

*Marc Miller*  
*Ghost Writer*



# The Specters Of Carlton County

Marc Miller

The ghosts of The Cowards' Patrol  
still ride the Ozarks back country.



# **The Specters of Carlton County**

*An accounting*

*by Marc Miller, ghost writer*

**[Book One of Five in the Marc Miller, ghost writer Series]**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Legend of C-Patrol

Although, in the more isolated areas of northwest Arkansas, there remains room for discussion about the *original* significance of the “C” in *The C-Patrol* – Christian, Carlton, Confederate, – in Carlton County there is none; it lives on in Ozark folk lore as *The Cowards’ Patrol*.

The event is said to have taken place late in the summer of 1861. Three hundred young men – more or less, no one wanted to count – clad and partially clad in an assortment of tattered, often blood-soaked, hand-made, gray, uniforms had succumbed to exhaustion in a narrow, rock-laced, meadow inside a broad bend along Sandy Creek some twenty miles north of Yates Corner. They represented the only survivors of twelve hundred proud and pious youngsters that had, the day before, gone up against a sizable, expeditionary force of seasoned Yankees as it circled back north toward the area that would, eight months later, host the horrific *Battle of Pea Ridge*. Although not generally acknowledged in Carlton County, there are historical records that suggest it was largely due to the Yankee general’s compassion for the clearly inexperienced and unprepared southern youngsters that the remaining lot had not also been slaughtered.

Captain Carlton – known to his parishioners in and around Yates Corner as the powerful, self-righteous, Reverend Jeremiah Carlton, depended more on Divine inspiration to lead his troops than on any true knowledge of military strategy. He had, in fact, granted himself his rank, formed his own regiment, and badgered church going families into assigning their teenage sons to his command. His sermon, “*And the Children shall lead us*” had been delivered loud and long with convincing emotion and eloquence in every small town and country church within a day’s ride of his home.

To say the Reverend Carlton had been respected would not approach the truth. To even say he was liked or appreciated would be inaccurate. Reverend Carlton was feared – plain and simple. He preached hellfire and brimstone and, taking advantage of what can now be understood as a series of purely natural coincidences, convinced the local residents that he possessed powers granted to him from God’s own throne. His sermons were not – what would be the term – uplifting. They were not intended to show

his parishioners how to live a good and decent life. They were designed to strike fear into the hearts of those who would consider straying from his Bible thumping, verse twisting, sect-serving teachings. *His* was the only certain path away from eternal damnation – a possibility difficult for most to ignore during the mid-eighteen hundreds.

Always dressed in black – complete with stovepipe hat and flowing cape – he stood well over six feet tall with broad shoulders and a long, narrow, oversized head, pale in complexion. His dark hair was long and unkempt. He was in no way pleasing to look at. It may well have been fully impossible for the muscles in that face to pull a smile. For whatever reason, none had ever been witnessed.

Unique, even among the numerous hell-fire preachers in those Ozark hills at the time, Carlton delivered a distinctive form of the curse – *Eternal Edicts* he called them. He convincingly contended it was a power and responsibility granted to him by God himself when, as a boy, he had been struck by lightning. *Whether* he actually possessed that power could *not* be the question. If there were only one chance in a hundred – one chance in ten thousand – that he had the power, his Edicts had to be taken seriously. They were.

As twilight crept across the encampment, Captain Carlton walked among his remaining men – boys – selecting a half dozen that he felt were still capable of taking the fight to the enemy. They would form a patrol – C-Patrol – and scout the woodlands to the north gathering information on the progress of the enemy and return with their report at dawn. Also, they were to seek out isolated Yankee stragglers and kill them, preferably silently with bayonets or knives, or by strangulation with a short length of rope. He clearly took great joy in demonstrating those horrific, tortuous, ways of inflicting death. The veins on his neck and forehead stood out and his eyes grew wide. It was, he said, intended to send God's message – just *what* message, was not explained. The Captain made it clear that he expected them to return with Yankee identity papers proving no fewer than five such kills each.

As a means of ensuring the loyalty of his remaining troops he gathered them before him so they would witness the *Eternal Edict* he issued to the kneeling, head-bowed, hands folded, trembling, young members of C-Patrol.

“Until you each send five blue-clad Yankee souls to hell, your own soul will not find its eternal heavenly rest.”

The young soldiers were dumfounded that their leader would send them back to face certain death let alone that he would enforce their mission with an Eternal Edict. But it had been done. They *did* believe. They were children.

Reliving flashes from the fury and horror of the battle just concluded, the six young men saw no chance that they could each take down five of the enemy before being killed themselves. It then became a question of how soon their souls would be dispatched into the fiery, eternal void. They could undertake the mission and most certainly speed the process along or abandon the assignment and put off the inevitable by the greater part of a life time. They opted for life. Once into the woods and over the ridge they shed their coats and caps. They turned east and set out across the state, determined to find a new beginning along the Mississippi River, far away from Carlton and the families they had just dishonored.

The six were branded cowards. Their families lived on in humiliation. Years later, with his dying breath, the ever fiery Reverend Jeremiah Carlton reiterated his curse on the lads. Since that time, the locals have watched and waited, not to see *if* the derelict spirits would return, but to see *when* they would arrive, and *how* they would manifest themselves – meek and despondent or angry and vengeful?

Whether all six of the young deserters reached the big river and whether they settled together or dispersed along the way is not recorded. That they eventually died is, by now, certain and that their restless, homeless, souls returned to Carlton County is undisputed by most local residents.

Through the years the lore has been seamlessly amended from pulpit to pulpit, church to church, storyteller to storyteller. In the current rendition one hears, that due to the righteous lives they went on to lead, they were each granted a second chance of sorts – a stipulation.

To this day – the story now goes – it is not safe for a Yankee, clad in blue, to walk the back woods, or sail the Sandy Creek in Carlton County between dusk and dawn on a summer's night. To win eternal peace, unless granted a pardon from the ghost of Jeremiah Carlton himself, the six wayward souls of the *Cowards' Patrol* must *still* fulfill their deadly mission and dispatch five Yankee souls to the fires of hell.

\* \* \*

That was the story that intrigued me. It was the reason I found myself on that

August day winding through the hairpin curves and traveling up and down the narrow blacktops and gravel roads of Carlton County on my way to Yates Corner. It was why I had selected the colors of my wardrobe so carefully and planned my itinerary for the daylight hours. There, in that insular back country, an itinerant writer from Indiana – even one thoroughly skeptical about such things – was well advised to play it safe when tempting forces from beyond the grave. I write about the unexplainable, the ethereal, the supernatural. My name is Marc Miller, ghost writer.

There was a second, even more formidable aspect with which I needed to be concerned. In my years of experience as a writer about such things, I had found there were too often unscrupulous individuals among the living willing to seek illicit personal gain by maintaining and fostering such tales. It was *they*, not the spirits, I had in mind when I glanced back over my shoulder. It was *they*, not the ghosts, I had learned to fear. It was *they*, not the evil specters, I typically confronted in the end.

The day was bright and clear, and the countryside was magnificent, offering beautiful blends of a hundred verdant hues. Mile after mile of time worn, rocky hillsides, were flattened only briefly - not always willingly - to accommodate the narrow road before arching again into the broad green valleys below. Colorful birds flitted from tree to tree doing all the things that birds must do on a warm summer afternoon.

Squirrels launched themselves from branch to branch like shimmering silver streaks in the sunlight. They landed effortlessly then paused for long moments to scrutinize this unfamiliar intruder as they gently swayed on each new perch. From time to time I spotted small groups of deer drinking from the clear, narrow, white streams that tumbled through the valleys. Cows grazed or lay in the shade chewing their cud. Spirited colts galloped playful for apparently no reason other than to gallop playfully.

From time to time, small, white, clouds - appearing lost and all quite out of place - drifted on the gentle breeze beneath the wide, blue sky, casting restless shadows that navigated their ways nervously across the meadows, climbed a bumpy pathway up the hills, only to disappear beyond the gently rounded ridges.

As I started down the final hill into Yates Corner the road sign read, "*Curves ahead. Slow to 20 mph.*" I would have had to *increase* my speed by *5 mph* in order to reach that limit. It's not that we didn't have hills in southern Indiana, but ours came complete with full, two lane roads around each curve and guard rails on those make-a-

wrong-move-and-tumble-to-your-death outside edges of the pavement. Not so in Carlton County. The fact that I had not met a vehicle during the previous forty miles eased my mind very little.

I had spoken too soon. Around the next turn, I came upon a rust laden, brightly painted, old van. It seemed to have stalled there on the pavement and there was no space between it and the hill to move off the road. The hood was propped open and steam was spewing from its radiator. Several long-haired teen boys milled around, some scuffing at the ground and others tossing stones into the valley. I pulled to a stop beside them and rolled down my window to offer help. On the side of the van was a hand lettered sign - *The Eternal Edict, Christian Rock*.

The band's name certainly grabbed my attention. I assumed they were local youngsters trying to escape to the big time. I imagined that currently they were enduring the same hardships and reveling in the same false optimism that multitudes of similar groups had endured before them. I privately wished them luck.

"How can I help," I asked, smiling, looking from one to another for some response.

"Got a call into Carlton's Garage. Expect he'll be here to help us out anytime now," one of them replied.

"A band, I assume," I asked realizing the absurdity of the question even as it was being formulated.

"A band of lonely souls just trying to get our act together, you could say," came his smiling, almost poetic, reply.

The others nodded and chuckled. It seemed to require some pushing and shoving among them.

"We do weddings, church socials, things like that while we're waitin' for our big break."

"Well, if you're sure I can't help, I'll move on, then. Wouldn't want to be rear-ender by *all* this traffic."

The young men smiled again and nodded suggesting my attempt at humor had not escaped them.

"We hope to be in good hands very shortly, Sir. Thanks for the offer."

"That *is* Yates Corner down there, isn't it?" I asked pointing to the settlement in



the valley.

“Yup. Been right there for a good deal longer than it’s probably deserved to be. Not much left. A general store, a gas station, feed store, cafe, the old church, and maybe three or four dozen houses – lots of them not occupied.”

“*The Carlton County Inn*. Where will I find it?”

“Yonder,” he said pointing across the valley to a sprawling, three story, shake shingled, native rock structure perched half way up the hill just behind the town.”

“Thanks for the information. Good luck.”

I rolled up the window capturing what little cool was left in my car and rode my breaks on down the hill. The lad had been right. Yates Corner had seen more prosperous times.

I have to admit I had wondered about the name - the singular form of *Corner* and, in fact, kept calling *Yates Corners*, in my thoughts. It soon became clear. The town was centered on a single corner – one road coming down off the hill from the west and making a ninety degree turn straight up the valley to the north.

The sharp angle of that corner pointed at the small, ancient looking, white, church, its steeple bare of paint and its windows patched to be serviceable rather than attractive. Its clapboard roof was rippled in waves of sun-melted tar. I assumed it was Jeremiah Carlton’s church of old.

Several, of what could well have been other original buildings, stood their ground, more or less proudly lining the sides of the main thoroughfare north and west from the church. Their faces of wood and stone remained much as they had for more than a century and a half. Was that a testament to craftsmanship or an indication of frugality? Perhaps both – the first allows the second I suppose. Then, again, it could merely indicate more recent destitution.

Several pickups were parked at a variety of unorganized angles in front of the cafe, or, what I assumed was the cafe. There was a single, large, window in front. From my car I could see curtains draped and tied back on the inside. There was rock sidewalk out front, worn smooth from a hundred years of foot traffic. Above it was a wooden awning - roof - whatever. Had there been a hitching rack between the support posts I would have surely wondered if, during my decent into the valley, I had slipped through a time warp back into the James gang era.

There was no sign to announce the business, but as I approached on foot and peeked inside, I saw tables draped in blue and white gingham and set with the telltale imitation crystal salt and pepper shakers and chrome, napkin, dispensers. It was going on one o'clock and I had not eaten since leaving Springfield, Missouri early that morning. The prospect of a blue plate special suddenly brought my hunger into focus. I entered and took a seat near the window.

There were an even dozen, unoccupied, small, square tables, each complete with four, wooden chairs any one of which would have brought a substantial sum at an antique auction. Forty-eight chairs times five hundred dollars each would bring in about twenty four thousand dollars - probably not enough to retire on after all. The three men sitting on low-backed, wooden stools at the counter turned to look me over in what could not be described as a furtive manner. I was clearly the oddity and therefore deserved their unabashed scrutiny. None spoke or in any other way acknowledged my presence.

A young woman, blond and perhaps thirty, dressed in tight jeans, loose leather sandals, and a red bandana top, flopped toward my table.

"Amy Sue. You?"

"Marc," I said hoping that would be the proper answer to her minimally defined question.

"From?"

"Indiana. *Southern*, Indiana."

"Stayin' at the Inn?"

"Yes, I am, in fact. Haven't checked in as yet, however."

"Long?"

"I'm not really sure. I'm a writer. Came to your beautiful area to see if anything inspires me, I suppose you could say."

"Through the week the Inn only serves supper - they call it dinner. I'm good for breakfast and lunch so don't fret none. Granny taught me cookin' and she's the best that ever cooked in these parts."

She smiled for the first time. It readily transformed her from plain to attractive - from aloof to amicable. She pointed to the menu on the wall above the counter.

There was a different entrée listed for each day of the week - apparently the same, week in, week out. At the bottom was a selection of eight side dishes that

seemed to remain as staples from day to day.

“Salad’s included with lunch. Three sides. Fresh every day – no holdovers. Breakfast is most anything breakfast you want – eggs, cakes, tatters, steak, chops, sausage scramble. Describe it and I can likely make it.”

Her smile broadened. She unwrapped a piece of gum and slid it into her mouth to mingle with that already there. I waved off her offer of one for me with a smile. Her unhurried approach was refreshing, relaxing, comfortable. Clearly I took less time to decide than she had expected.

“Thousand Island, steak - medium well - corn, green beans and stewed tomatoes - haven’t had stewed tomatoes since visiting my grandmother as a little boy.”

‘You’ll love what I do with ‘em. Texas toast cubes and the thickest cream in these parts, honey sweetened and stewed with fresh tomatoes over a low flame for six hours. Nothing like mine anywhere!’

“From that description, alone, I’ll agree with you.”

“You *sound* like a Yankee writer, but that’s okay with me. A few around here still hain’t give up on the War, but most of us has – not *forgot*, mind ya, just not frettin’ ‘bout it no more. Lots of us even pays taxes.”

The men suddenly turned away and lifted their mugs to their mouths.

The large Confederate flag hanging center stage across the back wall did not lend credence to Amy Sue’s initial assertion, but it was still daylight and I was wearing gray slacks and a flowered, red and white shirt. I told myself I was safe and then chuckled about the childish shivers playing chase ‘round and about my spine.

“Coffee, ice tea, lemonade?”

“Ice tea sounds good. Thank you.”

She returned to the counter and was soon back with my drink – a sizable pitcher of tea and a large glass filled with ice. It seemed to be a pour-and-refill-your-own arrangement.

“Didn’t catch your last name,” she said, clearly figuring she had a right to know though not offering her own.

“Miller. Marc with a ‘c’ at the end, Miller.”

She made that face that implies, ‘Peculiar, but okay, I suppose’. I had seen it often in response to my name.

I poured the tea and she disappeared into the kitchen. The oldest of the three men across the room stood and pitched a dollar bill onto the counter - apparently coffee plus tip. He nodded at his companions.

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, Jesse,” they responded raising their mugs something just more than imperceptibly in his direction.

The two of them re-huddled and continued their conversation. I could only catch isolated snatches. The old gentleman turned and came directly to my table.

“A writer, you say.”

It was not a question - more of a forward to what would follow.

“Yes. Articles, novels, things like that.”

“Got sumpthin’ in mind ‘bout these parts?”

It seemed more than small talk or polite conversation. I opted for the honest approach.

“I just ran across the tale about *C-Patrol* and thought I’d find out what the longtime residents around here think about it all.”

“Tain’t no ‘tale’, I’ll tell you that much. Probably oughta jist let that one rest. Can’t see no purpose served by diggin’ up the dead. Can’t stop ya of course. Jist a suggestion.”

He smiled, paused – clearly for emphasis – and adjusted his feed store cap before turning and making his way out the door. I continued to watch him through the window as he entered his truck and slowly pulled away. It was a new Ford pickup, green with a half dozen sacks of feed in the back and a heavy duty hitch in the rear. A single, black and white, bumper sticker read: *Keep on honkin’. I’m reloadin’*. I had to wonder if perhaps it had *not* really been intended as humorous. Spanning the window behind his seat were two guns; one looked to be a rifle, the other a shotgun - double barreled. They pointed in opposite directions.

As he moved on down the street my eyes were drawn to the windows of the two remaining trucks and the rifles resting across them, as well. It was an unfamiliar, unsettling sight to me.

I soon finished my glass of tea, surprised at how thirsty I was. It made me think back to the boys by the van up on the hot hillside, and the case of bottled water I had in

my trunk. I should have thought to offer them drinks. My single-minded passion of the moment had apparently clouded my compassion for them and their comfort.

Presently, Amy Sue returned with my salad - a generous portion by any standards. There was a variety of greens, sliced red and yellow tomatoes, grated cheese and carrots, with bits of bacon and cauliflower. A bottle of dressing and utensils wrapped in a white paper napkin accompanied it.

“Just took peach pies outta the oven so save room.”

It was issued more as a requirement than as general information.

“Sounds wonderful,” I said, agreeing in principal with the idea.

“Oh. They’re the best around, guaranteed. Sell ‘em to the Inn and they only serves the best. I better get your steak turned. I fixed you a baked potato instead of green beans. It’s a crime in these parts not to have a baked tatter with steak - bad enough you don’t eat ‘em rare.”

“A baked potato will be fine, then.”

What else was there to say? Twenty minutes into my stay and so far my assistance had been turned down by the band members, I had been told to stop snooping into things that were none of my business, and my taste in food had been found sadly wanting. Apparently the folks in Carlton County had a forthright, imperious, bent. The stay there promised to be interesting. I could see my characters coming to life well before I had any idea what story they would be telling.

Amy Sue had been right about the requisite marriage of steak and potato and, also, that she *was* a world class cook – *chef* would have offended her I’m sure.

She and the men at the counter enjoyed several quiet laughs together, accompanied by brief, almost apologetic, glances in my direction. They could have been prompted by several things – my clothes, my speech, my occupation, even my vehicle which bore neither a tail gate in back nor firearms inside. Perhaps it was something else, more private.

Such reactions had never bothered me - well, not since I emerged from adolescence with a rebirth of the solid self-esteem I had acquired as a child. I enjoyed being unique, unaffected by trends in thought or assets. That position often left me at the fringe of friendships but from there, I liked to think, I could maintain an objective perspective.

Some of the women I had known found that trait uncomfortable and eventually went their own ways - as it should have been, I'm sure. Others enjoyed me for a time as a philosophic oddity but soon tired of my unbending resolve and moved on. No one had yet emerged as a thoroughgoing, well-matched, soul mate. At thirty-six I figured there was time. Assessing my track record, however, perhaps a wife and family were not to be my lot. That sounded like I believed in fate and I didn't – at least I lived my conscious life as if I didn't.

Since the first Halloween I could recall, I had been intrigued by ghosts and goblins, specters and spirits. That was a poor way of stating the focus of my interest. More accurately, I am intrigued by the forces that allow or require people to believe in such phenomena. Most of my books relate in some way to such things. I've been called a debunker. I've also been called far worse. I see myself as one who seeks the truth and who has an all-consuming fascination with the mind and the ways it attempts to meet our basic human need to live on forever – in one form or another. Along the way I enjoy telling and retelling the stories I encounter and in preserving the interesting characters that cross my path.

With the clearing of my table complete, Amy Sue had a question:

“Plain or ala mode?”

Apparently I was to have some small say in the matter after all. I smiled.

“Plain, please. I want to experience Amy Sue's unadulterated, personal touch.”

“Big words like that is gunna make you stand out like a sore thumb around here. 'Course you probably can't blend in now anyway. Jesse's gonna tell everybody up and down the road from here to Purdy - he's the old man who left a while back. Standoffish. Big mouth. Never much on outsiders.”

“I seldom blend in anywhere I go, Amy Sue. Never really try. Will that be a problem around here?”

“Who knows? Try the pie. Should be just the right temperature by now.”

Her intentional dismissal of my question was not entirely unhelpful. That which is so scrupulously avoided often suggests the most interesting parts of a good story.

Like the dishes before it, the pie was magnificent. I told her. Her response – “Like I told ya!” – could have been construed as arrogant. I decided that coming from Amy Sue it was merely a healthy, honest, self-evaluation. I engaged her in

conversation as I lingered over the pie – she brought coffee since, as she informed me, *that* was the only civilized way to eat still steamin’ pie.

“This your home territory?”

“Yes, Sir. Back eight generations right here in Carlton County. I’m the first female in the past four.”

She took a seat – elbows crossed on the table in front of her. It was as close to her as I been. She reeked of perfume. *Reeked* is obviously the wrong term but the aroma *was* eye watering strong. She continued.

“In most places – bein’ the only girl like that – I suppose I’d a been spoiled rotten. Not here, though. We don’t spare the rod in these parts for no kid, irregardless.”

It had been an interesting trilogy of sentences and I didn’t doubt its intent. She exhibited some twisted pride in having been beaten into becoming an acceptable human being. I had much to learn about these folks and I was eager to become immersed in the experience.

“Your grandmother have this place before you?” I asked, trying to dummy up my writer’s grammar a bit while pursuing some recent, local history.

“Yes, Sir. It was supposed to hand down to my momma, but she died birthin’ me so Granny just stayed on ‘til I was up to it. Gramps and Granny raised me up. Done a H of a job, if I do say so myself.”

“Granny still around?”

“Oh, yes she is. Seventy two and goin’ strong. You probably oughtta get to know her; she’s like the local . . . historian - story teller, the olden times, you know.”

“Yes. I would very much like to meet her. I suppose she’s knows all there is to know about the C-Patrol legend?”

“She does, but you *gotta* stop callin it a *legend* hereabouts or you’re gonna find yourself in deep.”

“In deep?”

“Unwelcome and such.”

I didn’t pursue the ‘and such’ but only because she hurried on.

“My Granny has lots of other stories I’ll bet a writer guy would like to hear. I’ll talk to her tonight. You’ll be here for breakfast about 6:30. I open at 5:30 but that’s for the local men. They don’t take good to outsiders intrudin’ into their time. No offense, but

you can see where I'm comin' from."

I wasn't sure I wanted to see but I nodded and made a mental note for 6:30 – make that 6:45 in case there were any gun tottin' stragglers. I smiled, wondering if Amy Sue was to become my unofficial mentor of all things local as well as my appointment secretary. She was clearly not used to leaving people much room to consider their own preferences or needs.

Later I would come to understand that trait had its roots deep within the culture. In Carlton County there was *their* way and the *wrong* way. It simplified life, of course. There were no moral dilemmas. Right was right - Carlton County right. Few in those parts questioned that, and those who did stood the swift and righteous wrath of the faithful majority – the overwhelming majority.

It was the Jeremiah Carlton mentality – the one that had always frightened me more than any other. Since they knew the truth - the *only* truth - there was no room for dissimilar beliefs. It follows that knowing the truth bestows some degree of Divine Right. Believe as I believe or suffer the consequences - the consequences that I am fully justified in administering. It seemed to contradict what I believed my county stood for and, sadly, America seemed to be one of the World's last bastions of that kind of freedom of thought and belief.

I paid my bill - \$6.12 - and left \$2.00 on the table.

"You'll never get along around here bein' *puffy!*"

It was a tone of annoyance that punctuated Amy's words. She handed one of the bills back to me. It would take more experiences for me to establish an accurate understanding of the new term. My initial synonym would be 'big shot'. I'd hone it as experience would come to suggest.

It was at that moment I felt the familiar rush of excitement that heralded the start of a new project. It was somehow different that time. Was it excitement or was it fear? One, of course, did not exclude the other. There was so much to learn about these fascinating folks. I felt compelled to tell their story.

I received the dollar bill she offered with what probably reflected a mixture of puzzlement and sheepishness on my part. I had neither intended to bolster my image nor insult her pride. Nothing more was said.

I was soon on the walk out front surveying the main street. Most of my



observations from the hillside were validated. Several of the buildings, however, did look to be a mere fifty years old, and some of the older ones had been shored up and given minor face lifts through the years.

I backed out and drove toward the Inn. A sign at the entrance to the lane read, "One Way." The plot for another book quickly bathed my brain - a haunted country inn from which guests never checked out - well, not in the 'turn the keys in at the front desk' sense of the word, at least.

It was a single lane, gravel road that maintained a mostly even slope up to the wide, unpaved parking lot in front of a huge old rustic building. I had to wonder why so large out there in the middle of nowhere. A half dozen or so cars dotted the lot leaving it looking barren and deserted. Perhaps on Mondays the guests arrived late in the day.

There was some – what shall I call it? – not so much relief, I suppose as closure when I noticed the large sign on the opposite side of the lot: *Exit Lot Here*.

A short, stooped, old man, wearing what could have been taken for a confederate uniform and hat approached me with a four wheeled, wooden, luggage cart.

"Miller?" he asked, all quite friendly although he extended no hand.

"Yes. It's nice to be expected. I have three bags in the trunk. Let me lift them out."

I opened the trunk, talking as I worked with the bags.

"I'm Marc with a 'C' at the end. Always have to explain that. Not sure why my parents decided to butcher it that way."

"Hank. I'm Hank with a K at the end. Been Hank with a K for seventy six years."

He giggled an Impish giggle.

With the bags stowed carefully on the cart, I closed the trunk and turned, taking time to eyeball the building.

"The Inn have a few years on you, does it?" I asked trying to establish a time-line.

"It'll be seventy seven come October 31<sup>st</sup>. Not much around here that has years on me. The original part of the Inn's probably double my age, but I watched the men lay every stone and nail every board on the new part the year I was four."

"I see."

"Which is which?" I asked then clarified. "Which is the new and which the old part?"

“South end’s old. North end’s new.”

I nodded and pointed to the third floor. It sported an interesting, long row of small dormers perched just above the eaves at the base of the steeply sloping roof.

“I imagine the view out over the valley must be spectacular from up there.”

“Third floor was sealed off in sixty-four after the presence appeared. Not used since.”

“Sixty-four. Presence?”

The old man ignored my admittedly cryptic questions though seemed to take some satisfaction in having taunted me with the information.

“You’re on two, the southwest corner – the old part and just about the best suite in the place to my way a thinkin’.”

There had been a clear deception in what I had been told about the upper floor. I could see faces looking down from at least three of those dormers. I wouldn’t push. Hank had made it clear that it was not to be pursued - with him, at least.

A six foot placard standing just inside the front door spoke to several of my questions. It touted an Ozark Music Jamboree each weekend from May through October. That would be why there were so few cars on a Monday afternoon. It would also suggest how such a large Inn was surviving there off the beaten path. Build a better Jamboree and the World will ... at that point the analogy seemed lame.

The lobby was huge, and revealed the rough hewn, post and beam design of the building. As we approached the desk, the clerk - a plain though not unattractive woman in her mid-fifties - lifted the walk through counter top and came to meet us.

“Mr. Miller, I assume. I’m Jan Day. My husband, John, and I own this big old barn.”

She extended her hand and we shook. She held it longer than initially seemed comfortable - more like an aunt or grandmother might have done. Eventually she patted it and let it drop. By then it felt right. There was a bright and cheerful air about her. Her eyes studied my face as we talked. Her expression settled into an easy smile even when relaxed. She was the kind that people liked immediately, even from across a room.

“Come and sign in. Put you up in 224 - my personal favorite. Great view. Always a cross breeze. Quiet. Separated from 222 by the stair well. We’re not fancy

but we're homey. You'll find things clean and the staff cordial. We Arkies are good people."

"We *Arkies*?" I asked, realizing her speech pattern was fully as foreign to the area as mine.

She grinned.

"Been here thirty two years. I know that only qualifies me as a native in my own eyes, but it's how I feel."

"A few of us claims her," Hank said, his sunken eyes sparkling. "Kansas is almost South, ya know."

"I see, Kansas," I said. "I'm from Indiana - *Southern* Indiana. Born and bred as they say."

She nodded and watched as I signed the register. I followed Hank to the elevator. It resembled the old-fashioned counterweight and pulley model I had known from the feed store in the town where I spent my childhood. Hank refreshed me on the procedure in case I needed to use it when he or the operator - who apparently worked Friday noon through Monday noon - wasn't on hand. Pull the brown rope to start it going up and the white rope for down. I figured I could do that. I preferred the stairs anyway.

My suite - apparently everybody's favorite - was, how shall I say, cozy. A sitting room, a bed room, and bath. The couch and chair formed an L facing the corner windows in the small, square, sitting room. Near the door there was a desk, complete with chair and light, which hugged the inside wall. The dark, peg-in-plank, floor was mostly covered by a round, braided, rug, brightly colored in blues and red. The view out the windows was breathtaking.

The bedroom was just that - a quilt covered, double bed, a dresser, chair and nightstand. The corner closet was small but functional. There was a large shower in one corner of the bathroom - no tub - a sink and a second closet along one end. A vent in the ceiling relied on large, roof-top, wind driven, turbines to exhaust the air. It seemed to be effective. I felt air movement the moment I opened the south window in the front room. In the brochure, which I had been sent, the ventilation system was mentioned as an architectural marvel of the day.

As I re-entered the bathroom to arrange my things in the medicine chest, I could

hear the soulful rush of air as it left the room and entered whatever duct work was provided between the floors. It could have been an irritating sound - eerie, even, I suppose. I chose to define it as pleasant white noise and slipped it into the background of my mind.

It was well after three o'clock by the time I got settled in. I sat on the couch with my laptop and began making notes. Ideas raced. The setting was perfect - beautiful yet marginally mysterious - not entirely friendly yet not outwardly hostile. Characters leaped to life and demanded a story.

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes?" I called out, as I stood, placing the laptop on the couch and taking the required six steps to cross the room.

The opened door presented a tall, slender, 50ish looking man in boots, jeans and a western cut long sleeve white shirt with tight, three button cuffs.

"I'm John, Jan's lesser half."

He offered his hand and we shook. I motioned him inside.

"Oh. No. Can't stay. Just wanted to say howdy and see if things are to your liking - see if you needed anything. Through the week I seem to be the maid. Not many visitors 'til the weekend; then, all fiddlesticks breaks loose around here."

"Things are fine. Thanks. What tells me you are *not* from either Arkansas or Kansas?"

"Wyoming, actually. Met Jan at the U of C - University of Colorado. Both music majors, believe it or not. Interesting that she had to become a concert violinist before finding her niche as a blue grass fiddler here in the Ozark back country."

"And you?" I asked, more than a bit intrigued.

"Indigenous instruments. That means, well, I suppose you know what that means."

"I am guessing native music making devices or unique methods of utilizing existing instruments."

"You *do* sound like a writer. No offense but that's the word that preceded you. You're right on in your take on it, though. Wood flutes, recorders, zithers, dulcimers - things like that. You play?"

"First chair comb and wax paper," I joked.

“Poor man’s kazoo. That’s what one of my profs called that gadget. He once wrote a baseline in a symphony for the comb.”

“You’re saying there’s a future for me?”

“Probably not. It never made the hit parade. Just an interesting piece of trivia.”

“Your instrument?” I asked, trying to pin him down one more time.

“Banjo, base fiddle, spoons, - my goal in life is to be just so so on lot’s of things.”

Why did I seem to doubt there was anything just so so about John Day? His attempts at appearing open and down home were somehow strained and seemed to suggest the opposite.

“Dinner at five. May seem early but over the weekends, the big concert of the day begins at six to let us take advantage of the daylight hours. Electricity isn’t plentiful up here and we’d shut down the town if we were to use a big floodlight set up.”

“Five sounds good. Formal?”

“We encourage shirt, pants and shoes, if that’s your idea of formal.”

John winked and walked on down the hall chuckling. I went back to the couch and began making my *To Do List* on a yellow pad. In the end it couldn’t qualify as a list. It had but one topic:

1- Learn more about the *C-Patrol*.

Grandmother,

Hank,

others.

Then as an afterthought I added:

2- Faces in the third floor window!!

It was more like an intriguing uncertainty.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Voices from the Past?

At four thirty I made my way down stairs to the lobby, thinking I would explore that area before moving into the dining room for supper – *dinner*, that is.

There was a massive, stone fireplace that separated the desk area from the rest of the room. Heavy, brightly colored, rustic, furniture, was arranged into several conversation areas of varying sizes. I chose a secluded spot near the windows that looked out into a wide grassy area toward a grove of trees.

As I was settling in to enjoy the view and let my mind begin acclimating to the slower, easier going pace of life these rural Arkansas residents seemed to so wisely enjoy, Jan approached me bringing a phone message.

“So. You already met Amy Sue, I see,” She said, raising her eyebrows.

“At the café? Yes. Fantastic cook.”

“Billy Chance thinks she’s fantastic, too. They’re a couple, I suppose the term is these days. He’s the jealous type. His grandfather is the Sheriff here in Carlton County. Because of that, most of Billy’s anger driven escapades get hushed up before anything comes of them.”

“I see. And how is it you knew that I’ve made Amy Sue’s acquaintance?”

“Oh. Almost forgot, wanting to warn you about Billy, I guess. She called and left a message for you to meet her at her grandmother’s home at seven o’clock this evening.”

“Excellent! An interview for background information. The book I’m writing. Amy Sue seems to be a take charge sort.”

Jan took a seat that faced me at a slight angle. She nodded, but was clearly more interested in my book than Amy Sue’s strong personality.

“Keeping the topic of your book a secret?” she asked.

“Certainly not, though I’m beginning to wonder if perhaps I should have. I’ve been taken with the legend of *The C-Patrol*. I often write about ghostly subjects. It seemed a natural tale to investigate.”

“Fiction? Exposé? Or just retelling the story?”

“Fiction, I imagine. It may depend on how things develop. You make me think

there could be some *illicit* aspect to it all – your mentioning exposé.”

“Sometimes, in these parts, what you and I might call *illicit* is merely seen as *self-serving* without the usually associated negative connotation. There’s been a lot of prattle about the topic among the natives the past several years. Sightings, presences, creepy things like that.”

“By, *the topic*, you mean the souls of C-Patrol?”

“That probably covers it.”

“You a believer in such things, if that’s not too personal?” I asked.

“I tell myself I’m not. That probably excludes me from being a true native, doesn’t it?”

“Can you tell me something about the fate of the third floor here? Hank mentioned a *presence* but didn’t seem to want to go into it.”

She wrapped her arms around her slender torso as if experiencing a chill.

“It happened shortly before John and I came here. It’s not something we advertise; wouldn’t be good for business. It seems there were a series of deaths here at the Inn – all guests who were staying in third floor rooms. They took place during one summer back in the sixties. All six . . . victims, I suppose is the term - were from north of the Mason Dixon line. Three were stabbed and three were choked with rope – hemp rope like was manufactured around here during the civil war. It was a major industry. This may be sidetracking from the story but we understand there was a furor around here between the two main rope companies during the war - one sold just to the South while the other sold to the North as well as the South. Apparently, armies in those days required huge quantities of rope. The Purdy’s said it was treasonous to sell to the Yankees. The Yates’ contended that since the northern army was going to get its rope *somewhere*, the South might as well bolster its own economy by taking as much of their money as they could get. With this area being so close to the northern states, it made for easy sale and delivery.”

“Fascinating stuff. Back to the deaths.”

“Well, there’s really just the one other thing. Several reports of sightings occurred about the same time as the murders.”

“Sightings?”

“Sightings of the ghosts – the specters of C-Patrol,” she said looking around

uneasily.

“Here in the Inn?”

She nodded.

“Here and elsewhere in the area – always dressed in Confederate uniforms and often galloping together on horseback, one of them carrying a Confederate Battle Flag and the others brandishing sabers in charge position. I get goose bumps thinking about it.”

“Day or night time sightings? Do you know?”

“I assumed night but I guess I really don’t know that for a fact. Amy’s Grandmother will know.”

“What is her name, by the way?”

“Just goes by Granny Rakes. I’m quite sure I’ve never heard her given name.”

“Do you have any more information about what was seen here – on the third floor, I assume?”

“Yes. On the third floor. A few weeks before the killings began a maid reported being raped up there by two young men wearing Confederate Uniforms. Well, *wearing* is obviously an inappropriate term, but you understand. One was blond the other a redhead. When they finished with her they told her their names – Billy Anderson and Tom Parker.”

“Names from the Patrol?”

“Yes. Interestingly, the girl’s last name was Carlton, the great granddaughter of the infamous Jeremiah Carlton.”

“The belief is that they targeted her specifically?” I asked.

“Most certainly. She reported the boys made that very clear to her. Said something about *the sins of the parents being visited upon their children*. It was presented as something the Reverend Jeremiah Carlton had taught them – that would have been a hundred years before, of course. She tells the story to this day. You’ll want to speak with her, I assume. Nine months later she gave birth – twin boys – one blond the other a red head.”

“Did she have a boyfriend?”

“I’m really pretty fuzzy on the details. Betty gladly talks with anybody about it, though. I’m sure she’ll be happy to sit down with you.”



“Who would remember the original story she told? Time has a way of elaborating on such memories.”

“Hank was around but he’s reluctant to speak of it, like you said. Granny Rakes, will surely have her version of it. How much it will resemble the original I have no way of knowing.”

“Were there other experiences up there – on the third floor – that contributed to its being closed, and why do you continue to keep it sealed off the way it is?”

“You writers seem to have an endless array of questions. About the second question, first. You have to understand that the folks around here are basically wonderful people. They take care of their own. They’d share what they had until it was gone if circumstances called for it. They also adhere to an interesting mixture of religion and superstition. The two are inseparable and the other-worldly aspects of the *C-Patrol* legend are an integral part of that belief system. Ghosts exist and influence mortal lives – you’d be hard put to find a third generation Arkie up here who would ever think of questioning that. John calls it *religistition* – never in public of course. It’s the only term I’ve ever come across that fully describes it and most of these people *do* live their lives according to it.”

“You’re a wellspring of information, Jan, although I’m not sure how that answers either of my questions.”

“I tend to get sidetracked. John blames it on my naturally blond hair. I blame it on my suddenly white hair. Either way I escape any responsibility you see.”

I nodded my acknowledgment of her little joke.

She smiled and continued.

“We keep the third floor closed because to do otherwise would offend the folks who live in these parts. It was sealed by religious edict in the sixties – nothing legal about it. Frankly we have sufficient rooms on the first and second to handle our clientele, anyway.”

“Have you been up there?”

Jan leaned forward and her tone became hushed.

“It wouldn’t do for this to get out.”

I nodded.

“It won’t be heard from me.”

“On several occasion since we’ve been here John and I have ventured up there. It’s actually one of the nicest areas in the Inn – single rooms but large and light with a magnificent view of the valley.

“Let me back track just a moment. At the desk there are two brass pipes – three or maybe four, inches in diameter. One opens into the hall on the second floor and the other does the same up on the third. Before the days of telephones in every room, residents could step into the hall, open the lid on the pipe, and call down to the desk when they needed something or had a question. Ritzy, at the time. Ingenious really. John says old sailing vessels had the same sort of arrangement.

I nodded, knowing about that.

“Well, it’s happened now on four separate occasions. One of us would be working the desk late at night and a young man’s voice would come through the pipe from the third floor. Each time it was ... a call for help, I suppose you would say.

“The first time it scared me silly. I don’t remember the exact words. Just that it seemed to be a young man’s voice pleading for help of some kind.”

“I’ll say, scary,” I said, scooting to the front edge of my chair eager to hear more.

“Of course I told John immediately and the next morning we went up to investigate. It was not the first time we had been up there so we knew how things should be. We looked at the pipe first and found the brass cover – lid – hanging by its chain. We always kept the openings covered so mice and such can’t use the pipes to move from floor to floor.”

“Yes, I see!” I said. “Go on!”

“There was a spot – more like a splotch – of blood beside the pipe opening. It had not been there before. I wanted to leave that very second. Heck, I wanted to sell the place and go back to Kansas that very second.

“John convinced me to stay up there with him and we began going from room to room. Being unoccupied for decades you can imagine the dust and cobwebs that had accumulated. There are forty outside rooms up there – no suites – seven on each end with thirteen front and back. The central area houses a ball room, several smaller storage rooms, and public restrooms; those being a more recent addition.

“We began on the corner that’s right above your suite and circled our way down that side, across the back and up the other end. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Then we started through the rooms on the front. Still nothing until we reached 310. It was spic and span. One window had a circular area cleaned off at about head height, like someone had maybe used a bandana or towel or glove to rub away the years of grime so he could see out. The bed was unmade – by that I mean the ruffled sheet and comforter made it appear that it had been slept in but not made up. There was an open Bible on the nightstand and numerous candles melted to plates as if used as light sources. Perhaps the eeriest thing was the sweat stained, gray hat of a confederate soldier perched on the pillow. The front bore the coat of arms worn by Captain Carlton's regiment – the initials J.C. on either side of a cross. Some think it stood for Jesus Christ. Most believe it's more reasonable to think it was Jeremiah's own initials.

"I'll tell you, Marc, I almost wet my pants. John insisted we complete the circle of rooms and I wasn't prepared to either leave him there alone or to find my way downstairs by myself so I stayed with him, my hand through his belt.

"In the next room, 309 we found almost the identical situation as we did again in 308, 307, and 306 – the six middle rooms on the front. The water and electricity were not on up there – they hadn't been since it was closed off. We didn't spot any other signs of life – no clothes or towels or suitcases or cigarette butts. Nothing.

"We came back down stairs and sat right here in this very corner trying to think it through. John figured it must have been some vagrants who knew of the vacant rooms and used them when they passed this way. His explanation answered very few of the real questions."

"Like, how did they gain access to the third floor and why the voice message through the tube?" I asked.

"Yes. And the Bibles, all 1855 editions, and all open to *Revelations*. And the blood on the wall in the hall but nowhere else."

"Is there outside access to that floor?"

"Yes. Outside stairs on both ends – fire escapes if you will. We examined the doors and they had remained well secured from the inside – a two by four spanning the door and resting in strong metal brackets bolted to the wall. The doors open into the narrow halls that provide access to the stairs."

"And such a thing happened on other occasions?" I asked referring back to her original statement.

“Three more times about two months apart. The second and third took place on nights when John was at the desk – always between midnight and three a.m. The last time, I was there, alone. I’m sure the voice I heard was the same one I had heard the first time. I paid better attention. It was a young man’s voice but it was pleading like a child suffering in some way. I could feel the anguish. He – it, whatever – said: ‘Please let me get free without doin’ these terrible things. Please help me. Please help me. Why won’t you *help* me?’”

She sat forward as if to emphasize her next phrase.

“It had been the exact same message the two times John had heard it.”

“And it just started with no warning – no fanfare?: I asked. “How could ‘it’ have known anyone would hear?”

“Let me clarify. The messages were preceded by the sounds of crying for I suppose maybe a minute each time. More than enough to get a person’s attention.”

“Do the tube openings at the desk also have *lids* as you called them?”

“No. They would have to stay open in order to hear the unannounced voices of the guests. Otherwise no sounds would come through.”

Jan sat back. I sat back.

“Well, I’ll tell you, Jan, *that’s* a campfire story that would send the bravest scout scurrying back home to his mother.”

She nodded and shivered.

“How long ago did all of that take place?”

“I have the specific dates in my diary if you want them. It was between April and October six years ago.”

“Have you been back up there since?”

“John insisted on taking a look each time we heard the voice. I guess we’ve had no reason to be up there since they stopped. The rooms remained the same and just as spotless as the first time.”

“The local’s would have an explanation, I assume.”

“Oh, yes. It would just be more confirmation for them of the *C-Patrol* legend. A ghost from the past trying to make contact in the hope the living could now provide him some help just as the living had earlier doomed him to his fate.”

“Any way I might get to take a look up there?”

“I’m sure it’s okay. Work it out with John. Just, please, no one can know about it.”

“You have my word. Not until and unless I get your permission.”

She looked at her watch.

“Land a Goshen, Marc, it’s almost time for dinner. Just a dozen guests, counting you, so we’ve had things set up on the back porch – glassed in and very pleasant for small groups. Nobody else from Indiana. I really haven’t had time to get to know any of them very well. Most are holdovers from last weekend and will be checking out in the morning.”

“Nothing gives me an appetite like a good ghost story,” I said as we stood and walked across the large room together.

It was the truth. Apparently my decision to visit Carlton County had been a good one. I could expect to gain ten pounds before I had the story re-told.

At dinner, conversation lagged. The meal itself was wonderful, served family style. We all sat together around one large oval table. I was near one end and the older couple across from me was willing to talk if I provided topics and questions. They went on and on about the Jamboree and seemed knowledgeable about both bluegrass and the more native versions of pluckin’ and strumin’. Home was Hot Springs a half days drive to the south. They had been retired ten years and came up at least one weekend each summer. As questions became harder to find, the conversation gave way to fried chicken, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes with thick, white pepper-gravy and an endless assortment of breads and finger ready fresh vegetables. The peach pie for dessert had a familiar taste – I wasn’t complaining. It proved to be a delicious encore.

I was actually relieved when the meal concluded. There had been too many people at the table, too little good conversation, and a group of folks who mostly seemed strangely out of place anywhere near a concert. Except for the older couple, the others clearly knew nothing about music and though they claimed interest, I doubted it. It presented an intriguing puzzle, which at other times I might have pursued, but I had characters waiting for their cues and blank yellow pads eager to be filled.

It was straight up six as I approached the desk. John had taken over the duties there – actually, he was sitting back in a recliner reading.

He removed his glasses and stood as my face crossed his view above the counter.

“Marc! Is there something I can do for you?”

“I hope so. I find that I have an appointment with Granny Rakes later this evening and I have no idea where she lives.”

“You can find ‘the corner’ down in town I assume.”

“The one pointing at the church?”

“That’s the one. Go north from there about a quarter of a mile. It’s the first side street that goes off to the right. Her place is the second house you’ll come to on the south side. It sits way back at the end of a long sidewalk. She’s never had her place electrified but if you’re expected she’ll likely have a coal oil lantern lit on the front porch. Coal oil – that’s kerosene to you Yankees.”

He smiled and chuckled.

“Just to set the record straight, it’s coal oil in southern Indiana as well. I may be less of a Yankee than I appear.”

“Was dinner to your liking?”

“It was fantastic. Plain food always wins hands down in my book (no pun intended – well, yes it was!). I do have a question – an odd one, probably. The other guests? They were actually here for the Jamboree – the *Music* Jamboree?”

“Yes. And I agree. It does seem like an odd question.”

“Most of them know nothing about music. Why would they come?”

“Okay, so it’s not so odd. We seem to get quite a few folks up here who come more for the scenery and pampering than for the music. We give a special discount package for the three day Jamboree weekends and I guess they take advantage of the offer to meet their own needs. A dollar’s a dollar. I’ve never required a test in music theory or make them play an E minor scale to rent a room.”

It seemed reasonable and my curiosity was satisfied. John had something more for me.

“By the way, the filling station is only open between six a.m. and noon during the week. I keep gas in a tank out back for those who get caught short but figured you’d need to know if you’re fixin’ to stay on a piece.”

“Fixin’ to stay on a piece?” I repeated, pretending to look at the man over

imaginary glasses.

He smiled.

“Local flavor, Marc. Most of our guests expect it. By the way, do you know about Billy – Amy Lou’s Billy?”

It seemed like a quick ninety degree turn.

“Jan mentioned something about his habit of bludgeoning potential competition. Happen often, does it?”

“Officially, no. Unofficially, every weekend.”

“Perhaps I’m safe until Friday night, then.”

“Perhaps. Just don’t give the gal any reason to think you’re coming on to her.”

“So far my conscious is clear on that one, John, though she is a *fetchin’ young thing*. Thanks for the information and advice.”

“One more piece of advice, then, if I may. *Your* local flavor really isn’t working.”

“Fetchin’, you mean.”

He nodded and then quickly shook his head, smiling.

“I’ll stick to speaking Yankee, then, much as it seems to make me suspect.”

“Haven’t lost a Yankee in several years,” he smiled.

It had been intended as humorous but in light of Jan’s stories, it didn’t qualify that evening.

I had time to kill before my appointment, so I strolled around the outside of the building and found a bench in the back yard – one I had spied at dinner. There was a small cabin at the base of the hill about fifty yards from where I was sitting. A lone figure was walking the path toward it. Unmistakably it was Hank – short, stooped and labored in his stride. I imagined he lived there, or perhaps it belonged to his mistress. I chuckled. I wasn’t even sure why. I just hoped that when I was his age if I wanted a mistress I’d still be up to it.

The dependable breeze that swept up from the valley out front was not in evidence back there. The air had cooled into the low eighties from its afternoon high at ninety-five plus. It had not seemed that hot up in my room. The Inn had no air conditioning but the exhaust system kept a constant flow of air moving inside. It seemed cooler than it probably was.

At 6:45 I walked to my car and drove down the exit road. It ran parallel the other

one, a few yards further down the hill, but due to trees and other foliage I had not spotted it earlier. By 6:55 I was pulling to a stop in front of what I hoped would prove to be Granny's place. A pickup pulled in behind me. I chilled, thinking it might be the infamous Billy. It turned out to be the curvaceous Amy Sue.

We met on the street side of our cars.

"Evenin', Marc," she said, approaching me with her hand out.

I shook, cordially, but made certain I gave no hint of holding on too long or standing too close.

"Granny's waitin' – eager to meet ya. She'll take out a bottle and offer you a drink. You'll politely turn her down. Nobody drinks Granny's hooch 'cept Granny."

"I see. Okay, then. Thanks for the heads up. May I ask about Grandpa?"

"Hit in the head by a runaway timber during a barn raisin' when I was twelve. Doc said he was dead before he hit the ground. Buried behind the church."

"I see. I'm sorry."

"Nothin' sorry to it. It was just his time. God can handle a timber as well as he can handle a bolt a lightning."

She smiled – probably not because of her grandfather's death, but because she had such a good handle on the ways of the Divine.

The lantern had been lit, waiting just as John suggested. Granny was a large, pleasant looking, old woman dressed in a loose, mostly pink, flowered dress. She opened the screen door and met us on the porch. Moving her bulk from place to place required a slow and steady course.

"We'll sit out here. Skeeters'll be along in a half hour or so. You'll be on your way by then so we'll sit out here."

My time line had been established. She and Amy Sue took seats beside each other on the porch swing. That left me with a choice of three chairs. I opted for the one with the padded seat. I'm sure that spoke worlds about me to the old woman.

She offered the bottle and I politely refused. She nodded, more I thought *not* to recognize my lack of thirst than to indicate I had done well during her little test. Just what that test may have told her, I truly had no idea.

"So, you're nosin' into old Jeremiah's Eternal Edict and such, are ya'?"

"Well, I hadn't thought of it as nosin'. I am very interested in the story and the



characters and the current take on it all by the folks who live around here.”

“You spawn questions like turtles lay eggs. You jist cease your question makin’ and let me tell ya ‘bout some things.”

I nodded, recognizing that further conversation from me had officially been put on hold.

“There was six a them boys. Fine boys, every one. William Anderson was the oldest. He was sixteen. Daddy was the blacksmith. He was puny. Never would a made a blacksmith. Thomas Parker – he was fifteen – the doctor’s son. Smart, strong and handsome as they come at fifteen. David Rowland was fifteen too, a bastard baby but a good boy considerin’ he’d knowed no pa. Andrew and Matthew Tiller were the thirteen and fourteen year old sons of a hemp farmer. And then little Darrel Elder. Would a been thirteen a week after they disappeared.”

I noted she had said disappeared and not defected – perhaps that indicated a significant turn in her interpretation – in her allegiance.

“They’d each had one or more brothers killed in the battle the day before. It had been a slaughter – little boys up against Lincoln’s best. I always figured God saved those three hundred for some purpose. Turned out they fathered the next generation here ‘bouts. Maybe that was His reason. Maybe it was somethin’ else.

“The six that ran away had been cursed by the Reverend – and nobody in these parts has ever been able to do a curse like the Reverend Jeremiah Carlton. He was walking across a meadow during a thunderstorm when he was twelve and got hit by a bolt of lightning – it was God’s own finger what touched the lad that day. He started speaking in tongues nobody had never heard before.”

I had to think that was hardly verification that it was anything more than gibberish induced by momentary neurological short circuiting, but, of course, I held my tongue.

“When he was thirteen a judge asked him to say which man had stoled a horse and young Jeremiah marched right up and put his finger on the guilty man’s chest. Judge hanged him on the spot.”

I wanted to ask what other verification of guilt there had been, but didn’t.

“There was a bigamist living in sin with two wives in a cabin out on the bend in Sandy Creek, and when Jeremiah was seventeen he placed the curse of the flood on the man and his whores, and that very next spring a flood came and killed the lot.”

And just how frequently did the area flood, I wondered. I reminded myself that I was there to listen. Perhaps questions would be permitted some other time.

“Well, Jeremiah studied to be a preacher over in Huntsville and come back to serve the county for the rest a his life. Some say he still looks over us and dispatches the worst of us directly to hells fire.”

That had been delivered with less commitment than what had come before. I made a mental note that their might be a chink in the armor of Granny’s religistion.

Them six youngsters all grew old and died over to the east a here – don’t matter where. They’d lived upright lives and because of that, God granted them one more chance to find their peace with Him. God don’t meddle in what the Reverend Jeremiah Carlton decreed so the most He can do is to compel their souls to complete the task the Reverend had assigned them.

“Lots a us has felt their presence. A few a us has even seen their essence, a ridin’ at a full gallop right into blazing Yankee guns. A spirit can’t be harmed by mortal efforts but *it* can take its toll on us that still trods this earth. A few years back each a those boys cut their list by one – six Yankee souls sent to hell right here. Right here!”

She slapped her leg and nodded forcefully.

“A course eternity is a no hurry place so they’s probably off skinny dippin’ in some creek and chasin’ rabbits in the meadows for a time now. Just doin’ the things boys their ages should be doin’ – not soljerin’.”

I felt sure she failed to see the inconsistency in her thinking that they *should not* be required to be soldiers at their tender ages but yet *should* be required to each kill their half dozen, blue clad, Yankees before finding their deserved and well-earned place in Heaven. She was not finished. She felt the need to deliver an anti-skeptic message.

“Some non-believers asks why their spirits hain’t those of the old men they had growed to be when they died. It’s that Eternal Edict, you see. It keeps their spirits as they was at the time a their unfinished business. *That’s* why, in case you was wonderin’. Once they take their number – satisfy the Edict - they’ll enter their reward as they died.”

Granny had filled in lots of gaps in my information. She had taught me many fascinating things about the religistion of the area. There were still questions but it seemed I would only be allowed to ask them at some later time, undoubtedly to be

determined by Granny, herself.

It had been my impression she had finished but there was to be at least one footnote.

“I can see you’s a doubter. Here’s a bit I don’t usually share with your kind, but if you’s about writin’ it all up in a book, you need to know. Take yourself into the valley below the Inn most any summer’s night past midnight and turn your view up on the windows in the Inn’s dormers. You’ll see the lad’s faces. It’s where they stays at night.”

Jan had given me the impression that no one knew of their find on the third floor. Perhaps no one did. Perhaps it was just that Jan and her husband had not been privy to this part of the story – the part about the faces in the windows and the places to sleep at night.

“Go get my green box, child,” Granny said, impatiently, gently, elbowing Amy Sue. “And bring the ‘lectric lantern.”

The pasteboard box was soon in the old lady’s lap. She took off the lid – it was clearly a reverent act for her. She went directly to an envelope, removed it, and handed it to Amy Sue to hold while the lid was replaced.

“Show this man the pictures,” she said continuing her forceful, pushy, way, and reinforcing it with appropriate arm motions.

Amy took the seat to my left, removed six pictures from the envelope and handed them to me. She directed the light so I could have a good view.

The pictures were from several sources. One was an old tintype. Several appeared to be from a newspaper and three were faded, 3 X 5, black and white photographs. My mind whirled back to the history books. Yes, there were photographic techniques available at the time. I was surprised they would have made their way to Yates Corner, but then it may have been a thriving metropolis at the time – there were the rope manufacturers so who knew what else there might have been. I needed to learn that part of the history. Where were my yellow pads when I needed them?

Each picture had the boy’s name, hand written on a slip of white paper, and glued near the bottom edge. My eyes moistened as those dear, young faces stared up at me. Soldiers indeed. The Reverend had been mad! I wanted copies. How could that be arranged? Granny came to my rescue – whether through logic or intuition I won’t try to guess.

“Amy Sue tells me there’s a gadget up at the Inn that can look at a picture and make another one like it. I know you’ll want the pictures. She will take them there in the morning. You will make the necessary arrangements.”

I studied the pictures for a few more moments. I was taken by how those six somehow looked like all boys their ages. At least that was my initial impression. The more I thought about it the more it seemed somehow inaccurate – off track. I would consider the uneasy feeling at length, later.

I thanked them both. Granny’s parting phrase left me with hope for something more another time.

“You’re a good boy. Come back. I’ll bake.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### A Blue Tick Hound

It was 7:30 exactly as I pulled away from Granny Rakes' place. It would soon be dark but I felt the need to get a quick feel for the town, so I drove the streets in twilight. There were many more of them – streets – than a community boasting only 107 souls would seem to require. That, I imagined, suggested that Yates Corner had indeed once been a community of somewhat greater significance. There were dozens of crumbled foundations and lot after lot overgrown with weeds. I counted thirty one homes in good enough repair to contain occupants, another dozen that were not, and almost fifty open foundations and vacant lots.

Families were larger in the old days, so round it off to having been an even hundred homes, each with six family members and the historical picture began coming into focus. I figured that in order to keep Amy Sue's café and the several other businesses afloat, there had to be a substantial rural population that used Yates Corner as its trading center.

I thought back to my conversation with the boys by the van. It seemed interesting to me that perennially famished teenagers would have omitted the grocery story from the list of going establishments in their town. Perhaps they had just eaten. Perhaps their young spokesman was just being polite, uneasy in the presence of an outsider, so hurried through his description, to speed me on my way. Perhaps it was not their town, after all. They could have been from any one of a half dozen in the area.

By eight o'clock I had parked my car in the lot and was heading up the wood-plank sidewalk toward the Inn. The cars that had been there when I arrived were still there; the SUV may have been new. The moon was approaching full with beams so powerful they cast shadows – clear and distinct.

I stopped and surveyed the windows. Seven of the second floor rooms were lit. That left six, including mine, in darkness. I studied the dormers – all thirteen were dark. In the twilight, their sharply pointed silhouettes, rowed up side by side as they were, resembled the back of a dragon that I remembered from a not particularly reassuring childhood picture book. It was one of those fully irrelevant associations for which my brain was famous – well, famous to me at least. I tried to recall which windows had

greeted me with faces when I arrived. I was quite sure it was the three most central rooms. There were none at that time so I proceeded up the steps and into the lobby. I approached the desk.

“Making progress on that novel your reading?” I asked John.

He smiled as he stood, removing his half-lens reading glasses and slipping them into his shirt pocket.

“Some. It would go faster if certain guests would stop interrupting me, of course.”

We shared a brief chuckle.

“Is there any way for a guy to get a cup of coffee at this hour?”

“Always coffee and ice tea in those press-and-serve insulated bottles in the alcove just this side of the kitchen door. Sorry if we failed to mention it. Let me show you. My mug dried up a good two chapters ago. Detective Masters won’t go anywhere in my absence.”

He dog-eared a page, laid the book down, and led the way, talking as we walked.

“So, now you’ve met our Icon, have you?”

“Granny Rakes? Yes. A cordial though one-sided conversation. I was invited back.”

“Invited back! She must have really liked you. As I understand it her usual approach is to tell outsiders how long they have to get out of town and which direction to take.”

“Really? That much power? No. There was nothing like that. She even offered me pictures of the boys in *C-Patrol*. Amy Sue will bring them by here in the morning to copy – if I can hire your Xerox machine for a few minutes.”

“The copy facility comes with the place. It’ll be our pleasure. I’ll be interested in taking a gander at them myself. It’s in the office. That’s through the door behind the front desk. We keep it closed ‘cause it’s always such a clutter in there. Jan and I try to manage the place ourselves. Neither one of us ever had a business course, so you can imagine we’re not the most efficient operation.”

We reached the alcove and he took a mug from a shelf and filled it for me.

“Sugar, sweetener, cream, black?”

“Black is fine. Thank you.”

I accepted it with a nod and took the requisite first sip. He waited for my reaction

as he filled his own mug.

“Great!”

He nodded. We started back down the short, wide, hall toward the Lobby. I had a hundred questions but decided to dispense them judiciously. I began with the one most urgent to me that evening.

“Who owns the land in the valley between here and the hill across the way out front?”

“Jesse Rakes. Owns the valley from the outskirts of town, on out south for miles and miles. Grows corn and hay. Usually gets three bailin’s in a season. Has a huge old barn at the west end of his property. Sells it out of state, mostly. Big old flatbed semis pull in and out all summer. Usually load in the evening to avoid the heat. You’re lucky to have hit us during a cool spell.”

It had been far more than I requested but it was refreshing to get more than the minimum required. It still hadn’t answered the question I really had on my mind so I tried again.

“Think he’d mind if I went down there to photograph the Inn. I’d like a variety of angles at different times of day. Perhaps I should call him.”

“Old Jesse doesn’t have a phone. Just got electricity a few years back. If you were a local there’d be no problem. Not really sure how he’d react to an outsider. Worst that could happen, I suppose, would be that he’d ask you to leave. Jesse is a pretty easy going type. Good business man, don’t get me wrong, he’s wealthy, but I’ve just never seen him riled up.”

“His name is Rakes, you said. Relative of Amy Sue?”

“These valleys are full – plumb full, as the folks around here would say – of families named Rakes and they’re all related. Jesse is Amy Sue’s great uncle, or some such thing, on her father’s side. Her grandpa’s youngest brother I think – that may not be accurate.”

John motioned toward a set of chairs.

“Got time to sit a spell?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

It seemed to be John who had something on his mind.

“So, you take your own photos for your books, do you?”

“They seldom make it into my books. Mostly, I just tack them to my bulletin board for inspiration. Once I get back home from location, I tend to get fuzzy about things. The pictures help keep it all fresh.”

John nodded and sipped at his coffee. It seemed to be my turn.

“I’m hearing stories about faces being seen at the third floor windows here. What’s your take on that?”

“Well, never seen them, myself. I’ve heard the stories. Hank swears he sees them – regularly. I don’t know what to think. I’m not a ghost buff. Never really even considered the possibility ‘til we moved down here.”

He set his mug on the lamp table between us and turned in his chair to face me more directly.

“You’re going to try for pictures of the faces, aren’t you?”

“You got me, I guess. I’ve got super powerful telephoto lenses, dozens of filters, a box full of digital cards, and lots of patience. If they’re there, I’ll capture them.”

“Hank said he thought you had a bag of cameras and such. They frighten old Hank. His people believed that a photo of a person’s face removed some portion of their soul or some such thing. Probably best not to aim your cameras in his direction.”

“I appreciate the heads up. Tell him he doesn’t have to worry. I would think he’d get lots of photo opportunities, though, the way he dresses and all.”

“Oh, he does. His backside’s probably the most photographed backside in the state. The clothes are his idea. He was wearing them here long before Jan and I arrived on the scene. A few around here still don’t abide by buy Lee’s surrender.”

“Hank have a last name?”

“Wanna guess?”

“Rakes?”

“Rakes! Yes.”

“Married?”

“No. Never, as far as Jan and I can determine. Story is – a third or fourth hand story, understand – that there was some problem between his family and that of his sweetheart’s, which prevented them from ever getting together. I guess we’ve never had reason to dig any deeper into it than that. Hank’s a cheerful sort. A good worker. Handles the check-in and check-out between the front desk and the parking lot.



Weekends he has three local boys who help him. Old as he is, he never shirks his share of the work.”

“Is the cabin out back his?”

“Yes, well, it’s his to use. It was built for the caretaker at the same time as the original Inn. Three rooms and a sleeping loft. Has its own lane curving in from the west. Hank doesn’t own a vehicle so that doesn’t get much use. A younger sister visits him sometimes I think.”

“Jan said she thought it would be okay if I took a look around up on *three* sometime.”

“Sure. She told me you’d asked. Just say when. No electric up there so you’ll be able to see better during the daylight hours. Jan said you had agreed not to reveal your visit up there. The locals would come down hard on us – be disappointed in us – we’d lose their trust, you understand.”

“That’s not a problem. I’ve spent time in jail for refusing to reveal informant’s names.”

John pursed his lips and nodded as if to say, ‘My, that’s impressive.’ It had not been the reason I said it. Another question came to mind.

“This place have a basement?”

“Just under the center section – front to back. It’s where the boiler is for the steam heat. The wine cellar is down there. It has a separate stairway and no entrance into the rest of it. The larger section is entered from a stairway on the enclosed back porch – you may have seen the door at dinner. It’s an unfinished area down there with stone walls and concrete floor. Before we arrived and did some remodeling, the dish washing area was down there. The dishwashers were usually black folks and the Inn owners apparently didn’t want them seen by the guests. It’s hard to believe but that was the mentality.

“When we came we added an automatic dishwasher just off the dining room. Very handy now. Before, it required the use of a dumbwaiter to take the dirty dishes down there and bring the clean ones up. An interesting device, actually. There’s a banquet hall up in the central area of the third floor – dinner and dancing back in the heyday of Yates Corner. The dumbwaiter was built large enough to carry the food up on carts from the kitchen – sort of like meal delivery in a hospital. It hasn’t been used for

decades now.”

“Does the basement have an outside entrance?”

“No. Just the stairs from the back porch – enclosed as you saw.”

“It appears there are some interior rooms on my floor – the second floor?”

“Ten suites and a half dozen smaller rooms – cleaning, linens, washing machines, closets, things like that.”

“With no windows in those inner rooms, I wouldn’t think they’d be very popular.”

“Originally they were rooms for live-in staff – the owner liked to hire married couples to work here. Now we use them for the bands and performers that come in for the Jamboree weekends. Seldom get complaints when the rooms are free.”

I nodded, satisfied with my quick lesson in the Inn’s architecture. John still seemed concerned with a previous topic.

“You planning to go down into the valley tonight?”

“Yes, I am. Sometime after midnight. I’m told the faces appear after then – when they appear. It was almost a directive from Granny.”

“Might be well advised to take some local person with you, in case Jesse or any of his hands come across you.”

There seemed to be more concern for my welfare than there had been before.

“Amy Sue’s the only local I know who’d be fit enough to undertake the adventure and when the *Billy factor* gets added in, I’m not thinking she would be such a good choice.”

“I’m sure you’re right about that. I tend to worry too much. Jan’s on me about it all the time.”

“Do you and Jan have kids, if that’s not too personal?”

“No kids. We pursued careers rather than immortality through offspring. Not sure we made the right choice but what is, *is*, you know.”

“Concert careers?” I asked, probably pushing beyond the limit John had set during our first conversation up at the door to my room.

He smiled and nodded.

“Again, Marc, this wouldn’t be something we’d want to have generally known. Down here we’re the Queen and King of Bluegrass. For it to be known we used to tour with a classical string quartet would just blow our image.

“Why do I *not* believe that you played *banjo* with that group?”

Again he smiled and nodded.

“Cello. You asked about my instrument earlier. I should have been forthright with you. It’s Cello. Still practice most every day but keep it out of sight.”

“Again, your secret’s safe with me. Thanks for the conversation. I need to get back upstairs and make notes before all this new information seeps away.”

I stood, wondering what to do with the empty mug. John recognized my quandary.

“I’ll take it unless you need a refill.”

“Thanks. No. Trying to cut back to a dozen cups a day.”

It had been an attempt at humor but either wasn’t recognized or had been ignored.

I handed him the mug and John walked back to the desk. I took time to eyeball a bearded man sitting alone across the room. He had *not* been at dinner. He *had* been eyeing me throughout my conversation with John. I decided not to pursue it with him at that moment and took the stairs up to my room.

I fumbled for the light switch on the wall just inside the door – not having thought to locate it during the daylight hours. The light fixture hugged the ceiling and lit the small room well. There was also a large lamp on the end table that occupied the area between the sofa and chair. It held a three-way bulb that I turned on low. The room had two windows on the west wall, from which, during the day, I could look out across the valley, and two on the south, from which I could look straight down the valley toward Jesse’s big hay barn. They were still open from the afternoon and I left them that way.

I was for some reason uneasy with the drapes being open into the darkness, so I pulled them closed. They were tan and heavy, with a white, reflective lining. The ventilation system sucked them out at a gentle angle from the base of the window. It seemed a fine arrangement – privacy plus a cooling breeze.

I entered the bedroom on my way to the bathroom. That time I located the switch with no difficulty. It, too, proved to be well lit and cozy in the artificial light. I was puzzled. My suitcase lay closed on my bed. I didn’t remember leaving it there but then neither did I remember stowing it anywhere after unpacking. I picked it up with the intention of sliding it under the bed. It was heavier than seemed reasonable. I put it

back on the bed and opened it. My clothes were inside. I *did* remember unpacking. What was going on? I hurried to the window and pulled the drapes closed in there as well, suddenly feeling the need for some protective barrier between me and the outside World.

Perhaps it was a not so subtle hint that somebody wanted me to leave. I re-hung my shirts and pants in the closet and returned the rest to the dresser drawers. I hefted my camera case up onto the bed and opened it. Nothing was missing. I looked through the door back into the sitting room. My laptop was right where I had left it. Robbery had not been the motive. I walked to the hall door in the sitting room and fastened the chain lock. It was flimsy and certainly would not keep out a raging Billy Chance or whoever. 'No door, locked or otherwise,' would keep out spirits, I joked to myself in the quiet of my mind. It seemed a shallow attempt at that moment. I needed to focus.

I moved back toward my original destination, the bathroom. The wail from the exhaust screen in the ceiling had changed from what I remembered earlier. I cocked my head to listen. Suddenly, it was there. The crying Jan had described.

I was torn between staying to listen and going to find my tape recorder so I could preserve the sounds. I stayed, not wanting to risk missing a single moment.

It was hard to know if I was relieved or disappointed when the sounds stopped and the more familiar wail of rushing air returned. I was hoping to hear the voice – the young man's message pleading for assistance. It had not come. Like Jan had suggested, it was pants-wetting eerie. Fortunately I was in a location equipped to deal with such emergencies.

An image of the man in the lobby flashed across my mind. He knew I had headed back to my room. If those sounds of crying were not from spirits – and that was my long held, hard and fast, position – it had to be the work of some well-prepared person who knew I was there in my room. I would need to find the man and speak with him.

I left my suite, making sure the door was locked, and descended the stairs. They seemed narrower and more dimly lit than before. I recognized it was just my mind playing tricks. I walked directly to the lobby in search of the man. Neither he nor anyone else was there. I went to the desk and inquired of John.

"Do you remember the man sitting across the room from us a while ago during

our chat out there?”

“Man? No. I thought we were alone, actually.”

John’s back had been turned more or less toward the man. It is possible he hadn’t seen him.

“Medium height; with brown hair and a close cropped beard; balding back from his forehead; wore a blue, double button at the clerical collar shirt. You don’t remember him?”

“I know the man – Jack Davis. He’s the sight engineer on the bridge project a few miles on up the valley to the north. He’s kept a room here for the better part of the summer. His home is in Ohio. What about him?”

“I didn’t see him at dinner and just wondered.”

I hadn’t even bought my lame explanation so I felt sure John hadn’t. He remained polite and added an explanation.

“Jack often works late and misses dinner. Margie, the cook, saves him a plate and he heats it up and eats alone when he gets in.”

It seemed to be a plausible explanation. Still, in my mind it had become a three way tie for the scary guy – Jack, the spirits, or John. Of the mortals there in the Inn, only Jack and John knew when I started up to my room. John? Interesting. He joked about being the maid but that *did* put a key into his hands. I thanked him and went back up stairs.

My door was standing open. I looked inside – one way and then another. I called out.

“Hello! Some one here. Maid?”

There was no answer. I entered, leaving the door open in case a rapid retreat seemed advisable. There was no one in the sitting room. No one in the bedroom or the closet. No one under the bed or behind the drapes. No one in the bathroom, its closet, or in the shower. I felt four years old again, doing my nightly monster check before lights out. I hadn’t found any back then, either.

I returned to the sitting room, closed the hall door, and slid the chain lock into place. I had never been prone to get scared, but something – something revolving around my presence there – was cause in someone’s mind to send me packing.

My book, it seemed, had just moved to a new level. The ‘spirits’ didn’t

understand how threats only increased Marc Miller's resolve. It had become not only fascinating but exciting. There I was assuming a major role in my own book. I loved it when that happened.

First, I unpacked my tape recorder and made certain that it and a new tape were both working. I spent the next several hours making notes. As was my style, I set up one yellow pad for informational notes – things I had learned, a second for questions that needed answering, and a third for possible scenarios, plausible plots and subplots that reflected the events as they were revealed to me.

*Not* according to my usual style, I set up a fourth pad writing the single word, *Exposé?* at the top of the first page. I had no plan for it, other than to note items there that might suggest illicit activities. *Might* was the key word. I had come to write a ghost story and that was still my focus.

When I next checked my watch it was 11:50 – time to leave for the valley. I zipped my camera bag closed, slipped the strap over my shoulder, picked up a light jacket, and prepared to leave. Again, I locked the door, although I was coming to understand its purpose was solely to keep honest folks from entering. It was an oxymoron of a kind, the message being a sad commentary on modern life – *We are only ever truly safe from the ill deeds of those who never perform ill deeds in the first place.*

To contemplate it further would have only made me angry so I put it out of my mind and pretended my things would be safe in the suite.

The parking lot was unlit at that time of night, understandably, I supposed, since the Inn's primary clientele came and left during the daylight hours. It irked me that I felt compelled to look over my shoulder as I unlocked my car and then check the back seat as if expecting to find the boogie man, himself, lurking there. I'd known what he looked like since I was four, so there would be no mistaking him. The thought allowed a smile, which in turn relaxed me.

The road that followed the valley south from town was dirt – hard, red, clay would more accurately describe it. I drove into the valley just far enough to be out of sight of vehicles passing by on the main road. Granny Rakes had not specified just where in the Valley I needed to be. I turned the car around so it would be headed back toward town. I wasn't certain why I felt compelled to do that, but it seemed a prudent maneuver.

The night air was crisp with a chill. I donned my jacket. From the trunk I removed a folding, aluminum, lawn chair. With it in one hand and my camera equipment in the other I walked to a grassy spot some twenty feet east of my car. I set up the chair and took a seat. In the bright moonlight I could easily see to assemble the tripod and check the camera and lenses. My plan was to keep watch on the windows through the telephoto lens. I would snap pictures from time to time whether I could see anything or not. The literature on such phenomenon was replete with unseen images appearing in photographs. Of course, if a face appeared I would capture it – or try to. The literature was also filled with instances when spirits seen, had escaped the most sensitive film. Perhaps they had not yet figured ways of eluding the digital technology.

I found it surprisingly comfortable sitting there, alone, outside, in the darkness of night. I had been in similar situations a hundred times before. Something rustled in the grass at my feet startling me. It was a field mouse who paused just long enough to stand up and take a peek, sniffing about my shoe. It then hurried on its way. I wondered if he left because he didn't like what he saw or because he didn't like what he smelled. It was worth a private smile.

I had the camera on its tripod adjusted to a comfortable angle beside me. I soon had it focused on the dormers. I zoomed in until a single window could be framed in my viewfinder. I began sweeping slowly from one window to the next.

By 2:30, nothing of consequence had yet happened. I rubbed my eyes wishing I had brought a thermos of John's good coffee. Next time I would remember. I rolled my head and stretched.

As I leaned into the camera again, preparing to continue the sweeps, I stopped – shivering the shiver of all shivers. There was warm breath on the back of my neck. I sat motionless, considering the options that might be open to me. Then something rested on my shoulder – someone's hand, I felt certain.

"Yes?" I managed, choking it out like a question, while struggling to maintain a motionless, unflustered, carriage.

There was no answer but suddenly I felt something moist and rough being applied to the back of my neck. Alcohol? A syringe? A knock out shot?

The time for composure had just passed. I turned as I took to my feet, uncertain of what action would be called for.

“Woof! Woof!” came my adversaries, happy, tail wagging, greeting. It was a hound of some kind – a Blue Tick Hound if I recollected my Ozark research properly. It had come up behind me and stood, supporting itself with its front paws – one on the chair and the other on my shoulder. Apparently happy about coming upon a companion at that time of night, he had licked my neck – his way of saying, “Hi!”

I was happy to see him, too, but passed on reciprocating in kind. A pat on his head was clearly acceptable. I returned to my chair and began talking to her – explaining what I was doing. She lay down beside the chair seemingly content and pleased to be there if not particularly enthralled with my monologue. I had to admit that having company was suddenly nice. Again I smiled into the darkness wondering if ‘Ol Blue, there, met John’s qualification as the *local* he thought I should have accompany me.

It was then the first image appeared. I pushed the button. It was just a face - a bodyless, neckless, face, floating – bobbing – there in the center window. Quickly, I searched the others. On the sweep back toward that center window another image appeared just next door. A different face but also unconnected and floating.

My new friend sat up and began howling. It could have been at the moon. It could have been at my sudden change of pace or even something else. I tried to quiet him.

“Hush, dog. It’s okay. It’s all okay.”

It made no impact so I ignored him and kept my focus on the windows. Finally, there was a third and a fourth, a fifth and a sixth.

“A bonanza,” I said out loud.

Ol’ Blue stopped as easily as she had begun and lay back down breathing heavily from having overextending her old lungs.

Just as quickly as the faces had appeared they were gone. I noted a glow in each room just before and just after each one disappeared – at least in the three of them I had been looking at when the faces faded away. A glow. That was the only way to describe it. It attached itself to nothing I had stored in my mind. Just a glow – yellow and brief, not really blinking but definitely varying in intensity in some, slight, way.

I took a small pad from my shirt pocket and wrote all that down not wanting to forget a single aspect of the impression. I continued to watch the windows for another



half hour before giving up for the night.

Blue accompanied me back to my car as one friend would do for another. I packed things back into the trunk and leaned down to tell the dog goodbye. I hoped she enjoyed my breath a whole lot more than I enjoyed hers.

As I drove away she made no attempt to follow me. When I reached the main road I looked for her in the mirror. She had turned and was trotting back along the road in the other direction. Perhaps she belonged to Jesse or one of his hands. Perhaps she had been running with a pack and tired of the chase or lagged behind unable to keep up with younger generation. Perhaps she belonged to the specters and had been howling her greeting when their images appeared. I chose not to continue along that line.

The creation of possible scenarios had always come easily for me. My grade school principal had called them lies. Perhaps intent did temper their voracity. I chose to believe that he just didn't understand the writer's spirit – perhaps not the best choice of word on the heels of that experience. I pulled into the parking lot, turned off the motor, and just sat there for a long moment. A series of sighs seemed in order.

It was then I first noticed the piece of paper secured under my wiper blade. Advertising for the Jamboree I suspected. Then again, I didn't remember it being there when I left for the valley, but my mind had been focused elsewhere – it could have been that I just missed it. No, I had sprayed and washed the windshield before leaving the lot. That pretty well confirmed that it had been presented to me down in Jesse's valley. Not a trick any dog I'd ever known could do. Ol' Blue and I had not been alone.

I got out, gathered my bags, and slipped the sheet into my shirt pocket. I might have been able to read it there in the moonlight but decided to head for the comfort of my suite. Comfort? That remained to be seen!

Not inappropriately, I suppose, I felt relieved to find the door was still locked. Inside nothing seemed out of place. The drapes remained closed. The breeze had become cooler than I could enjoy. I closed the windows, plugged in the laptop and prepared to download the digital images I had just captured. Sleep would have to wait. I felt a shivery rush as the icons popped up on the screen.

The first thirteen were blank – well, blank of faces at least – I would examine them more thoroughly later. There were fifteen clear shots of the faces and several that

showed the glow – the light, behind the windows in the rooms. It seemed important to have hard copies immediately in case anything happened to the digital cards, so I set up the photo printer and ten minutes later was perusing them on 8 ½ by 11 sheets of extra bright, glossy, 32 pound paper.

They were not as clear as I had hoped but each shot was easily recognizable as being a face. There were some computer tricks I could use to sharpen them. They were clearly the faces of young men but there was an odd aura about them. The colors were washed out. Perhaps they could be made more vivid when I got them home to my high powered software.

Where to keep them? I slipped them into a pasteboard mailing envelope and put them under my pillow for the night. I began getting undressed, ready to catch a few winks before my appointed breakfast hour at Amy Lou's. The folded sheet of paper from the windshield fell to the floor as I removed my shirt. In my excitement over the photos it had slipped my mind.

I sat on the bed and unfolded it to see what fabulous offer it might present. The answer came quickly. There were just three words printed in large, irregularly formed, block letters:

**LEAVE OR DIE !**

It was clear and concise in presentation; I'd give the author that.

Although the message was unnerving – frightening, even – I finally had substantiation that there was an actual adversary out there. I had my first entry under *Exposé*. It was a peculiar kind of relief that accompanied me to sleep that night.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Go Home, Damn Yankee!

My eyes popped open at six fifteen. I was in no way rested, yet really wasn't sleepy. It was a curious mixture of feelings. I was immediately out of bed, in and out of the shower and dressed. I moved the printed photos from beneath my pillow to the narrow, brief case I carried. In light of my recent, clandestine, visitors I would keep my notes and such with me wherever I went. I decided to also keep a camera at the ready. By six thirty five I had cracked the windows for ventilation and left my room.

By six forty I was headed for the café. Pickups were leaving the area *en masse* as I approached. Speeded up just slightly, it would have been reminiscent of a traffic jam in an old Charlie Chaplin silent picture. Amy Sue had passed on the schedule accurately. I pulled to a stop, slid my briefcase under the seat, locked the doors and entered the café.

"Surprised to see you up so early," she said in greeting.

I was the only patron. She had coffee waiting for me at the table by the window. I wondered why she was surprised at my early rising. Had she already heard of my late night escapade in the valley? Did she just expect writers or Yankees or bachelors to sleep in? It probably didn't matter. I went with a generic response.

"Always been up and at 'em with the roosters, Amy Sue. I want to thank you for your assistance last evening. Your grandmother is an impressive lady."

Amy nodded her head in just the right way to convey she believed my sincerity and that she had been happy to help.

"So, what you got up your pencil this mornin'?" she asked giggling at her little joke.

I smiled and took a pencil from my shirt pocket playfully shaking it in her direction.

"What'll it be?" she asked continuing to bus the tables.

"May I help with the busing, first? Worked my way through college in restaurants.

"Never look a gift horse," she said offering a truncated version of the old saying.

I began at the counter and within a few minutes we had the place ready for the next rush. It appeared that was going to be me. I took my assigned seat.

“How about hotcakes and scrambled eggs?” I asked.

It was more question than not because I figured Amy Sue would have her own twist to it all. She did.

“Stack a hotcakes and three scrambled. That be with bacon, ham, or sausage – patty or link?”

“Sausage – patty.”

“Orange or grapefruit juice?”

“Orange sounds good.”

“Hot or cold cereal?”

“Oh, I really don’t need cereal of any kind with all that.”

“I’ll make it hot, then – it’s oats today.”

Breakfast was prepared on the grill behind the counter so she remained available for conversation while she worked.

“What time you want me up to the Inn with the pictures?”

I was taken aback that I was to have some say in it and then promptly blew my moment by deferring to her schedule.

“Is one time better than another for you?”

“Nine fifteen is best. It’ll just be old Abraham in here at that time. He can fix himself whatever he wants. We’re all sorry he got stuck with such a sad name, you know. He’s really not half bad once ya get past that moniker.”

I thought it best to let the whole concept of Mr. Lincoln’s name sakes die a natural death. At least I assumed that was the reference.

“Nine fifteen should work out fine. Just come to the front desk in the lobby. Shouldn’t take but a few minutes.”

She didn’t answer. I supposed it seemed clear to her that we had an arrangement. I wanted to know more about Amy Sue.

“You have brothers or sisters?” I asked not at all sure how willing she’d be to share such personal information with an outsider. It seemed not to be a problem.

‘Nope. It’s just been me and Granny most my life. Can’t complain. It’s a good life.”

I wanted to ask about her father - why he wasn’t in the picture - but felt uncomfortable about it. I wouldn’t have to ask.

“My pappy was killed the war, in case you’re wondering about him.”

“I’m sorry.”

It rushed out as an automatic response. My next inclination was to ask which war, but then we’ve been at the center of so many during her lifetime it probably didn’t really matter.

“It’s okay. Like I said, Granny and I have had it pretty good.”

We continued making small talk while the eggs were scrambled and the sausage sizzled. Before long it was served – a table full of delicious looking – and smelling – food. Through a strange association it reminded me of Blue – the last thing I remembered really smelling.

“I was out walking last evening and ran across a Blue Tick Hound – very friendly – down by the lane up to Jesse’s place.”

“Probably *Ol’ Blue*. Uncle Jesse’s pride and joy. She’s gettin’ on in years. Must a had a dozen litters in her day. The boys don’t come courtin’ her no more. No pups for three years. Granny says I’ll be in the same boat if I don’t hook somebody pretty soon.”

It really was, *Ol’ Blue*? Imagine that!

“I understood you had a somebody - Billy, I believe was the name I heard.”

“Been checkin’ up on me, have you?”

It was the most feminine, almost flirty, tone her voice had taken with me. She turned back to the grill, poofing her hair and doing that spit-wet little finger along the eyebrow thing that women do when wanting to fancy up on a moment’s notice. I’ve never been able to understand why it always required the *little* finger.

If her efforts had truly been for my benefit I was flattered but would wait for her explanation about Billy before I . . . well, I wasn’t really sure what it was that I might do. Amy Sue was attractive. She was roughly my age. Other than that we had nothing obvious in common - well, she was a woman and I was a man - that might be a place to start.

Our lives had begun in different places and followed very different paths, providing us with widely dissimilar experiences, beliefs, and philosophies. One was not necessarily superior to the other but they were, I believed, quite incompatible.

“Billy’s a lot like *Ol’ Blue*, she said beginning her explanation, “Always there with his tongue hangin’ out ready and willin’ for a good time. Probably not as loyal or

sensible as *Blue* but then Billy *is* male.”

There was no apology expressed or implied for having delivered the gender belittling comment in my presence. Clearly she saw it as a well-established fact of life. I averted my smile from her to the window.

“I understand he has a temper,” I continued.

It was Amy Sue’s turn to smile and nod. Her response was delivered as unquestioned gospel.

“Men are that way. Get riled up and physical before they think – *without thinkin’* may say it better. Men don’t think ten feet ahead. That’s one reason God gave ‘em women. To make things right after they’re finally done goin’ off half-cocked.”

Her take on relationships assumed both a quiet, female superiority and the childlike behavior of men extended well into adulthood. She may have been right. I liked to be pampered more than I like to pamper and I looked for the opposite in women. I often found that folk wisdom had an efficient – if unscientific – way of cutting to the chase.

Amy Sue was not finished.

“Billy’s one of a passel of boys – six older brothers and three younger. Every last one a them suffers from male pattern stupidity. Somehow the others all got a woman though.”

She shook her head as if truly stumped, then changed the subject.

“So, you’ll be leaving today, will ya?” she asked out of the blue.

“That’s not my intention. No. Still have a book to write. Don’t have nearly enough information and impressions yet.”

She frowned. My answer seemed unexpected and clearly presented more than a little concern to her. I pressed.

“You have some reason to think I’d be on my way today?”

She stammered and brought coffee pouring it a bit too full.

“No. Guess I just thought you’d be in and out in a hurry. No. No reason.”

In my experience, three ‘no’s’ in one short response were usually equivalent to a single ‘yes’. Whether she knew something for sure or was just acting on her understanding of the Blue Tick - that is, *local male* mentality, I couldn’t be sure. I tended to believe her response was based on firsthand knowledge if only from snatches

overheard earlier as the men talked among themselves at breakfasts.

I returned to a previous subject, not entirely sure why.

“So, no wedding bells in your future, then?”

“With Billy? Heavens no. Just ain’t many men my age left in these parts. Boys are on a push to get married from the moment their upper lips turn dark. They don’t stay unhitched any longer than they have to – not around here, at least. It’s seventeen and out as they say.”

I wasn’t aware that’s what *they* said but didn’t pursue it.

“Billy’s different, then, I guess?”

“Most women wouldn’t have him – a bit dull witted, not really attractive, ill-tempered, disrespectful, can’t hold a job, goes wild when he drinks and he drinks too often.”

“And you remain special friends with him, *why?*”

“Everybody has to have somebody. Some do better than others. We all got needs.”

For an instant her face saddened and she sighed. It passed almost as soon as it began.

“At the rate you’re piddling with your food you won’t be ready to make copies by 9:15. Cold oats ain’t nobody’s idea of good eatin’. I’ll take ‘em back and see if I can bring ‘em back to life.”

“Like I said, I won’t have room for oats anyway. This is much more than I’m used to having this time of day.”

She took the oatmeal back to the counter. It wasn’t clear if that was in the service of *her* edict or *my* wish. It wasn’t returned so I assumed she had bowed to my contention.

It seemed clear to me that she was – at least marginally – concerned about my well-being. Her reaction added unwelcome substance to the three word suggestion – threat – I had received the night before. Upon reflection – there in the light of day – I doubted if “*idle* threat” was a part of the local working vocabulary.

“I hear you been takin’ pictures with a fancy camera,” she said at last, obviously not aware that could only have been seen in the night darkened, valley, the evening before. It would pinpoint the whereabouts of the source. I might have my first lead.

“Oh? Who’s telling that?”

“Buck. Don’t know how he come by the information.”

“Buck one of Jesse’s hands?” I asked casually.

“Ya. Most everybody around here works for Uncle Jesse these days.”

“He raises hay, I understand.”

“Raises hay, corn, cattle, pigs. Into lots of things. Done okay for hisself. If it wasn’t for him I reckon there wouldn’t be no Yates Corner no more.”

“You get a lot of farmers – rural folks – in here, do you?”

“Ya. Generally men. Women folk stays to home mostly. Some come in with their man on Saturday noon. Changes the place when women is here. Makes lot’s a men uncomfortable.

“Jesse must own lots of land, then. I assume it takes a lot of land to raise enough hay to make a guy rich.”

“I got no idea how much.”

That topic had been effectively closed. I had finished my meal anyway so it worked out well.

“What are the damages this morning,” I asked.

She presented me with a written guest check, something I had not received the day before. It was itemized: Breakfast, 6.75, minus \$1.00 for fifteen minutes busing, total = \$5.75. I knew better than to question it or protest the arrangement. I left six dollars and fifty cents on the table. She glanced in its direction and nodded her approval. I assumed I had redeemed myself for my previous puffiness. I was amused that my services had been figured at four dollars an hour and wondered if that was beginning wage or if it took into account my previous experience.

“Until 9:15 then,” I said.

I had two hours before that appointment. Several things had whetted my curiosity. I went back to the Inn and parked my car. With camera in hand I walked around the building and took the trail back toward Hank’s cabin. There were wild flowers along the way that called out to be photographed. I listened.

My destination was not the cabin itself but the private lane. I was interested in where it led so I began following it south. I was struck by two things. The two tracks were hard, shiny, red clay - not surprising in itself - but they were each wide - much



wider than I would have expected. The other thing was its general appearance - not that of an unused roadway. I was unfamiliar with the agricultural characteristics of hard packed clay. Perhaps it did not allow for the growth of grass and weeds. For whatever reason, none was growing in the tracks. The lane appeared to be in regular use. 'A dead-end lane in regular use?' It made no initial sense. I would look for another explanation.

Together it all told me nothing, other than that John had probably not been back there in some time. Perhaps Hank did have a vehicle and for some reason did not want his employers to know. Possibilities, although irrelevant. I enjoyed my walk. Thirty yards or so to the south the lane made a Y. The leg veering to the left seemed to be the main artery while that to right was mostly overgrown.

I proceeded along the overgrown trail to the right since it seemed to follow the natural lay of the land as it curved west and began a gentle descent of the hill. Presently, I emerged onto the exit road from the parking lot. It seemed a reasonable place for such a private lane to begin – or end as it were. Looking toward it from the main road one would be hard put to spot it behind the low hanging branches and bushes, long in control there. It reminded me of the entrance to the Bat Cave. If it were the appearance of this spot that John had used to base his assessment, I understood his impression.

I retraced my trek back up the lane. Something, or someone, exited the trail to the right just ahead of me and disappeared into the underbrush. It had been a flash out of the corners of my eyes. I paused and took a deep breath that calmed the sudden cold ripples prickling up and down my back.

As I passed the spot I looked after the movement but there was nothing to see. It could have been a raccoon or a possum. I'd try to convince myself of that. I smiled taking solace in the fact that I hadn't read references to Yeti sightings in the Ozark Mountains.

I took a right at the top of the hill to follow the more traveled route. Eventually it dead-ended into an east-west gravel road – also well-traveled from its appearance. My guess was that it formed the south and west boundaries of the Inn property and eventually wound around becoming the line that separated the city limits from Jesse's valley land. I decided not to continue my hike and returned to the Inn by way of Hank's

cabin. During that walk I had inched up to a higher level of alert than felt comfortable. Movements in the underbrush became suspect and scary rather than curiosities.

My sojourn had taken the better part of an hour. It was 8:15. I stopped at my car to pick up my briefcase and then went directly to my suite. My chest tightened as I approached the door. It was still locked. Inside nothing seemed out of place. I opened the drapes and the bright morning light quickly roused the sitting room from the blandness of its night time indifference. Once again reverting to my preschool habit, I undertook a thorough search for goblins. None were found. I listened for a moment at the screen in the bathroom ceiling but heard nothing other than the monotonous rush of air being inhaled by the powerful exhaust fans on the roof. With a little imagination there could have been strains of a melancholy cello in among it all.

I expected all that good news would loosen the unpleasant grip the darker, more gullible, side of my mind had taken on my chest. It didn't. I took a seat on the couch and removed the envelope from my briefcase. I had time to kill and wanted to study the pictures in more detail. I slipped them from the envelope. Almost before I recognized the problem, I felt my chest draw even tighter.

They were not in the order in which I had arranged them the night before. I had sorted them according to age - from the youngest appearing to the oldest. They were now a hodgepodge - some even upside-down. Instinctively I looked into the envelope expecting to find something - another note perhaps. There was nothing. Had someone just been curious and careless or was it part of a continued attempt to play with my mind. In either case that person - and I was still betting on the living rather than the dead - had to have been skillful enough to pick both my car door and the lock on my briefcase. Not rocket science but also not a typical, man on the street skill. None of the photos had been stolen.

When had it happened? Although I had been sitting by the window at the cafe, within easy view of my car, my attention *had* remained inside that morning. It could have taken place then. Or, there had been plenty of time while I was on my walk. I had to wonder: the car and the case had been relocked. Why? My room door had not been relocked when the intruder left. Perhaps there were two different people - factions - realms? - showing an interest in my activities.

It was then that an ill-formed image took shape in my mind. It pictured the

clothes I had just seen in my quick glance inside my closet. I went into the bed room and opened the closet door. The image had been correct. Three of my six, colorfully, flowered shirts had been replaced – replaced with plain blue ones.

I removed one for examination. It was old fashioned in design with a clerical-type, double button at the neck, collar. It was a well done replica of a Civil War era garment – probably northern, although my scanty knowledge of such things couldn't allow me to be sure.

“Why three and not six?” I asked myself out loud. Perhaps such an extensive wardrobe had not been anticipated. Even so, why leave the others?

I held it up to my body and examined it in the mirror over the dresser. It was certainly my size. Seeing the medium blue reflecting back at me brought to mind the shirt of the bridge engineer - what was his name? Jack somebody. Davis. Jack Davis. He had been wearing a blue shirt, and of that off brand style, in the lobby the night before.

My mind whirled with questions. Why would Jack tempt fate by wearing blue? John said he was from Ohio – a Yankee by definition. Maybe he didn't know the legend. Of course he did – he'd been in the area for months. So, maybe he knew but didn't believe. Maybe he was a ghost buster in disguise out to tempt the spirits. Maybe he was suicidal and hoped to be done in by the evil forces. Whoa there, Mark! Whirling minds were only productive up to a point.

I checked the pants hanging there. None had been switched. My door had been locked - maybe *re-locked* - when I got back. A different MO or just a maneuver to confuse me? The maid? It was John. Out of habit I had made my bed that morning and there was really nothing else needing to be done. I went into the bathroom and checked the towel and washcloth I had used. They were still draped over the shower door – the washcloth was still wet. *Maid John* had evidently not yet made his rounds.

Supposedly, spirits could move through walls. I had to wonder if they could transport with them solid items of the physical world such as shirts. If not a spirit the perpetrator would have needed a key - unless it was the lock picking, picture shuffling, car intruder from earlier. If not a lock picker or someone with a key then what? Secret panels and passages?

My mind needed to be reined in. I returned to the sitting room. The drapes were

closed. I checked the door. It was still locked. The chain lock was dangling. I couldn't remember if I had secured it or not. I'd go with *not* just to ease my mind. I slid it into the slot.

I took a seat on the couch. It was uncomfortable having my back to the hall door so I moved to the chair. It was no better with my back to the bedroom door.

"Perhaps I should just wet my pants and leave," I said, aloud, thinking it would sound substantially funnier than it did.

As I put the envelope back into my briefcase I felt some relief understanding there had been no actual attempts to hurt me. My adversary was clearly still in the 'scare the damn Yankee out of here' stage of his - or her - or its - plan.

"Ol' Blue, perhaps?"

With that I finally smiled.

I decided to wait for Amy Sue in the lobby. First, I checked the digital cards on which the pictures had been recorded. They were still in their pouch in my camera bag and seemed to be intact. I wouldn't take time to open them on the laptop to make sure they had not been erased. Since these 'ghosts' seemed to play an important part in the plan to get rid of me, I doubted anything would be done to remove them from evidence.

Again, I locked the door behind me to keep it safe from the honest folks. A few minutes later my briefcase and I were downstairs in search of a cup of coffee.

"Marc. Good morning," came Jan's cheery greeting from behind the desk.

"Jan! Hello! A beautiful day in *your* Ozarks. I'm going to need to make some copies when Amy Sue gets here – probably about 9:15. I'll be chasing down and taming a cup of coffee 'til then."

Jan seemed quiet though I suppose there was really no response required – I hadn't asked a question and she appeared busy.

I got the coffee and took a seat near the neatly laid, though unlit, fireplace. From there I had a full view of the front desk so I would see Amy Sue as soon as she arrived. We spied each other at the same moment. I met her and Jan opened the pull up section of the desk so we could enter and go into the office. Five minutes later the copies were made and Amy was on her way. Neither woman had much to say to the other. Perhaps there was something between them. Perhaps business was just business and required no chatting. Perhaps they were both busy and eager to move on

to the next things on their agendas. I decided to go with that one – it seemed to fit the nature of these friendly people better.

I took the copies into the lobby and again took a seat in the corner near the windows on the west. I was eager to compare the portraits with those I had snapped the night before. They were soon spread out on the low table between me and windows. I made comparisons to see if the matches I expected were there.

The answer was yes and no – yes that the six pictures from Granny Rakes seemed to be of the same six boys whose faces I had photographed in the windows. No, in that they were not the same photographs as I had expected them to be. Half were facing in the opposite direction and the camera angles were clearly different. Granny's photos were black and white – color photography had not existed when they were taken. Mine were in color and faithfully represented the hues as I remembered them. Despite the differences, there was an aura of similarity. I couldn't place it, but there was something.

I wondered where there might be an archive of historical photos from the area. I slid the pictures into the stiff envelope, locked them inside my case and went to find Jan.

"Is there some kind of library or local county museum around here?"

"Up at Banks. It's the county seat. Both, actually. I have a brochure here someplace from the museum. Not sure of the library hours but I can get the phone number for you. . . . Yes. Here's the museum piece. I got the library number on my list of seldom visited places. Of course I use that list so seldom that I can never find it. . . . Here."

She read off the number and I jotted it down. I took the brochure and thanked her, returning to my seat by the window. From my cell phone, I made calls to both numbers. They would be open by the time I could get there – a fifteen minute drive straight up the valley to the north. I was told it would take me by the new bridge construction, which would slow me down a bit. For some reason I felt the need to let Jan know where I'd be.

"On my up to Banks, I guess. I understand it's a fifteen minute drive."

"That sounds about right. The bridge stuff may slow you down a bit. Still, no more than twenty. Straight up the valley to the north then right on county 312. As I recall the museum is in the basement of the courthouse on the square and the library is

in the old one room school house a block or so north.”

“Great. I’ll see you later, then. Maybe this afternoon I can get that tour of the third floor.”

“Sure. Just work it out with John. I’m not about to venture back up there especially after hearing about the pictures you took last night.”

Five minutes saw me through town and I was on the open road heading north.

A flagman stopped me near the bridge site – waiting for the traffic from the north to clear the single open lane. I rolled down the window and tried to engage him in conversation.

“Looks like quite a project.”

“It’ll be nearly a year’s work. That’s good in these parts.”

He turned his head to spit tobacco juice. I assumed that was the polite way to discharge it.

“I’m staying at the Carlton Inn down in Yates Corner – same place Jack stays.”

“Jack?”

“Jack Davis, the engineer here.”

The old man shook his head.

“Ain’t no Jack Davis workin’ here. Never heard the name.”

“I must be mistaken then.”

A single pickup passed from the north handing the flagman a piece of well tattered, red, cloth.

“You take this flag and hand it off to Billy at the other end. That way he’ll know you’re the last car coming up.”

I took the flag and put it on the seat beside me wondering if *Billy* was THE Billy. I moved on up the makeshift gravel road. I was puzzled about the mix-up over Davis. Had I misunderstood what John told me about him? I didn’t think so. *The pot stinkins*, as a mystery writer friend of mine too often says.

Billy could have certainly been Billy – thirty-ish, big, strong and unattractive. He grabbed the flag from my hand without comment. In many ways he seemed to fit my expectations. I made no attempt at conversation. If he recognized me he made no indication of it.

Banks was another small town though looked like the big time next to Yates

Corner. The center of the square housed the court house, two clumps of confederate statues, and several well-kept flower beds flanked by green, wooden, benches. Many were occupied by older gentlemen. I wondered if they might have information for me. The opposite side of the four intersecting streets made up the business district with a wide variety of stores that appeared to be thriving. The angle-in parking along the street was nearly full. I found a spot behind the court house. With camera and briefcase in tow I went to find the museum.

It was in the basement entered by way of sunken, outside, cement, steps. It had the requisite musty museum odor. So did the old gentleman who was apparently in charge. He sat in a rocker on a small braided rug worn thin where the rockers had made their impression through the years.

"Welcome to the *Carlton County Historical Museum*," he said, not getting to his feet. "Feel free to look around. I know everything there is to know so if it's research you're doing just pull up a chair and fire away."

"Thank you. I guess I'll look around first and then I'll most likely want to chat with you."

"A Yankee?"

"Guilty. Indiana - southern."

"Good folks up there. One of my uncles married a gal from up there - Manchester, or some such place."

"Yes. Quite a way north of where I'm from."

He nodded apparently exhausting his knowledge of my stomping grounds.

"Picture gallery in through that door. Turn the lights on by the door. Don't forget to turn 'em off when you're done. A replica of a log cabin through that door. Same thing with the lights. Don't sit on the bed - fat man broke one of its legs a few years back. Lots a books in this room as you kin see - public records goin' back to 1800. Volumes on land grants and family trees. Careful with the old ones. Their spines is brittle. Same with the flag collection. Been sprayed with a preservative but you could still poke a hole in 'em with your finger if you tried."

The old gentleman presented an interesting mixture of local grammatical construction and a vocabulary that seemed above average.

"You sound educated, Sir."

He nodded his agreement and smiled proudly.

“Eleventh grade. Joined the Marines my senior year. Korea. It was a terrible experience for a kid. Terrible!”

His lower jaw quivered.

I nodded, though no agreement on my part was required.

I walked the rooms for a while, making certain to follow his admonitions about the lights, bed, flags and books. I spent some time in the gallery taking pictures of things that caught my attention. There was old Jeremiah Carlton himself, black hat and robe, astride a pure white horse looking stately if unattractive. His face could have been that of Andrew Jackson as it appears on a twenty dollar bill. There was nothing specifically related to the *C-Patrol* or the battle of Carlton’s regiment. I wondered if that battle even had a name.

I asked about it.

“Fourteenth book from the left, second shelf from the top, middle section: *The Carlton Regiment*, by J. P. Carlton, printed in 1946 right here in Banks.”

“My. You do know your library. I’m impressed.”

“Me too.”

He giggled a high pitch giggle.

“I can still cite you volume and page in these old books but couldn’t tell you what I had for breakfast on a bet.”

“Getting there myself,” I said.

He looked at me as if to say, ‘You don’t have to patronize me, Sonny.’

“What was the name of the battle between Carlton’s regiment and the northern forces?”

“The battle between Carlton’s regiment and the northern forces is all I’ve ever heard it called.”

I found the book and took it to the single library table in the room. I clicked on the goose neck lamp expecting to be told that I must not forget to turn it off. He said nothing. Perhaps my good deportment up to that point had given me a pass.

As he noticed my page by page interest he spoke.

“That one’s been transferred to a CD over at the library. For a couple of bucks they’ll make a copy for you.”



“Thank you. I’ll just take down the reference then. Any others that make reference to the *C-Patrol* incident?”

“There’s a book of family trees that traces the history of the boys’ kinfolks. You can examine it at the library as well. Not on no CD though. That’s about it. Now over at the *Register* office – that’s the newspaper – they’ll have back copies with stories about the specter sightings. Not sure if they’re indexed but Gussy can probably find ‘em for you.”

“Gussy? He’s the editor?”

“Gussy! *She’s* the editor. Was my high school English teacher. Old as these hills and twice as stubborn. She’s the kind who’ll keep the Grim Reaper waitin’ ‘til she gets one last paper out.”

He giggled again and shook his head.

I had detected no reluctance on his part where it came to talking about the boys of the *C-Patrol* so I gave it a shot.

“You seen the specters, have you?”

“Jist once when I was a boy. Me and some friends was night fishin’ the Sandy. I must a been maybe twelve. I’d caught the least fish that afternoon so it was my job to keep the fire goin’ all night. I was back in the woods picking up wood – probably right at midnight when outta the south they came riddin’ by, whoopin’ and hollerin’, that big red flag wavin’ behind ‘em. It was quite a site I’ll tell you.”

“Your friends saw it, also, I take it.”

“They was sleepin’.”

“Slept right through the noise?”

“I never did understand that neither. Never said nothin’ to ‘em about it – well, not ‘til years later – after I got out a the service.”

“How many did you see?”

“All six was there from little Darrel right on up to Billy Anderson.”

“You knew them by sight?”

“Always a history buff. Granny Rakes – she lives down in Yates Corner – taught me all she knew.”

“They were all on horseback?”

“Yup.”

“It was my understanding Carlton’s Regiment was strictly infantry.”

“T’was. Spirits has access to things, though, you see.”

It had been his full and satisfactory explanation.

I returned the book to its place on the shelf and, after getting directions to the library, said goodbye.

“Thanks for droppin’ in Mr. Miller. Hope you find everything you need for your book.”

I was outside, my eyes adjusting to the daylight when it hit me. I had not mentioned my name. We had not exchanged that information. Yet he knew. Knowledge of my presence had preceded me. I had to wonder. Jan? Would she have called ahead? If so, why? To make sure the old gentleman would be awake? I smiled. It made no sense that it would have been her. Still, I was curious. I could have just returned and asked him, but thought better of it and moved on to my car.

The door was locked as it should have been yet on the front seat, spread open there, was a road map of the mid-west. A route was marked in red from Yates Corner to Indiana. The arrows along the way pointed north. It was a not so subtle hint to get my behind out of the area. Was I making somebody nervous or was it thought to just be none of my business? I couldn’t answer that.

I slid into the seat, folded the map – after more than a few attempts – and put it into the glove compartment. As I leaned forward to turn the key I took time to unobtrusively inspect the area. No one suspicious seemed to be present but then I really had no idea what I was looking for. There was something about the red SUV two slots down from me but I couldn’t place it. I backed out and was soon at the library.

It was a wonderful old building, well maintained on the outside. Inside was pretty much what one would expect –bookcases around the outer walls broken up by the several floor to ceiling windows on each side. The desk was at the rear. I walked back to desk, introduced myself to the young lady there, and inquired about obtaining a copy of the Carlton disk. One was available. I was surprised. Seven dollars. I paid for it and put it into my case.

“Anything specific to the C-Patrol, here?” I asked.

“Not really. Your best bet is Gussy. She’ll give you access to stories about the sightings and such.”

“You buy the idea of the sightings?” I asked.

She smiled and looked directly into my eyes.

“If I didn’t, I’d certainly never even hint at it around here.”

I had her answer without hearing her admission.

“Flimflamery?” I asked.

“It’s been suggested before.”

“Proof?”

“None, so far as I know.”

“I have to ask. It will seem strange.”

“Oh? Go ahead.”

“Were you alerted ahead of time that I’d be coming?”

“I don’t understand. Just by *your* call, earlier, Mr. Miller. When you asked me to make a copy of that disk for you.”

“Oh. Yes. Of course.”

She clearly thought I had come into early senility. Perhaps I had!

I stammered though my thank you and left.

Someone had called using my name. If it had been the old man from the museum trying to be helpful she would certainly have recognized the difference in our voices. It had become an interesting game of chess. Why, on the one hand would someone have the disk prepared for me and on the other suggest I leave immediately? Maybe he or she thought getting the disk would speed me on my way. But how could anyone have known that I was going to find out about the disk? It was mind boggling – a state I usually welcomed, but not that day.

I drove to the newspaper office.

Gussy looked a hundred years old. Her face reminded me of one of the dried apple dolls that I had run across at the tourist stops on my drive down through the Ozarks.

“Mornin’” came her cheery, gravely, greeting.

“I’m Gussy. Owned this paper for fifty year.”

“I’m Marc Miller, a writer, here to research the *C-Patrol* incident.

The use of the word, *incident*, seemed to be better received than had either tale or legend.

“I’ve been wondering for most of those fifty years why somebody hasn’t recognized that story as worthy of being written. I’ve even saved clippings.”

She began moving her fingers through the folders in the drawer of an old, green, metal file cabinet as she continued.

“You published?”

“A dozen novels. Lots of articles and short stories in anthologies and mystery magazines.”

“Believe in the supernatural, do you?”

I was being pre-qualified to see if I was worthy of her information.

“A skeptic with an open mind, probably best describes my position on the subject.”

She nodded and lifted the folder out of the drawer and placed it on the counter.

“It’s fewer items than one might imagine for a story that goes back a hundred fifty and some odd years. Looks to be maybe a couple of dozen.”

She slid the folder toward me. I repositioned it and quickly flipped through the clippings. One jumped out at me.

“This photograph. What can you tell me about it?”

“Taken by one of Jesse Rakes’ hands a few years back. It purports to show the boys’ spirits riding with the flag and swords at the ready. Very dark. Reproduced poorly when printed. I have the original somewhere. It wasn’t a whole lot better. Modern technology might be able to clean it up – the digital stuff that I really don’t understand. If I don’t kick the bucket soon, though, I may just have to begin learning about it.”

It had not been delivered in a humorous vein though, unthinkingly, I chuckled aloud drawing a glance over the top of her gold rimmed glasses. I was struck by her use of the word, *purports*. The first native-son doubter I’d run across.

As I began reading through the articles she went in search of the photo. By the time I finished it was laying on the counter beside the folder. I examined it. She was right. It was only marginally more distinct. She began pointing out its features. Horses, faces, flag, swords, the leg and stirrup on the image in the foreground.

“I assume you’d like copies of all this?” she said at last.

Apparently I must have passed her *author authentication test*.

“Yes, copies. I’ll gladly pay whatever the costs are.”

“I have a machine in the back room. Give me a few minutes.”

Before I could ask if I could be of any assistance she had parted the heavy dark blue curtain and shuffled out of sight. Five minutes later she returned with my copies in a large white catalog envelope. The bill came to six dollars and twelve cents. I had the correct change. She stamped the outside of the envelope with the name, address and phone number of the paper. I thanked her, handed her my business card and walked to my car.

I peered inside before opening the door. The seat seemed clear of any surprises.

As I opened the door a sheriff's car pulled up behind me and an older, uniformed, rough looking man got out and approached me, baton in hand. For some reason Sheriffs seldom liked me. I wondered what this one had on his mind.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Reverend Carlton – In the Flesh and Blood

The Sheriff offered his hand.

“I’m Sheriff Chance. You’re Marc Miller from Indiana. I ran your plates. Seem to be free of warrants and such. Stayin’ in the area long?”

The message seemed clear – foreigners were suspect until proven otherwise!

“As long as it takes to research a book. Maybe a week or so. I’ve certainly become a fan of this beautiful area.”

“It is that. Folks around here like to keep it for themselves, you understand.”

“Probably not entirely, but if you’re suggesting some folks don’t want me here I *do* understand that.”

“Had problems?”

“Nothing extreme. I’m doing fine.”

“I’m here to enforce the law. Don’t go out on a limb yourself. That can get dicey in a hurry in these parts.”

“Thank you for the offer and for your advice.”

“Where you staying?”

“The Inn down at Yates Corner.”

“Oh. The Inn. Jan and John. Good people. Two of the few who came here and stayed. Folks like them. They bring lots of money into the area. Jan plays a mean fiddle, too, of course.”

“That’s what I’ve been told. Haven’t had the pleasure of hearing her yet.”

“Can I ask what you’re writing about?” he said, for the first time indicating I had been granted some freedom of choice in the conversation.

“You can. If you’re like most folks I’ve met you won’t like what I tell you.”

“You’re a straightforward type. I can live with that,” he said, the hint of a smile, if not acceptance, breaking the edges of his mouth.

“*C-Patrol*. Most likely a fictionalized version of the story; possibly a straight forward account of my experiences here chasing after it.”

He raised his eyebrows but didn’t try to talk me out of it.

“Well, like I said. Don’t take any guff. I’m as close a 911 as they say on the cop

shows except out here we don't have 911. Here's my cell number."

He took a card from his vest pocket and handed it to me.

"Why does this make me think you anticipate problems for me.?"

"Can't see the future. Just a careful person. Keeping the folks here law abiding is my job. That goes for keeping you in line, as well, of course."

"Of course. I appreciate your concern."

"Maybe later then," he said, tipping his wide brimmed hat.

"Hope it's under pleasant conditions similar to this one," I added.

He nodded and moved back to his car. I certainly didn't dislike the man. He seemed sincere - even likeable. There had been an implied threat but it wasn't from him. It was more a general warning about forces over which he was admitting he had only marginal control. I would keep his number handy - maybe even put it on speed dial. I felt certain I had not told him anything he didn't already know. My answers must have been a match to his information. I suppose that was more a tribute to his thoroughness than to my honesty.

By the time I was ready to back out, his car was gone. I was hungry. The question became whether to find a café locally or head on back to Amy Sue's. I headed for Yates Corner. The bridge construction site reminded me about the Jack Davis problem. If he worked at the site why would the flagman deny it? If he didn't, why would John and Amy think he did - or did they? It was probably totally unrelated to anything I was doing so I should just forget it. I had a hard time overlooking such obvious discrepancies, however.

It was almost one o'clock when I walked through the door at the cafe. Four men sat paired at two tables, though it was clear they were together. They looked to be laborers or farmhands. I didn't recognize them as folks I'd seen before. I received a cheery "Hi" from Amy Sue but no recognition from the others.

"Hear you been up to Banks this mornin'. It's more of a town than this but too much hustle and bustle for me."

"I have to ask," I said taking my usual seat.

"How I knowed you was up there, you mean?"

I nodded.

"Billy come in for a early lunch. He seen you on your way."

It seemed a simple, plausible explanation – still.

“I didn’t realize he knew me by sight.”

“Think about it! A stranger, a thirty year old man, drives a red Chrysler with Indiana plates, speakin’ in a really thick Yankee accent?”

“I see your point.”

For some reason – nothing I could pin down – I wasn’t convinced.

“Your lunch’ll be just a minute,” she said.

It appeared that I might not be asked for my preferences. I wouldn’t. It seemed to be Amy Sue’s choice that day. The food arrived shortly – chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes with white gravy, corn on the cob, and stewed tomatoes.

“Had time to study the pictures of the boys?” she asked, taking a chair.

I wasn’t sure just *what* she figured I’d be studying them *for*.

“I’ve looked at them. They certainly seem young. I was wondering if there is any way of determining their exact ages at the times those pictures were taken. I assume they weren’t snapped as going off to war pictures.”

“Hadn’t ever thought about that. I’ll ask Granny. She probably knows.”

“I suppose this is a gruesome question but where were the members of Carlton’s Regiment buried – the ones killed in the battle I mean.”

“Wasn’t room in the church cemetery so a special one was made up on the hill to the west of the road you come in on. You passed within a few hundred yards of it. First side road to the right as you leave town. If you’re plannin’ to visit it, get out before sundown. Story is there’s still lots a restless souls that prowl the grounds up there at night. Some say it’s where the boys of *C-Patrol* now call home. Like when they got back here they just felt more comfortable up there among their own, if you know what I mean.”

“Sightings up there?”

“Lots. I never had the guts to go but all the teenage boys in these parts have to spend a night up there – it’s like once they turn thirteen they have to do it to become a man.”

“Have to?”

“It’s a teen boy thing, I guess. They require it of themselves, is what I meant.”

“And they have stories of sightings?”



“Not all of ‘em but lots do.”

“And the folks around here believe them? I mean you don’t wonder if it’s just macho tales they fabricate – make up – to make themselves look brave and such?”

“Could be some of that but I doubt if it’s much. We all know you don’t mess with the spirits. Tell lies about them and who knows what fearful things might happen to you.”

I nodded and continued eating. It was an interesting way of authenticating such sightings. If one did lie about it, the lie would be protected by the belief that no one dared lie about such things.

So, your trip to Banks go okay?”

“Very satisfactory I suppose. I got some interesting information and a few more pictures.”

For some reason Amy Sue wouldn’t let that trip alone. I wasn’t sure how to find out why.

“I met Sheriff Chance. Seems like a good man.”

“Billy’s uncle. Looks after his own. Been Sheriff for twenty-five years – maybe longer. A fair man, usually.”

The ‘usually’ concerned me but I didn’t press. I figured it probably related to Billy’s drunken binges. A tall man entered, looking all quite out of place in his three piece, black suit and hat.

“Reverend!” Amy Sue said, a smile blossoming on her face. Quickly to her feet and across the room she pulled out a chair for him at what I assumed must have been *his* table. He was no more than fifty, so I assumed the special treatment had more to do with his position in the community than his degree of infirmity.

“Usual?” she asked.

He nodded, removed his hat and placed it on the chair beside him. He looked my way and I recognized him with a nod and smile. He replied in kind, then unfolded and began reading the paper that had ridden with him in his coat pocket. I wanted to make his acquaintance. Amy Sue brought the coffee pot and an unusually quite voice.

“That’s Reverend Carlton - Justin Carlton, great, great, something-or-other grandson of THE Jeremiah Carlton.”

I nodded again.

"I'd sure like to meet the man sometime," I said not directly asking for an introduction.

"He's a good man. I'm sure he'd be happy to talk with you. Finish your meal first then I'll introduce you just before you leave."

She presented that suggestion as though it were some kind of well-established protocol.

"That sounds fine. Thank you. Does he claim divine powers like his great, great, something-or-other did?"

"Them powers wasn't passed down through the blood. They was special gifts. He's pretty much just a regular preacher."

"Married?"

"Father of six kids - five girls and one boy."

"Let me guess; the youngest is the boy."

"Right. Poor kid. He has no choice in it. He'll be the next Reverend around here."

"None of his daughters expressed an interest in the ministry, you mean?"

"Daughters? What kind of sick church do you belong to? Hereabouts no female takes up bein' a Reverend. That's just wrong!"

My question had clearly over-stepped the boundary of decency – as locally defined. I wouldn't apologize but did move on.

"What's the pie of the day, Amy Sue?"

I hoped after my faux pas she'd still serve me a slice.

"Double crust apple-cinnamon. Granny says it's my best effort from the oven."

"Is that ever served ala mode?"

"Always!"

She seemed surprised I had to ask. I would have thought that with television, such parochial ideas of right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable would have disappeared or at least that the more widely accepted alternatives would have been familiar. Not so, I was learning.

At the rate I had been stowing the food away since arriving in Yates Corner, I imagined myself arriving back in Indiana a fat old man. Finished at last, I left money on the table and stood, wondering if Amy Sue would actually make the introductions or if

that was up to me.

She approached Reverend Carlton and did the honors.

“Reverend, I’d like to meet a friend of mine, Marc Miller – he spells it with a ‘C’ but that hasn’t seemed to affect him in any dark way. He’s a writer from *southern* Indiana.”

I was pleased to be included on her list of friends and I noted her geographical reference – apparently her way of indicating her marginal endorsement. She had become my image consultant as well. I extended my hand. He accepted it, though remained seated.

“Good to meet you, Sir.”

“Any friend of Amy Sue’s,” he said, offering another saying, cut short. There was apparently an economy in the expression of idioms there to which I would need to pay closer attention.

“Have a seat, if you like,” he went on as if he had reason to expect a more prolonged conversation. I had no reason to believe he was not aware of my presence and mission. I sat. Amy Sue returned to the counter.

“The Carltons seem to have a lock on the Reverend business in these parts,” I began, more or less generically, smiling.

“More generations than I can count with my shoes on.”

I was surprised and pleased – relieved, perhaps – at the common touch and natural humor.

“I’m here researching a book.”

“I know. *C-Patrol*. Figured I’d be on your itinerary, eventually. How can I be of assistance?”

“Please don’t take this wrong but you don’t sound like the others in this valley. Sure you’re from around here?”

“Here to Harvard and back to here. Doctor of theology.”

He leaned forward and hushed his tone.

“I meticulously avoid using that title locally. Most just know Harvard as *the Reverend School back east*.”

I nodded. It had not been delivered as a put down of his parishioners. Just the fact of the matter. He continued.

“Most of these folks are good, uneducated people who genuinely want to live a good and Christian life. They aren’t interested in the classic, philosophic, debates about religion, so I don’t bother them with it. I may be shirking my duty as a theologian but I believe I’m providing what is needed and helpful as their pastor.”

He lingered over a long sip of tea, as if collecting his thoughts. He then continued.

“Sometimes I feel like a mechanic in a garage. People come to me with faulty parts – parts of their lives that aren’t working – and expect the Reverend Carlton to fix them. I do my best as did most of the Reverend Carlton’s before me.”

I liked the man - a lot. I pursued his earlier offer.

“You asked about how you could help me. I’d just really like to pick your brain sometime.”

“Brain pickin’ season is always open where I’m concerned - *unlike* where many others around here are concerned. I understand though that Granny granted you an audience. That’s unusual.”

“She was quite gracious. Yes. Back to *your* gray matter. When would be convenient?”

“Have you been up to the Confederate Soldiers Cemetery yet?”

“The one up on the hill to the west?”

“Yes. The one that received the bodies from Jeremiah’s ill-fated regiment.”

“No. Just learned of it, in fact. Hoped to head up there from here.”

“How about I accompany you and we can talk? I feel some irrational obligation to spend time up there every week.”

“That would be very kind and helpful of you. Yes. When you’re finished with lunch, then.”

“Have to have a piece of Amy Sue’s apple pie before I leave. I live by the fantasy that God Himself would strike me down if I failed to do that. It’s pure hogwash, of course, but a marvelous excuse to remain *the plump Reverend Carlton*.”

He chuckled. Amy Sue brought the pie as if on cue.

“You intrigue me, Reverend.”

“Likewise, *writer*. Why don’t you call me Justin or Justy so I can feel okay about calling you Marc?”

“It appears the Reverend business has come a long way since the days of Jeremiah.”

“In some ways. No one around here would think of calling me anything other than Reverend. If it weren’t for Emma – my wife – I’d probably forget my first name altogether.”

“May I ask about Harvard?”

“My father sent me – mostly for the prestige attached I think. He didn’t count on the changes it would induce.”

“Changes?”

“Education. Information. Options. So long as you only know one way you can’t consider alternatives. You just continue to believe in the same traditions to which you’ve been exposed. You can never really know if there are better or more reasonable ways. My four years of undergraduate school had me so confused I spent another two trying to sort it out through a Masters program and then it took three more years to figure out a plan for myself and this parish. Hence, a doctorate – D. D. – Doctor of Divinity. So, in a way, you see, it was all really just a comedy of errors - an unavoidable mistake.”

“D. D. – Disturbing Detour” I joked, hoping my attempt would be appreciated. It was. We shared another smile. He finished his pie and we left together.

“I walked over here, from the church” he said. “Thirty women in the basement making quilts. Individually I love them but I can’t stand them as a gaggle. Neither can I comprehend their skill.”

“Quilting?”

“No, although that *is* amazing. But, there will be a dozen different conversations going on at once around their quilting frame and each of them will know absolutely everything that was said around that circle during the entire afternoon.”

I smiled, then chuckled considering his serious reaction.

“We can take my car then, if you aren’t bothered at the prospect of soiling your reputation by being seen in it.”

“There are numerous downsides to being the Reverend Carlton but getting my reputation tarnished is not one of them. A minister in these parts is held to be above that sort of thing – fully unreasonable but it’s a perk I accept.”

At two thirty we turned off the highway onto the steep, gravel road that led up to the cemetery. I was amazed at how large a space it took to bury 937 young men. There were fifteen, small, white crosses from side to side across the front of the closely cropped grassy area and a seemingly endless number of rows behind them.

“Not the finest hour in the Carlton Family History,” Justin said closing the car door and hesitating as he surveyed the field.

“The story seems to be that the ghosts run rampant up here on occasion,” I said. “And then something about the young adolescent boys’ rite of passage.”

“I was here, myself, the night of my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. Been a tradition since soon after the war, I guess. Have no idea how it started now that I think about it.”

“Was your night eventful?”

“Ghosts, you mean? I couldn’t say. You see, being scared out of my gourd was not high on my list of priorities. My plan was specifically designed to avoid that issue. I made sure that I hadn’t slept during the 48 hours before I arrived up here. Then I immediately fell into a deep sleep and didn’t wake up ‘til morning. Those ghosts could have danced on my chest and I wouldn’t have known it.

“How clever. I can see how Harvard was in your future.”

“The lore is so powerful here that I’m sure many of the more suggestible boys *do* see things. There are trees with branches that wave ominously in the constant breeze up here. The shadows they cast and the movement could easily become the stuff of specters.”

“It sounds as though you don’t buy the ghost lore.”

“I’m a Christian minister. I believe in the continuation of life – in some form – after death. I like to think of Heaven as a place where up-tight and angry souls can finally mellow out. I imagine old Jeremiah, himself, is probably having second thoughts about some of the things he did. So, you see, I can’t discount the ghostly goings on entirely but I can maintain my faith at the one chance in a million level.”

“Do you have any alternative explanations for the sightings – other than overactive imaginations?”

“From time to time I’ve wondered if there has been some chicanery involved.”

“Intentionally misleading image making?” I asked not knowing just what words or terms to use in developing his meaning accurately.

“Yes. No idea how, why, or by whom. Not even sure why I believe that. It’s like an itch in the middle of my back – it’s there but just out of reach.”

“I have the idea somebody may be putting on a show for me,” I said. “The boys’ faces in the Inn windows appeared for me on cue – as Granny suggested they might – the first night I arrived. I suppose I’ll be expected up here for a similar presentation tonight.”

“You should be careful. Lots of folks around here are suspicious of outsiders – especially those sporting non-southern accents. Add to that your interest in an almost sacred event and you may be seen as a threat to some. Suspicion leads to presumption of guilt which allows righteous retribution even before there’s any proof of wrongdoing.”

I nodded, indicating that I understood, then extended it a bit.

“Ghost sightings have become big business in some places – haunted hotels make a killing just because they’re haunted. Could somebody be heading in that direction with all of this?”

“Perhaps. As deeply rooted as the protective instinct is around here it would probably have to be an outsider. Doubt if any locals would chance it. I might be wrong.”

We had been walking among the markers as we talked. From time to time Justin would stop and pat one of the crosses – each bearing a deceased’s name. I didn’t intrude, assuming it was a name of some significance for him.

Presently he stopped and pointed to a grove of trees at the far end of the huge lot.

“It’s from back there the images seem to originate. Boy after boy verifies it. Sometimes a single young soldier walking along. Sometimes several or all six together. They are usually crying or calling out. If the boy lets himself be seen the specters tend to move toward him but then disappear about half way though the cemetery. It’s often foggy up here. The surrounding trees and brush make it a natural cooling basin.”

“Any horseback sightings up here?”

“A few. They’re almost always down in the valley in front of the Inn, though. Up here they usually ride out of the woods and move North West along the side of the cemetery over there. They disappear after piercing the fence. They’re usually reported to be whooping and hollering when on horseback. Of all the images that have been

reported it's the one that makes the least sense. There were no horses in that regiment other than the big white one Jeremiah rode. And they carried their regimental flag not a Confederate battle flag."

For all his talk about not believing, he suddenly didn't sound that way. Had he been pulling my leg all along? Why? To what end?

"The sightings seem to be pretty well confined to here, the valley, and the Inn, then, is that right?" I asked.

"Seems that way. Yes."

The Reverend had gradually become serious.

"Where is the battle ground, itself? I assume that it's known where it took place."

"Yes. About twenty miles northwest of here. It hasn't been preserved in any way if you're wondering. No signs. Just one of history's quiet memories. It's a series of fields in the valley along Sandy Creek, pretty much just like it was the day of the battle. Hay and corn mostly. Lots of milk cows in that area so lots of meadows for grazing."

Before we turned and began the walk back toward the car Justin stood, transfixed, gazing deep into the woods as if expecting – hoping – to see something. For several minutes it seemed to consume his being. I didn't try to penetrate it with conversation. Eventually, he turned and we resumed our walk. He was silent for some time before he spoke.

"It's such a strange phenomenon. I was raised with the lore, you know. I can doubt it intellectually but when I'm here, where so many others swear they have seen the boys' ghosts, I find myself really wanting to believe – really wanting to see even the tiniest shred of evidence onto which I might hang my own belief. The goblins of our youth never entirely leave our subconscious beliefs, you know."

I allowed it to remain rhetorical and didn't attempt a response. He hadn't expected one.

As I dropped him off at the church he closed the door and then leaned back in through the open window with a final admonition.

"I think it would be well if you didn't venture back up there by yourself tonight. It's a feeling I got while we were there. Nothing rational about it. I'm not the one to accompany you if you choose to go. I have my relationship with my parishioners to consider."



It had not been a threat. It had been a vague warning. The goblins of his past had clearly reopened some old emotional attachments. I thanked him for his assistance and drove back to the Inn. Dinner would be served in less than an hour. I was not really hungry but hoped Jack might make it. I wanted to make his acquaintance.

As I left my car and started up the walk toward the Inn I stopped to look up at the third floor windows. I saw no faces but thought I detected movement in one of the rooms. It may have been my overactive imagination fired by Justin's recent change of mood. I went on inside and up to my rooms.

My plan was to tour the third floor immediately after dinner. It remained light until well after eight o'clock. I'd borrow a flashlight to search out the darker corners and should be able to examine everything there was to see.

I unlocked my door – and it was still locked – and put my briefcase and camera on the sofa. As I turned to go into the bedroom I saw a shadow flash across the doorway. My heart began pounding; my own childhood goblins began acting up. I hesitated and then moved to the door, looking and calling out.

“Hello! Maid? John? Amy?”

There was no answer but I heard a distinct creaking sound from the bathroom. I knew what it was – well I knew what it sounded like. The closet door in there made that sound. I looked around for something I could use as a club or weapon. The dresser had two small jewelry drawers on each side at the top. I removed one – carefully, silently – and hefted it. It would be better than nothing.

I entered the bathroom, first peaking inside and then moving quickly to pull back the shower curtain, the drawer at the ready. The shower was empty. I turned my attention to the closet door. It was standing open, just a crack. It was dark in that room since there were no windows. I wondered if I should turn on the light or would that just make me a better target for the goblin – whatever – whoever?

I needed to see so flipped the switch. I approached the door and – allowing myself one final sigh – pulled the door wide open with one swift movement. It was empty. How could that be? I had seen the shadow – about that there could be no doubt. I had heard the creak.

I moved the door gently to close it. It made the identical noise I had just heard. I tried it several more times. It *had* been that door.

I left the light on but went back into the bedroom. There were my open suitcase and my clothes in disarray on the bed. Someone or something had been repacking my suitcase. That I had interrupted the process was clear. That the packer had disappeared almost before my very eyes was also clear.

It was a quandary. People don't disappear and I didn't believe in ghosts. I rehung my shirts and pants. The intruder – that's a good name to use – the *intruder* had not yet gotten into the drawers. Again, I stowed the suitcase under the bed. Under the bed! Could it be?

I got down on my hands and knees and looked. No intruder there. It would be an uneasy sleep in that room that night. I took some solace in the fact that the intruder had made no effort to actually harm me. In fact, when faced with my presence, it chose to depart rather than confront or even just face me.

It seemed prudent to cancel my plans for a shower. I dabbed my face neck and the underarms of my shirt with after shave and ran a comb through my hair. With briefcase in tow I turned out the lights and headed for the lobby. It was still well before five so I would have time to just sit and collect my thoughts.

I took a seat in *my* corner. Presently, I realized I was maintaining a white knuckle grip on the briefcase. I set it on the floor beside me and consciously worked at relaxing my muscles – face to toes. I soon felt better.

It was fascinating that I had allowed myself to become so emotionally out of control. Being frightened really was not a part of my makeup. Interest. Curiosity. Inquisitiveness. It was with those traits that I typically approached the unknown. Perhaps my experiences with Justin up in the cemetery had set the stage – caught me off guard when I returned to my room.

In the window I saw the reflection of a man – Jack – standing somewhere behind me and looking in my direction. I wondered if he would approach me. To rise and confront him would seem out of place at that moment so I sat. I tried to glance over my shoulder but could not turn far enough to view him. When I again looked in the window, the reflection had disappeared. I assumed it had been a reflection.

I stood and stretched, turning around in my attempt to be nonchalant about it all. It came off like a teenager making his first attempt to put his arm around a girl at the movies. Jack was nowhere in sight.

Instead, there was an older woman – seventy, perhaps – standing, near the fireplace, hesitant in her demeanor. As our eyes caught each other's gaze she moved in my direction. I smiled and waited to see what was to develop.

"Mr. Miller?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I'm Marc Miller. May I be of some help?"

"You don't know me, of course, but you may have heard my name: Betty Carlton."

"Yes, mother of two fine young men the way I hear it.

"Can we sit?" she asked not acknowledging the positive spin I had attempted to put on her situation.

"Certainly."

I motioned for her to pick her spot. She chose one end of a couch and I took a chair facing her across a coffee table. She sighed and began.

"I'm sure you know more than that. Raising two boys ain't newsworthy in these parts. Birthin' the sons of apparitions is."

"I nodded and shrugged, indicating her assumption was correct."

"I lost both my boys in the service – one army, one marines. They died protectin' our freedom. I'm proud of 'em. With them havin' passed on, now, it's no reflection on them anymore – just on me. It's time I set it all straight."

I assumed she was working her way toward the story of her son's actual parentage, but patiently allowed her own time and manner.

"I was nineteen and worked here as a maid. I come from a good home but it was wanting in open affection, you know what I mean. There was no kissing or hugging or getting rocked to sleep at night. It was like durin' all my young years my yearnin' for those things built up inside me. I wondered if it was because I was just unlovable, you know?"

She dabbed at tears trying to escape the corners of her eyes. Even her long practiced smile could not hide her anguish.

"By the time I was fifteen I had found the boys were eager to pay me lots of attention. They liked to touch me and kiss me and it became like an addiction to me. I'm not justifying what I done all those years - Heaven knows, I'll rot in hell for it - but they'd bring me presents and was so gentle and loving and talked so sweet. They'd

come up the outside stairs here and I'd sneak 'em into the third floor. We'd use a vacant room for our private time. It was just looking and touching and kissing – I drew the line at anything more.

"But then there was these two handsome boys - Ethan and Richard. Ethan had blazing red hair and the most wonderful smile you'd ever seen. He said he loved me in a way the other boy's never had - I knew he meant it. And Richard, dark hair, brown eyes, built like a Greek God I guess you could say. Well, I started letting them do more than just touch and kiss and so on, and a few months later found I was pregnant.

"I couldn't know by which one, so I made up the story about the double rape by the two oldest ghost soldier boys. I knowed from readin' that one had been a red head and the other dark. That way, regardless of what color my baby's hair would be, it would fit the story."

She sobbed for a long moment, head bowed toward the restless hands in her lap, then continued.

"I'd sold my soul to the Devil either way, you see – having a illegitimate child *or* lyin' about the spirits. I figured that bein' spirit sired would make my baby one step above a bastard, you see, so that's the story I told. I was prepared to stick by it no matter what people said. I was so surprised how everybody seemed to believe me right from the start. All of a sudden I was like something special. People felt sorry for me and begun taking care of me. Nobody *never* blamed me."

She looked up squarely into my face.

"It's a terrible thing to have to birth bastard twins before you find any respect, Mr. Miller. I need to clear the names of William Anderson and Thomas Parker and I'm a hopin' you will do that in your book."

How was I supposed to respond?

"Of course I will, Betty. You've done a brave thing."

"Nothin' *brave* about it," she said, getting to her feet. I stood with her and she continued.

"I *have* done the *right* thing, though. Now I can go to hell with a clear conscious."

She wanted no more conversation. She turned and left, walking more erect and more decisively, it seemed to me, than before. I hoped she had found the self-respect that she had spent her lifetime seeking. I hoped her God was more forgiving than she

expected.

I picked up my case and walked toward the dining area arriving just as the meal was being served. Jack was not there. In fact virtually no one was there. I had forgotten the others would have left. The older couple was sitting where they had sat the night before and seemed pleased to see me. We exchanged pleasantries and began exchanging dishes back and forth across the table.

Several dozen, dreary, grandchild, anecdotes later, dinner mercifully came to an end. I went in search of John.



## CHAPTER SIX

### The Look-alikes

After dinner I found both Jan and John at the front desk.

“This a convenient time for me to take a peek upstairs?” I asked quietly in case hidden ears were listening.

John nodded and looked at Jan. It seemed clear it was not something either really wanted to undertake but John lifted the pass-through and joined me. He kissed Jan back across the desk and we were on our way. I had noticed earlier that the ceiling opening leading up to the third floor from the second had been closed, plastered and painted. It looked like a stairway to nowhere.

John led me across the back porch and into a general use anteroom. We took a narrow stairway from there. That back entrance to the third floor had been partially sealed like the one in front. There was a lift up trap door cut into it with two hasps and two hanging padlocks. John unlocked them – each requiring a different key. He pushed the door up and out of the way. We entered the area, dimly lit by a small window to the rear.

With flashlight in hand, John pointed down the hall toward the front of the building and I led the way. At the intersection with the front hall I began taking note of the numbers on the doors. The six with which I was particularly interested were several doors to our right. I looked at John. He motioned me on, which suggested it was my party and he'd follow my lead.

I turned the handle on the first and pushed it open. It was as I had been told to expect, spotless except for the window. It had a circular spot rubbed clean at head height. I would have to refer back to my original pictures of the windows to see if that was the location of the faces I had photographed. The light was filtered through the grime of the windows and cast an eerie presence into the room. The bed was fitted with sheets and comforter but remained unmade as if having been recently slept in. I felt the sheets wondering if ghosts left telltale heat behind. Either they didn't or any earlier occupant was too long gone. I lifted the hat from the pillow and smelled it. Musty but not the smell of sweat. It was small like one made for a boy. I began taking pictures. I examined the hall-side wall looking for what I wasn't sure. Maybe holes for projectors. I

had nothing more specific in mind.

I opened the closet door. John handed me his flashlight. I searched the tiny space. The 'maid' had not taken the care in there that she had in the room itself. It was infested with cobwebs, and dust lay a quarter of an inch thick. Other than that it was empty. I lifted the mattress on the bed. Nothing. I was ready to move on to the next room.

"I'd like to borrow the hat if that's alright."

John remained silent, shrugging his shoulders and nodding. I opened my case and put it inside. We entered the second room.

The window was open. I looked at John. That moved him to speak.

"An open window is a first."

He was intrigued enough to follow me and watch as I examined it. I slid it up and down with some effort deciding to leave it closed as a storm seemed to be brewing to the west. There were lightning flashes in the distance and the day began growing dark before its time.

The room presented the same general appearance as the first. Again I examined the cap. It was a larger size. The regimental crest had been sewn onto the front. The precision of the stitches suggested it had been machine sewn. It made me wonder. I commandeered that hat as well. I took more pictures and found the closet in the same, dusty, untidy, condition. The closets of the two rooms were back to back against the shared wall, making a small offset toward the front of each room. The wash stand and a chair were set in place in those alcoves. Clean towels and washcloths were hanging from the rack on the side of the stand. They were not of the same thick, luxurious, vintage as the ones in my room.

The storm grew closer. John seemed edgy. We moved on to the third room. It was one of the rooms from which a face had appeared to me the day I was checking in. The clear spot on that window was in the lower pane rather the upper as had been the case in the other rooms. I pulled the chair to a spot in front of the window and took a seat. The cleared spot was positioned to allow a clear view of the parking lot. I replaced the chair, took some pictures and we moved out into the hall.

The door on the room we had just previously examined was open. I was sure I had closed it. I went back to check. The window I had closed had been reopened and



a significant breeze was blowing into the room and out into the hall. I re-closed the window, that time securing the old brass, slide-lock on the top of the lower section. As I turned back toward the door I saw that the bed was made. John had remained just outside in the hall. I pointed at the bed. He nodded and shrugged, looking nervously up and down the hall. I closed the door and we moved on toward room number four.

As we passed the third room I heard noise coming from inside. My curiosity by that time far outweighed my fear. I opened the door, slowly and then went inside. Water had been poured from the large pitcher into the bowl on the wash stand. The washcloth and towel were damp and had been laid on the top of the stand as if used. Somebody - or something - was playing with me. I snapped a few pictures and then left for the fourth room.

Again I felt the bed.

“My God! John. Feel this,” I said.

The bed was warm. There was still an indentation in the pillow where a warm head had rested. The hall door closed behind us. It startled us both. The lightning flashed and the old window rattled against the rising wind outside. John continued in silence. It had grown considerably darker since we had arrived on the floor. I took pictures. I examined the inside of the closet hoping to find – I didn’t know what. I took several pictures in there as well.

I turned the knob on the hall door and it opened as easily as it had when we entered. At least our playful adversary wasn’t attempting to trap us up there. The sixth and final room was in few ways different from the others. Its bed was cool and unmade. There was water in the pitcher but not in the bowl. The towel and washcloth hung in place, dry.

“I’d like to take a quick look into just one of the other rooms,” I said.

John motioned to the room north of the one we had just examined. I nodded and opened the door. It was dusty and web infested. The bed had a torn, bare, mattress and the dust covered pitcher was sitting in the bowl. The windows were evenly coated in grime producing what, under other circumstances, would have been considered a beautiful, colorful display as the lightning flashed and cast momentary shadows of moving branches from the huge old oak trees out front. I captured several views with my camera. I looked inside the closet. There was a small cardboard box on the shelf

not nearly as dusty as the shelf itself. I took it down and examined it. It looked to be ten by ten by twenty inches and was empty. The only marking was the stenciled word 'LINENS'. I replaced it and closed the closet door noting to myself it was relatively new.

I took one final look around and snapped a few more pictures. Something seemed different but I couldn't place it. Same floor plan, bed, wash stand and chair. Still it was something. Perhaps the photos would help. I nodded to John signaling I was done. We walked back down the hall passing an ornate double door on the opposite wall.

"To the ballroom?" I asked.

John nodded.

I stopped and tried the knob hoping for a quick look inside. It was locked.

"Sorry. Don't have a key with me," John said. "In fact, I'd have to search hard and long to find one."

We continued to the trap door. It had been closed - fallen shut in the breeze from the open window I figured. John bent down to open it. It wouldn't open. I added my assistance but still it would not budge.

"It appears to have been locked from below," John said.

He took out his cell phone and placed a call.

"Amy. The trapdoor seems to have been closed and locked. Find Hank. He has another set of keys. ... No, we're fine. Nothing out of the ordinary."

He put the phone away.

"No reason to cause her any further alarm," he said unnecessarily explaining his marginally truthful comment to her. "She really had a bad feeling about us coming up here. Jan gets feelings and they are often right."

I nodded casting the beam from the flashlight here and there. I stooped down to examine something on the floor in the area between the trap door and the outside wall.

"Those look like footprints in the dust to you?" I asked.

John looked with interest.

"Sure do. Not ours. We weren't back there. Seem fairly fresh, though I guess there's no way of telling how long they may have been there. Don't have a dust depository ratio in mind."

It had come close to an attempt at humor. I followed the tracks to the back wall

where they stopped, toes headed right into the wall. I shivered, standing there examining the wall with the flashlight. I poked at the wall fully expecting my hand to move right through it. Well, not fully expecting it maybe, though I had acted in that way.

I returned to John who had taken a seat on the floor, back against the wall. I joined him and turned off the flashlight to conserve the battery.

“I’m getting the idea that this sojourn is considerably different from your past experiences up here,” I said, assuming the accuracy of my previous information.

“Oh, yes! No shenanigans before. This trip has been just plain scary and I don’t mind admitting it. Opening windows and doors, pouring water, warm beds, disappearing footprints and now a locked trap door. It’s very likely my last trip up here.”

“Do I hear you buying into the ghost theory?”

“You hear me buying into the scared out of my wits theory. I have no reason to come up here so why come up here? It’s going to be that simple from now on. You’re welcome to snoop anytime you want to but it won’t be with me.”

I tried to change the subject.

“What do you know for sure about Jack Davis?” I asked leaving it open-ended.

“Know about him? Well, been here going on two months. Came in to oversee some part of the bridge construction. Pays his bill weekly by credit card. Man of few words. Preferred one of the first floor suites even though they are smaller.”

“You know for a fact he’s connected with the bridge project?”

“I suppose not, when you phrase it that way. Why are you so interested in Jack?”

“I asked about him up at the bridge site this morning and the flagman had never heard of him – or so he said at least.”

“Strange. Why would he be sticking around a place like this if he didn’t have some business to be here?”

“A good question,” I said. “I figure he wouldn’t be – unless he *did* have some business here. I just can’t figure what that might be.”

John’s phone rang. It was Jan. Hank was on his way with the keys.

“Poor Jan’s frightened out of her skull down there,” he reported. “I’m afraid I’m not doing much better up here.”

“Well, I’ve never known of ghosts leaving warmth behind – in beds or otherwise. I am assuming we have a warm blooded, heart pumping, air breathing creature trying to

send me packing. You've gone above and beyond for me. I appreciate that and won't put you through anything else."

There was a knock from below and we heard Hank's muffled voice. Get these locks off in a minute. Not locked, just hung through the hasps. You two okay?"

"We're fine," John called back.

The trap door was soon opened and we made our way down the back steps to the anteroom. Hank was openly bothered and wasn't one to keep his feelings to himself.

"You shouldn't be up there. Them ghosts have proved themselves to be unfriendly – deadly, even. Shouldn't be up there!"

He shook his head. John apparently had a response ready.

"Marc noticed that one of the windows had come open – apparently from the vibrations from the thunder and such. Like you said, I didn't want to venture up there by myself so Marc offered to come along. Couldn't have rain pouring in, you understand."

Then, in what seemed to be a strange aside, John went on to the old man.

"I really think Marc wanted to snoop around up there anyway."

It was as if he were trying to get me into trouble with the locals. Maybe it had just been a piece of nervous conversation.

Hank looked each of us directly in the face. He wouldn't question the story but wasn't finished.

"Well, I'm telling you. It ain't no place for you to be. Jan's too young to be a widow lady. Don't know if you're hitched, Marc but same for your wife if'n ya are. The fact they locked ya in up there should speak fer itself."

I wasn't sure just what he had intended – other than to lay more fright on us. Why would the spirits have locked us into a place they didn't want us to be in the first place? It made little sense.

"We can keep this just among the three of us, can't we?" John asked Hank.

"Nobody'll hear it from me. Ain't no reason to get folks all scared 'bout riled up spirits. No reason."

He shuffled on out the back door shaking his head and mumbling as he went. I accompanied John back to the front desk. Amy greeted him with what seemed to be the hug of all hugs. She had been beside herself. After what seemed an appropriate

length of time for them to hold their connubial clutch, I interrupted.

“Are there architectural drawings – blueprints – available of this place?”

John nodded.

“We have two rolls of plans in two cardboard tubes – one for the original section, where your room is, and one for this newer section over here. I think they’re at the back of the closet in the office.”

I followed him into the office. Amy remained at the desk.

“You have more experience than I do in matters such as this,” John said as he worked his way toward the back of the closet. “What’s your take on it?”

“I’m a skeptic when it comes to ghosts so my take will be biased. I’d bet on one of two explanations. One, somebody is trying to drum up a reputation to draw ghost enthusiasts to this area. It could be an economic boon, for certain. Fill this place of yours during the week all year long as well as on summer weekends. And, who could spread the word better than a writer? Or, two, someone wants to make sure *nobody* spends time on the third floor. The second makes the least sense but it’s the one I’m drawn to.”

“But why? It’s just a huge big old musty empty space.”

“I have no answer but I sure would like to snoop around up there some more.”

“You’re just plain crazy!” John said clearly not understanding my position.

“There’s probably nothing plain about my craziness. It has come upon me in a thoughtful manner.”

I thought it would be seen as humorous. It wasn’t

“Well, I’d like to get it settled, I can tell you that,” John said. “Tell you what I’ll do. I’ll give you the keys to the two padlocks but I don’t want to know anything about what you’re doing until you can show us what’s going on. I’ll even try to find the keys to the ballroom.”

“I can live with that. And, after all, our trial run this evening has taught us one important thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Not to leave the padlocks hanging unlocked on the open trapdoor.”

Again, John clearly saw no humor in it. I thought it was worth a chuckle though I muffled it into the end of my fist out of deference to him.

“Here they are,” John said at last.

He handed the tubes out to me one at a time.

“Take them along with you. Not sure what you’re looking for. Like I said, I really don’t want to know.”

He closed the closet door.

“The last deaths up there on three were when?”

“1964”

“Any other sighting-related deaths or accidents that you know of in more recent years?”

“None that I can recall.”

Amy overhead the question and answer as we left the office.

“This is probably totally unrelated, but remember that Jerry guy. He stayed up there in Marc’s suite several months ago and just left without checking out.”

John nodded and added: “He had lots of questions about the ghosts around here, also. He was here for, what, Amy, about a week – ten days?”

“Nine days,” she said. “Then one morning when John went in to tidy up his rooms, he and all of his things were gone. Didn’t look like the bed had been slept in. Stuffed us for two days board and room.”

“Did you report it to the authorities?”

“John called Sheriff Chance and he came out and filled in a missing person report. Not sure what happened after that. He never got back to us. If he’d have found him I’m sure he would have let us know so we could have pursued the money the man owed us.”

“How did he pay?”

“Credit card, I’m quite sure,” Amy said. “Is it important? I can check the receipts. We still do it the old fashioned hand written, pressure impression way out here.”

“I am curious since he was also interested in the ghosts and disappeared from the suite I’m presently occupying.”

“Won’t take but a minute. Receipts all get filed every night right here in these shoeboxes. We’re strictly low tech, like I said.

A few minutes later she had the receipt in hand and put it on the desk.

“Jerry Dobson – that’s right - from Grant, Ohio,” she said beginning to remember

the details.

“Really?” John said as if surprised. He donned his glasses and picked up the slip of paper.

“Grant, Ohio. Isn’t that where Davis is from?”

“Let me check. I’m sure he said Ohio. . . . You’re right. Grant, Ohio.”

“Several interesting coincidences there,” I pointed out, though not really needing to. Same city and state, *and* same initials.”

“And it doesn’t stop there,” Amy said, holding up a receipt from Davis for side by side comparison. “Check out the card numbers.”

They were identical. J. D. and J. D. from Grant, Ohio using the same credit card.

“You were able to run them both without a problem, I assume,” I said, more or less thinking out loud.

“That’s right,” John said, pocketing his glasses. “We even considered running Jerry’s card to get paid for his last two days here but without his signature it really wouldn’t have been cricket. We didn’t.”

“There’s no doubt in your minds that the two J. D.s are different people?”

They looked at each other and immediately shook their heads.

“No. There’s no way that Jack could be Jerry,” Amy said.

“Different body types entirely,” John added. “Should we inform Sheriff Chance?”

“Let’s wait just a bit longer. I’d like to speak with Davis first. I’ve been trying to catch him but he’s elusive. It’s like he wants to keep tabs on me but really doesn’t want to meet me.”

I raised the pass through and stepped to the outside. Three teenage boys approached the desk. I stepped back out of the way to contemplate my next step. It was going on 8:30. My attention was drawn to the three faces. I moved to a nearby chair and took a seat. I was close enough to hear. Apparently they were the boys who assisted Hank on the weekends and they had dropped by for their pay checks.

I took the pictures from my briefcase. There they stood: Billy Anderson, Tommy Parker and David Roland – the three oldest boys from the *C-Patrol*.

There was friendly conversation between them and the owners. Lot’s of smiles and laughter. I had to meet them so stowed the pictures and went back to the desk. John introduced me.

“Boys, like ya to meet a friend a ours, Marc Miller. He’s a writer. Spending’ some time with us here this week.”

“Hi. Things jumping around here on a week day evening are they?”

“Like we wish,” the tallest one said.

“I heard about you,” another offered. “Writin’ about our cowardly ancestors, ain’t ya?”

“That depends on who your ancestors were and whether or not they were actually cowardly.”

“Good response!” the third boy said, vigorously high fiveing the other two. I started to raise my hand into the mix but thought better of it.

“Got a few minutes to chat?” I asked, taking a twenty from my wallet and placing it on the counter.”

“I’d say about twenty minutes, the way it looks,” the first boy replied with a broad smile, playfully snatching the bill from where it lay as the other two nodded their agreement.”

We moved to the area I had come to call my own, in the corner by the northwest windows.

“I need names,” I said.

They introduced themselves – Don, Junior and Specks.

I looked at Specks.

“Your nickname confuses me. You’re not wearing glasses.”

“Picked it up a few years before I picked up my contacts.”

I nodded. “And Junior?”

“Wilton. Wouldn’t you rather be Junior than Wilton?”

I shrugged and nodded. That had to be his call.

“So, shoot,” Donny said, “You’re on the clock.”

“First let me do some guessing about your ancestry. I’m going to say that you, Donny, have a good deal of Anderson in your blood.”

“How’d you do that. Ya. I’m a Anderson.”

He looked at his companions. Clearly, I had caught their attention.

“And Junior, how about some Parker blood?”

“Right on. You’re *very* good, Sir.”



"How about me?" Specks asked eager to see if my luck would last.

"Roland."

"You been checkin' up on us, right?"

"Actually, I've been comparing your good looking faces with some pictures I found of those ancestors you mentioned. Have you never seen their pictures – the boys from *C-Patrol*?"

They shrugged and shook their heads as if not fully understanding what I had asked.

"Would you like to see their pictures?"

"Sure."

"Ya."

"Of course,"

Came a trio of answers.

I removed the pictures I had obtained from Granny and sorted out the three I needed, placing them on the coffee table that sat between the boys and me.

"Looky there, guys," Junior said pointing.

The three looked dumbfounded. They each seemed more interested in the pictures of the other two than in their own.

"You say these are not really us?"

"I'm told on good authority they are three of the boys from *C-Patrol*."

"No kiddin'?"

"That's what I'm told. Let me show you three more and see if they ring any bells for you."

I removed the other three and placed them directly above the others. The boys leaned forward.

"It's Duke, Jake and Spencer," Don said without hesitation.

The other two nodded.

"May not be Spencer for long," Specks said.

"They broke into laughter enjoying some private joke."

"What? I'm missing something here."

I looked from face to face. Don explained.

"Today's Spencie's thirteenth birthday. He has to survive the night up on the

ridge – at the cemetery where the soldiers are buried. It's always the scariest night of a guy's life around here. He's pretty flighty to begin with. May just become the first not to make it."

Again they laughed.

"Your reaction has me confused, guys. Is it really scary or is it humorous?"

They became immediately serious.

"Oh, it's scary alright. Laughed outta nervousness for Spencie, I s'pose. Hain't been a set a dry thirteen year old's jeans come off that hill in *my* life time, I can tell you that," Junior said. "It's just that once you go through it, it all sort of fades somehow. Nothin' you'd never want to repeat but not clear how really bad it must a been."

"So tonight's Spencer's turn is it? I assume you have your ways of helping him prepare."

Again they laughed.

"Like making ghost sounds outside his window at night all week, you mean?"

"You guys are vicious," I said smiling.

"It's like our sacred duty, you could say. It was done to us and . . . well . . . you see how it goes."

"Yes, I think I do. Do the older guys go up and add a few ghostly effects to make a kid's experience more memorable?"

"What?"

There I went talking like a Yankee writer, again. I rephrased my question.

"Do you go and try to scare the piss out of the kid the night he stays up there?"

"Oh, no."

It was a fully serious response from the three of them in unison. They looked at each other and then at me, shaking their heads. I believed them.

"Do you speak about what you saw the night you were up there?"

"You mean is it allowed?" Donny asked.

"Yes. I suppose that's what I meant."

"No rule says ya can't. If nothin' happened, ya don't want to admit it so ya don't say nothin' at all. If something did happen it's hard to know if ya should say about it or not. Ya don't want the other guys to think you're blowin' wind – getting' all puffy – about it, ya know."

"I'm not sure I understand – blowin' wind?" I said.

"Lyin', tellin' a whopper!"

"Yes. I see. So, do any of you have a story to share either here together or off in a corner with me privately?"

They looked at each other and Specks spoke.

"Donny's the only one of us that saw anything. He told us because we're his best friends. It ain't known about beyond us."

"Donny. Will you share it with me? I promise not to ever reveal my source without your permission." [Permission later granted and on file.]

The boy moved uneasily and his face became flushed. His breathing rate increased if only slightly. He nodded.

Junior patted his friend's knee. This was clearly no minor undertaking.

"It was just one boy – probably fourteen or so. He come walkin' outta the fog in my direction – slowly like – not really staggering but swervy, like he didn't know where to go. I heard him cryin' before I could see his face. He had a bandage around his head and it was bloody. His jacket was unbuttoned and his long, white, shirttail was outta his pants. His pants was ripped all the way up one leg and it was bloody, too. He was draggin a rifle along – had the end of the barrel in his right hand and was just draggin' it behind him. He kept callin' out – 'Momma! Momma! Where are you'? It was like I could see through him – not always but sometimes. I was so scared that I stood up to run but all I could do was just stand there like I was froze to the ground. He saw me and started toward me. I thought I was dead. He put his left arm out toward me and then about twenty feet away he just disappeared.

"I'm not ashamed to say I was cryin', too, by that time. I wanted to get the hell out of there but it wasn't even three yet so I sat back down against the tree and like took hold of myself with my arms crossed over my chest."

He demonstrated. He looked like tears might flow.

"Tell him the part about in the morning," Junior urged.

"Ya. Funny. At day break I came down off the ridge and Specks and Junior were there waitin' for me just like we planned. Tell him what *you* guys saw."

Specks, clearly emotionally involved in the story, stood up to continue the story.

"Donny's pants leg was split clean from the bottom up to his belt (he

demonstrated) and his forehead was bleeding. Me and Junior thought they'd done got him good. For a second I wondered if maybe they'd killed him and what we was seein' was his ghost. Then he came and grabbed us – hugged us – and I knowed from feelin' it weren't no ghost."

"I still don't have any idea how all that happened. I'm sure I didn't go to sleep. I wasn't about to let another ghost sneak up on me. I still dream about it sometimes."

"What about the wound on your forehead?" I asked.

"Darndest thing! When we washed the blood away, we couldn't find nothin' – no cut, not even a bruise," Donny reported clearly still puzzled.

"Wow?" I said, shifting positions in the chair, my flesh crawling from his vivid description.

"Don't take this the wrong way, please," I said, looking between Junior and Specks, "but do you two guys believe Donny?"

"No doubt in our minds about it, Sir. Donny's always been the truthful kind. His uncle is the Reverend in these parts. He's a God fearin' boy. It was just lucky me and Specks each already had our nights up there or I don't know if either one of us would a gone through with it," Junior admitted.

"Do other boys experience things like that – the ripped pants and blood and such?"

They looked at one another and shrugged.

"Can't say," Junior answered. "Like I said, a guy seldom speaks about *his night*. If it wasn't for the rip and blood I doubt if Donny'd have said anything to us."

Donny nodded, indicating that Junior's assessment had been accurate.

"Let me change the subject. I suppose I have a couple of minutes left on the clock," I said. "Have you had your pictures taken recently?"

"Yearbook pictures," Donny said, looking at the others.

"And that guy at the carnival up in Banks early in the summer – when was that?"

"June fourteenth – it was flag day, my parents wedding anniversary," Junior said.

"What kind of pictures are you speaking about?" I asked.

Specks answered first.

"This guy was just around the midway taking pictures of everybody. Donny thought he'd been following us so I thought the best thing to do was turn around and ask

him. He admitted that he had been. He said he needed some photographs for a magazine he worked for and liked the look the three of us had. So we stood there and let him snap away.”

“Do you happen to know if – what did you say their names were – Duke, Jake and Spencer – if they also had their photos taken up there that day?”

“Don’t know but I can find out in about fifteen seconds,” Specks offered.

“I’ll call Duke on his cell.”

Junior handed his phone to his friend who was soon poking the buttons. Donny explained.

“We go together on the phone bill. We trade off who gets to carry it. Today’s Junior’s day.”

They were nice lads. I felt I could trust them. I liked them, even. While Specks spoke on the phone, I made small talk.

“So are there enough beautiful girls to go around for a trio of handsome young men like yourselves?”

Junior’s ears got red and Donny looked at his hands then back up at me and spoke.

“Fifteen teenagers in town. Seven guys and eight girls. Now with Spence turning thirteen I guess it’ll be even guys and girls.”

“You guys each got a special girl?”

I wondered if I might have crossed the line from small talk to nosy. Apparently not. Donny continued as the spokesman.

“Junior goes with Mary Beth and I go with Ellen Kay. Specks is still a bachelor but Jennie would love to have him if he’d just get up the guts to ask her. He’s a little backward when it comes to romantic things.”

Specks had the report.

“Ya. Funny. That same guy took all their pictures that same day.”

“That guy. Do you know him?”

“No. Figured he was from out of town, like on assignment here from his magazine.”

“Do you know Jack Davis who’s staying here – beard, blue shirts, probably Ohio plates?”

“Yes, Sir. Great tipper.”

“Was he the guy with the camera?”

“No. Looked nothing like him.”

I nodded and changed the subject as I peeled off two more twenties.

“You work here weekends with Hank I understand.”

“Ya,” Donny said. “Hank’s great. It’s hard work. Lucky to have the job. Not much for guys our age to do around here. Gotta be twenty four and married to go to work for Jesse.”

“Why that age, I wonder?”

“No idea. Maybe cause by then a guy has a family to take care of – wife, kids, you know – and old Jesse wants to save the work for those who needs it most.”

“I’m sure you have heard the stories about the boys’ faces appearing in the third floor windows here at the Inn.”

They nodded but offered no information.

“Any of you ever seen the faces?”

There was an uneasy silence among them. Specks finally spoke to my question.

“You have to understand that around here it’s all a spiritual – religious – sort a thing: the ghosts and sightings and like that. Most of us believes it’s just for us who has roots here to know about and not for outsiders. The faces in the windows are a pretty big part of that, I guess ya could say. It’s not something we talk about. The three of us ain’t even never talked among us about what we’ve seen or not seen up there. I’m sure we all look, I don’t mean we ain’t fascinated by it. But it’s not to be spoke of.”

“I won’t press you anymore, then. I can’t tell you what a big help you’ve been. I got these two more twenties here and they’re yours if I can just snap a few pictures of my own.”

“Snap away, right guys,” Donny said, eyeing the bills and smiling his endearing, broad, smile.

The others nodded and I took several dozen quick shots from lots of angles – standing, sitting, full length, busts.

“Oh, I do have one final question. What are the hours Spencer will be required to stay up there tonight”

“Sundown to sunrise. He’s probably already up there, poor kid,” Donny explained

compassionately.

I nodded.

“Thank you gentleman,” I said at last. “Go find those young ladies you spoke of.”

“Oh. That’s certainly our plan, Sir,” Donny said.

In turn, they each offered me their hand to shake and they were soon pushing and shoving their way toward the front door. I wondered about Donny’s story. His friends certainly seemed to have bought it. I turned my swivel rocker and looked out into the darkness to collect my thoughts and organize my notes.

I blinked and shook my head, getting to my feet. Twenty yards away from the building there was a filmy apparition – a young lad dressed in confederate gray, dragging a rifle and wandering this way and that. I went to the window using my hands to shield the glare from the lights above me. The image was gone. So was my composure.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **When a Foot is Not a Foot!**

Considering the happenings in and out of my suite there at the Inn, I figured I would be in no more danger up on the cemetery ridge than there in my bed. I installed new batteries and a fresh card into my camera, adjusted it for night photography, and headed for my car, first dropping the two yet unexamined tubes off at the desk for safe keeping.

As much as I hated to admit it, approaching my car had become a spine prickling event. I noticed the red SUV parked just a few spaces away – the one I had seen earlier in Banks. I took a short, casual, detour to give it a once over. It was impossible to look inside through the smoked glass windows. I did notice one interesting aspect on the outside – Ohio license plates. It belonged to Jack Davis.

I moved on to my car, also red though in the darkness neither looked attractive. I put my briefcase in the trunk and the camera on the front seat beside me. I was soon on my way down the exit road. I paused for a moment at the point where Hank's overgrown lane entered the road. I thought I saw flashing lights well up the hill from where I sat. Hikers? Maybe even Donny and Junior searching for a private spot to be alone with their girlfriends. There was neither time nor reason to investigate so I moved on to my immediate destination – the foot of hill below the cemetery.

Again, I backed into a spot off the road so my car would not be seen and yet would be ready for a quick getaway should that become necessary. I didn't want to disturb young Spencer nor did I want him to know of my presence. I was sure that would violate one of the unwritten laws that governed a young man's night in the cemetery. I made my way on foot off to the right of the road so I would enter the burial lot from the northwest corner. As I recalled there was a stand of trees there. I would remain secluded among them.

There was a sturdy old oak tree near the front of the grove. I fantasized that it had been waiting there for a hundred years just to support my back that night. From my spot in the shadows I had a clear view of the cemetery. The moon was bright when it managed to peak out from among the clouds but that happened infrequently. Bank after bank of dark, swirling, clouds moved rapidly overhead, the remnants of the thunder



storm earlier in the evening. The air was heavy with humidity and the damp ground had cooled under the influence of the rain. I smiled, sitting there in the grass thinking that by daybreak *my pants* would be wet, though legitimately so.

By anyone's definition, it was an eerie setting – the billowing clouds, varying in thickness and illuminated from above; the branches swaying unevenly in the gusty wind; and the rapidly shifting, moon-cast shadows. When those conditions chased each other in just the right way, the small, white crosses seemed to leap from place to place. I felt Spencer's fear, but I owned several advantages not the least of which was my knowledge of the pride – come morning – that he would feel for the rest of his life.

Something snapped in the grass behind me. Some small, nocturnal, woodland creature, I told myself, though I did turn to investigate. Nothing. Something fell to the ground and lit several feet to my left. An acorn, I told myself. It was worth a lingering glance.

I was glad I had worn a jacket and hoped Spencer had, too. I wondered where he was. I could see no sign of him. I envisaged him cowering in a clump of bushes, praying for morning to arrive ahead of schedule. The other boys had not imbued his description with the stuff of a hero.

Had I spoken too soon I asked myself, sitting up straight and craning my neck?

The figure of a youngster, presumably a boy, emerged from the other side of the cemetery far to my left. I held my camera at the ready. I snapped a picture not certain how effective my new and very expensive night vision lens might be. The figure wore a jacket and a hat with a bill in front. It was an ageless image silhouetted there in the darkness. It could have been Spencer from today. It could have been an image out of the past.

As it began moving – slowly – out among the crosses, I noticed fog had begun to settle onto the hill top. I was upset at the likelihood that might soon ruin my opportunity for pictures. It began at the edges of the huge open space, near the trees and bushes that surrounded the area. A normal phenomenon I told myself. The foliage had cooled down sooner than the ground and precipitated the humidity from the warm air into droplets of fog around the periphery. A lesser, ground hugging, version was creeping – rolling – along behind the lone, young, figure. I listened intently to determine if the boy was speaking or crying or whatever. I heard nothing.

It was after it had come to within thirty yards of me that I first noticed it was dragging something behind it – a rifle, a sword, a stick – I could not tell. It certainly could have been the same image I had witnessed less than an hour before back at the Inn. It could also have been the image from Donny’s story.

The figure stopped in the center of the cemetery and turned south – walking away from me, slowly, but directly toward the grove of trees at the far end – the grove notorious as the spawning ground of apparitions. I took picture after picture.

If it were Spencer, he was showing incredible bravery, fully unlike the expectation I had been given. But what if it were a specter – perhaps the one I had just seen wandering at the Inn. Was it finally nearing home, hoping to soon find its comrades, its friends, its brothers?

Even if a specter, nothing required it to be Confederate. What if it were the spirit of a fallen Yankee – a drummer boy who had perhaps been caught in crossfire. Was he bravely walking to meet the enemy – to take the fight to those who had dared try to break apart his land? Would he raise his saber and charge the galloping *C-Patrol* if it were to appear out of the mist?

The writer in me would not be contained. Neither would the wave after wave of goose bumps rippling along my flesh.

Two thirds of the way through the sea of crosses the figure stopped and raised its weapon, pointing it high and toward the front. The call that cut the night air was loud, distinct and determined.

“Ho-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o.”

It was a battle cry – falsetto in pitch – from one who knew something about battle cries. The figure began moving south again, the weapon held high and steady. The mournful cry was repeated dauntlessly, again and again.

The moments that followed came as close to making a believer out of me as had anything I’d ever experienced. The woods in the distance began to glow – at first a mere crystal clear shimmer easily mistaken for the light of the moon reflecting against the fog and moist leaves and tall grass. The moon, however, was obscured in a thick blanket of dark clouds. The area grew dim. The shadows melted into the darkness. The figure stopped.

The light in the trees grew brighter and the fog thicker. Then, without fanfare –

no bugler to announce their imminent arrival – galloped six, grey clad, horsemen. They moved out of the woods from my left and crossed the northern end of the cemetery diagonally, through the fence, and into the trees along the eastern boundary to my right. The lone, young, figure turned to follow, charging at a full run, screaming after them but was quickly outdistanced.

I had shot one frame after another, moving without plan from place to place. The young figure dropped to his knees and then sat back on his legs. I could hear his sobs. I wanted to rush to him and console him. I dared not. If that figure were Spencer, I had been privy to the most heroic act I had ever witnessed.

I needed to have focused on the riders but they were gone so soon. I tried to recreate in my mind the amount of time the entire sequence had taken. I counted off the seconds as I pointed to the progression of the horseman. They had fully disappeared by the time I heard myself saying, ‘ten one thousand’. Ten seconds that might change my life.

Earlier, I had been taken by the similarities in the various accounts of the galloping *C-Patrol*. They came from the left and rode toward the right. There was always the diagonal path. The flag was always flying – even at night. Fog had always been present. The specters were consistent, I’d give them that.

The figure eventually stood and walked back to the area from which it had come. The weapon – stick or whatever – was left behind. But was the show over for the night? I didn’t know. Did he?”

I decided it would be well if I moved closer to what I assumed by then was Spencer – so I could keep a clandestine eye on him. I wasn’t sure what prompted that feeling. Disconcerting memories of dealing with my own goblins, perhaps. Maybe it was I who wanted someone to be close to me.

I made my way quietly and slowly through the trees and behind the underbrush toward the spot where he had reentered the stand of trees near the top of the road. I didn’t see him and did not want to reveal myself. I took a seat on the ground. I would at least be close enough to hear in case he called out.

I was positioned so I could continue to view the entire cemetery. The low, dense, fog had filled the field consuming the lower half of the crosses. They looked to be floating on the quiet foam of some shimmering ocean. Before midnight the area was

completely entombed in sheets of thick, dripping, mist. Had more apparitions appeared neither Spencer nor I would have been able to see them. I sat out the night just the same.

When dawn broke and nature's light began to spread across the area I figured Spencer's rite of passage had been duly completed. I stood and walked openly around the area looking for the lad thinking he might have fallen asleep. He was nowhere to be found. Perhaps he had skedaddled at dawn's first light; perhaps sooner, although from what I had witnessed I didn't believe that.

I walked one final time around the spot into which I had been so sure the boy had entered. I had heard the saying, "My goose bumps had goose bumps," but not until that moment did I understand the term at the deepest emotional level. There, on the ground, neatly folded, was a complete confederate uniform – coat, trousers, shirt, socks and boots. I picked up the hat, which lay on top. It bore the logo of Carlton's Regiment. I held up the coat and pants – small, clearly hand made for a boy.

I looked around – no idea why – not sure what I might have expected to see. Determining that I was alone did nothing to quell the foreboding that had overtaken me or the pounding heart within me.

I decided to take the uniform. Its former occupant seemed to be finished with it. I doubted that a newly turned thirteen year old male would have been that neat and orderly. Although a hundred and seventy five year old spirit of a youngster just might be. I shivered.

I would come back later in the full light of day to examine the woods to the north and inspect the ground for telltale hoof prints in the soft ground. The horses and riders had certainly looked real. Something had been missing, though I couldn't place it. I was eager to look at the photos – hoping there *were* photos.

As I neared the bottom of the hill I saw the back of the red SUV turn onto the main road. Before I could spend time contemplating that, I heard the whooping and hollering of a group of boys. One was being patted on the back. They were exuberant in the way that only boys that age could be. They were all fully clothed. I smiled that I had taken time to make that observation. Spence was clearly being congratulated by his best buddies. He was sandy haired and was wearing jeans, sneakers and a hooded-sweatshirt. No hat, I noticed.

I let them make their way on down the road toward town before starting my car. I placed the uniform in the trunk, out of sight and safe – well, out of sight, at least. I went back to the Inn and straight up to my room. I needed sleep. Two nights without rest was taking its toll. I would soon reach that point where reality and unreality would blur into a single pool of disjointed experience. That would not do. I wondered if it had already begun!

As I got undressed I saw the suitcase on my bed. It obviously contained my clothes again. In my clouded, tired frame of mind it came to me all quite clearly. If I just didn't unpack them, the intruder would have nothing to pack up. It seemed like the ideal solution. I moved the suitcase to the floor and was soon asleep.

\* \* \*

I was awakened by an insistent knock at the door that wouldn't go away. I donned a bath towel and opened it. John and Sheriff Chance were standing there.

"What time is it, guys?" I asked still squinting against the light.

"Almost eleven thirty," John answered. "A terrible thing has happened. The older couple you've eaten with the past two nights – they were found murdered in the bushes to the north of the Inn."

The Sheriff continued the explanation.

"Looks like they were both strangled with a length of old fashioned, rope. The murderer didn't bother to take it with him. Burt may have been knocked out first with a club of some kind. Looks to me like they were come upon out there and Burt was knocked out to give the killer time to kill Betty. Once that was done he went back and did the same to her husband."

My mind cleared rapidly. The north side of the Inn. That was where I had seen the image of the young soldier that night before. I spoke without thinking.

"The times of death – would that be about eight or so last evening?"

"Coroner thinks about that time, yes," The Sheriff said. "You must know something."

"I'm not sure what I have seen and what I've imagined these past forty eight hours."

I told them what I thought I had seen outside the lobby windows the night before.

"Sounds crazy, I know," I said by way of summary.

“Actually, it’s the very same story Jack Davis tells. He was eating a late dinner. Took his food out onto the back porch and sat facing the windows along the north end. You two talk about it last night?”

“No, Sheriff. I’ve never spoken with Davis, as much as I’d like to. I think there’s something fishy about him.”

“I’d suggest you worry less about Davis and more about your own safety, Mr. Miller.”

“Are you asking me to leave your County?”

“No. Just suggesting you don’t put yourself in situations where bad things could happen to you.”

“So, you don’t suspect me in the murders?”

“Checked out your whereabouts at the time. John and Davis both vouched for where you were.”

“Davis?”

“Says he saw you in a chair by the windows about that time. He puts it at nearly 8:30. John here says you left some packages with him a few minutes later. Solid alibis I’d say.”

“Anybody alibi Davis?”

The Sheriff looked at John who shrugged.

“When he verified he had seen you in the lobby, I guess I assumed that had to have placed *him* inside as well. Now, that you ask, I see it doesn’t. I’ll look into it further. What I actually came to ask was whether you and your fancy camera happened to be taking any pictures out the north windows about that time last night.”

John excused himself and left.

“I took shots of some boys – their faces show remarkable resemblances to those I’m told belong to the members of *C-Patrol*. If any of the pictures include things going on outside it would be purely coincidental. I haven’t looked them over yet. Digital. Come in if you like and we can examine them together.”

He entered closing the door behind him.

“Let me slip into some pants. Be right back.”

Within a few minutes I had the digital card in the slot on the laptop. The icons popped up. I clicked them into view one at a time.

"We do grow handsome lads around here, don't we," the Sheriff said.

It was a paternal side of him that I had not seen.

"Kids of your own?" I asked as we continued to move from picture to picture.

"Four. Boy, girl, boy, girl."

"Look there – here," he said pointing to the lower corner of the screen."

We both leaned in to examine it. There could be little doubt. The picture had been taken of Donny – a full length shot – standing in front of the windows. Just to the right of his left hand and looking to be some twenty yards out into the lawn was the blurred figure of a very short confederate soldier. The essence of the figure's carriage was that of boredom. It was fuzzy at that distance and features could not be discerned. I was sure it what was I had seen although by then its demeanor had changed from bored to despairing. It was with more than a little relief that I realized my sanity was evidently still in place.

Could that figure be the same one I encountered in the cemetery? I had no immediate way of ascertaining that. I made a print for the Sheriff telling him if his lab needed the original I'd email it to them.

"Lab," the big man smiled. "In these parts that's a fancy dog, Son. Got nothing to do with police work. I can send it to the State Police in Little Rock if you think that would help."

Suddenly it seemed I was on his team. I for one certainly wanted to know who or what it was.

"How could it hurt?" I said. "Get me an email address and make sure they're expecting something from me. I'll zip it off in their direction."

He nodded and stood, then had one more comment.

"Amy Sue missed you for breakfast this morning. She was fretting over it when I stopped in for coffee earlier. I think you've turned her head. Sleeping in suggests a late night. You out roaming around again, were you?"

"I spent the night up at the Confederate Soldiers Cemetery."

"I'd figure it would a been too foggy to see anything up there."

"Thickest fog I've ever seen. You're right about that. Kept thinking it might lift, you know."

I've always been a terrible liar. It's like there is a brightly, blinking light on my

forehead every time I so much contemplate a fib. The Sheriff raised his eyebrows but let it pass. He was soon at the door.

“The old couple,” I began. “They told me they had retired to Hot Springs, but I didn’t hear where they had lived before.

“Chicago, I’m told.”

That was about as Yankee as one could get!

“One more thing. What were they wearing when they were killed?”

“Blue jeans and matching jean jackets that Betty had apparently embroidered herself.”

Yankees wearing blue on a hot summer night in Carlton County! I locked the door, showered and dressed.

My mind had taken a turn about the bedroom intruder. He – it – had made no move to harm either me or my things so I would think of him as an inquisitive monkey escaped from the zoo. The fact there wasn’t a zoo within a hundred miles notwithstanding, the fantasy made me feel better.

I still had no idea how it was gaining entrance. A monkey could possibly come down the exhaust duct. It was better than a foot square. I had too many other things on my agenda to consider it any further.

I needed to examine the blueprints of the Inn. I needed to look at the pictures I’d taken up at the cemetery. I wanted to at least skim the book on CD for more background information. I considered purchasing some adult diapers – that was more for the smile it brought than anything else.

First things first, however. I was starved so headed for the café. It was exactly noon as I entered. The little room was packed with cigarette smoking, tobacco chewing, obviously not recently bathed older men. That was the lingering odor I had mistaken for musty on previous visits.

The only unoccupied seats were two stools at the counter. I opted for the one on the end, figuring I would seem less intrusive there. Amy brought my lunch – again without the necessity of placing an order. I was impressed with how she managed the room – taking orders, preparing the food, keeping up a constant flow of conversation, and never letting a coffee cup go dry. Most importantly, she clearly enjoyed what she was doing. I also began to understand the reason behind the excessive amount of



perfume she wore. It wasn't for *their* benefit; it was for *hers*.

It was a different atmosphere there than I had found in similar cafes I'd visited around the world. My experience was that men who frequented such establishments could be counted on to be playfully obnoxious with the waitresses – in a sexually suggestive sense. It was not that way there. The men were strictly hands off respectful of Amy Sue. Not that they didn't take pleasure in watching her bend down to set the plates on the table and not that they didn't follow her *derriere* with their eyes as she walked away, but no comments were made either to her or among the men.

I wondered why. Perhaps it was a part of their upbringing to be respectful of the fairer sex. Perhaps they knew Amy Sue was the property of quick-tempered Billy Chance – though I had a hard time envisaging anybody ever *owning* the strong minded Amy Sue. Perhaps it had to do with Uncle Jesse. I liked option number one. It seemed to mesh well with other characteristics I was coming to appreciate about these people.

Before I was well into my meal the others began leaving. Running the cash register turned out to be a simple process. No guest checks were delivered. The diners knew the prices. Payments were left on the table and when change was needed the men made it among themselves.

By the time I was ready for the pie of the day the place had emptied.

"I'll bus the place but only if you'll let me do it as a friend," I said.

She smiled but didn't specifically respond. It hadn't been a question. I began with the tables along the far wall and we met in the middle. It took less than five minutes to clear all of them. I carried my overflowing bus-tub into the kitchen and placed it on the counter beside the sink.

When I returned, my coffee had been refilled and moved to 'my' table by the window.

"Strawberry-rhubarb pie today," she announced. Always on Wednesdays this time a year. The teenage boys around here seem to really like it and always come in after the men leave."

Then, delivered as a confidential aside: "I'm not sure if it's really because they like my pie or if they just like to ogle my bosom. Either way I figure it's helping them fulfill a healthy, natural urge."

It was delivered in a matter of fact manner with no intention of being humorous.

There in Yates Corner life was accepted as just what life was, and it seemed a healthful philosophy. Teenage boys liked pie. Teenage boys liked breasts. They were accepted equally as a part of the natural order of things.

Suddenly I felt hormonally fifteen again – without any of the guilt I had been raised to feel about such things. (Sex not pie!)

My still steaming, double crusted, golden brown, slice of pie arrived at the same time as did the three amigos I'd met the night before. There was something about being a teenage male that I *had* forgotten – the constant, and apparently mandatory, pushing, shoving, and pounding of one another. The unending laughter over senseless tidbits I did recall and it was refreshing to hear it continuing through still another generation.

“Hey. Mr. Miller. Good afternoon,” Donny said as they all three managed a wave in my direction. “Did you tell Amy Sue about how we're big time models now?”

I assumed it was a reference to my having taken their pictures.

“Figured you'd take care of that yourselves,” I said hoping to get myself off the hook for what had apparently been a major oversight. It hadn't been my intention to get their hopes up. It turned out that I hadn't.

Junior delivered the punch line, directed at Amy Sue but stated for my benefit.

“Mr. Miller, here, is going to sell our pictures to the next issue of *Young Indiana Inmates*.”

The boys bent over in laughter until their faces were wet. It was fully impossible not to join them. Laughter was indeed infectious. I hated that saying because of the insidious implication of the term, infectious – like laughter disbursed some terrible disease. I preferred something like *laughter easily initiates laughter in others as a positive, life affirming behavior*. It was probably both too cumbersome and not nearly catchy enough to ever become an idiom. That, however, could not detract from the truth of the concept. *Maybe, laugh and the World laughs with you*. Seemed that someone had beaten me to that one.

The boys lined up on stools at the counter and turned their attention – their entire, teen-boy, attention – to Amy Sue and her chest. Her assessment of their intentions appeared to have been accurate as fork after fork missed mouths on turning heads.

“So, did young Spence make it through the night, okay?” I asked at last, thinking

there young systems needed a rest from ogling.

Specks turned toward me and nodded.

“Seems so. My little brother went to meet him this morning. Had nothing special to report.”

He turned back to his pie – and other things! Once again the local dictums appeared to have been strictly adhered to.

I wondered how long these boys usually stayed at the café. It was as if I wanted time alone with Amy Sue. I had to wonder if, like laughter, teen-boy hormones were *also* ‘infectious’.

The boys each presented a twenty in payment. Amy Sue patiently counted eighteen fifty back to each of them.

“Oh, by the way, Specks,” Donny said as they made ready to leave, “We sort of made you a date with Jennie. She’ll be here for pie any second now.”

“And,” Junior added, “She’s expecting a walk in the woods afterwards.”

It called for a round of bone-numbing punches accompanied by Specks’ half-hearted protests.

“You’re pullin’ my leg. You wouldn’t do that to me. What should I do? How . . .”

His rambling was cut short as a very attractive young brunette entered, tentatively, and remained, somewhat awkwardly, near the door.

The other two boys pulled out chairs at a table in the corner and giggled themselves on out the door. Specks escorted her to a seat and looked at Amy Sue as if to ask, ‘Now what?’

Amy Sue knew exactly what to do, as if it were an oft repeated activity. She turned the radio on to a station offering young people’s music. She delivered one, oversized slice of pie, with a large soft drink and two straws. Satisfied with her part she returned to the counter by way of my table, taking my plate and cup. It was her way of telling me to leave so nature could take its course over in the corner. I left money on the table and went outside as she disappeared into the kitchen.

I found Donny and Junior sitting atop the hood of an old black pickup.

“Forcing the issue for your friend, I see,” I said smiling.”

“Sometimes Mother Nature needs a little help,” Donny said grinning.

“So you got some kind of a lover’s lane around here I suppose.”

"A make out spot?" Junior asked apparently needing clarification of my terminology.

"Yes. That," I managed.

"Lots of 'em, actually. Lots a private places out here in these hills."

"Let me be more specific even though it's absolutely none of my business. Last night. You indicated you would soon be with your ladies after leaving the Inn. If you were, I'm interested if you might have found some privacy up by the Inn, south east of the Inn actually. I saw lights up there and just wondered. If that's your spot you know I wouldn't want to stumble onto you when I go for my late night hikes."

I thought it sounded pretty lame. They seemed to buy it.

"Not our place up there. Got our special spots down by the creek. Too wet last night so we stayed in Donny's car."

"If Donny has a car then I assume this pickup must be yours, Junior."

"Right. Too old. Too slow. Too much in need of everything but it is mine."

I nodded and shrugged, trying to imply that I understood.

"Well, I better be moving on. Thanks for the conversation. I hope things go well for Specks."

"Oh, things'll go well, for sure."

I guess I looked puzzled because Donny offered an explanation.

"We told Jennie *just* what old Specks likes."

"And if he's never had a date, *how* does he *know* what he likes?"

"HE don't!"

The boys laughed themselves off the hood and onto the ground. I wasn't about to ask further but suspected that before the afternoon was over Specs would discover exactly what he liked! I entered my car and drove back to the Inn, smiling.

I had learned several important things. Spence had decided to keep to *the thirteen year olds' mum code* so there would be no stories out and about to discredit the one I had given the Sheriff. Also, it had not been the boys whose lights I had seen up Hank's lane. And finally, I learned that teen-boys remain pretty much the same from generation to generation, North or South.

I retrieved the tubes from Jan and returned to my room where I spread the blueprints out on the coffee table. It was already growing warm and soon the sun would

be shining in through the west windows. I adjusted the opening to allow maximum air movement realizing the cool, built up overnight, had already been spent. I'd give the architect one thing; his ventilation system moved lots of air and back in the day where a breeze had been the only air conditioner, his design had been very successful. I took a seat in the center of the couch and began getting oriented to the drawings.

I found the main, general floor plan and honed in on my suite. Either a foot had been shorter back in those days or the carpenters couldn't read blueprints. I paced off my rooms. Both the sitting room and the bedroom were each a good two feet shorter – left to right as I stood facing the western window – than called for in the plans. The other dimension seemed about right.

The area occupied by the bathroom had originally been a dressing room explaining the closet along the western end. It, too, was narrower than the plans suggested. At the time the addition had been added, back when Hank was a little boy, the bathrooms had been put in place in the older section where my room was. I noted the dimensions stated for the stairwell and I went out into the hall to step it off. It seemed accurate. I rapped on the walls, not sure why. It was a response akin to kicking the tires of a car one was considering purchasing. I returned to my room.

The blueprints were gone – well, not gone I discovered after a brief search, but re-rolled and placed back into the pasteboard tubes. My Imp seemed to have either a playful side or a neatness fetish – repacking my clothes and putting the plans away. If he – it – had not wanted me to examine the plans would he have not removed them or destroyed them? The meaning of his behavior was not clear. Surely he understood by then that I didn't succumb to threats or scare tactics, if it were such things being *implied*. As I had determined earlier, my intruder behaved more like a monkey *or* some close relative just slightly above it on the evolutionary scale.

I continued studying the plans for some time, soon feeling I understood the overall layout well enough. I went into the hall wanting to pace it the length of the building. I began counting off my steps and moving north. It was eleven paces to the stairwell opening – thirty-three feet. I stopped and recounted the inside measurements that I had just determined – sitting room twelve, bedroom ten, bathroom six. Twenty eight feet. Add to that the thickness of the two interior walls and the one there at the stairwell and I could only account for about thirty feet.

The obvious answer to the quandary came out of the blue. I returned to my bathroom and opened the closet door along the outside front wall. It was thirty inches deep and ran the entire six foot width of the bathroom. It was the wall to my right – the north wall that interested me inside the closet. I pushed and shoved and felt for buttons and levers. My finger came across a hole cut into the molding near the ceiling. I pulled down. There was a distinct click as the right edge of the wall popped open – away from me – an inch or so.

I had joked earlier about secret passages. Apparently it was no joke. I opened the door into darkness. I needed a flashlight. How would I explain borrowing one in the middle of the day? I remembered the emergency candles in each of the rooms.

I was soon outfitted with a lit candle in its brass holder complete with ring handle. I put several additional candles and a pack of matches into my pocket. I entered the dark passageway making sure I understood how the secret door was opened from that side. It was an identical pull down arm. I closed it behind me thinking it was better to leave it as it would be expected to be. With my back to the front wall I saw that I had two choices: I could climb the angled ladder in front of me to the third floor or take a narrow passage to my left. It apparently crossed over the stairwell and met up with another secret door or passage of some kind on the other side. I opted to stay on the second floor and soon made the ninety degree turn just across the stair opening. My flickering candle revealed another floor to floor ladder, but this one descended to the first floor.

I was comfortable with the first floor so I carefully made my way down the narrow ladder. On the first floor the area was double in width – at least six, perhaps seven feet wide and ran the length of the room, nearly twelve feet. It was like a small room. Near the back wall – toward the hall – there was a trapdoor in the floor, perhaps two by three feet. That would lead into the basement. Actually it would lead directly into the dirt according to John who described the basement as being under just the central portion of the building. It would bear investigation at a later time.

At the front of the room – toward the parking lot – was another door like the one in my closet. I assumed it opened in a similar fashion into the closet in that suite. I clicked it free of its latch and peeked into more darkness. I entered what did indeed turn out to be an empty closet and searched for some inside latch. It was a simple slide bar

built into the back of the door latch. I opened it a crack. Light streamed in. My eyes needed time to adjust. Again it was a bathroom actually dimly lit by light entering from the bedroom. I opened the medicine chest in the wall. It was filled with man-type toiletries telling me the suite was occupied and most likely by the only first floor resident – Jack Davis – unless, ghosts had taken up shaving and using deodorant.

I noticed myself beginning to breathe again and wondered how long I had been holding it. I made my way cautiously from room to room. The closet held Jack's unmistakable blue shirts – something I still didn't understand.

The suite was virtually identical in plan to mine except reversed end to end. I had to wonder how many such passages had been built into the building and why. I opened several dresser drawers in search of something that would tell me more about the mysterious Mr. Davis. I found nothing special, although his wardrobe was definitely not that of a man who worked at a construction site. No work boots or even metal toe shoes. No jeans, just slacks. No hard hat or gloves. White, linen, handkerchiefs. The desk drawer in the sitting room held a handgun, three clips, and several boxes of ammunition. I was no arms expert, but I did know a handgun when I saw one. Mr. Davis was not who he represented himself to be.

Terror struck as I heard the key being inserted into the lock. I glanced quickly toward it and saw the knob begin turning. I hurried back through the bedroom hearing the door open even before I entered the bathroom. I didn't look back to see if I were being pursued. I figured if he had to stop for his gun it would buy me a few precious seconds. I was immediately into the closet with the door closed behind me. My hands were trembling as I struggled to light the candle. A few moments later I was into the passageway with that door secured in place behind me.

I didn't think it prudent to stop and gather my wits so I began retracing my steps. I climbed the ladder and crossed over the top of the stairwell. I turned toward the entrance to my bathroom closet and there at the other end of the passage, behind the ladder to the third floor was another candle, also being held waist high.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The Underground Railroad

“Who’s there?” I requested in my best authoritative tone, not an easy undertaking considering every part of me including my tongue was trembling.

There was no answer. I wondered why. I raised my candle higher hoping to get a better glimpse of my challenger. He mimicked my movement. I lowered it and he lowered his. My playful Imp, I wondered? I moved closer, small step by small step my heart thumping against my ribs. I reached the ladder to the third floor. The light was coming from behind it. I moved to my left to go around it. The other candle suddenly disappeared. There was no one there. A specter Imp?

On the wall behind the ladder was a large picture frame. Apparently the glass surface had been reflecting the light from my candle and as I moved it about the reflection also moved. I couldn’t be sure why I hadn’t had the same experience the first time I was there. My focus had been on the ladder and the hole in the ceiling against which it leaned. Maybe I had just been looking elsewhere or the angle had been different. Regardless my heart began to slow. In the excitement I had forgotten to take any photographs. I snapped several of the picture in the frame and others of the hidden room. I entered my closet and blew out the candle, continuing to look through the crack back into the passageway in case Davis knew about it had followed me, keeping his distance.

No one appeared. I closed the door and re-entered my bathroom. Should I block the door against the intruder? It would tell him that I knew about the passage and I didn’t think I wanted to feed him that information just yet.

If the intruder was *not* Davis – and I wasn’t ruling him out – it was most likely someone or *something* that came and went through the third floor. But then there was also that trapdoor in the floor of the room on the first floor. Could that be the portal though which the intruder was coming and going? A crawl space of some kind?

All of that was interesting but it seemed to be a less than useful side trip from my mission there – to learn about *C-Patrol* and the mystic things that seemed to be related to it in recent years – make that *days*! During my brief exposure to Yates Corner, I had become committed to writing the story. If it proved to be a hoax, that would be fine. I’d



write it that way. If it remained unexplainable according to natural laws I'd write it that way. It would be written.

I sat again with the drawings, looking at the sketches of the front of the building. There was the one of the original building without the new north wing and then a second depicting it as it would appear after the renovation. I examined the sketches of the rear and the sides.

Even as I had gained my first glimpse of the Inn from across the valley, one thing seemed odd. The Inn had been designed with a steeply peaked roof, like those necessary in areas of the far north where large amounts of snowfall needed to be naturally shunted away to reduce its weight on the structure. Why such a roof in an area that received at best only a few inches of snow a year?

Perhaps it was merely an architectural whim or an attempt to mimic the form of a Swiss Chalet. One thing seemed certain; there would be a huge open space above the rooms on the third floor. Why not have added a small fourth floor with more dormers? It was a question that could probably never be answered so I dwelled instead on the unused space – the attic as it might be called. Were there entrances? Probably. Where?

I sorted through the drawings until I found a helpful blueprint. The space looked to be fifteen feet tall at the peak and some forty feet front to back and ran the length of the building. It could have housed a basketball arena. Six huge, wind operated, exhaust turbines sat on the roof just to the rear of the peak. My interpretation of the schematics suggested that the exhaust ducts from the rooms ran between the floors and ceilings and then up huge channels into the attic space. I wondered if the secret passages included exits into that area.

It was a little after two. I rolled the blueprints together and returned them to their tubes. I was ready to view the pictures I had taken the night before.

Some were wonderful. The ones of the small soldier boy were clear and crisp. Those of the horseman varied in quality but several looked to be pretty good, certainly better than the one I obtained from Gussy at the paper. I printed out the half dozen best and began studying them.

I felt certain the first shot of the boy could be enlarged to offer a good likeness of the facial features. I played with the image on the laptop and presently had a two by

three inch rendering of the face. It looked like the picture of Darrel Elder that I had acquired from Granny. Of course Darrel Elder looked just like young Spence – or Spence looked like Darrel to be fully accurate. It presented an interesting non-answer since it did nothing to tell me if I had photographed Spencer or Specter.

My mind spun more scenarios. If it had been young Spencer, his confrontational behavior could have been intended to scare away the ghosts and/or prove his bravery if only to himself. If it had been the ghost of Darrel Elder, the behavior could have been that of the lad's lonely spirit desperately trying to rejoin his comrades – calling them to arms even, at the outset, and then running to be among them again.

Interesting, if opposite interpretations of exactly the same deed. In the end the lad collapsed to his knees and cried. For Spencer that could have represented relief or just the eventual outpouring of emotion and fear built up over years of terrifying anticipation of that night. For Darrel it could have represented disappointment and despair at having been left behind to drift on alone.

I put the picture aside and turned to the horsemen. Again, I tried to focus in on the faces. Presently I had a crisp, clean enlargement of the closest rider's face. There was nothing there. Oh, there was a gray mass, contoured in rough resemblance to a face but there were no features – no eyes or nose or mouth. It had a ghoulish, scarecrow appearance. The rest appeared all quite real – the hat, the clothes, and the shirt collar buttoned tightly against the cool night air. I made a print and went back to the full angle shots. I had captured the initial glow and the eerie shimmering of the trees. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the pictures was that those shimmering trees could be seen in the background right through the soldiers and their horses. The images were at best fuzzy. Their outlines – how can it be described – looked wrinkled like hands too long in a bath. How I wished I had taken a video stream so I could study the actual movement as they crossed my field of vision.

I figured transparent horses had most likely not left hoof prints behind but I needed to make sure. I put my camera cards and the prints into my briefcase and drove back up to the cemetery. As I pulled to a stop at the edge of the burial ground, I swallowed my heart. There, walking among the crosses in broad daylight, was once again the figure of a boy.

He didn't seem disturbed by my arrival. I got out of the car and cautiously made

my way in his directions, pausing now and then to shoot a picture. When I came within twenty yards of him he called out and waved.

“Hey. You must be the Mr. Miller the guys are talkin’ about.”

“I am. Call me Marc if that’s allowed in these parts. Mr. makes me feel so old.”

We were soon standing face to face.

“I can call you Marc when it’s just between us if that’s what you want. It wouldn’t due down in town.”

“And let me guess,” I began. “You would be either Darrel or Spencer.”

“Yes I would.”

He smiled at his little joke appearing to understand my reference.

“I’ll shake your hand, if you’ll allow it,” I said. “If I feel solid flesh I’ll assume you’re Spencer. If there’s nothing there I’ll go with Darrel.”

“Fair enough.”

He beamed as he extended his hand and shook.

“Good to make your acquaintance, *Spencer*,” I said.

The boy nodded.

“I had you goin’ though didn’t I?”

“You did. You come up here often?” I asked hoping to understand his presence there.

“Hardly ever. I just needed to come and check it out this morning. I spent the night up here last night.”

“So did I.”

The boy looked alarmed and frowned.

“I didn’t see you.”

“I kept to myself. It was not my intention to intrude on your special time up here. I knew about the ritual of the thirteenth birthday.”

“You do sound like a Yankee writer, Mr. ... Marc.”

“That the word on the street about me, is it?”

“Yes, Sir. To a man!”

I smiled and nodded then continued.

“I am under the impression you decided not to share what you saw up here last night.”

"It's how we do things here. You gonna tell?"

"I would never spoil your story however you decide to tell it in the end."

"Thanks for that. It's probably more important than a outsider can ever understand about. You ever had to face down a ghost? Mr. Marc."

"I have, but not when I was thirteen and not to prove my worth to myself or anybody else. It must have been very scary."

He acknowledged that with a bouncy nod.

"If I lived up in your neck of the woods they'd call me a nerd," Spencer said, apparently the beginning of a more lengthy explanation than I anticipated. "Here they call me 'brains'. It sounds like flattery but it ain't – and I know that should have been *isn't* – but I wouldn't fit in talking like that. The Reverend and I just sit and talk sometimes so I can practice. I'm going to Harvard someday like he did. I'm going to be a teacher. But I got off track.

"The Brains thing. I'll admit I've always been scared of my shadow. I'm weak and small and not good at sports. I've never been beat up but that's just because the kids around here are basically nice people. So, I had more to prove last night than most of the guys do."

"And did you prove those things to yourself?"

"Yes, Sir. It's like I left the scaredy old Spencer up here. I don't think I'll ever be frightened of anything again. I feel taller, can you understand that?"

"Yes. I *can* sense that. You look taller."

Spencer smiled and nodded in my direction.

"I'm going swimming down at the creek later on this afternoon and I'm going to jump off the cliff into the water."

"Is that safe?"

"In my brain I've known it had to be safe since I was just a little kid. I mean day after day kids jump off and don't get hurt. But standing up there looking down, my heart always gave way. But it won't today. The guys will S their pants when they see it. I can hardly wait. I should be going. Nice to meet you and thanks for keeping things just between us."

"Nice to have met you, Spencer. I wish you the best at Harvard and beyond."

Spencer had taken several strides toward the road when I called out. He

stopped and turned.

“Ya?”

“The uniform. The boy size confederate uniform. Do you want it back?”

“Sorry, Mr. Marc. I don’t know nothin’ bout no little tad’s confederate uniform.”

He frowned and turned, mounting a trot and soon disappeared around the corner and down the hill. Had he been putting me on? His grammatical construction said yes. His spontaneous facial expression said no. Another shiver. I may just name the book, *Shivers for Mr. Miller*.

I moved on toward my original destination – the area over which the horses had appeared to travel. I walked the field from one side to the other and found nothing. The sod was still soft from the rain that fell just before the – just before the what? Event? Materialization? Chicanery?

I entered the woods and looked around. It was not a dense growth. It continued down the hill behind the field and spread from side to side at the back of the cemetery. The ground in and among the trees appeared to have been unmolested for years. It had not been flesh and blood horses that burst out of the grove the night before. In the minds of the locals that meant it had to have been the specters. I always opted for more alternatives than that. Two sides to any given issue were seldom enough.

As I walked back to the car I realized what had been missing. The other reports of the horsemen sightings were complete with the excited, noisy, boisterous, voices of the young riders. I had heard nothing. I had heard no voices. I had heard no hoofs to the turf. I had felt no trembling ground. What I experienced was strictly visual. It had been somehow real enough to be caught by my camera, but yet unreal enough to show as transparent on the prints.

I reached my car and unlocked the door. At that moment I heard it. I was being hailed. The words were delivered in a slow, deliberate, unnatural, monotone from some distance away.

“Mr. Miller. Death before dawn. Mr. Miller. Death before dawn.”

I easily spotted its source. A confederate soldier, rifle shouldered, standing just in front of the trees that I had been investigating a few minutes earlier. He waved his right arm over his head as he spoke. Then, he turned and walked slowly into the

woods.

I ran the length of the field slowing only as I approached the first line of trees. I had been thinking on my way. Was this a trap to lure me to my death before the next dawn or was it another elaborate charade designed to drive me away.

Not surprised, I found no one. I found no foot prints other than those I had left earlier. I decided caution was the better part. I smiled. My first truncated idiom. Perhaps I was beginning to fit in. I walked back to my car. I felt compelled to glance over my shoulder several times. The fright was not over. On the front seat of my car lay the neatly folded, boy-size, confederate uniform.

I opened the trunk. It was gone from there. I told myself that I should have marked it some way so I could be sure if it reappeared somewhere else . . . listen to my inane prattle. I put it back into the trunk and drove to the café. It was too early to eat and I wasn't hungry but I drove to the café.

"I'm in need of an endless pitcher of ice tea," I said taking a seat at my table.

"Close in ten minutes you know," Amy Sue said, delivering a tall single glass of tea and an uncharacteristically curt delivery.

"I forgot you're not open for supper. Sorry, I can just leave."

"Nonsense. What else does a beautiful, eligible, old maid have to do in this town beside wait on . . . stragglers."

Her pause indicated – intentionally or not – that there had been some other word she considered using but thought better of it. I thanked her for the drink.

"You look tired. Not getting' your proper sleep?" she asked as she ran the final wet cloth of the day over the counter.

She appeared nervous – not her usual self-assured self

"Seems sleep *has* been a bit hard to come by. Spent last night up in the Soldiers Cemetery and tonight I'll be back in the valley to get more pictures of the faces in the windows at the Inn."

It was *not* my plan but I had the idea telling her would bait the trap for what I really had up my sleeve. The café seemed to be gossip central for the community.

"Granny dated them pictures of the boys. Says they was all took within a few months of them goin' off to war. That help?"

"Yes it does. I assume you had seen those pictures before."

“Lots a times. Sure. Why do ya ask?”

“Have you ever thought they resembled some of the kids who live around here, now?”

She stopped, appearing to give the question serious thought.

“No. Not really. No.”

She averted her gaze from my face as she spoke. It had been another trilogy of negatives in as many sentences.

“Don’t you see a resemblance among the three older boys and the three that came in here for pie earlier this afternoon?”

“Boys? In here? This afternoon? Are you playin’ with my mind?”

“No. Donny and Junior and Specks. They sat right there at the counter and ogled your bosom.”

“Mr. Miller. That’s not the kind of conversation a girl around here takes off of strangers. I think you should leave.”

“But they were here. The boys who work up at the Inn on weekends.”

“I don’t know what goes on up there on weekends but I sure as lightning know what went on in here this afternoon and it wasn’t nothin’ like you been sayin’.”

I looked at her, confused by what I was hearing. Her eyes were moist. I put a dollar bill on the table and left. I was stunned. I could verify the boys’ existence of course through Jan and John but I was baffled by Amy Sue’s behavior. I could face her with her lie by bringing in the boys – providing the boys really did exist. Things had suddenly taken a bizarre turn.

I drove back to the Inn. Dinner would be served in forty five minutes. It would only be me now that the old couple had, moved on, I guess I’ll say. Maybe finally I’ll get to meet the mysterious Mr. Davis. I went directly up to my suite thinking I would read the newspaper clippings and see what was on the photos I had taken of the picture that hung in the passageway.

The clippings verified what I thought I had remembered. Each reported sighting of the horseman came complete with wild yelling and the thunder of hoofs. Perhaps, being a non-believer, I had only been worthy of half the show.

The photo of the picture was surprisingly clear. It was a map – beautifully drawn. Initially, I couldn’t tell what it represented. There were hills and trails and caves marked

by name. There were houses marked with crosses. Near the top was a thick line from side to side. Above it, printed in large letters, was the single word, 'FREE'. Below it, "SLAVE". It was a map directing slaves to freedom in the north.

Could it be that the secret passages and room had been designed as part of the Underground Railroad? Again, interesting, but useless. It might, however, be the stuff of another book someday.

I felt dirty so I took a shower and put on clean cloths. I still entered the lobby several minutes before dinner was to be served. Uncharacteristically, neither Jan nor John was at the desk. I walked on into the dining area on the back porch. Food was already on the table and my tea had been poured. I took a seat and served myself. During the twenty minutes I was there eating no one entered the room to check on my needs. It hadn't really been called for but I had to wonder why. It was not the routine that had been previously established.

The food was delicious and I went back into the lobby. Still nobody in sight. I took a seat in a spot from where I could keep my eye on the desk. I wanted to speak with Jan and John about several things. I picked up the paper and paged through it. I noted that I was missing a box supper at the church that evening. Under other circumstances I would have rushed to be a part of such a local event. I wondered if Amy Sue was participating. If so, it would undoubtedly be Billy who would purchase her fixin's – uncontested, I assumed. My list had grown too long.

There was no time to wait any longer. I borrowed a flashlight from the desk and left an "IOU" for it. I needed to pay a nocturnal visit to the third floor.

'You're out of your mind,' I said to myself.

'Yes. I realize that,' I answered.

'But you're going to go anyway?'

'It certainly looks that way.'

My plan involved using the ladder in the passageway thinking my whereabouts might remain unknown that way. On the third floor I first entered a closet and then exited it into one of the single rooms. The bed was bare and there was no sign of life. I opened the door into the hall and looked about, first without light and then with. There was nothing to see. I walked to the far north end of the hall and made myself cozy on the floor, back against the far wall. I was there to wait and see if anything happened on



three at night. I had baited the hook earlier in the day at the café and was prepared for a long session.

At precisely one o'clock I began hearing a low muffled sound coming from inside the ballroom in the central square of the floor. I was as intrigued as much as startled. It was not what I was waiting for. The doors had been locked the first time I was up there so I assumed the same would be true that night. It was. I moved back and forth along the wall until I located the spot where the noise was loudest. I took a seat on the wall opposite it. The noise appeared to run in cycles of about one minute each. Then there would be silence for a time – perhaps seven or eight minutes – and then the noise again. Did ghosts groan according to a time table? It sounded much like a groan – a creaky, raspy, labored groan. It had no human quality, really. Just noise.

Then the predictable nature of the noise varied. It was like . . . a sneeze. Then another and another. There were no more. After thirty minutes I moved back to my original place on the floor. Fifteen minutes passed and then I sensed movement in the hallway. I was less at ease about it than I had imagined I would be. I opened my mouth wide so as to make no sound as I breathed. I heard footsteps coming toward me. I heard a door open and close. I waited several minutes then quietly made my way back down the hall. There was light coming from the crack under one of the doors. I needed to see inside, but how.

The key hole – that wonderful seventy five year old key hole. I put my eye to the opening. It was impossible to get a wide angle view but I could see all that I needed to see. It was pretty much as I knew it had to be. There was the figure of a man at the window placing a transparent film over the circular clear area. He then raised a large lantern behind it and moved it back and forth in slow, irregular movements. He was projecting the picture of a boy's face. My bait had been taken. It didn't increase my understanding about the motivation but it had accomplished my purpose.

If my experience from the valley had been representative, it meant the man would be moving from room to room repeating his activity with several different faces. I needed to make my exit quietly but rapidly. I had seen what I needed to see although the man's face was unfamiliar to me.

I made my way back to the trapdoor that John and I had used. It was locked. That suggested that the man with the lantern probably used the secret passage – or

another one like it. I wanted to follow him when he left so I needed a safe, out of the way, place to wait.

He had come from the south end of the hall so I had every reason to think he would also exit that way. I circled around the hall across the back of the building and up to where I had been sitting originally. Along the way I stopped to listen for the groans. They had stopped. I again tried the doors into the ballroom. They were still locked. I took a seat on the floor to wait. During the next half hour the man moved from room to room just as I had expected him to.

In the end he walked back down the hall to the south and directly into the room at the end – one with windows only on the south, outside wall. It was a room I had not yet explored. I hurried after him as silently as possible on the old plank floor. I hesitated at the door, checking underneath to make sure it was not lit. I eased the door open and looked inside. No one was there. The closet door was open. It must have been another passageway. Should I risk entering it? I'd come that far.

I felt for the lever with the finger hole in it. It was there. I pulled it down. The door snapped open. I eased it out into the black space ahead and listened. Creak. Creak. Creak. I figured it was the ladder bending under the weight of the man – the man who knew his way so well that he required no light. I moved ahead feeling my way in the darkness. I found the opening in the floor and then the ladder extended through it. I made my way down to the second floor minimizing creeks by stepping only near the outside of each rung. The absolute darkness continued. I found it disorienting. I located the opening to the first floor and peered into it. There was a brief flash of light and then the sound of a closing door.

I descended the ladder and felt my way along the wall toward the spot I assumed would be the door. It was dilemma time. It could be that the man lived in that first floor suite and he would be there when I opened the door. Chances were, however, that it opened first into a closet which would give me one additional layer of privacy – security. I opened the door. The darkness continued. It was a closet and I found the slide latch, then moved it slowly to the open position.

The door was free. I opened it just a crack. Darkness continued inside the room. I entered and soon ascertained it was a bathroom. As I looked through the door into the bedroom I saw another brief flash of illumination from the sitting room. It was the door

into the hall opening and closing. I rushed through the bedroom to the sitting room door. I didn't dare lose him after all that good fortune.

I opened the door into the hall. The figure of a man was just turning into the back hall that passed the anteroom and then the kitchen. I hurried on. I had no reason to be secretive at that point. It was fully legitimate for me to be there in the first floor hall. If asked, I could say I was searching for John.

The figure exited the Inn through the back door. I watched through the window as the man made his way to Hank's cabin. It had not been Hank. My brief glimpse of him upstairs as the lamp illuminated his face told me that, as did his stature and stride. I closed my eyes and practiced remembering the face in the hope that would keep the image from fading.

I needed to sleep. I also needed to peek into the basement. I opened several doors off the back hall until I found the one that led downstairs. I flipped the light switch and descended into the large, damp, musty smelling area below.

I had become obsessed with secret passages so searched the walls for openings. I remembered that trapdoor in the passageway that led from my suite down to Jack's. It would have missed this area by thirty or forty feet to the south. The huge old dumbwaiter John had told me about was built against the south wall. In appearance it was more like an elevator for short people having a floor area six feet square and the floor to ceiling dimension being perhaps five feet. It had no sides being open all the way around. It worked with a series of pulleys and counter weights, much like the main elevator. To raise it you pulled down on one section of a looped rope. To lower it you pulled on the other section.

I examined the rope. It appeared to be relatively new. That made no sense – new rope on a dumbwaiter that hadn't been used in decades. On the floor was a spot of fresh grease. Things were not adding up.

I crawled across the floor of the device so I could examine the wall behind it. Wood rather than limestone like that in the rest of the area. I pushed on it in various places and examined it for latches. I spent more time than was probably reasonable, neurotically going over the same areas time and time again. Something told me it was a door, but then, as I had just admitted to myself, I had become obsessed with such things.

I left the dumbwaiter and inspected the rest of the big room. The old dishwashing area occupied the opposite wall, about twenty feet away. There were six large sinks, a vast number of slotted, wooden, dish drying, racks, and an ingenious water heater of 1800 vintage. It was a large, open, copper, vat with a firebox underneath. Iron pipes ran from it to each sink where faucets had been installed. It was surely state of the art at the time.

None of that seemed useful. Well, perhaps I had spoken too soon once again. One of the sinks was wet, with puddles of water sitting in several irregularities on the bottom. Beside it was a bar of soap, still wet, and blackened from having just washed some very dirty hands.

On the right side of the vat was a ladder leading to a place just above its rim. I assumed that back before running water it could have been used to carry pails of water to be dumped into the vat for heating. I climbed the ladder. There was a foot or more of water in the bottom. Why?

*Why* a lot of things, actually. Why the new rope? Why the new grease job? Why the dirty soap in the wet sink? Why the handy water supply in the vat?

I checked the firebox. It was clean and had apparently been unused for years. As I walked the area one final time, I was struck by something else. Although the basement had the generally musty smell one would expect, the variety of *musty* changed from place to place. That was an awkward way of stating the observation but it was true.

The northern section of the area had the regular old basement odor – pungent, almost burning when inhaled through the nose during a deep breath. The south area, however, though musty, was sweeter and in some way less harsh. The difference was at its peak near the dumbwaiter. The grease? The new rope? The soap? The shaft above it allowing the air to rise? I had no clear answer.

One thing seemed certain to me. If that wooden section behind the dumbwaiter was a door, it had to open from the other side and I just might be able to gain access to that from the trapdoor on the first floor in my secret passageway.

I left the basement and went directly to my room. I was spending far too much of my sleep time doing things that could have been accomplished in the morning. My body was far too adrenalized (a new word assembled on the spot just for the occasion!) to

allow sleep. I entered the passageway and was soon down at the trapdoor on the first floor. It was complete with pull ring. I opened it and lit the area below with my flashlight. There was another ladder, which I descended, closing the trapdoor after me.

I had entered a long, narrow, corridor. It was five feet wide with limestone walls like the basement. The floor was hard packed red clay – damp and slick. Looking ahead I could see it ran the entire width of the Inn, in fact, it seemed to just go on and on. I moved along it. Twenty paces into my walk several things changed. There was a collateral tunnel off to the left. I surmised it connected with the basement – yes – the wooden section in the wall. There were also bare light bulbs strung along the ceiling at twenty foot intervals. I turned into the tunnel and followed it for another forty feet. There it was – the wooden wall. From that side, the door was clearly outlined and securely closed with a bar from side to side. I wouldn't try to enter because I really wanted to explore the remainder of the main corridor.

At one point there was a twelve by twelve inch header across the ceiling. I surmised it was probably there to support the back wall of the Inn where the tunnel passed under it. The corridor – tunnel, at that point – continued for a considerable distance beyond the Inn. The floor was covered in sawdust, which was well trampled into the clay making a drier and less slippery surface.

The tunnel ended some fifty yards beyond the back wall of the Inn. To the right of the blank wall in front of me was a concrete ramp, ten feet wide and thirty feet long. It rose at a fairly steep incline into some kind of building. I walked up the ramp. Up at ground level I was confronted by a set of doors – old fashioned, swinging, garage doors that opened out. I stepped outside, closing them behind me. The building was the old garage – originally a carriage house, I assumed – that sat beside Hank's cabin.

I turned off my flashlight as I stood there in the bright light of the moon. The fresh air felt wonderful and I filled my lungs.

It came from behind me.

“Who's there? I got a shotgun pointed at yer head and a old trigger finger that's awfully hard to keep steady anymore.”

## CHAPTER NINE

### A Proliferation of Possibilities

"It's Marc Miller," I said, instinctively putting my hands up, hoping the name might make the difference between a head and no head.

"Oh. Marc with 'C'. Sorry, son."

It was Hank's voice. The cold metal was removed from my neck.

"Didn't recognize ya in the dark – that's *dark* with a 'K'."

He giggled his high pitched giggle.

"My old eyes don't work so well at night anymore. Sorry if'n I startled ya."

"All's well that end's well," I said, turning to face him.

"Out pretty late, ain't ya?" he asked, tilting the barrel toward the ground.

"My mind gets going sometimes and I just can't sleep. A walk in the night air often helps."

"I'm just a night owl," the old man said. "Always slept in short spurts. Up at six to help folks check out - not many do that during the week. Then a nap and back by three to start helpin' 'em check in - when we know reservations is comin'."

It seemed like a plausible explanation for his presence there, even though none was probably required – it *was* his turf.

"There is one thing I've been meaning to ask you – mostly just because I'm a nosy," I said. "The three boys who work with you on the weekends - what are their names?"

The old man frowned instantly but didn't miss a bit.

"Mike, Bruce and Rick. Really good boys. They have fun but they work hard as long as there's work to do."

Those were *not* the names of the boys with whom I had spoken. I tried to pursue it without being obvious.

"I was wondering if they ever did other odd jobs. I'd like to have my car washed and cleaned out before I leave."

"I'll ask 'em if you like. Sometimes they come back here during the week to bug me for a swig of hooch. Boys there age really need a swig now and then you know. Like a tonic for their parts."

I would not pursue, 'parts'.

"Thanks. Guess I'll go try to catch a few winks before breakfast, then," I said, turning toward the Inn and raising a hand in farewell.

Hank seemed to have bought it. He stood and waved me on my way.

\* \* \*

I awoke to a mind whirling with inconsistencies and unresolved problems. The three boys: Real? Figments of my imagination? Specters? Or was there a conspiracy afoot to confuse me, distract me, scare me? I had received two threats that could be considered death threats but all things considered it seemed more like false bravado.

Why had the faces from the windows been simulated, and since they had, did that suggest the riders in the cemetery were of similar origin?

I decided to avoid Amy Sue that day. Our last encounter had ended on an unpleasant, unsettling note. If she had been forced to lie about the boys – either as part of her belief system or by something else – I didn't want to put her on the spot. I could pick up some things at the little grocery store. I'd been known to survive for days on little more than chips, Twinkies, and orange pop.

I would begin my day back up at the cemetery. I had a hunch. By the time I picked up a supply of goodies and sat in the car long enough to devour a bag of Fritos and a pop, it was seven o'clock. I parked up at the cemetery and walked to the tree under which I had sat during 'Spencer's night'. I examined the ground in the area, remembering that something – an acorn I thought – had dropped to the ground there beside me. I estimated where that would have been and got down on my hands and knees. I had no idea what I was looking for – perhaps only an acorn.

At one point my hand pressed against a stick – maybe a spike or pencil. I picked it up. At first glance it looked like the stub of a black pencil. I stood up examining it more thoroughly and determined it was a hard carbon rod, encircled at one end by a metal ring. A foot long, wire, pigtail had been soldered to it. I knew immediately what it was. Memories of my college production of Arthur Miller's, *The Crucible*, flashed in my memories. We had used an arc light to project backgrounds on the set. An arc light is basically just two small carbon sticks set to touch each other – end to end. It produces an extremely powerful, single-point, well focused, light source. The carbon rod I had just found was new – unused. As I recalled they did not grow on trees.

I looked up into the branches above me not really able to determine if anything seemed out of the ordinary. I circled the tree. Nailed to the back were a series of foot long lengths of one by fours making a ladder of a kind up the trunk. Again I saw visions from my past – the means of access to the tree house my friend and I built when we were ten. (A pull-up rope ladder would have been better. *Girls* could climb the steps!!!)

The wood was weathered and nail heads rusted, but I had no way of determining how many years it may have been in place. I climbed, testing the first few steps against my hundred and eighty pounds. I made my way to the top. It led up to a wide fork, which proved not to be your run of the mill fork in a hundred year old Oak tree. This one was fully electrified with a weather tight double socket secured to the tree at the end of a power line skillfully concealed as it was strung through the trees from the light post at the front gate.

I looked further. Two more step-like supports were in place. After a few moments of cogitating, I envisioned a three foot long, one by twelve set in place on top of them making a substantial shelf for an arc projector. I figured I suddenly had nailed down an explanation for the galloping riders - images projected against the fog and trees. Someone had been up above me the whole time I had been there that night. He had clearly preceded me and was set up, waiting, prior to my arrival.

Had the show been just for my benefit? Might it be that the performance was repeated periodically so a sprinkling of the young initiates would witness it; just enough to keep the legend alive?

I was still stumped as to the motivation for such an elaborate scam. It seemed to boil down to one of two possibilities: building an economic advantage through the publicity and anticipated, ghost-related, visitor revenue; or scare tactics, the purpose of which I hadn't a clue. Perhaps it was tied to trying to keep people off the Inn's third floor. Things kept bringing me back to the Inn and that suggested Jan and John's fine hand in it all.

There could be a third reason; such an operation would surely reinforce the religistition among the citizenry – a move that might seem necessary by some if outside influences were felt to be eroding the local belief system.

As I stepped down onto the ground, I felt a sense of discontent; maybe it was disenchantment. It was as if I had been rooting for the galloping youngsters to have, in



fact, been something otherworldly. I had grown attached to the boys of *C-Patrol*. I felt their sense of isolation and desperation. I felt their shame and helplessness. They were so young. In my mind they had made the correct decision – choosing to flee into constructive lives rather than to charge into immediate, senseless, death.

It left open all the deaths that had been attributed to them – historically as well as recently. Another possibility came to mind. There could be *two* – double – sources for all of this: one the scamming I had uncovered here and at the Inn; the other being appearances by the specters themselves. I shivered at the idea. What if the movie that had been projected had actually been taken of the galloping apparitions' images? I shivered again and walked back to my car, glancing over my shoulder more than once.

I checked in the trunk. Everything that should be there was there. I looked ahead into the car as I unlocked the door. There was nothing that should not be there. I checked the back seat – slashers, chainsaw murders, the elderly tea serving ladies from *Arsenic and Old Lace*? I had no idea what I was looking for.

I felt uneasy there in the cemetery so hurried back to the Inn. The lady in the grocery had graciously given me an extra bag, one large enough to hold the little uniform so I could take it up to my suite for further examination without risking questions. Again, I didn't know what I would be looking for.

Jan was at the desk. I called to her from the front door.

"Messages?"

"She shook her head."

"Thanks. See you later."

I headed on up to my room wondering if Davis was in his suite as I passed the door. My Imp, undaunted by the packed suitcase, merely sat it outside the hall door making it easily available to accompany me when I left. I could smile about it. It had become a game of sorts that sent far fewer chills up my back than it had originally.

I retrieved the bag and locked the hall door from the inside with both the key and the chain. My immediate mission was to find a way into the attic. It was probably more idle curiosity than anything related to my book. Still, the specters seemed to have some association with the Inn. The attic just might offer something that would be of help.

With my groceries arranged on my dresser and my new, top-a-the-line, grocery bought, flashlight in hand, I set off into the passageway, climbing the ladder to the third

floor. It was with some caution that I entered the first closet and then the room itself. It was empty like it had been on my other visits. I could find no opening up into the attic in the closet. There had been none in the passage way. It may be out in the hall.

Again, with caution, I opened the door into the darkness of the third floor hall. I stepped out, closed the door behind me, and began a search of the ceiling with the beam of my flashlight. In the end there was nothing so mysterious about it. Directly above the trapdoor that gave access to the third floor from the ante room, was a pull down stairway into the attic.

It was ancient in design and worked by a series of weights and pulleys like house windows had in the early twentieth century. The rope loop hung down only a few inches from the eight foot ceiling. I made several attempts jumping at it before snagging it with two fingers. It creaked with a kind of insistence that would not be silenced even through careful, patient handling. I figured no one was there to be startled. If I were being watched it had been planned, so one additional creak more or less would make little difference. As I mounted the first step I realized I was being foolish, *stupid*, might better describe my actions. I was climbing into the unknown with the great likelihood there could be danger lurking just above.

The ladder creaked. The noise from the turbines was far louder than I had anticipated and whined with an unnerving, high pitched squeal. There was turbulence in the air and it rushed by me like an endless parade of wayward whirlwinds.

My intellectual assessment had no influence on my legs and I was soon standing there waist high into the attic. Several huge windows on each end flooded the area with soft light. It was floored. I proceeded up the few remaining steps and was soon standing there, hands on my hips surveying the vast area.

It reeked of the same sweet musty smell I had experienced in the vicinity of the dumbwaiter in the basement. I concluded that was probably associated with the variety of wood used in the building. I had entered the enormous, single, room at approximately its center. The grates that were in place on the floor, covering the dozens of exhaust ducts, conformed to no particular pattern, shape or size, and each clattered against the onrushing air. The various noises combined into a din that became unnerving.

I walked north to the window and looked out over the trees. I could see part of

the town in the valley.

Along the sloping back wall were what appeared to be bunks. There were several dozen sets, three high and double width, front to back. They were simple frames with wooden bottoms held in place by strong, old, roughhewn, two by fours that *were* actually two inches by four inches. The mouse infested remnants of mattresses remained in several of them.

Surely not servant's quarters. Perhaps a part of the underground railroad. I needed to put in a call to my old friend in his rocker at the Museum and see what he could tell me about that operation in this area. I made a mental note as I walked across the room to the south.

Two thirds of the way to the outside wall – against which my suite sat two floors below – *two* oddities caught my attention. The *first* was an array of several hundred bales of freshly cut hay stacked five high in a circle around the *second*. *That* was another trapdoor – six feet square. Upon closer examination with my flashlight – the light from the windows was blocked by the hay – I discovered that the trapdoor had no hinges. Instead, there were four rope loops – one in each corner; their function was to lift the door up and out of the way leaving the hole open. I looked above the opening. There was a somewhat smaller . . . how can I describe it . . . wooden platform suspended from four ropes – one attached to each corner. The ropes were drawn up through large, sturdy looking pulleys well secured to reinforced rafters. They were then wound onto four wide take-up wheels attached to a large, geared down, electrical motor.

My conjecture was that the opening was directly over the dumbwaiter, which stopped at the third floor, and that the platform was lowered and raised through the hole to move hay in and out of the attic. Why? From where? Hay did seem to form a probable link to Jesse and his operation. My confusion had suddenly become compounded. I needed to find a way into the ballroom on the third floor but I would not ask John for the key. If he and Jan were running some illicit operation in there I didn't want to make my interest obvious.

I knelt at one corner of the big trapdoor and lifted it several feet so I could get a good look. The room below was pitch black. Using my flashlight I looked where I could. Mostly I saw the hole used by the dumbwaiter. From where I knelt I could only look into the south section of the area. There were tables and chairs and several machines

unfamiliar to me.

At that moment a light went on in the ballroom and I heard a man's voice call out.  
"Who's there? Billy, that you?"

I doused the light and reset the trapdoor. I made my way as quickly and quietly as possible to the folding stairs and then hurried back along the hall to the room that offered entrance into my secret passage way.

I stopped to catch my breath at the bottom of the first ladder, and then quickly made my way back across the stairwell and into my suite. I listened at the closet door for the tell-tale sounds of a pursuer. There were none. I went into the sitting room and collapsed into the couch.

The man and his voice had suggested several things. First, that it was not entirely unexpected that someone *might*, legitimately, be up in the attic at that time of day – let's see, that would have been a little after nine a.m. It also made the Billy connection. Of course there might be more than one Billy in town, but only one whose name had been mentioned where I was concerned. I had not been pursued. Did that person not think it significant enough to investigate? Perhaps that person didn't know about the passages or even the customary method for accessing the attic? He did have a key, however.

Why would the pull down stairs not have been secured shut from above if something illicit was going on up there? As it was, any inquisitive person walking along the third floor could have . . . Oh! I saw the fallacy in my thinking. No one *would* be walking along the third floor.

The bag containing the uniform was on the coffee table. I shook it out into my lap. I wasn't a seamstress but I knew brand new clothing when I saw it. The cloth smelled off the bolt new. It had never been laundered. So much for the poor little ghost wandering around eternity in the nude. It may have also verified Spencer's contention that he had no knowledge of such a uniform.

So, it had been planted. There was virtually no chance it had been left for Spencer's benefit. The boys told me all quite solemnly that just wasn't done. I believed them. That left what seemed to be the only other viable explanation. It was there for me to find. But why? What purpose would it serve for me to find it? Still another attempt to scare me away, perhaps? Something to write about – something with which

to intrigue my readers?

In size it would have fit Spencer. That meant someone knew that both the boy and I would be up there. That *he* would be there that night had been known from the day he was born, I supposed. That I would be there could not have been known for more than two days at the most. If the uniform had been left for my benefit, somebody's nimble fingers had been very busy. I could search for the seamstress. The Reverend might even help since he knew the quilters so well. But what purpose would be served? If it were to be kept a secret there in Yates Corner it *would* be kept a secret.

It was a strange realization. The only person I felt sure might betray the local tradition of *religistition silence* was the minister of the people who swore by it. Again, though, what purpose would be served? Once more I felt a strange, sad, sense of loss as I repacked the little uniform.

I *needed* coffee. I was well beyond the point of merely wanting it. I locked the door and went downstairs. Jan and John were both at the desk. I stopped to make small talk. They seemed nervous - agitated even. It was a side of them I had not seen. Perhaps as the weekend performances approached they began to get uptight.

"I'm going for coffee. Can I refill your mugs?" I asked.

"No. We're fine. Thanks." John said.

The two of them smiled nervously at each other. I would explore it further after I soothed my soul with a sip or two of caffeine.

Back at the desk, again, I pursued the conversation.

"Nice boys you have working at the Inn. I had a good time chatting with them here the other evening."

"Here? The other evening? I'm not sure what you're talking about," John said, brow furrowed. He bit at his lower lip.

"Donny, Junior, Specks – the boys who help Hank on the weekends."

"Must be some confusion," Jan said. "The boys who work here are named, Mike, Bruce and Rick. They haven't been here any evening this week have they, Honey?"

Jan looked her husband in his face and shook her head.

"Not this week. They pick up their checks on Fridays when they report to work."

It was not the information they would have reasonably shared with each other in such a situation. I hadn't mentioned anything about them having been there to pick up

their checks. Their deception had been delivered for my benefit. It was unnerving, however. No boys at the café. No boys at the Inn. Different names, although they matched those given to me by Hank. I didn't press; it was an issue that *would* need to be pressed later. I returned to my room.

On the floor just inside the door to my room was an envelope that had apparently been slipped through the crack underneath. I picked it up and removed a single sheet of paper. It bore two requests. First, talk with Sheriff Chance about the disappearance of Elmer Myers and then meet the writer, 'up the old lane to Hank's place' at ten that morning.

I punched 7 on my cell phone - speed dial for the Sheriff.

"Sheriff Chance," the deep voice answered.

"Sheriff, this is Marc Miller, the writer."

"Yes. Good morning. Got up on your own did you?"

It had been a humorous jab relating to the day before.

"Just like a big boy," I replied trying to maintain the friendly tone he had set. "I just received an anonymous note suggesting I should ask you about the disappearance of Elmer Myers."

"Elmer is – or was, I'm not sure – a fine young man, always trying to make things right between folks. Twenty six. Wife and two kids. About two months ago all four just vanished. I'm ashamed to say I haven't been able to find so much as one solitary clue. It's interesting someone chose to tell you about it. It makes it appear related to the book you're writing. Can't see any connection right off the top of the deck, however. I don't suppose the note was signed."

"No. Like I said, anonymous. It does appear to be a woman's handwriting. That's all I have. Two months ago you say. Wasn't that about the same that other man – Jerry Dobson – the guy from Ohio – disappeared also?"

"I'm going to ask you not to pursue the Ohio man's departure. I'll fill you in on that when the time is proper. I *can* tell you that both took place within twenty-four hours of each other."

"Since Jerry Dobson is off limits I'm sure that Jack Davis is, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Same initials. Same town in Ohio. Same credit card number."

"I see. You seem to be a first class investigator."

"Just a snoop. Don't claim to be anything as skillful as you suggest."

"Well, you obviously know there is some connection. I'll ask you to just leave it at that for the time being. Sometime during the next forty-eight hours it should all be out in the open. Just be careful and stick to your book. Don't get sidetracked."

I thought I'd take one more shot.

"You're referring, of course, to the bales of hay in the attic here at the Inn and the nocturnal activities in the ballroom."

"You know about that, too. I guess we need to meet and talk. I'm tied up 'til five. How about I meet you in your room at six?"

"I'll be here. Thank you."

"One more thing, Marc, and if you quote me on this I'll deny it. Jesse Rakes, for all his glad handing and back slapping, is a scoundrel without a conscious. Everybody around here knows it but nobody would ever dare speak of it. Stay your distance from him – and that would be as close to a direct order as I have any right to give you."

"That was the picture I had developed of the man all by myself. I promise that I'll be careful. See you at six, here. Oh, there is one more thing. Do you know the boys – the teens – who work up here with Hank on the weekends?"

"I know who they are. Can't say I really know them. Come from good families. Fathers are local business men."

"Do you know their names?"

"Oh. Sure. Let's see, there's Donny Anderson, Wilton Parker - I think he goes by Junior – and Specks. You know, I guess I don't really know his actual name – Specks Roland."

"You just made my day, Sheriff. For some reason, after I spoke with them and photographed them the other evening, their very existence is being denied to me. Hank and later Jan and John even recited a whole different set of names to me. I don't want them to end up in the missing persons file."

"Very strange. Only one person powerful enough around here to manage that. I'll look into it. You tend to your knittin'! By the way have you seen the Reverend Carlton this morning?"

"No, I haven't. Sorry."

I hung up. What was the meaning of his question about Carlton? It came so close on the heels of his reference to someone with power - which, by definition, the Reverend in Yates Corner did seem to possess.

The Sheriff had included me as a marginal confidante in some other investigation. I understood that was only because I was close to stumbling onto something big and he didn't want me ruining it. I would do my best not to spoil things for him.

It led me to consider the power structure in the county - the big four as I saw it. The Reverend in religious matters, and suddenly, perhaps, other things as well. The Sheriff in law enforcement. Granny where supernatural forces were concerned. And, Jesse Rakes where who knew what was concerned. He was the major employer in the area so he certainly held a good deal of economic power. I now had every reason to think it was more than that.

Not without difficulty, I rescued two Twinkies from their seemingly impenetrable cellophane prisons and left for Hank's lane. It was already hot - 92 degrees at mid-morning was a harbinger of 102 by mid-afternoon. The air was again heavy with humidity and the dependable breeze was nowhere to be found. I looked back at the stately old Inn, particularly interested in the big windows in the end of the attic.

Something was wrong with the picture. The wind driven turbines atop the roof were rotating at full speed and yet there was not a leaf fluttering on the entire hillside. They had to have been electrified. I needed to ask John about that. It was my understanding that wind driven exhaust system was proudly touted as a milestone in architectural innovation at the time it was built. To use electric motors seemed almost sacrilegious.

There was a second interesting occurrence taking place as I watched. A curtain was being rolled up from the bottom of the window. I hadn't noticed it when I was there, but then it would have been rolled up well above the top of the windows and that area received only minimal attention. Down at night to block any light from inside and up in the day to prevent suspicion.

I moved on and turned up the overgrown lane toward Hank's, licking the last, glorious, golden, remnants of Twinkie cake from my fingers. I saw no one up ahead. The specific rendezvous point had not been specified so I continued.



"Over here, Marc," came a woman's whispered voice off to my right.

I turned and left the path to search it out. Five yards into the sparse underbrush I saw her. I must admit I was surprised.

"Amy Sue. I certainly didn't expect to be meeting you."

"I only got a minute but there is some things you gotta know. Sorry 'bout the thing with the boys. Here's the deal. Elmer Meyers is or was my first cousin. I'm real close with his wife, Paula. The day before they disappeared she told me Elmer was going to go to the authorities about something connected with Uncle Jesse. Jesse may be squirrel smilin' kin, but he's a gosh awful human being. He's into something really bad but his workers won't say what. He threatens to harm their families if they ever breathe a word. He's got us all scared. Billy does special jobs for him, I guess you could say, and he had Billy tell me I had to lie about the boys like I did or he'd kill Granny. If he finds out I've told you he will kill her but I figure you're our only hope around here to get the authorities to look into things."

"You're a brave lady, Amy Sue. I think you can rest easy because things are already underway to fix what's wrong around here."

"I knew it. You're really a secret agent, ain't you?"

"No, nothing like that. Let's just say I've been contacted by the people who are closing in on things. I'm going to trust you as my friend not to breathe a word of that to anybody – not even Granny.

"You have my promise on my momma's spirit. I gotta go. Don't look right when I'm not at the Blue Gingham."

"Blue Gingham? That's the name of your cafe?"

"Yup. I guess you'd have no way a knowin' that, would you. Sign fell down when I was just a little girl. Since everybody 'round here knew the name it just never seemed important to put it back up."

She administered an unexpected, though pleasant, kiss to my cheek and left. In case my mid-morning stroll was being monitored – and I felt sure it was – I continued on up the lane and circled back to the Inn by way of Hank's cabin. Hank was not in sight. It may have been nap time.

Several things had come together for me on the way back to the Inn. The hard, extra-wide, clay tracks on the other lane into Hank's place could have been made by the

regular deliveries of hay by Jesse's semis. The tunnel was used to deliver the bales from the carriage house to the dumbwaiter to the attic. Oh to be a mouse in the corner of the ball room. It had likely been the groaning of the dumbwaiter that I had heard that night in the hall outside the ball room. The how of the operation seemed to be falling into place. The why still eluded me. What happened to the hay once it arrived in the attic? Hay? It was *hay* and that made no sense!

Back in my room I called the County Museum and spoke with the old gentleman there.

"Underground railroad? Yes, Sir," he said. "It was quite extensive in these parts. The Inn was right at the center of it all. It's never been verified, I guess, but there's bound to be secret rooms of some kind in there. The story is that travelin' Yankee salesmen, sympathetic to the cause, had special wagons with double floors – room for three or four people laid out flat. The salesmen would stay overnight at the Inn all legitimate like and on the return trip north, the Negroes who was hidin' there would be taken up over the line into Missouri to freedom. More than a thousand families made it north through the Inn. Lots a intrigue back then. The Inn owner used Negro help in the basement so the ones just passing through blended right in. Quite a operation."

"You don't have anything more specific about the Inn."

"That's it so far as I know. It's funny."

"Funny?" I asked.

"Funny that in all my years here I s'pose I've only been asked about the underground railroad a half dozen times and then here in the past two months two a you guys is askin' 'bout it."

"Two. Who was the other?"

"Another Yankee I remember that much. His initials was J. D. I can tell you that, too. It's a game I play. Like *you* are M. M. – J. D. for Jack Daniels and M. M. for Marilyn Monroe. Both beautiful creations ya know."

He giggled in appreciation of his own humor. I had received more than I'd hoped for. I hung up and sat back to think.

Why the mysterious goings on about the boys? More scare tactics? My guess was it had to do with the photographs. I spread all the kid's pictures out on the coffee table – the ones I took by telephoto lens from the valley, the ones I got from Granny,

and the ones I took of the boys at the Inn. It was the first time I had taken time to really make those side by side comparisons. One thing popped out at me immediately, though it didn't seem to provide any answers. The faces in the windows were not Granny's boys. They were *my boys* *The Young Indiana Inmates*. Although the two generations bore a remarkable resemblance, close examination revealed there were significant differences.

The carnival guy took the boys' pictures and passed them on to whomever was eventually using them in the windows. There may have been a middle man who prepared the positive slides for use in the windows. Why the new pictures when old ones were available? Why try to be so accurate anyway. A boy's face would seem to be a boy's face. Color! Granny's pictures were in black and white and to add the necessary realism they needed to be in color. Specters didn't fade into black and white.

It raised another spine tingling thought. If the color pictures had *just* been added that summer, and the faces had been seen in color *before* that summer – way back before color photography, in fact – the *specter theory* seemed to gain some legitimacy.

Then my suspicious nature took the opposite tack. What if the boys that Hank had named *were* the ones who really did work with him but the other three had been sent in for my benefit because of their resemblance to the *C-Patrol* kids? Why would that matter? It would seem to involve the Sheriff somehow since he named the original boys.

It would matter if the one running the scam believed there actually were *C-Patrol* ghosts that popped up from time to time. The real faces and the fake faces would need to be similar. Finally, I'd had an idea that provided some meaningful connection. Still why have them disappear? Unless they *were* ringers and the bad guy figured I might break the youngsters under repeated questioning. Maybe. Marginal.

So many questions and such tentative, nebulous answers.

There was a knock on my door. I went to answer it. The picture wasn't pretty. There was a dagger driven into the door frame pinning a billfold open to a driver's license. It belonged to Elmer Myers. A six foot strand of stringy old rope draped over it was wet with fresh blood.

I stepped out of my room to look down the hall. Ten yards away stood a lone Confederate Soldier, tall and composed, aiming a rifle in my direction. I saw the spark

and the puff of smoke. I heard the shot ring out and felt the slug burning its way into my flesh.



## CHAPTER TEN

### Ubiquitous Disquietude

I fell to the floor, my thigh ablaze with pain. I crawled back inside, shoving the door closed with my one working leg. With the aid of the desk chair I managed to stand and lock the door. I pulled the heavy wooden desk across the entrance, then limped my way into the bathroom and closed the door all but a crack. I dialed the Sheriff as I kept an eye on the sitting room.

“Sheriff Chance, here.”

“Sheriff. Marc Miller. I’m in my room at the Inn. I’ve just been shot in the hip by somebody uniformed as a Confederate Soldier. It happened out in the hall – within the last two minutes.”

“Are you armed?”

“No. Guns are revolting to me, but I have a means of escape in case the man invades my room. So far that has not happened.”

“Escape?”

“I’ve located a secret passageway and unless the shooter also knows about it, I’ll be safe. I’d sure like some help here, though.”

“I can have a car there in five minutes. I’m way north of Banks so it’ll be twenty minutes at best for me. The deputy’s name is Hammond – Wayne Hammond.”

“I’ll be waiting. Have him meet me in my bathroom. I have the hall door barricaded so he’ll need to muscle his way in.”

I put the phone in my pocket and reached for a towel to use as a tourniquet. My adversary didn’t seem to be trying to force entry. I kept watching, my eyes flitting between my awkward attempt at first aid and the door in the other room.

The burning in my leg had lessened but not the bleeding. I assumed that my blood and flesh had cooled the slug. My full attention was drawn back to the sitting room door as I heard the knob begin to rattle and saw it turning back and forth. The deputy could not have arrived that soon even if he had been sitting in the lobby. The light in the bathroom went out.

It was at that same moment that haunting cries began from the vent in the ceiling.

“Help me!” the voice moaned. “Help me! Set me free!”

It sobbed as it called out, louder than I recalled from the first occasion. There was also an added touch this time. It called to me by name.

“Mr. Miller! Mr. Miller! Take my hand.”

Even though my heart had never raced so wildly, I quickly found plausible explanations for everything that had happened up to that point. But then . . .

A face appeared in the mirror over the sink. It was a child’s face – Young Darrel Elder’s face – topped by a gray, Confederate hat and bound at the neck by the tightly buttoned, narrow, Confederate collar. The clarity of the image varied and it shifted positions on the mirror making it appear, there in the dark, that it was floating about, untied to any surface. It was in color.

A distinct, tell-tale, creak from the bathroom closet distracted me and quickly brought my fine escape plan into serious question. The door to the passage way was opening. I had nothing available to use as a prop against the closet door. I removed the key from the inside of the bathroom door and moved into the bedroom, closing the door and locking it. Then I turned and crossed the room ready to do the same with the door between me and the sitting room. I placed the key into the lock so the door could be closed and secured in a single motion. I continued to watch the sitting room door and listened for the progress of the intruder in my bathroom.

I contemplated a jump from the bedroom window but it was a good fifteen feet to a rock terrace below. I thought about hiding in the closet there in the bedroom. That would merely be a stalling action and would rob me of what little mobility I had at that point.

The knob at the bathroom door turned several times, then stopped. I began speaking to myself out loud.

“Let’s see, specters should be able to float right through doors, should they not?” I asked in an inane attempt at self-diversion.

If I only had my camera I could take a lesson from Jimmy Stewart in *Rear Window* and snap flashes into the eyes of the oncoming challenger. Challengers. In my case it was now plural. I was being sandwiched between two of them.

The figure in the bathroom spoke.

“Mr. Miller. Let me in. This is Jack Davis.”

My would-be killer seemed to be footnoting the event with his name – not a name that filled me with great joy or hope at the moment. A name that even the Sheriff refused to speak with me about. I removed the small drawer from the dresser and stood at the ready beside the one still cracked door into the front room. I wouldn't go down without a fight. Again he called out.

"Mr. Miller. I'm here to help you. Jack Davis."

Again my flesh crawled. "Help me into eternity?" I asked myself.

The activity at the hall door suddenly ceased. I heard a key being inserted and then the unmistakable clicks as it was turned. A moment later the door came crashing open. I was distracted by the simultaneous forcing of the bathroom door behind me. Where were the cops when you needed one?

"M r. M i l l e r !" came a distorted call from the sitting room.

"M r. M i l l e r !" came a second distorted call from the bathroom.

I looked back and forth through clouding vision, having no idea how to proceed. My blood loss had been more significant than I realized and I felt myself taking the inescapable, faint-driven, header onto the floor.

\* \* \*

I fought to hold the dream in mind as I roused to consciousness but bit by bit it slid away. There had been faces and mirrors and tunnels and pie, kisses and shots and fog – and, oh, yes, dancing Twinkies. It was gone by the time I opened my eyes. I was flat on my back, stark naked, under a sheet, on my bed in the Inn. Two strange men were there with me. The pain in my leg had stopped though I sensed throbbing. In a rush it brought back the events just past.

I tried to raise myself with my arms feeling the need to assume a less vulnerable position.

"Whoa there, friend," the larger of the two men said in a gentle voice, which seemed fully incompatible with his mass.

"You were shot."

"I know that and now it seems I'm being held captive."

The man shook his head and smiled.

"I'm Jim and this is Tommy. We're physician assistants and Tommy, here, just removed a marble sized ball a lead outta your hip."



Tommy picked it up and showed it to me.

"You're gonna have a sizeable hurt on for some days."

"Medics. I see. I assume I pulled through, then."

They smiled.

"Sheriff Chance?"

"Waiting in the other room," Jim said. "His deputy came through the door just as you hit the floor. I'll tell him your back among the living."

While he was gone Tommy gave me some instructions.

"Shot you full of penicillin - your medical card didn't suggest an allergy to it. There's a vial of more powerful stuff on the night stand. One with meals three times a day. Pink pills are for pain. You can read the instructions. Get to a doctor as soon as you can. No muscular damage to speak of. You should be fit as a fiddle in a couple of weeks."

"You're saying my butt contains no muscles to damage?"

"Neither does your brain and it seems to function just fine."

The man was quick both in wit and with a smile. I liked him.

"Thank you. I appreciate all you've apparently done for me."

"Glad to do it and here's the bill. Master card, Discover or Visa."

He smiled. I understood the drill and motioned for my pants which were draped over the back of a chair. With the number copied and the receipt signed, they seemed finished.

As Sheriff Chance entered they left. With some pain and difficulty I scooted up into a sitting position, my back against the headboard.

"Hope this doesn't spoil you're investigation," I said, extending my hand and shaking.

"Just speeded things up a bit. You want to tell *me* or shall I tell *you*?"

"I did have an idea flash through my head when I saw the hemp rope on the dagger. Did you find that soldier, by the way?"

"Sure did. Buck Rakes, Jesse's right hand man. What was your flash?"

He pulled up a chair obviously interested in my take on it all.

"I figured Jesse was raising vast fields of marijuana, bringing it here to the ballroom to dry, packaging it someway and sequestering the packages inside the re-

baled hay. Then his trucks that delivered hay all over the five state area became the fully unsuspected transportation network.

"The ballroom had been used for two reasons. One was its isolation – a spot up on the third floor where authorities would never think of looking for such an illicit operation. Had the marijuana been found growing in isolated places, Jesse could have made a case that it was all self-seeded from the hemp growing days of old. Had it been found drying in his barns, however, he'd have had to pay the piper.

"The Ball Room was a doubly good place due to the constant flow of air to quickly dry the marijuana and remove the odor high above the town. I suspected that ventilation played an important part in whatever was going on in the ballroom when I discovered the exhaust turbines had become motor driven.

"I understood how the operation had been kept secret when I learned the way Jesse used threats of death to loved ones if anyone crossed him. I first suspected something like that when I learned he only employed married men. It allowed the most effective targets for such threats – a man's wife and children.

"I assume the two J. D.s were both government agents and that the first one had been contacted by Myers. When Jesse found out about the betrayal he killed J. D. and perhaps Myers and his family as well. The killing of the old people was probably done to maintain the vengeful – menacing - side of the *C-Patrol* legend, which worked to keep folks away from the third floor here in the Inn.

"My sudden appearance here was seen as threatening by Jesse. It meant he abandoned some of the care he had typically taken in the past, at least where maintaining the legend was concerned. The silent riders up at the cemetery alerted me to that. Usually there would have been an audio portion to the event but I moved too fast and there wasn't time to set up the entire show.

"Jesse's downfall was really dictated by the parochial way of thinking he had learned as he grew up here in this area. Amazing as it is to me, these good people are only minimally affected by the World at large. Jesse assumed I would be intimidated to the same degree that the people around here would be by the threatening supernatural events he set up: the original three word threat on the mysteriously appearing sheet of paper; the faces in the windows; the images of the galloping soldiers; the inexplicable disappearance of the local teenagers I had photographed; and the several confederate

soldiers he inserted here and there to harass me. When, those things didn't seem to be enough to send me packing, he moved up to killing the old couple, feeling certain that would be the clincher.

"I assume the faces I saw in the windows the day I arrived were part of a practice session by Buck during the daylight hours and that I just happened to look up at the right – or wrong – moment. Hank, privy to Inn reservations, evidently forewarned Jesse that a writer was coming for an extended stay and that made him nervous."

"Jack's blue shirts and jacket were attempts to lure Jesse into making an attempt on his life. I assume Jack had back up shadowing him at all times. I also assume it was Jack or his helpers who provided me with the subtle hints to leave - packing my bag and providing a map marked with my route back to Indiana. He didn't want me sticking my nose in and spoiling his investigation. For some reason he didn't feel he could take me into his confidence.

"Feds!" the Sheriff said, throwing up his hands and smiling. "You're right-on just about everything - *well almost everything.*"

Through the mental fogginess lingering in my head from whatever sedative the Medics had given me, I heard a sinister tone in those last three words and I panicked. I was suddenly gripped by the possibility that Sheriff Chance had been the mastermind behind Jesse, and that at that very moment the big man intended to kill me right there in my bed. It seemed unreasonable to me that a man like Chance would not have known about marijuana fields in his county. Also, it could have been that from information supplied by the first J. D. he got a line on Elmer Myers' willingness to sell out the operation so *he* killed the man before he could make his statement.

The Sheriff removed his pistol from its holster. It was an older model, long barrel, six-shooter, like something out of a Roy Rogers movie. He spoke as he fondled it.

"You said you hated guns. So do I. You know that in the thirty some years I've been in law enforcement I've never once shot a man. *Could* have on occasion but didn't."

I assumed I was to be his first. I could find nothing to say.

"It was Jesse's cornfields that caused us the most problem, you know."

I still could find nothing to say, though his monologue was not taking the turn I was expecting.

"Planted the corn two feet apart in both directions. That allowed plenty of light in between for the lower growing marijuana plants to flourish. Came up after the corn was hip high and was harvested by hand just before corn pickin' time. The Fed's had photo planes lookin' around here for years. Never a sign of them plants. That's the part I don't think you had figured out."

He put his pistol away and snapped the safety belt across it. I sat there puzzled - relieved but puzzled. My mind was clearly still making less than quality decisions. I sighed and nodded, at last able to speak.

"You're right about that. I certainly missed the cornfield angle."

I felt myself relaxing and feeling very foolish. I shook my head as if to clear it.

"So, you got enough information to get on with that book?" he asked as he stood and adjusted his wide brimmed hat, signaling, I assumed, that he was ready to leave."

"Almost. I have one historic connection I'm trying to make between the Underground Railroad and the sightings of the faces in the third floor windows. You don't happen to know when that began, do you."

"Sorry, not a history buff. Granny Rakes should know if anybody does. In case I don't see you again, have a safe journey and don't think too harshly about us Arkies."

"Actually, I've grown very fond of the folks in these parts. Everyplace seems to have its share of Jesses. That in no way minimizes the worth of the rest. It's been good knowing you."

It had been a lame and inadequate goodbye on my part, but it seemed reasonable since just minutes earlier I believed he was going to kill me.

He left and Jack entered.

"So *you're* the Imp who's been playing games with my belongings," I said offering my hand.

"You don't take subtle suggestions very well. I assume you're not married or if you are, won't be for long."

It was good for a chuckle between us. He continued.

"Sorry for the scare. Sheriff called me as soon as he got off the line to you thinking I could get up here faster than his deputy. Someone should have called you back I suppose."

I nodded leaving no doubt about my full agreement.

"So, the bad guys all rounded up?" I asked, still uneasy about certain odds and ends.

"It's happening as we speak. Probably only three will be arrested: Jesse, Buck - his assistant - and Hank who ran the operation here at the Inn."

"Hank with a K," I said more to myself than to Jack. "I understand it was Buck who shot me."

"Deputy Hammond caught him with the smoking gun, as it's said.

"So, did I get hit in such a non-vital area because Buck is a good shot or because Buck is a poor shot?"

"I hear he can put a hole through the center of a quarter at fifty paces. His job was to put some serious muscle behind the threat, I suppose."

"It seems he succeeded. By the way did you or your Imps set up some image producing gizmo aimed at my bathroom mirror?"

He looked genuinely puzzled.

"No. I'm not a gizmo type of guy – sneaky, but no gizmos."

I supposed I would believe him.

"I need to be on my way," he said. "Glad you got out of this no worse off than you did."

In a final humorous gesture, he left through the bathroom.

Jan and John became my next visitors.

"The Bluegrass Twins," I said by way of greeting.

"That's us," Jan said. "Sorry about the deception - the boys - but there were terrible threats made and we couldn't figure any other way. You'll be staying through the weekend?"

"Probably not. Need to finish up a couple of things and then head home."

They nodded.

"Sorry I won't get to hear you play."

"We have some CDs. We'll trade you one in advance for a copy of your yet to be delivered book."

"That's a deal."

"Six young men out here that would like to say hi," John said, motioning through the door into the sitting room.

"Well, if it isn't Curly, Moe and Larry, and Curly, Moe and Larry," I said.

They smiled and Donny spoke.

"Sorry about the disappearing act but I suppose you heard about the threats."

"Yes, I did. Just glad to see you guys are all okay."

I turned to Specks.

"I understand you recently went for a stroll in the woods."

His face lit up.

"Oh! Yes, Sir! And I plan to go back agin and agin."

After the required jostling of one another, it was Spencer's turn.

"Me and Jake and Duke here were wond'rin' if you needed anymore *Indian Inmates*."

"The three older boys giggled."

"It just so happens that I do need three more. Know of any willing subjects?"

"We could do it," Jake said. The three nodded, first at each other and then at me.

"Okay then, Spence, get my camera from the front room.

I soon had three more young look-alikes preserved for posterity. I fumbled in the rumpled pants beside me searching for my wallet. Three twenties were distributed to the wide eyed, appreciative, youngsters. Six hands were shaken and they pushed and shoved their way out of my life.

The medics had left crutches beside the door. I was sure I wouldn't need them. I struggled to my feet. Well, I didn't really need them but what the hey, they were there. I wouldn't want to offend the nice young medics.

I got dressed and went into the bathroom to examine the medicine chest and the mirror in the door. If it had been rigged to project the face I certainly couldn't determine how. My theory had been that it was a one way mirror onto which an image had been projected from the rear, through the wall. I found no one way mirror and no hole in the back of the chest. My things were still inside occupying all three shelves.

Perhaps from the screen in the ceiling, then. I managed to drag a chair into position underneath the opening and attain a standing position on it. With my pocket knife I unscrewed the cover feeling sure that the duct must house the projector. Again there was nothing there and no indication that anything ever had been. I replaced the

covering and got down – an act considerably more difficult than mounting it had been.

Apparently it would remain one of those unexplainables. I could live with unexplainables. I didn't like to, but I could. I'd rather leave them that way than to build elaborate, other worldly legends to explain them. However, such instances clearly pleased the tiny part of me that wanted to believe in ghosts and such. I nestled this one into a cozy spot somewhere between my cold intellect and my fascination with things other worldly.

I looked at my watch and was amazed at the time. No wonder I was hungry. High noon. My intention was to visit the café. I would even give in and use the elevator. I made my way to the front desk. Jan admonished me to sit down and take it easy. She offered to make me lunch. I needed to see Amy Sue so I politely took a rain check. John helped me out to my car.

I was soon at the Blue Gingham Cafe – it sounded far too fancy for a place where a bunch of smelly old men hung out. I smiled at the thought and hobbled my way inside.

"Are you a ding-dang fool?"

"Hello. I'm happy to see you, too, Amy Sue. Yes, I survived and am doing well. Thank you for your concern," I said chiding her about the greeting.

She pulled out a chair for me at my table and took my crutches.

"Here to chat or here to eat?" She said, short and to the point.

"Both, I hope."

"Sorry I was short. Just a big shock about Uncle Jesse and Buck. Buck was an uncle on the other side once removed. I know things'll be better around here now. The fear and lies can stop. Still, they was blood. It's hard."

"I'm sure. I guess I really came mostly to make certain you're okay."

"You're a sweet guy. Hope you find a sweet girl back home. I had some fantasies about me and you - if you can believe that."

She blushed and looked away for a moment.

"We're just too different though, you know? I wouldn't leave here and I doubt if you'd be comfy livin' in these parts – would ya?"

Her tone seemed to hold out one last strand of hope.

I shook my head.

"No. I think you have us both figured about right. You and Billy going to be okay now?"

"Time'll tell. I figure he was under lots a stress doin' stuff fer Jessie he knowed was wrong. Maybe that was driving him to be crazy with drink. Time'll tell. Either way, I'll be fine. I survived a dead momma givin' me birth. I survived the loss of my daddy and granddaddy. Someday I'll survive Granny's passin'. You're born, you lives, and you dies. The challenge is to do all three to the best a your abilities."

I had only a vague understanding of her philosophic pronouncement but I could see it was deeply meaningful to her. It was something about the *process* of living being somehow more important than its *quality*.

"You know that finding those pictures and projectors and all isn't going to change our beliefs about *C-Patrol* around here, don't you?"

"Yes. I am aware of that. I'm even glad about it, I suppose. It wouldn't seem right to ruin such an important part of people's lives."

"Sweet *and* understanding. You'll find a girl; I'm sure of it."

"May I ask one more question of you – about the faces at the Inn?"

"Sure, if I know the answer."

"Do you know when the faces were first reported?"

"Granny says there were faces almost from the day the Inn was finished. Lots a folks from around here was leery of goin' there."

"That far back?"

"Yup. Back then, though, they always appeared at the big windows at the ends of the attic. They was real blurry like just the eyes and mouths. Not in color like these days. Granny knows the stories better than I do."

"I think you've answered my question."

I solidified and organized my ideas as I ate. I was sure what had originally been seen were the faces of the Black People up there looking north toward freedom. The whites of their eyes and teeth-set smiles were all that could be seen against the black of the darkened room and the color of their skin.

I had found my link between the Underground Railroad and the ghosts of the *C-Patrol* lads. The first sightings – actual faces interpreted to be ghosts because of the local religistition – legitimized the area as a haven for the supernatural and when a local



resting place for the young spirits was needed, the Inn became the most logical place.

Throughout history power-mongers have used the supernatural – and its assumed power to reward or punish throughout eternity – as a primary method for controlling the behavior and allegiance of others. Jeremiah Carlton had been a master of the technique. Apparently, so had Jesse Rakes.

Somewhere along the way Jesse began augmenting the local superstition for his own purposes. Throw in the power of a few wayward souls as proof the supernatural realm exists and the hold becomes absolute. The message soon became clear: *Don't mess with the third floor or else!!!*

I convinced Amy Sue to join me in a bowl of her scrumptious cherry cobbler and we talked, in the awkward start and stop way two people do when they know they will never see each other again. I didn't promise her a copy of the book because . . . I wasn't entirely sure why. Maybe I was afraid my take on it all would offend her or tread on the beliefs that laid out her path – being born, living, and dying according to some plan. I would not risk bringing any of that into question for her.

I would spend the afternoon and evening pulling my notes together and start home at daybreak.

## EPILOGUE

### The Specters of Carlton County

The fog seemed restless as I began retracing my route up the long, winding, hill to leave Yates Corner. The first rays of morning light danced in the eerie mist as it rolled down cemetery hill.

A few yards beyond the lane, which led to the field of crosses above, a vehicle, also headed south, became visible through the fog ahead. It was stopped in the right hand lane. I pulled along side, rolling down my window and leaning across the seat to look and speak.

I was immediately confused.

Puzzled!

Stunned!

It was the van and boys I had encountered at essentially that same spot on the day I arrived.

“How can I help,” I asked, tentatively that time, trying to present a smile and fake whatever nonchalance I could muster. I looked from one to another waiting for some response.

“Got a call into Carlton’s Garage. Expect he’ll be here to help us out anytime now,” one of them replied.

Hoping to eventually muster some further explanation I continued.

“A band, I assume,” I said, indicating the sign on their van, as the shivers of Carlton County revisited my spine.

“A band of lonely souls just trying to get our act together, you could say,” came his smiling, almost poetic, reply. The others nodded and chuckled. “We’re still waitin’ for our break, I guess you could say.”

“Well, if you’re sure I can’t help, I’ll move on, then. Wouldn’t want to be rear-ended by all this traffic.”

My lines in the conversation had seemed, somehow, scripted – mandatory – familiar.

The young men smiled again and nodded suggesting my attempt at humor had not escaped him.

“We hope to be in good hands very shortly, now, Sir. Thanks for the offer.”

Perhaps I was dreaming. I knew I was not. I put the car in gear and began moving on – very slowly – drawn to the baffling scene in my rear view mirror.

Suddenly, the boys turned their attention to the hillside above them. I stopped. They began cheering and waving their arms wildly. I could see wonderful smiles light their faces even from where I sat. I opened the door and stepped out onto the road looking back, up across the car to where *they* were looking.

There, in the fog, with first sun illuminating the scene like a spotlight from heaven, I saw a huge, white horse, ridden by a tall, commanding figure, whose black cape rippled in the breeze behind him. The horse reared high and, with tall, black hat in hand, the man warmly motioned the boys to join him.

My gaze returned to the six excited youngsters on the road below.

It was a gradual, seamless, transformation that I witnessed there in the ghostly fog that August, Ozark, morning. With a gentle flickering of their figures, the boy’s clothing changed into the ragged, gray, uniforms and caps of Confederate Soldiers. The van rippled and distorted in my view, quickly dividing into six strong, spirited steeds. They were immediately mounted and the happy band of youngsters charged – whooping and hollering – up the hill toward the suddenly smiling, patiently waiting, larger than life, old horseman with the long face and pale complexion.

*The Specters of Carlton County* had found their peace.