a week. The rope burn was filthy. He'll need a shot of penicillin. Have somebody bring him by my office before leaving tonight."

He turned to Tyke and motioned him to turn around so he could look at his abrasion under the light.

"Been dizzy or sleepy?" he asked.

"A little dizzy, usually just when I change positions too rapidly."

"May be some infection festering up in there. Better come in tomorrow – make it late afternoon. Okay."

"Sure. I'll be there."

Doc rummaged through his bag eventually coming up with a vial of pills which he handed to Tyke.

"It's a myosin to fight the infection. One now and then

one every two hours while you're awake tomorrow."

Tyke accepted them and nodded.

I was intrigued that Doc seemed more interested in Tyke's condition than in Terry's. I supposed the old man had a warm spot in his heart for kids.

An hour later three deputies arrived, one to transport Terry and two that Sheriff Carter had assigned to double the bodyguard duty. By three thirty we were all back in bed.

The words of the – whatever it was – in the cabin played over and over in my mind: I could have killed him. Was it bragging? It sounded more just like a statement of fact. How did he know he hadn't killed him? He was essentially dead before the boys went to work on him. Did he know the boys would be able to save him? Maybe it was a ghostly, know all things, quality. None of it made sense.

And what about the knocking noise that had awakened the boys? It didn't seem reasonable that it could have been Terry. He had been knocked out with the second blow. That left only one possibility – the attacker himself. Why? Had he wanted the boys to save Terry's life? Why? What if they hadn't? They would have been devastated. In some way, either one of those outcomes had to serve the assailant's purpose. What was it?

One other – way out – possibility flashed through my mind. What if the 'real Charlie's ghost' had been watching and, being the compassionate soul Tyke figured he was, had somehow alerted the boys to Terry's dire situation?

I had one and half suspects in mind though nothing even faintly resembling proof to back it up. Number one was the Reverend Abernathy, short of stature, tenor in voice, and fervent in his belief that fear was the necessary force to get his flock to Heaven. The half, for absolutely no good reason, was the figure that waved at me from the upstairs window at Aunt Sally's. It had an illusory quality. Ghostly? I wasn't sure. But it appeared unreal and somehow unnatural, in appearance. Like a playful four-year-old in an old man's body. Could it be a ghost inhabiting a deserted third floor in a huge old house? Might Sally not even know of its presence there?

"Makeup or a full head mask," I said out loud. Even a child could look the part with such a mask. A child's voice

could not, however, mimic the voice I had now heard on several occasions. If it weren't Charlie's Ghost, it had to be a mortal man.

* * *

It was Tyke who was shaking my shoulder that next morning.

"Hey, sleepy head," he was saying as I first realized I was emerging back into the world of light and reason.

"Hey, yourself," I managed – the snappiest comeback I could dredge up at that moment.

"It's already five thirty. Deputy Franks here and I are starved. My class is cooking so Frankie and I are going on down, now. It took a good deal of sweet talking for him to allow it."

I looked at the deputy, mounting a sad, hound dog face.

"Is this what got to you?" I asked indicating Tyke with a flick of my head.

"Not nearly as pathetic as the boy's, but yes, that's the general idea."

We chuckled and I sat up on the side of the bed.

"Bet you missed me in here last night, huh?" Tyke said, selecting a shirt for me from the open closet.

"Can't say. I was asleep," I answered thinking the quality of my comebacks was definitely improving.

I stood and stretched, and accepted the shirt.

"Yellow," I noted as I slipped into it.

"Yeah. This, of all days, needs bright colors."

I sensed the momentary admission of sadness – agitation – terror – in his tone.

"Well, now that you seem up for the day, Frankie and I'll head out. See you down at the cafeteria."

The familiar Tyke Rakes smile had, by then, been plastered back in place across his face.

I nodded and tried to find slacks that would complement the shirt. Blue seemed to work. I made a list of topics I thought would be interesting for us to pursue at the morning writers' session. Quick characterization as necessary in short works. That would be a good starting place.

I gathered the other boys and their body guard – Butch – and we entered the cafeteria right at six.

"It certainly smells like breakfast," I joked to the others in reference to the cooking staff.

They smiled but were so clearly absorbed in the terror of the day that they felt no obligation to do anything further. It soon became clear they were convinced that for one of them this would be the last breakfast.

Perhaps they should be sent away to a place of safety. While they filled their trays, I called Sheriff Carter and spoke with him about it. There was a retreat center three hills to the south. It was used only on weekends. Arrangements were made quickly. I requested a third car and explained my plan in the privacy of a corner. He agreed. David entered and I went over my plan with him. He also agreed.

At seven the boys returned to their room. David and I accompanied them and I laid out the specifics of the procedure.

"We are going to sequester you guys away from the Academy for the next twenty-four hours. No one other than the sheriff, three deputies, the Headmaster, and I will know your whereabouts."

"We're even going to be hidden from ourselves?" Tyke joked trying to lighten the moment.

I looked at him over the top of my nonexistent glasses. He understood his effort had been appreciated.

"Here's how we'll do it. One at a time three sheriff's cars will pull up right in front of the dorm door. For each car, a different one of you will go around to the side facing out toward the campus, get into the back seat, close the door, sit back so your head is out of view and then secretly slide out the other door and back into the dorm. That car will then drive away – without you – and go to a false destination. We want whoever might be watching to think you are being transported in three separate cars. After all three of you have entered and exited your car and are safely back inside, you will leave together through the rear door of the dorm and lay flat in the bed of Tom's truck. He'll lay cut brush on top of you and drive you toward the landfill. At some point, he will be replaced by the Sheriff and two deputies, and you will be delivered to your real destination. Questions?"

Of course, Tyke had one.

"You said three deputies would know our destination. I only counted two."

"Perhaps you missed the one who is already on the floor of the truck cab and who will be with you throughout your adventure."

"Pretty slick. You use this before?"

"No."

"How did you come up with it so fast?"

"The writer in me, I guess. Give a writer a situation and just watch him elaborate on it."

The boys smiled. David patted me on the back."

"Watch out the window for the first car to arrive," I said looking specifically at Stretch.

Tyke had something else on his mind.

"I've got a doctor's appointment at about five. Will I be able to make it? I'm feeling pretty lousy."

"Headmaster, you have something for Tyke, I believe."

He smiled and handed the boy a brown paper sack. Tyke reached in and pulled out a full length, old lady's dress.

"What's this?"

I explained.

"At five o'clock you'll arrive in an unmarked car for your doctor's appointment. You'll be dressed like Aunt Sally or someone from her generation at least. A plainclothes, female, deputy, will accompany you. We need you to act. Have difficulty with the stairs and let the deputy take your arm and help you. Got it? We don't want any possible prying eyes to know it is you."

"But in an old lady's dress?"

"Get beyond that to the nice long life you're going to be assured of as a result," David suggested.

Tyke nodded.

"It's probably my head – sort of fuzzy. Worse than when I got up. I feel like I need to sleep."

"Here comes the first car," Stretch said.

"That would be for you, Scooter," I said. "Remember it all hinges on you not being seen getting out and reentering the dorm."

He nodded and hugged the other two boys. He hesitated at the Headmaster who drew him in and held him for

a long moment.

"Let's do this thing as a group, fellas," I said motioning them all to follow me.

In turn they each executed the car enter/exit maneuver as well as if it had been practiced a dozen times. We then walked to the back door. David opened and went outside, nonchalantly looking around. Tom had the brush cut and waiting. The truck was backed in, tailgate down. The boys were soon in place on their backs. It would not be a comfortable ride. I hoped it didn't aggravate Tykes head.

David stood talking with Tom as he loaded the brush. The tailgate was closed and he waved goodbye to David as he pulled out and began the trek down the back road. The deputy, on the floor of the cab, would keep in contact with the Sheriff throughout the trip.

David came back inside and we walked to the front door. It was nearly time for my morning session. Though neither of us mentioned it, our thoughts were clearly in the back of a truck winding its way down a bumpy one lane dirt road.

"The Sheriff will keep you informed at your office, David. Unless I hear from you I will assume all is well. When you know they are safely at the retreat, let me know."

He headed for his office. I headed for the cafeteria. Twenty minutes later, as I was defending my use of the dash – over the more traditional comma or semicolon – David appeared at the rear door and offered a thumbs up. Relief swept through me. I relaxed and probably even became a bit less defensive with the dash bashers in the crowd.

We were finished by ten and I returned to my room. On my pillow, I found a pair of pruning shears. Had Tom come up to see me and forgot them there? I doubted that. More games from my adversary – or one of them. But what significance would pruning shears hold? I had nothing!"

Well, I had Gracie. I headed for town and one of her extra gooey sweet rolls and a pot of coffee.

Again, I was the only person there.

"You sure people actually come in here to eat?" I asked, joking with her.

"Six to seven, twelve to one, six to seven, you couldn't

git in the door."

"Ca-ching!" I said awaiting a response.

Clearly, she hadn't heard the – what would it be called? Probably onomatopoeia, another thing she'd never heard – but then who had? I didn't want to spend time explaining.

"Chinese for money."

"Oh. Ya. Lots a Ca-ching those times."

I took a seat on a stool and pointed to the rolls under glass as she brought coffee.

"I saw you looking for Doc the other evening."

"Me?"

"Ya. Down back by his store room."

"Oh. Yes. I was looking for him. Never did find him."

"That was his whole office when he first come here, they say. One big room with a curtained off exam area. Then he bought the building, let his nephew keep the grocery down stairs, and set up his practice on the second floor."

"You sick?"

"Oh. No. Nothing like that. Just wanted to see if he had any more suggestions for dealing with Tyke's injury."

I just assumed she knew about it. Hearing no question from her I was sure she did.

"Doc should a been upstairs. Didn't see him leave. Don't see everything over there of course."

"He's in an out a lot, is he?"

"Recently. For an old codger, he takes them stairs mighty good you know."

"He seems to, yes. Good firm handshake as well."

She nodded.

"The Reverend ever stop by here?"

"Not often. Sometimes. Not this week. Seen him scootin' about town a lot though. No idea why. How's the book comin'?"

"Slow. I talked with Aunt Sally last night. She had lots of new information for me. Seems nice."

"She's a saint. Done took care of her brother – he's tetched in the head – fer the past sixty years since their mother died."

I began to make sense of things.

"He's the one who lives up on the third floor?" I asked.

"You heard about him, did you? Nobody talks about Old Harold much. He's such an embarrassment to poor Sally."

"Embarrassment?"

"Well, I can't verify this but everybody knows it's true. Her momma held the best séances in the valley. Some said she could call up the Devil himself. That's how good she was. Had a powerful suction between the light and dark. Story is she took up with some man from the other side and ended up having his baby."

"A mortal woman getting pregnant by a spirit?"

"It happens. The Reverend tells of it. Read your new testament."

"Is it known who that spirit belonged to?"

"Not by name. A spirit could a come from a thousand miles away you know. They ain't bound by distance or time."

I nodded, just to keep the story going.

"Somebody she felt sorry for, I'm told. A deformed man so ugly no woman ever looked his way when he was alive. Turned out he was a kind and gentle soul underneath it all.

"Her husband had been mean tempered. Died a strange death. Drowned in the Sandy during a Devil's Darkness."

"Does that son, who is by now an old man, always just stay inside?"

"When Harold's momma was alive she'd take him out walking at night, after the streets was dark and empty of people. He was a handful but she took him around town anyway. Had him on a leash. Only way to manage him."

"That house. What's its story?"

"Built by Sally's grandfather. He was Mayor here for over fifty years. Associated with a rope company up in Carlton County. Made lots of money. Served as mayor without takin' no pay. It's probably why he kept gettin' elected. Not really much for a mayor to do around here."

"Will you play a little writer's game with me?"

"Sure, if it's decent."

A strange comeback, I thought.

"I assure you it is."

I immediately wondered if we meant the same thing by,

decent. I plunged on without clarifying the definition.

"Let's suppose the ghost of Charlie Chance is for some reason completely out of the picture – has not even been here during the past fifty years. If you were writing a story about the things that have happened in his name, who else might you have reason to think could be doing it all?"

"Like who'd benefit the most by keepin' up the legend?"

"You said it better than I did."

(And more bluntly than I thought I dared.)

"The Reverend, I suppose. He holds it over the little kids' heads, you know, to help them live a Christian life. I can't think of anybody else who'd benefit from it."

Her tone indicated her idea had taken a different track.

"Okay, then, let's forget about benefits. Anybody else for any reason at all?" I said.

"Well, there's Sally's brother, of course. They say he's strong and mean. Small in stature, you know. Deformed someway - spina something or other. He's backward – feebleminded – so they say. Might git loose and go do things."

"Any chance somebody might be using him to do these things?"

"Could be but then we're back to profitin' from it all."

"I suppose we are."

She refilled my cup.

"Dark a the moon tonight, you know," she said. "If this southerly breeze keeps up it'll be the Devil's Darkness. I'd advise you to just stay inside and mind to your own business 'tween dusk and dawn, Mr. Marc Miller."

"Why would I be a target?"

"You're meddlin' in things that ain't none a your business, that's why. You ought a knowed that without me havin' to spell it out."

"I suppose. Yes. But thanks for laying it out for me. Well, better be on my way. Oh, Tyke sends his thanks for your treats the other day."

"I'd send more but don't want to spoil him. He's a good kid like he is."

It was a philosophy I'd seen before in those hills: A hard life raises a good child. Something seemed sadly

missing, but then, Tyke was a good kid. Whether he was that way because he wanted to be or just because he was afraid not to be was my unanswered question. I could tell that Gracie was still bothered by something.

“What?” I asked.

“Well, I’ll tell you this. If all these years none of this has really been Charlie’s doin’ then he’ll never find his peace and happiness in the beyond ‘til the real villain is found out.”

I put the money on the counter and left.

It opened up a new, interesting, scenario. What if the image I’d been seeing really was Charlie’s ghost and he kept bating me so I wouldn’t give up my search for the real perpetrator? Once I found him, Charlie knew he could then win his peaceful place in the hereafter. Fascinating. Fully irrational, but fascinating!

I kept being drawn to Doc’s storage room – a fully unreasonable interest. Perhaps, unbeknownst to me, I had at some point, developed a fetish for dark green drapes or big, shiny, metal tanks.

The streets were deserted as usual. I walked to the rear of Doc’s building, knowing full well that Gracie’s eyes were following me. Not a bad thing, I decided, in case any danger should befall me. It was possible somebody else could be using the room and might be in there.

Again, I tried the door and again it was locked. However, in the daylight I could see the room and its contents more clearly. Unfortunately, the green drape had been pulled into place leaving only the waiting area just inside the door for me to view. Interestingly, however, the chairs, which had been stacked randomly the first time I looked, were now arranged as if ready to receive waiting patients.

Perhaps Doc used the area to teach CPR or classes for mothers-to-be. I could have spun a dozen legitimate reasons and few if any suspicious ones. I left for my car and drove by Aunt Sally’s place. She was working in a flower bed that stretched the length of the north side of the house. I pulled to a stop, got out, and walked across the lawn, keeping one eye on the third floor.

In the daylight, I couldn’t see into the room but did notice the curtains being pulled back.

"Sally!" I called softly, so as to not startle her.

She straightened up and wiped her brow, waving.

"Good morning, Mr. Miller. Didn't expect to see you back here."

"Driving by and wanted to thank you again for sharing your information with me."

"And . . ." she said, hands on her hips, clearly convinced there was an ulterior motive.

"You got me, I'm afraid. I'm not sure how to begin."

"Let me begin for you, then. It's about Harold, my kid brother. You wonder, from the descriptions you been give, if it could be him who done in the kids. It's been said before."

I nodded.

"That is the question that has crossed my mind, yes."

"You seen old Charlie's ghost, right?"

I went with a straight forward yes, rather than qualifying it in all the ways that would have been necessary for a truly honest answer.

"I'd like you to meet Harold," she said, removing her gloves and dropping them into a basket.

She began moving toward the front porch and I accompanied her.

"He's just turned sixty," she said as we reached the front door. "Not as hyper as he was as a tyke but Doc still gives me pills to control him. He can feed and dress himself and take care of his bathrooming. Born with spinybifida. Curled his spine up like a pretzel. Likes to be outdoors and I bring him out every night in good weather. He likes to kick a beach ball around the back yard – it's why I had it fenced in – so I didn't have to keep chasing after it or him.

"Harold's a happy kid most of the time. Used to have terrible tantrums. He does what I tell him. I can still switch his behind when he don't mind and he knows it."

We made our way up an elegant, winding staircase to the third floor. She stopped outside the door to his room and spoke.

"Harold. I have brought a friend. You be nice to him, now, you hear!"

I heard excited sounds from inside.

She took a key from her apron pocket and unlocked the

door. She entered first and Harold went to her immediately. They hugged and then he turned his attention to me. He was terribly misshapen. His neck and head were curled below his shoulders. He had to turn his head to the side to make eye contact. He dragged his left foot. His hands were huge – bigger than mine by a third, maybe twice as big. He drooled through a broad, friendly smile. He was balding with red hair remaining only as a tuft circling his head above his ears. His eyebrows merged above his, large, red nose. He would frighten most adults. He would certainly send children screaming down the street.

“My daddy come to git me?”

It was a question but one that baffled me. Sally offered no explanation.

He felt in my shirt pockets and patted my rear pants pockets.

"He's looking for treats. Doc always brings treats," she explained.

"May he have a candy bar, a Baby Ruth?" I asked.

"He'd love that."

I turned my left side toward him and held open that pants pocket. He looked into my face and patted my cheek then investigated the pocket, soon finding the little treasure. He immediately handed it back to me.

"Fickus please," he said.

I was confused.

"He can't unwrap things. His big old hands are severely arthritic. Have been since a teenager. He said, 'Fix it, please.'"

I smiled and nodded at him and unwrapped the candy bar. He watched, his face less than a foot away glancing back and forth between my face and the bar. He jumped up and down and clapped in child-like anticipation.

"Trit! Trit!" he said.

"Treat! Treat!" Sally interpreted.

He looked up at Sally before making any attempt to retrieve the unwrapped bar from me. She nodded and it was soon in his possession. He took it to a corner of the room and sat on the floor, facing the corner, as he began enjoying it, one small bite at a time.

"He'll make it last a hour. Thank you. That was very kind," Sally said.

He turned back toward me saying: "My daddy's cumin fir me. Play ball."

He nodded emphatically.

"My daddy's comin' fer me. Play ball."

"Daddy," I asked, turning to Sally.

"Mother told him someday his daddy would come fer him. She meant it as an explanation of death but that's way beyond what he can understand. Harold loves to play with his big beach ball out back. He fantasizes 'bout playin' ball with his daddy. I've never told him no different. It seems to give him lots of pleasure. Not much pleasure in Harold's life."

I could see that. I could also see the love that passed between the two of them.

Thank you." I said and turned toward Harold.

"Good bye now, Harold," I said. "Nice meeting you."

He waved and repeated what seemed to be his favorite phrase: "My daddy cumin' fir me. Play ball."

He turned toward me and waved, though was clearly more interested in the treat than in my staying or leaving.

"Waving is one of his best things. He means it friendly. Children see it as threatening, though, I'm afraid."

We left the room and Sally relocked the door. I had to wonder what would happen to Harold if – when – anything happened to Sally, but it was a question I wouldn't ask.

She offered lemonade. I passed and thanked her. Apparently, Harold was still busy enjoying his treat since I didn't see him at the window when I drove away.

I left in an absolute quandary. The body could well have been the body I had come to know as Charlie. The facial features, though similar, were not those I had just seen up close. My Charlie had long, stringy, red hair – interestingly almost an exact match to Gracie's in color. They were, supposedly, related, so shared the same gene pool. Gracie was also short in stature and had large hands so I assumed those traits also ran in the family.

Although the hair – or lack of it – could have been changed, the intellectual level I had witnessed and his minimal language facility seemed to leave Harold in the clear. Of

course – my unrelentingly suspicious, mind went on – I could have just been set up. It could have been staged. Her apparent motivation seemed reasonable – to let me see that her brother was beyond suspicion. That could have served several ends, however – to actually protect her unfortunate brother or to try to prove to me he was something that he was not. Physical disfigurement was not necessarily correlated with low intelligence. He could have been playing that part. Doc would know for sure. I'd find out.

So, my long list of possible suspects now seemed to include not only the Reverend Abernathy, but also Harold, Sally, and in a stretch, even Gracie. It brought me back to motivation. I first considered what was to me the least likely scenario.

Harold was the bastard son of the Ghost of Charlie Chance. Through some mystical process of inheritance from the other realm, his mission in life had become the continuation of Charlie's lifetime wish to keep people away from his land. By killing off a few youngsters each year, Harold thought surely the Academy would move. Solid motivation. Absurd premise – to me, at least.

Then there was Sally. Same basic premise, I supposed, trying to bring some peace to her mother's ghostly partner in giving life to Harold. Or, perhaps, it was Harold's mother's ghost who freed him from his room at night and directed his virulent activities. Every bit as absurd to me.

Gracie: She was a Chance at heart. Unless possessed by Charlie himself, I had no reasonable connection between her and the partings. My use of the term 'reasonable' was clearly up for interpretation. Could old Charlie have threatened her with a Soul Sucking if she didn't carry out his deadly assignments? For the folks raised in the local traditions, the risk of going to Hell for killing was still probably superior to having no soul at all. She would have only been nine when the first parting occurred. She could have, of course, been a later replacement for somebody else.

By the time I reached the top of the rock steps to campus, I was again reminded that I may not have yet met the mastermind behind the Ghost of Charlie Chance.

Two of the younger boys were playing Frisbee across

the walk. I stopped and watched. I became confused. The boy to my right looked just like the boy to my left.

"Aha!" I said, out loud, after more time than should have been necessary. "Twins."

It dredged up another association for me. Doc's grandfather had owned a rope business in Carlton County. Abernathy's grandfather had owned a rope business in Carlton County. Could that have been the same man? Were those two related? If so, could they for some reason be in collaboration in this thing and their apparent public dislike for each other just be a cover. It was as hard to imagine Doc being involved in this as it was Sally. I figured a desperate mind spun desperate hypotheses.

It was lunch time. I wanted to receive updates on the boys. I returned to my room to wash up. It was a shamble. The mattresses were on the floor. The rugs were draped across the backs of the over turned chairs. My clothes were strewn about the room. There was a message scrawled on the mirror over the dresser: "The Sins of the Fathers shall be visited upon their children."

It, too, posed a quandary. It sounded like something a clergyman would use and yet I was certain it was not a precise Biblical quote. Would a clergyman make such an error? And how could it have related to scaring me away. It couldn't. That had not been its intent. Whoever it was realized I was in for the long haul, so what was the purpose of the message? It had apparently become a 'Catch me if you can' game. I shuddered. It did narrow my list to those with huge egos – the catch me serial murders always possessed them.

As I inspected the message further, the open window behind me slammed shut. Immediately, the now familiar, high pitched, ghostly laugh, echoed in the hall. The spirit seemed to be at it again!

///

CHAPTER NINE

I went into the hall, not really expecting to see anything – I didn't. I did notice the window was open in Tyke's room next door. That seemed odd since it hadn't been in use for several days. It intrigued me enough to enter. The can that rattled when I pulled the signal string in my room, had fallen onto the floor from its hook on the window frame. I tugged gently at the string that fed out the window. It was loose so I pulled it in. Tied to the other end was a strong stick some eighteen inches long. The picture began to take shape. The stick had been put in place to hold open my window. Shortly after I entered my room the string was pulled from Tyke's room and the window slammed shut. The perpetrator then left before I got into the hall.

I turned back into the room. There was a faint noise, a clicking – no, more of a slapping, rhythmic and regular. Slap...slap...slap... It took no great detective work to find that it was coming from the shelf across the top of the open closet. There I found a miniature tape recorder – ancient in design. The tape had broken and the take-up wheel was continuing to run, slapping the broken edge of the tape against the head.

I turned it off and took it with me. Although a marvel of miniaturization for its era it was quite bulky by present day standards. I opened the window and I took a seat in my chair. With the recorder on my lap, I rewound the tape and pressed start.

The reels turned but no sounds appeared for a full minute. At that point the laugh began and lasted for twenty seconds. It was shortly after that that the brittle old tape had

broken.

I had to assume the prankster planned to return later and retrieve the device thereby removing any trace of evidence. It was my first actual break – maybe. I called Mary.

"Mary. I need someone to do some detective work for me – probably on the internet."

"Tyke's taught me well. Let me give it a try."

"I need to find out everything I can about an old, mini tape recorder and the tape I found in it. When it went off the market, where it had been available, things like that."

"Okay. Got a pencil at the ready, here."

"The name is partially worn away. What I can make out is just the last few letters. Looks like ...ty-Mite. It could be Mighty-Mite. Can't be sure. Its serial number is zyx082761. Has six, size A batteries in a compartment at the left end. Uses half inch tape on open reels that are two inches in diameter. The reel has the name APEX-FIFTY on it and a serial number 030938. I'd guess late fifties or early sixties but that's just a guess."

"Seems like lots to go on. I have a friend who has managed radio stations since Marconi – she may have some idea. I'll begin with her."

"Thanks a lot. The boys are safe and sound, I assume."

"Just heard from the sheriff. Tyke seems to be very tired. I suppose that's reasonable considering the trauma to his system. The only real problem other than that seems to be keeping them fed."

She chuckled, then added:

"Sheriff said he had something interesting he needed to show you. He's on his way up here now."

We hung up. Something interesting she said. Perhaps the breaks were beginning. I certainly hoped so. I made a call to a friend of mine in the salvage business and asked about the tank in Doc's store room. I hadn't seen any fancy equipment in his upstairs office so wondered what might have been shipped in it.

"Serial numbers?" I asked, merely repeating his first question to me. "Let me download some pictures from my digital camera and see if I can find any."

A few minutes later I had several sets of markings to report.

"HypChbr-120704, Model 8, Packard."

He spent a few minutes in silence at the other end feeding it into his computer. Before I hung up he had provided some information that was both unexpected and not immediately useful.

I made another call, this one to another friend, the Sheriff in Carlton County just to the north. I inquired about the possibility of Doc Johnson having an illegitimate son in that area. He had heard the same rumor and knew the woman and boy – man now – in question. He could not verify it but assumed it was true. The young man had no obvious means of support but he and his mother lived well. It probably was of no consequence anyway. Just a nagging puzzle piece that may have found its way into the wrong box.

By the time I had finished making few new notes, Sheriff Carter arrived. He took a seat in Tyke's chair and handed me one of two large brown envelopes he had brought along.

"Pictures from the state Forensics lab of one of the bodies from about this time last year. Three shots – full front, full back, and then a close-up. It's the close-up you'll be interested in."

I removed the pictures and was immediately saddened but moved right to picture number three. The Sheriff explained.

"It's a blow up of this area on the lower, front, abdomen."

He pointed from one picture to another.

"Looks like very primitive letters – upside down – carved right into the skin," I said, repulsed at the idea. "I make them out to be DJ."

"So did I. So did the lab. The report says they were cut by the fingernail on the boy's right index finger."

"And that tells us several things, possibly," I said, my mind shifting into high. "First, that the death was not instantaneous. He had time to cut the initials. Second, that he was sending us a signal - most likely to ID his assailant unless they have some local religious significance."

"None that I know of. If they are initials, you do realize whose they could be," he said.

"DJ - David James?"

"It's why I didn't share the information with Mary."

"I suppose we need to compile a list of DJ's," I said having no idea how to go about that.

"Not many last names beginning with J in these parts - Jakes, Johnson and Jensen are the only three that come to mind."

"We need to find any links to the partings – regardless of how farfetched. Maybe it has to do with this hilltop land in some way. Maybe the Academy itself – knowledge of new ideas is pretty threatening to some folks. Old grudges? I have nothing specific in mind."

"I'll put my daddy to thinking on it," he said. "He was Sheriff here during the forty years before I took office."

"I didn't realize that Sherifing ran in the Carter family."

"Most occupations do run in families around here, farmers, business men, clergy, teachers. Hard to break away from the family tradition."

His tone suggested that information was in some way more meaningful to him than the words indicated. I had an important unanswered question.

"How did the state lab get involved in the death of the boy whose pictures we just examined?"

"The mortician saw the letters and the bloody fingernail. He reported it to the boy's father who had a relative on the state police force who took the pictures and nail scrapings and got the lab involved. They only went so far as to verify that the fingernail was the probable cutting edge used to make the letters."

I moved on showing him the recorder. He had never seen it or even one like it and had nothing to offer other than to point out it was probably a very expensive item when it came on the market.

"May I ask a personal question," I asked.

"Sure," he said with a shrug indicating some degree of openness.

"A few say you and Reverend Abernathy are close in some way."

He broke into a smile.

"You may have to diagram this, Marc. The Reverend's wife's mother is my wife's mother's cousin once removed."

"I won't even try. That's the extent of your relationship?"

"As a boy, I considered going into the ministry and Reverend Abernathy and I spent some time together talking about it. The more I got to know him the more I realized I didn't want to follow in his footsteps."

"May I ask why?"

"He's fully illogical and so filled with anger he scared me."

"Anger?"

"Seething!"

"About?"

"I have no idea but early on I decided he tended to take it out on his congregation. He's a ranter and raver from the pulpit. Preaches the 'spare the rod spoil the child' philosophy. Seems to take some pleasure in seeing children being punished. Thinking about him sends rabbits across my grave."

"Rabbits across your grave?" I asked not understanding the reference.

"Chills up my spine. Local lore has it such chills are caused by a rabbit running across your grave."

"Before you're in your grave?"

"I didn't promise it would be logical. I merely offered an explanation."

We exchanged smiles.

"Just hearing your information about the Reverend sends a herd of the little varmints over mine, then. Change of topic. That woman deputy you're having accompany Tyke is reliable, I assume. Sorry, it was a dumb question. I'm just uptight about things."

"We could have Doc go up to the retreat center instead," he said.

"No. I don't want any possible leak as to their whereabouts. Doc could be followed. His appointment book could be examined. I'd feel better leaving it as it is. The lad seems to be going downhill. He needs the medical attention."

We have to see that he gets it."

"I'll be following them in another unmarked," the Sheriff said, as if attempting to reassure me. "I'll wait outside and then make sure they get back safely."

"I feel better already. That deputy. Her initials don't happen to be DJ."

"Donna Rakes, Tyke's cousin's wife. The boy couldn't be in more competent hands."

I nodded.

"Looks like a second envelope, there in your lap."

"Oh, yes. It's what I have on the Butler boy, the one whose body was actually examined by the state lab several years back."

I took a few minutes to peruse the contents. The boy had died of congestive heart failure.

"Why would Doc have had the lab collaborate on such a straight forward cause of death as this? It was a Devil's Darkness death?"

"A bit iffy on that. Actually, two days into the new moon, but, given their willingness to buy into the idea of the partings, coupled with an extra strong south wind it became close enough for most folks in this area. Their need for an ironclad explanation allowed an immediate expansion of the time line."

The Sheriff was sounding more and more like me. I read on. The package of information seemed a misfit with the others. No mention of burst capillaries in the skin. The eyes seemed to have remained unaltered. No mention of dried mucus membranes. It just didn't fit with the other reports. I didn't point it out to the Sheriff at that time, however.

"Can you find out if he had a known history of heart trouble?"

"Doc should know."

"Anyway, to do that and bypass Doc for the time being? Get some alternative verification? Don't want to just trust to old Doc's memory. His patient records are clearly mostly in his head."

"I can ask the parents. Won't be easy but if it seems necessary I will do it."

"I think it is."

"Consider it done, then."

We stood and the Sheriff left. My phone rang.

"Marc, this is Mary. We hit the jackpot with my first call. My friend knew the tape recorder model well. She used one as a young reporter. Expensive to operate – batteries only lasted about an hour. It was the first mini-recorder with an electric motor. The previous models used wind up motors to conserve battery power and provide an even speed. The tape is from the same era. Both went off the market in the early sixties. Most likely they were only sold in cities – they were really expensive and thought of more as toys than being utilitarian."

"Good work. Thank you."

I entered the cafeteria at two o'clock on the nose.

"This afternoon I want us to consider the use of coincidence and correlation in establishing plots. Who wants to take a stab at defining those terms?"

Surprisingly it was Mike – quiet, thoughtful, Mike.

"A coincidence is like when one thing seems to make another thing happen but it really don't. A correlation is when two things can be shown to go together."

"I'm impressed. Great. Let's go for some examples of coincidences."

Several had suggestions.

"You sneeze three times and then seem to start having bad luck."

"You wish Santa Clause would bring you something and then you get it."

"Great. How about correlation?"

"Fat people are more likely to have heart attacks."

"Rainy seasons go along with good crops. Dry seasons go along with poor crops."

"Okay. How about this one," I asked. "Men who ride first class in airplanes have more heart attacks than men who don't ride first class in airplanes."

"Sounds like a correlation, to me," Mike said. "Is it true?"

"It's true, if by true you mean it really happens that way. But, it's not true if you you're looking for the real cause and effect relationship."

"What?"

"It turns out that men who ride first class in airplanes are generally older than the average man; that makes them generally heavier, and have more money which may mean they have worked harder or have more stress in their lives. When those factors are balanced out there is no difference in heart attack rates between the two groups."

"So, correlation doesn't really mean cause and effect?"

"That's my point exactly. And I bring it up to help you remain mindful of that when you are plotting a story. Cause and effect must be believable."

"That must be hard to do in the ghost stories you write," a girl suggested.

"It surely can be. Depends on what you believe is the truth about the spirit realm, I suppose. I tend to want proof that I can see and feel and make work at a logical level. Many folks don't need that. For them to say the ghost killed the young men who attended this school makes sense. To me it doesn't."

"Why not?"

"Well, if ghosts don't have physical mass – nothing you or I could touch if we went up to one and tried – then how could that non-mass physically attack a person?"

"But Old Charlie don't attack. He sucks the soul out."

"I know that's the belief and I'm not here to tell you you're wrong. I, however, have to ask, 'How do you know the soul has been sucked out and how do you know it was Charlie's Ghost that did it?'"

"Charlie never wanted nobody up here on his land."

"I understand that. I don't see how it's connected in a cause and effect way to the partings."

Silence over took the room.

"Let's go back to soul sucking. I have to admit I have never heard the term before I came here and I've investigated dozens of cases involving the supernatural. How can anyone know it actually happens?"

Again silence. Then a freshman girl had a tentative response.

"Because the Reverend says so?"

"And I suppose he has ways to back that up?"

Her shoulders shrugged.

"As I said, I'm not here to change your beliefs. I'm trying to point out that as I write about these events they pose a multitude of cause and effect problems for me. If you've studied writing you've come across the admonition to make sure your character's motivation is logical and well established - tight, it's often called.

"The stories about Charlie say he was a mean and terrible person. The motivation that's suggested is that he was possessed by the Devil, and anyone so possessed will be mean and terrible. But then I get to looking at what I actually know about the man and I can easily explain why he grew to become the kind of person he did without any reference to the Devil. He was mistreated and openly scorned by everyone in his life. He was excluded from human contact and formal education. Put yourself in his place and think how you would have developed.

"That's the writing assignment for this afternoon. It's in two parts and you can use a flashback format if you want. Put a baby into a loving, accepting, home and neighborhood, and show and justify the personality he or she is likely to develop by age ten. Then do the same for a baby born into a situation where it is put down, treated badly, its needs are ignored, and it is isolated from other children and most adults. Toss in a good dose of ridicule from the kids who get close enough to taunt it and make sure it gets blamed for every unexplainable bad act that occurs in the neighborhood."

"This is great," Mike said, standing. "Can we go git started?"

"Be gone, the lot of you."

They hurried out of the room. Whether that mirrored Mike's enthusiasm or some fear that I'd continue talking I couldn't determine.

Katy came up afterwards.

"You sure tread close without stepping on toes," she said.

"Sometimes it's hard to know how far to push. I was interested in how quite young Mike suddenly got into it all today."

"He's an interesting youngster. He is thoughtful and

that is often mistaken for inattentiveness or shyness. Would you believe he had the lead in the Spring Play this year? Put him on stage and it's a fascinating transformation – he becomes his character lock, stock and barrel."

"Interesting. I have another question for you. These kids – almost all of whom speak the Ozark version of English – write beautifully in the Kings' English. How have you accomplished that?"

"Written English as a second language."

I suppose I frowned because she was moved to explain.

"I show them how to translate from their form of English into formal written English. No value judgment is ever made against the way they speak. It's just two separate ways of using the same basic language."

"You really should give seminars on your approach. I see so many teachers who rake students over the coals for the dialectic speech they learned in their homes without providing any real assistance other than red marks on their papers."

"Perhaps I will look into that."

I doubted that she would, though I had been serious.

Since I had given the students the rest of the afternoon to work on the assignment I had a bit more than two hours left before supper. As I arrived back in my room my cell phone rang. It was the Sheriff.

"I've met with the Butler boy's parents. He had a life long history of heart disease. By the way he doesn't trace his ancestry to any of three families you mentioned to me earlier. Hope that helps in some way."

"It confirms several suspicions I've been brooding over since you left. Thank you. The boys are still okay, I assume."

"Doin' fine. Tyke's still woozie, I guess you'd say. Never seen a person quite like that. Sleeps and then when he wakes up he's only marginally aware. Think an infection could be doing that?"

"Doesn't seem reasonable. Doc will know, I'm sure. It's only a couple of hours 'til his appointment."

It triggered an idea. I hung up and went to Mary's office. I was soon on the internet tracking down one last piece

of medical information. I made a call to the Sheriff and then spent several minutes with Mary.

“What’s your verdict on the state of the kid’s health at the times of their deaths?”

“Except for the Butler boy, they were all in pretty good health. Doc always stays on top of that. If he has any ongoing concerns he sees that they come in periodically for extra checkups.”

“Has Tyke ever experienced periods of vertigo – wooziness, as the Sheriff describes it?”

“No. Is he not feeling well?”

“That’s the report. Thought to be associated with his head trauma – related to the concussion. Is David around?”

“Left about an hour ago, in the car. Had some errands to run. Not sure how to reach him. Is it important?”

“No. No. I’ll catch him when he gets back.”

“Oh. By the way,” She said, “you have an email from ‘Riskybusiness’.”

“Yes. My friend in the insurance industry. Can you help me open it?”

It was soon accomplished. She left me alone and I read it, then printed a copy before deleting it. I often wondered where deleted emails went. Perhaps there would be a science fiction story in that someday. All of the unwanted emails banding together and waging cyberwar against those of us who had rejected them.

On my way across campus I put in another call to the Sheriff.

“Sheriff. David’s out in his car somewhere. Can you put an APB out for it and just keep it under protective surveillance from a distance?”

“Unusual request. Protective surveillance? You writers! But, sure. The Devil’s Darkness thing?”

“Yes. How better to once and for all get rid of the academy than to get rid of its heart and soul – so to speak?”

That hadn’t been completely honest and I’m sure Tyke would have taken me to task over it. I was suddenly all quite paranoid about anyone with the initials DJ. I spoke briefly with Tyke, telling him to stop taking the new medicine. There seemed to have been a mix up in what he had been given.

I then made a call to a well-known judge in Indiana who had been a longtime family friend. I made my request and then waited for a return call. Ten minutes later I had the authorization I needed from a local Arkansas judge.

I hurried to the new boys' dorm in search of Tom.

"Thomas, my boy. I hope you're as handy with electrical things as I imagine you are."

"Wiring? Radios?"

"Yes, things like that."

"Top a my class in Electricity last semester. Workin' toward it again in Radio and TV basics this semester."

"Nice going. I need your help for what could be a dangerous mission."

"About keeping Tyke and them safe?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'm in then. What's up."

"Absolute secrecy, first. Nobody can know."

"Got it. I'm really good at not saying nothin'."

Under less serious conditions it would have been humorous.

"We'll need a selection of tools and some small lengths of wire of various gauges. Not sure what we will actually need."

"Give me ten minutes. That all secret, too, I guess."

"Right. Meet me in my room."

He nodded and left.

It was no longer just based on whim. The evidence was beginning to point me in one direction.

A half hour later Tom and I had completed our mission and were back in my room.

"Where you learn to pick locks like that?" he asked me.

"These old locks don't take much skill. Actually, the key to my dorm room fit perfectly so I can't take much credit."

He nodded and smiled.

"Not sure what we just done or why, but I guess that's part of secret missions, huh?" Tom said.

"Yes, it is. I must say I was amazed at your skill and knowledge. You'd never seen such a device before and yet when I told you what needed to be done you had it rewired in ten minutes."

“Wish the girls appreciated stuff like that. Nothin’ I’m good at ever impresses ‘em. Tykie’s okay, ain’t he?”

“Yes. Last I heard he was just fine. I don’t think I ever thanked you for all your help with the escape plan earlier.”

He shrugged.

“We help each other.”

It was the essence of the local social philosophy and I had never heard it stated more eloquently or succinctly. If every day, everybody lived according to that dictum, the world would be a wonderful place for all of us. I’ve often wondered how such a simple truth as – “we help each other” – could be so consistently overlooked day after day, year after year, generation after generation.

But my head was getting off track. I thanked Tom again and reminded him of the absolute secrecy involved. He was on his way.

At the end of the session I had slipped Mike a note to drop by my room. He walked in the door beaming.

“Sounds like you need my help. Never thought I’d be helping a famous writer. What’s up?”

I spent the next ten minutes outlining exactly what I needed from him. I had also written out instructions for him to take to Miss Hawthorne. I was sure she would assist us. He was then off on a trot.

I went down to my car and drove to the church.

The Reverend was shocked to see me.

“You do the Devil’s work. I shouldn’t see you.”

With that I had learned two important things. He believed that not only Charlie, but I, too, was in league with the Devil. I was sure the connection would be circuitous and I really wasn’t interested in having it sorted out. Secondly, that there might be a chink in his armor. He said he ‘shouldn’t’ see me not that he was refusing to see me. An interesting development.

“You’re saying we can talk, then?”

“I suppose. Come in.”

We both sat as we had before.

“I won’t take up much of your time. Mainly I just wanted to tell you, face to face, that I am now sure of two things and can prove them to the satisfaction of most people. First, the

fiendish deeds that have been going on around here the past fifty years have not been the doings of the Ghost of Charlie Chance – or anybody’s ghost for that matter. Second, I know who the wrongdoer is and will have indisputable proof within a few hours. I’m telling you this ahead of time so you can make any arrangements or modifications you may need to make.”

I left that last statement nebulous believing he would read into it whatever he felt he needed to – and he would need to do something. I stood and waited for a long moment in case he had anything to say. He didn’t. I left and headed for Doc’s office. It was going on four. I made my way up the steps and entered his waiting room.

He was also surprised to see me. We continued to stand. I spoke.

“I just wanted to inform you in private, that the medicine you gave Tyke earlier was the wrong kind and suggest that if you find yourself making that sort of mistake often it’s probably time to take down your shingle.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You said it was a myosin for infection. In fact, it was a potent sedative. I’ve never heard of fighting infection with a narcotic.”

“You meddling in doctor’s doings now as well as in those of the paranormal?”

“Not meddling, Sir. Just hoping to avoid some even more damaging mistake.”

Doc didn’t respond.

“The boy will be here shortly. His cousin’s wife is bringing him. Coming right from a play – Charlie’s Aunt – so he’ll be in costume – a dress.”

I had no idea that sentence would be so confusing – all the wrong names and titles. Still, Doc knew the play and indicated with a nod that he understood.

“I figured it would be David who’d be bringing him. Usually it’s David.”

“Too busy, I guess.”

“Which Cousin’s wife?”

“You got me, Doc. Soon after I arrived I gave up trying to keep track of relationships among these folks.”

“Jill, Betty, Donna, Ellen Kay?” he pressed.

“Donna, I believe.”

“Donna Rakes – Hank’s wife. Good people. She was a Jakes. Jakes to Rakes. Kind of humorous in a pedestrian sort of way.”

I nodded.

“Well, I’ll be on my way. I’m sure I’ll see you before I leave.”

“Ready to leave, are you?”

The prospect of me not being there seemed to perk the old boy up. Glad to be of service!

“I’m about one chapter away from having my book outline finished. This is where it always gets interesting. Oh, one more thing that may be none of my business. Sally says you medicate Harold. Is that for his hyperactivity?”

“Yes. More to help Sally than Harold. That always presents an ethical dilemma, you know. You’ve met old Harold, have you?”

He seemed both surprised and disturbed.

“For just a few minutes. He seemed more impressed with the candy bar than me.”

Doc nodded.

“Spent his whole life waiting for his daddy to show up and play ball with him. Just plain sad.”

“I’m certain this is none of my business but I’ll give it a shot anyway. Any idea who his father is or was?”

“Old Charlie Chance’s ghost, the way I hear it.”

“And you believe that?”

“Who am I to say? He sure looks a lot like Charlie.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask somebody about that. How is it known what Charlie looked like?”

“Preserved in the lore. Lore can represent a very accurate history you know, especially when it’s thoughtfully handed down from one dedicated story teller to the next – generation to generation.”

“Sally’s mother was a storyteller as well as a medium?”

“You’ve learned a lot in a short amount of time, I’ll say that for you, and yes to your question.”

“Harold seems to be a happy little man,” I said, again fishing.

“That’s a blessing. He’s dying, you know.”

“No. Sally didn’t mention that. Probably thought it was none of my business.”

“Best he goes before Sally,” Doc said, hurrying on as if to indicate Sally did not know. “There would be no way to explain her departure to him.”

“Cancer?” I took a stab.

Doc nodded. I winced.

“What about his level of intelligence?”

“Never progressed beyond the four-year-old level. Sally has to do almost everything for him.”

“I appreciate your time and insights. Better be on my way. I’d hate to miss supper.”

“Whose cookin’ this evenin’?”

“The sophomore boys, I believe.”

“You’d do a whole lot better over at Gracie’s, then. It’ll be hotdogs and canned sauerkraut up at the cafeteria. Probably fruit cocktail and green beans. It’s safe for the cooks but not a delight to the pallet.”

I showed myself out. Near the bottom of the steps I paused to make a call.

“Sheriff. Marc. Any word on David’s car?”

“Hasn’t been seen by any of my cars. I’m going to widen it to a general APB to all local law enforcement.”

“Probably not a bad idea.”

“Donna and Tyke are in the car and ready to head into town,” he reported.

“Good. Be glad to get this next phase behind us.”

“Next phase?”

“I tend to talk in writer’s jargon. Just translate it as the doctor’s appointment.”

It hadn’t been entirely truthful. I seemed to be falling into more and more of that.

“Does Donna know you are following her?”

“No. Thought it would be best not to advertise it.”

“Okay then. Good luck.”

I never wished people ‘good luck’. What had gotten into me down there in those Ozark Mountains?

“Ten four. That’s cop talk for understood.”

I hung up. It was twenty minutes until five. I had a dilemma. Both the appointment and supper were at five. I

headed for Gracie's in hope of downing a quick sandwich.

"Evening Gracie. Got a sandwich for a hungry man in a hurry?"

"Corned beef on rye or ham salad?"

"The first sounds great. You doing okay?"

"Me. Sure. Question around town is how are you doing? Folks is expectin' the worst fer you tonight."

I was more uneasy for Tyke and the other two at the retreat than for me. The bad guy with the big ego had to do something spectacular to prove me wrong and maintain his hold over the lore. The sandwich arrived.

"What do you know about Donna Rakes?"

"Donna Purdy Rakes or Donna Jakes Rakes?"

"The second."

"Well – and this ain't a nice thing to say, but considerin' how it turned out I guess it's okay – we all thought she was one of them funny girls. She was good in sports, had big muscles, never had a boyfriend, hung with the younger girls, things like that. But then, she up and got married so that was that. As a little kid she was always beatin' up the little boys. Ended up marryin' the one she give the hardest time to. I always thought she was pretty strange. She'd go to every funeral that come along, even when she didn't know the deceased. Talked about becoming an embalmer. Her daddy put short life to that. She hated her name. Made the kids call her either Donny or DJ. Not very feminine I guess is what I'm sayin'."

"Oh, Oh. I'll be right back. Keep the sandwich warm if you will, please."

I was soon outside and on my phone to the Sheriff.

"It just occurred to me that your Donna Rakes used to be Donna Jakes – DJ – and that she has a reputation for hurting boys. What do you think?"

"I'd all but bet my career on her, but then we can't afford to take any chances. So far, she's right on target according to the schedule and route. She even volunteered for the assignment. Oops! I'll speed up and stick a bit closer. This winding road makes it difficult to keep to a constant speed and unless I ride her bumper I can't keep her in view absolutely every second."

“I’ll keep on the line if that’s okay,” I said.

“She’ll come into sight as soon as I round this next turn. . . . A problem, here, Marc. She’s not there. I can see clean up the next hill. She couldn’t have outrun me on this road. She must have turned off. There’s only been one side road since I saw her last. I’m turning around. . . . I’m on my way. . . . There’s the turnoff. . . . I’m on it driving crazy as a teenager. Pray for me if you’re into that kind of thing. This is a oil pan bustin’ rut of a road. I’m going to try and contact her on our radio band. I’ll get back to you.”

The phone went silent. I began pacing. I figured it was at times like this that smokers were glad they were still smokers. I chewed on a nail (finger, that is!) then searched my pockets for a Baby Ruth. Too much time was passing. What was going on? Had she prearranged the turnoff and some kind of hiding place for the car? He needed more help out there. I had no idea where they were so it would be fruitless for me to take out in my car.

The phone rang.

“Got a little standoff going here. She has the boy in the car and she’s outside, standing behind it with her gun pointed in my direction. I’m still in my car and inching in up as close as I can before she begins firing. . . . I’m thirty yards away and stopping the car. . . . I’m opening the door. . . . I’ll get out and stand behind the door and try to speak with her. I’m going to put the phone into my shirt pocket. Maybe you’ll be able to hear.

I could hear, alright. Two shots. Loud and clear!

CHAPTER TEN

I could hear the conversation via the Sheriff's phone.

"Donna, this is Sheriff Carter. What in the hell are you doing, woman?"

I supposed that was one way to cut to the chase.

"Sheriff? That really you?"

I assumed he showed himself so she could be sure.

"Man, am I glad it's you, Sir."

I assumed she lowered her gun since the voices became clearer and less agitated.

"What are you doing?" the Sheriff said repeating his initial question.

"I spotted your car following me, Sir. When I speeded up you speeded up. When I slowed down you slowed down. Never got close enough for me get any kind of make on you. It had every mark of a tail that I've ever been taught. So, first chance I got, I left the main road. I'd be in town by now but blew a tire hitting the holes to hard."

"Tyke okay?"

"I'm fine. Already thinking how I'm going to tell my kids about this one."

"Marc. Don't know how much of that you were able to catch."

"Everything right down to Tyke's flock of kids."

"We'll get that tire changed and then come on in. We may be a few minutes late. Doc's used to folks being late. He won't be concerned."

"Okay. My heart has started beating again. Don't worry about me."

It had been a joke although I received no verification that was how it had been received. His phone remained on.

As I turned to return inside, I saw Doc come out onto his landing. He attached something – probably a note – to his door and descended the steps, going around the side of the building and into the basement room.

“Sheriff, I need to speak with Tyke, privately. Can we use your phone while the tire gets changed?”

Our conversation was brief and to the point. He understood. Within five minutes they were on their way and ten minutes later, as I was finishing the last of the chips on my plate, I saw the car pass the window and then park in front of Doc’s office. The Sheriff pulled in a block away and made no move to leave his car.

It was time for me to make my next move. I paid the tab and walked down the street to where my car was parked half a block beyond the grocery store.

All the evidence had come together into a more or less neat package. I had every reason to believe the Ghost of Charlie Chance was about to put in another appearance. Time of day was irrelevant in this case. Too much was on the line.

It had occurred to me earlier in the week that there was no evidence that the boys had actually been killed at night – after midnight as the legend would have us believe. They were typically found the following morning. With Tyke the only one of the three candidates out in the open and available, I was sure the strike was imminent.

At my car, I started a video recorder that Tom had helped me connect to a remote microphone and video camera set up in the back room. I didn’t presume to understand how it worked, but took Tom’s word that it would perform perfectly. There would be three people in that office I needed to keep safe. I had briefed Tyke by phone on what I thought he and Donna could expect inside and how they should react. He had passed the information onto her. Now it was a matter of letting it play itself out and hope my calculations had been accurate. I fitted a wireless earphone in place and walked to the rear of the building along the side opposite from the stairs and entrance into the basement office.

I positioned myself so I could see in through the small, high, window near the ceiling. I called the Sheriff.

"I'd feel better if you moved in closer – to just outside the office door once they have entered. They will be going into the old lower rear office."

"I see. They climbed the steps to the office and then returned and are now doing just that – entering the back office. What's going on?"

"Stay close and we'll soon find out. I'm on the opposite side of the building from the entrance watching through a window."

"I'll say one thing for Tyke," the sheriff said. "He makes a fetchin' lookin' octogenarian aunt. All the old men in town will be wanting to jump his bones."

"Perhaps that's best left between us," I suggested. "I'm going to keep my phone on. I'll put it up to my earphone. It's receiving transmissions from a mic inside the room. I obtained permission from Judge Richards so all of this is quite legal. Things are under control regardless of how it may sound so don't make any move unless I request it."

"Okay, Marc. I'm trusting you on this one."

"And I appreciate that."

I had a good view looking down on the whole room. I could see over the curtains to the waiting section and into every nook and cranny.

As they entered, Doc pulled back a section of curtain and went out to meet them.

"Don't you look different," he said to Tyke. "Go on back and take a seat on the exam table. I'll be right there."

He picked up a magazine from a table and handed it to Donna.

"I figured you might be interested in this issue. All about the creeks in this area. As I recall you loved the creeks as a little girl."

As she accepted the magazine and glanced behind to sit down, Doc took a syringe from his white jacket pocket and sunk it into Donna's arm. She was immediately unconscious. I was sure he would not harm her further than that – not there in his office. He arranged her on a chair and went back to see Tyke who had shed his dress and rolled down his jean legs.

“How you been feeling today?”

“Tired. Woozy. Not very good, really. I seem to be so weak. Can’t really think straight.”

“Well, let me take a look at that head of yours. ... Hmm ... Yes. Got a nasty infection going in there. It’s like I figured. Why I had you come down here. You see this big tank?”

“Yeah. I was wondering about it.”

“It’s a hyperbolic chamber.”

“Like they use to cure the bends in deep sea divers?”

“Exactly the same. In fact, this very chamber was used on board a ship I used to sail.”

“I wouldn’t think you’d get many cases of the bends up here in these hills.”

“No. None in fifty some years. But a hyperbolic chamber has been found to have another medical application. By raising the pressure slightly on a person’s infected area, the medication is forced right into the bacteria, killing them on the spot.”

“Cool! So, how do you get my infected gash into that contraption?”

“Only one way. After I swab on the medicine we’ll slip all of you inside. You’ll feel a little pressure but it won’t be unpleasant and it will only effect the abrasion with the medicine on it. Half an hour and you’ll be better than ever – I promise.”

“Sounds like magic.”

“Lots of things about modern medicine still sound like magic to somebody who was trained sixty years ago. Clothing confuses the pressure gauges so you’ll need to slip out them before you go inside.”

Tyke did exactly as he was instructed and was soon stretched out on his back inside the thick walled, big tube. The open end had a heavy, round, hinged door that would swing shut and lock into position against a rubber gasket. The tube itself was no more than thirty inches in diameter.

Tyke had been positioned inside with his arms at his sides. There was not room to move them back up over his head. Doc paused as the door was almost closed. His madness surfaced full blown.

“William Oliver Rakes, of the lineage of Bertrand

Overstreet, I hereby condemn you to suffer the punishment visited upon you by the evil deeds of your great grandfather, himself. When we were boys he would threaten me and beat me until I was bruised and bleeding – sometimes even unconscious. He would taunt me until I would scream. I was helpless and no one would believe me. His friends would offer alibis and they would laugh at me. Laugh at me, the only true genius these hills have ever produced. I was worth a hundred Bertrand Overstreet's. Bad seed he carried. Bad seed. These last fifty years I have been gently pruning the tainted families until now there are only three descendants left. In a few minutes, there will be only two. And before long, none at all. 'The sins of the father will be visited upon his children.' It is written you see, William. I have no choice but to follow the Divine dictum."

The door slammed shut. Doc was clearly on an adrenaline high. He turned a dial and thumped at a pressure gauge. He checked his watch and nodded.

It was at that moment an event transpired that old Doc had never expected to witness. The closet door swung open and there stood the Ghost of Charlie Chance. He swayed and drooled and pointed at Doc. In his distinctive, chilling, raspy, slow, monotone he began to speak.

"You are the Devil. You are Evil."

He moved a step out into the room and turned his head so he could look up into the face of the old man.

Doc backed up and was soon standing against the tank with nowhere else to go.

"You know who I am? Old Charlie Chance or what's left of me after all these years. You been corruptin' my name and reputation, makin' it look like I was the one who done in all those sweet young boys. I couldn't rest 'til I found out who it was. Now I know. I heard what you said to the lad there. You's up to killin' him as we stand here. He loved you old man and you's killin' him this very moment. I'll get you old man. I'll have your soul before the moon returns. Mark my word. Your soul is mine unless you got some mighty good deal up your sleeve."

"Okay. So, I did some things. I'll admit that to you. I killed the boys and made it seem like it was you. I needed to

cleanse the line, don't you understand. You, of all people, should understand about the torment – the awful torment! I did it for the next generations here in these valleys, you see. I got rid of the bad seed. I have made a good life possible again for all these people.”

Doc sank to his knees, hands folded, tears streaming, pleading, groveling in front of the hideous figure.

“Got all that?” I asked the Sheriff through the phone.

“Got it. It makes me sick but I got it.”

“Inside you'll find Donna out cold – a knock out drug of some kind. I'm sure she'll be fine. I suppose it's time you enter. I'm on my way and will be right behind you.”

“But the ghost?”

“You're not afraid of a little ol' ghost, now are you Sheriff Fredrick Carter, son of the fearless former Sheriff Walton Carter?”

“I don't understand but I'm going in.”

By the time I arrived, most of the fun was over. The ghost, more commonly known thereabouts as Mike, had removed his mask. He and Katherine had produced a magnificent costume on very short notice and Mike's performance was worthy of rave reviews.

“Tyke!” the Sheriff said, frantically.

I opened the door to the chamber. We were met by a fully unconcerned voice.

“Hey guys. Is this the kind of thing Michael Jackson slept in? It's really pretty cool in here.”

“How in the?” the Sheriff asked. “I thought . . .”

“My consultant in everything electrical, Tom Rakes, and I made a few modifications so the chamber looked like it was working when in fact it wasn't. The tank was Doc's death chamber. He set it to actually remove the air pressure from the inside. The occupant became like an astronaut with a burst suit facing the vacuum of space. The victims suffocated and the vacuum-like conditions burst blood vessels, dried mucus membranes, and nearly pulled the eyes out of their sockets. Through the years Doc subtly added those facets to the lore about what happened when a soul was sucked from a being, and in that way the natural effects of his machine gradually became woven into the fabric of the legend.”

"It was Doc who appeared as Charlie's ghost, then?" the Sheriff asked.

"Yes. I'm quite sure of that – well, most of the time, at least. The outfit is probably as close as the trunk of his car. He was too intelligent to trust anyone else with his secret. On occasion, he did seem to enlist an accomplice to play parts – drive my car back to the parking lot, probably impersonate Jeff returning to campus, things like that – but never to help in the actual crimes. My guess would be that it was his son from up north in Carlton County who I also suspect he supports financially.

"Hey guys, I'm still in here naked as a jaybird. If Officer Rakes will leave the room, please, I'd like to get out of here and get dressed."

The sheriff and I helped slide him out and he was soon descent for the whole world to see.

"Your wooziness gone?" I asked.

"I stopped taking the medicine right after you called me up at the retreat, and by the time we got here it had all cleared up. I guess Doc was doping me up to make me easier to handle here if I balked at getting into his death trap."

"That's exactly what he was doing."

The Sheriff addressed Doc.

"Donna. She'd better be alright, you know."

"She'll come to in a couple of hours. Have her take two aspirin and call me in the . . . Well, have her take two aspirin."

He took a pack of spearmint gum from his jacket pocket and offered it around. There were no takers.

"Remorse?" the Sheriff asked Doc as he clicked the handcuffs shut.

"Remorse? Why remorse? I've performed a noble service for the future generations here in my valley. I've gently pruned and sanitized the gene pool. Ridded us of the bad seed. I'll go down in history! You'll see. Everybody will remember Doctor Jeremiah Johnson."

Indeed, they would!

The sheriff turned to me.

"Doc Johnson. How long have you had that DJ connection?"

"It hit me soon after you showed me the picture of the

Butler boy but then when David disappeared this afternoon and Donna Jakes Rakes entered the picture I must admit I had some momentary misgivings. I felt the need to cover a few more possible bases. David could not be located – as if on some clandestine mission of his own. The boy's death did benefit the school financially. Then, when it came to light that Donna – who sported a long history of problems with boys – had volunteered, well, I did have a few moments of panic.”

“You’ve suspected Doc right along, then?”

“If it weren’t Charlie’s Ghost, then the number of suspects bright enough to pull it off was limited. Once I got the report on the Butler boy I was sure. He had actually died of heart failure so Doc ran him in as a ringer, so to speak. He let the state lab examine a body – something he hadn’t done before. In that case, there were no signs of suffocation as there had to have been in Doc’s own victims. Doc’s request for help put him above suspicion – should that ever become an issue. The results of the state lab’s autopsy confirmed the cause of death as being natural – not homicide. That put it in line with the rest of Doc’s falsified reports, which thereby gained legitimacy without ever actually being substantiated. I was absolutely convinced of Doc’s role when you told me the Butler boy was not related to any of the three great grandfathers. He was the single misfit in the pattern, you see.”

The backup arrived and removed Doc. Paramedics took care of Donna.

The Sheriff, Tyke, Tom and I went outside. A deputy addressed us.

“David James was in an accident. His car ran off the road going down Poke Mountain. The wind done knocked over a tree and it fell over the road just beyond a curve. He was knocked unconscious. His car had careened on down the hill into the brush. That’s why we couldn’t locate him. He’s fine. One of our cars is bringing him here, now.”

“The Sheriff looked at me.

“Any loose ends we need to tie up?”

“Not really though the dagger was apparently from Bali, the home port of the ship Doc sailed on as a young physician. Tom and I found a box of unused audio recording tapes of the

same make and vintage that were used on the recorder I found in Tyke's room.

"There is one very interesting twist to the deaths. Through an insurance fraud investigator, I know, we discovered that Doc had independently taken out huge insurance policies on the young men he intended to kill. All under an elaborate system of false identities. It is how he managed to support himself and make the large donations to the Academy and elsewhere. He courted the Academy so he could bolster his philanthropic image in the area as well as win the trust of the very boys he would one day kill. Psychologists would probably theorize that those gifts were strategies his subconscious used to reduce or block his guilt.

"Sadly, the bottom line is that, like Charlie, Doc was persecuted by the kids around him. It was mainly by the new families. Those kids were being ostracized by the old residents, which made them angry, and they sought out scapegoats among others who were different. In one case, it was Charlie. In another it was Doc.

"There was a key difference, however. In Doc's case, it drove him mad. Somehow Charlie seemed to keep it all in perspective. What I've discovered about Charlie suggests he remained a goodhearted person who avoided conflict at all costs. I don't know what this will do to the superstition base of the area but if I know these folks, it will all soon be redefined and settle into some comforting, new, niche. Myths don't die they evolve."

In all likelihood both men had been geniuses. One, however, had also been blessed with the wisdom to appreciate the larger picture.

Tom had a question that was clearly bothering him.

"So, you're sayin' Old Charlie really was better balanced in his head than Doc?"

"That's the way I read it," I said.

"What will happen to poor old Doc?" Tyke asked, his compassionate nature showing through sad eyes.

"I imagine he'll be declared mentally incompetent and live out his years in an institution for the criminally insane."

"He's really done a lot of good in his lifetime, you know. More than most of us, probably. It's just sad to think it has to

end this way.”

“Perhaps the operational word there is End, Tyke,” the Sheriff said.

Tyke nodded understanding the reference.

“Someday I’m going to come back and be the doctor in these parts you know. I hope I can be as good at that as Doc was.”

I put my arm around the boy’s shoulders.

“That policy that Doc took out on you is in your name of course, so long as you are alive. By the time you’re ready to go away to college it should have a cash value large enough to pay most of your way. Doc loved the Tyke part of you, you know. It was Bertrand Overstreet’s great grandson that he hated. I think he will be pleased to know that money will help train the area’s future physician.”

Tyke nodded and managed a quick, faint, smile.

The boys put their arms around each other and walked away to have some private time. The terror was over. Somehow, they would have to begin adjusting to that.

I had my story. It furnished me with two important wishes for the future. First, that Tyke achieved his dream and became a first rate, country doctor. Second, that Tom very soon moved on from punkin’s to girls.

EPILOGUE

It had been an interesting and productive week there at The Ozark Hills Academy. This time it was the ghosts who seemed to surface as the good guys.

That always presented a quandary for me. Although most of me didn't believe in ghosts, if they did exist, I wanted them to be the good guys. On the other hand, neither did I want the living to be the bad guys. My greatest hope was that mankind would somehow wise-up and realize that the good, generous, and helpful approach to living was consistently superior to the selfish, me first, hurtfully competitive way.

I'd rather live in a world where everybody followed Tom's philosophy - "We help each other out." Then, the concepts of winners and losers, haves and have nots, would become irrelevant. I've always been an idealist and will continue to be. It's the only position that holds out any hope for the long-term survival of mankind, although holding it at this moment in history risks filling one's life with tremendous sadness.

The final session with my young writers drew to a close at four thirty on Friday. We clearly wanted it to linger on. It had been a good experience for all of us. They had grown and I had grown. It's what a true teacher – Facilitator – wants to have happen. I ate supper with David, Mary, Katherine and Tyke. It was an attempt to say goodbye without acknowledging that we would probably never see each other again.

After supper Tyke and I walked the grounds together and I listened to him spin plans for his future. Fortunately, he

recognized that he was already something wonderful, so becoming that was not one of his concerns. Like Doc, he would make his corner of the World a better place. Unlike Doc, he would go about it with levelheaded foresight, thoughtfulness, and wisdom, in the service of bettering the lot of all the lives he touched.

We came upon Charlie's cabin and, without a word between us, entered to look around. One last time we touched his wonderful gadgets and commented on what the total picture there told us about the man nobody ever really got to know while he was alive. Eventually, we closed the door behind us.

I had finished my work there on that mountain and although it was going on seven o'clock and the sun was nearing the horizon, I decided it was time for me to leave. Tyke helped me carry my bags to the car. It was a lingering hug, not words that signaled our goodbye.

I drove down the winding road unwilling to glance into my rearview mirror. I had four Baby Ruth bars left in my stash and had decided to drop them off for Harold. I pulled to a stop in front of Aunt Sally's house. His room was dark. That seemed odd. I scribbled a note on a sack, placed the candy bars inside it, and walked toward the house prepared to leave them inside the screen door. I had neither the strength nor the inclination for another goodbye that evening, besides it was growing dark in a hurry.

On the door was a wreath, bowed in black ribbon, and decorated with small toys: a plane, a drum, a fire truck, and a tiny beach ball. I was puzzled, but would not knock to pursue it.

As I started back down the walk through the evening fog, I noticed the wind had kicked up considerably. I heard what could have been laughter coming from the back yard. I was drawn to it and carefully rounded the house to investigate.

The scene was indistinct. There seemed to be an excited, happy-faced, laughing, Harold that I saw first. He kicked his beach ball across the yard and out of my range of view. It was immediately returned and a joyful, clapping, Harold went to retrieve it. The growing fog made it difficult to make out the specifics. It could have been a game of catch

against the wind.

I moved out of the shadow to get a better view of the entire area. Harold spotted me. His response was wide-eyed and wonder-filled! In the breeze and wind, it was garbled but could have been:

"Daddy came ta git me. Play ball!"

He kicked the ball again and I moved closer so I could follow it with my eyes. There, in the shadows of the dusk, stood an indistinct figure. Charlie? It waved a slow, deliberate wave and called out what seemed to be a single word.

"Beholdin!"

It appeared to beckon Harold, who ran to his side. Hand in hand they turned and disappeared in the dense mist.

Had Harold had found his daddy? Had Charlie found his peace?

Perhaps, my mind was playing with me – running with the cloudy visions – allowing me a moment's fantasy in which to play out one of those, 'wouldn't it be nice if', moments. I was soon on my way down the hill.