

*Marc Miller*  
Ghost Writer



The  
Ghosts  
of  
Rutherford Mansion

By  
Marc Miller,



The ghost of Rebecca Rutherford keeps a candle lit while she roams the grounds in search of her long lost lover.

# **The Ghosts of Rutherford Mansion**

**By  
Marc Miller: ghost writer**

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Characters**

The mysterious midnight lights had begun appearing again in the second-floor window of long abandoned Rutherford Mansion. Born in the late eighteen-hundreds, the three story, brown rock, structure, clung to the top of a barren hill overlooking Forbes Crossing – stately by light of day; foreboding in the ominous, slowly shifting, shadows of the night.

The silver mines in the valley below, which had been the source of the Rutherford's wealth, had been closed some eighty years. Many believed that the town might well have followed suit. Two dozen houses, most in their final stage of life, sat in no particular pattern, within easy walking distance of the last three remaining businesses on Main Street.

The café survived, and perhaps flourished, by serving tourists, most of whom came to gawk up at the unique old building above and hear Harry – the café's octogenarian owner – spin yarns about the community's heyday and of the ghostly goings on up the hill. The hotel, a two story, rust colored, clapboard, relic of the civil war had been refurbished to meet the minimal requirements of most present-day travelers. The accommodations were touted as quaint rather than crude. It seemed to work. The rambling old building sat across the wide, graveled, street from the café. Its rear porch, which hung off the second floor, had a clear view of the Mansion on the hill above and sported a dozen, twenty-five-cents-a-peep, telescopes bolted along the warped oak railing. Next door, the general store – food, clothing, hardware, tourist bait – met most of the life sustaining needs of those who lived

in FC, as Forbes Crossing was referred to, locally. There was also a double pump filling station (recently upgraded from one) on the South edge of town but it could be debated whether or not it was actually within the village limits. And then there was the mine, no longer productive but kept open and meticulously modified to accommodate sightseers. It offered daily tours at ten, one, and four. Every Friday there was a midnight, torch-lit, walking tour up the hill to within twenty yards of the mansion, ending back at the mine for a Miner's Feast of hearty stew, sourdough bread, beverage of choice, Aunt Mildred's famous mixed berry pie and Harry's, deep-voiced, spine-tingling, dimmed light, rendering of the ghostly tale. It inevitably prickled the skin and raised the neck hair on most who listened. He was so convincing that one was moved to wonder if he had not somehow been a part of it all – way back when.

Rebecca had been the only daughter of Frank and Mary Rutherford. She was said to have been a petite, ravishing beauty with a kindly manner, long golden hair, and a smile that set boys' hearts afire. She fell in love with Johnny, the son of the mine foreman. Her parents forbade the relationship with such an uneducated, dirty-nailed, ruffian. Rebecca was overtaken with melancholy from which most believed she would never recover. Upon hearing of her great sadness, Johnny, in the dark of night, scaled the rock wall to her bedroom window to rescue her from her despair. In the early morning hours of August thirteenth, eighteen-seventy-nine they fled together on horseback during a ferocious, summer, storm. While fording the creek in the valley – by then a raging, whitewater, torrent – they were swept away and never seen again; or so goes the newspaper version of the story.

The locally popular version has the ghost of Rebecca, separated from her love in the raging storm, returning to roam the house and grounds atop the hill waiting to be reunited with her love so hand in hand they can pass over to death's reward together. She lights a candle in her window at midnight to guide her love back to her. Recently, the light had been missing for several weeks. The ghost of Johnny, the story goes on, haunts the miles of long abandoned mine shafts and

tunnels, not knowing his love awaits him only a few hundred yards up the hill. Often, at night, he can be heard working the rock with his pick and filling a tram with his shovel – his self-imposed torture for allowing his lady to be lost to the elements.

This second version is the one that has kept Forbes Crossing on the map all these years and apparently continues to fill the sizeable coffers of one Harry Harper, great, great, (whatever) grandson of Johnny's father (via a brother, of course) and current owner of the café, the hotel, the general store, and the mine.

One may be able to understand, then, why my presence in the little town has not been welcomed. I am Marc Miller, ghost writer, and I have come to Forbes Crossing to investigate and write about the mysterious Ghosts of Rutherford Mansion.

News of my pending arrival there in the rolling hills of northwest Arkansas, had preceded me. Just how, I am not yet sure. I do know that there was no room for me at what was obviously a mostly unoccupied hotel. I managed to secure a room on the second floor of Widow Wilson's house – a room she often rented out on a week by week basis. One meal a day was included. My room was cozy, with blue and brown print drapes too narrow to actually be drawn to cover either of the two windows; three table lamps – two of which worked; a double bed in one corner with a hideous – nightmare inducing –, carved, headboard but a very decent mattress; a writing table with wooden chair and floor lamp; and two recliners set so their occupants looked out the largest window directly up at Rutherford Mansion. A large, clearly handmade, blue and brown toned, braided rug covered most of the wood plank floor. I wondered how many men had given up their wool trousers so that could come into being. The bathroom was across the hall, although there was a corner sink and mirror – clearly afterthoughts – in the front, inside, corner of the room. It was stocked with towels, washcloths, and a fresh 3-pack of bar soap. I would be quite comfortable there. I hoped my coming and going at all hours of the day and night would not bother her. She – Sarah, mid-forties, dark hair, attractive in a plain sort of way – assured me it wouldn't.

By the time I had paid for the week and got minimally

settled in, it was 9:30 in the morning. I had skipped breakfast back in Springfield where I had spent the night, eager to find Forbes Crossing – no longer incorporated and not on most maps. So, I headed for the café, at that point unaware of Harry's all-encompassing hold on the town. He was out. Millie was in.

“Coffee?”

“Yes please. Black is fine.”

“Know what ya want?”

“How about pancakes, sausage patties, and one of those gorgeous looking cinnamon rolls?”

She raised her eyebrows as if in surprise.

“Gorgeous looking! Really? Thanks. I'm the roll maker – and the pies. Harry mostly keeps me in the kitchen. He likes mingling with the customers. He just ran into Eureka to the bank. Been no bank in town since I been around and I grew up here.”

She turned and moved through the half-cut, swinging doors into the kitchen. Millie was in her mid to late fifties and didn't seem to mind looking that way – a bit of untouched gray hair, a smattering of wrinkles, which she wore well, and a plus size, cheery, flowered, full length apron that seemed just right for her.

There were some books and postcards for sale at the counter beside the register. I stood and went to take a look at them. Three thin books on the history of the town, one of them dedicated mostly to the ghost stories. They were new to me. I took a copy of each back to my table along with several postcards exhibiting photographs of the mansion, the mine entrance, and an artist's rendering of Rebecca. Had she really been that beautiful, I understood how she stole the hearts of the young men in the area. I believe even mine skipped a beat!

Presently, Millie returned with the roll and coffee.

“Something to start on while the rest gets made,” she said. “I got you a fresh roll – still warm you'll find.”

She giggled quietly – or nervously – as she arranged things on my table.

I noticed that she had 'fixed' her hair and added a bit of powder here and there. I let it amuse me, privately. She was

twenty years my senior but then in such a small town, age similarities probably weren't the primary requirements for amorous relationships. Breathing most likely topped the list!

"Doesn't seem like there are many tourists, today," I said, fishing.

"Early week doldrums. We're crawlin' with 'em Thursdays through Sundays. S'pose you got your pick a the rooms at the hotel."

Not wanting to raise questions, I contrived a story.

"I decided I'd like to stay in a more out of the way place – less hubbub, you know – so I'm up at Sarah Miller's house."

"Nice lady, the widow. Sad about her losin' her husband so early on. Nice lady."

"Natural causes?"

"Unnatural, I'd say. Killed in the mine – a wall caved in while he was helpin' to make the main room bigger. Terrible tragedy."

"I see. Yes. I'm sure."

"See ya got some a Harry's books there. He's quite a writer, too. Has another one in the works. I better git back to the vittals or you'll have charcoal briquettes for breakfast."

She chuckled her way back through the doors. I assumed it was probably one of her on-going little jokes – the charcoal thing. If Millie was anything, she seemed unaffected and forthcoming.

I hadn't missed her insertion of the word, 'too'. Clearly, she had not only known that I was expected but somehow was able to recognize me. My presence seemed to be a far bigger event than I would have expected or wanted. That seldom happened unless somebody saw me as a threat of some sort. In the future, I would incorporate an increased sense of caution in my questions and activities.

After a fine meal, I laid down a generous tip and crossed the street to the general store. As advertised on the large, front, window, it contained a little of everything – right down to bolts of fabric and Origami instruction books.

'Fold a ghost out of paper,' I mused to myself, very glad I had not uttered it aloud.

"I'm Ben. I run the store for Harry."

It had been a hand out, full smile, palm to my shoulder,



friendly introduction from the big man. I wondered if all tourists got the glad-hand treatment. I was the sole customer so had no way to judge. Before I could respond, Ben continued.

“You’re that writer fella from Indiana, right. I knowed your face by the picture on the back cover on your books – they sell like hotcakes here once the tourists really git into ghost-gear.”

“Yes, I am. Marc Miller. Good to meet you, Ben. Ghost-gear?”

“When they first arrives, lots a them is skeptics, you know. Like they come to debunk the whole thing. But once ol’ Harry gits inside a their heads, they begin a wonderin’, ya know? Then after a trek up the hill and time in the mine and talkin’ amongst themselves, they soon git into ghost-gear. They want to find things out so they buy books – Harry’s for sure and yours use’ly. I been wantin’ to meet you fer years. Why you here, by the way? Lots a skuttlebut goin’ ‘round.”

“Skuttlebut? Really? What are folks saying?”

There was no hesitation in his response.

“That every time you mess in things, like over at Hickory Hollow, big problems come up.”

“Problems? Really? I’ve just come to hear the stories and write about them – that’s what I do – write stories about ghostly happenings that take place in and about the Ozark Mountains. Been doing it for years. I never set out to hurt anybody and certainly never a whole community.”

Ben nodded though quite clearly remained skeptical. I imagined he had read my books and understood that I called things the way I saw or found them.

“Anything in particular I can help you find, Marc?”

The direction of the conversation had been changed.

“Not really. Well, yes. I seem to need a new gadget for a lamp – the part the bulb screws into.”

“The socket?”

“Yes. That’s the word I was searching for.”

“One way or three way?”

“Let’s do it up fancy – three-way with a bulb to fit.”

My items were soon gathered.

“You’ll need a medium, flat head, screwdriver. Got

one?" he asked.

"Better add that to my list, too, I guess. Thanks for the reminder."

"Sometimes the problem ain't with the socket at all but with the plug – broken prong or such."

"Let's have a plug as well, then. You seem to really know . . . your lamp fixing."

Ben raised his eyebrows. It had been a really dumb remark on my part but Ben seemed to take it in good humor. I wondered if he'd soon be suggesting I just buy a new lamp and perhaps a table on which to set it. Maybe he had a house for sale! He didn't, and I left with what should certainly be more than I needed – including a weekly newspaper promising coverage of the extended geographic area. I just imagined that most tourists left his store with far more than they needed – which probably included some of my books so why was I complaining?

I returned to my room with two goals in mind. First, fix the lamp so there would be light to read by that night. Second, settle back in one of the recliners and study Harry's books. What the town still needed was a museum. I mused that perhaps that could be a retirement option for me – if Harry would approve it, of course. He seemed to be the man with the power and the vision in that little place.

It turned out Ben's take on the lamp had been correct – it was the plug – looked to have been stepped on. The bulb was also burned out so the new one was immediately useful. Just what one did with an extra three-way socket I wasn't sure but figured I would leave it behind for Sarah when I left.

Time passed rapidly as I immersed myself in the reading material. At noon, there was a gentle, tentative, rapping on my door.

"Yes. Come on in, please."

I had no idea who was about to show himself. I set the book – pages spread open, face down – on the lamp stand between the chairs. As it turned out, it was a herself.

"Just me, Sarah. Hope I'm not interrupting the famous writer."

So, she also knew. I was quite certain that I had all quite intentionally not mentioned it.

“Not at all. Come in. Is there something I can do for you?”

“Other way around, actually. I made chicken and dumplings for lunch and I always make way too much – my husband had such an appetite. I wondered if you’d like to come down and join me. Lemonade or coffee – ice tea isn’t even out of the question.”

I liked Sarah’s gentle way and ever-present smile. Her language pattern suggested she was not original stock there in northwest Arkansas. I loved to hear Ozarkian spoken in its clear simplicity and undemanding format. Sarah definitely did not speak Ozarkian – at least not in my presence. I pegged her as having had an upper Midwestern childhood. I just might need a friend and she seemed to be offering.

“That would be wonderful. We’ll just make that the meal for today, I guess.”

“Oh. No. That was not my intention. I have pot roast in the crock pot for din . . . supper.”

I knew it. She started to say dinner – definitely not an Ozark upbringing.

“That sounds hard to beat. Let me just mark my page here and wash up, then I’ll be right down.”

I was soon downstairs, seated at the kitchen table. It was a bright and cheery room with large, small paned, windows across the back. The white walls and cabinets were decorated with colorful, hand painted flowers. My earlier impression of her needed one amendment: lonely. Sarah was clearly a very lonely woman. She didn’t speak of friends or of a social life.

“I understand your husband met a far too early death. I am sorry. I can’t imagine how that must be.”

“Kurt was a good man. We had been childhood sweethearts back in Pontiac.”

“Michigan?”

“No. Illinois. Sort of midway between Springfield and Chicago – a bit west of between, I guess.”

I nodded wondering why she hadn’t returned there.

“Your roots are here, now, I suppose.”

“Roots, no. Fate, yes. That sounds terrible and I really didn’t mean it that way. These are good people but once an

outsider always an outsider.”

“May I ask how you came to be here? An unlikely landing spot for a pair of young Midwesterners I’d think.”

She raised her eyebrows as if in silent agreement.

“Kurt was a mining engineer and he was hired to come and supervise the renovation of Mine Number Six – the one just west of the mine that’s now used for tourists. Harry’s proposal was to return the front hundred yards of the tunnel back into a fully operational mine as part of the big plan Harry had to make this into another Eureka Springs or Branson. Just two months into the project Kurt was killed.”

“A wall fell in on him as I understand it,” I said.

“Wall and ceiling. That’s the story.”

Aha! Already a twist in this investigation. I loved twists. I hated people getting hurt to deliver them, however.

“That’s the story? You mean you have your doubts?”

“Kurt was a mining engineer. There is no way he would have put himself or any of the other men in jeopardy. Supposedly a fissure – a crack – developed unexpectedly and then it all collapsed. I am sure it couldn’t have happened that way. I guess I stay here hoping that someday I’ll be able to find the truth.”

“Who said it was a crack?”

“Harry. Whenever anything is said about this town it comes from Harry. It’s like everybody believes they owe everything good in their lives to him. And, I suppose in a way they – we – do. He provides the work and he initiated a profit sharing plan years ago – The Village Committee. The better the Crossing does, the better its residents do.”

“Why would Harry mislead folks about what happened to Kurt? Were there problems between them?”

“None that were out in the open. By that I mean Kurt had major doubts about the legitimacy of the ghost stuff but as far as I know he didn’t share that with Harry. Had no reason to. Kurt was a history buff and he did some research into it – old newspapers going back beyond the Civil War; old books covering the history of the area. Things like that. I still have it all in an overflowing box in the attic.”

“Do you believe Harry killed your husband?”

“I’m not really saying that. Like I said, Harry is the

leading citizen of this town and he seems to have the best interest of everyone here at heart. It's all just confusing and I seem to be helpless to look into it any further."

"You've been through your husband's clipping and notes and such?"

"A hundred times it seems – though not for years, now. He could find no reference to the Rutherford girl or her death except here in the city records – no state-filed birth certificates, baptismal records, or death certificates for either Rebecca or Johnny."

"Nothing in the area courthouse records?"

"Nothing, but he recognized that way back then, centralized record keeping was hit and miss at best. Such things were mostly recorded in the family Bibles."

"But you'd think a family of note, like the Rutherfords, would take the proper measures to see to those things – document the legal line of succession and such."

"That's exactly what Kurt said. Anyway, it really doesn't matter – it being the truth of the story. Most folks who leave here don't really believe it as fact anyway – like the ware wolf lore or the Big Foot lore or the spirit of Jessie James roaming the big cave in Missouri. It provides a few thrills – an enjoyable weekend away from real life – and that's it. I can't fault Harry for that."

"Do you believe the locally available certificates are forgeries – fakes?"

"Kurt thought so, but like I said, he didn't see any of that being truly associated with the work he had come here to accomplish. Just his recreation I guess you could say."

I returned to the question that seemed most important.

"Does it make sense to you that something might have come up between them that would have driven Harry to kill Kurt?"

"It really doesn't and yet . . . I mean, Harry provides me with a stipend every month and saw to it that I got this house free and clear after Kurt's death. He's been very good to me."

"But still, there is something that doesn't seem right?"

"Yes. Like I said, it is unfathomable to believe that Kurt would have overlooked any serious defect in the rock that enclosed that area where they were working. It was what he

was trained to do and the safety issue was largely the reason he had been hired. Anybody who could wield a pickax could have enlarged the area to accommodate the expanding tourist activities but Harry understood it would take more knowhow than that to complete the project safely. He was paying Kurt very well for his expertise.”

“Was the project eventually finished?”

“Oh, yes, almost without missing a beat, although it was all moved to the adit – that’s the mine entrance – a few hundred feet to the East – locally referred to as Lucky Adit Number Seven. Harry brought in a professor from the University over at Fayetteville and the project was completed on schedule.”

“Lucky?”

“I guess because it met all the requirements that provided exactly what Henry wanted – the easily enlarged main room to accommodate the tourist gatherings for the Miner’s Feast and stories; a sufficient, sort of eerie, curving, length of working tunnel for the tourists to experience; and all of it in a completely safe, well drained, dry, area under ground.”

“Remember the professor’s name?”

“Michaels, I believe. Maybe Fredrick Michaels. I can find out for sure if you want.”

“Maybe later. Is he still alive?”

“Actually, I believe he was killed in an automobile accident soon after he finished his work here. He was returning to Fayetteville and ran off a mountainous curve one foggy night. I’m sure I have a clipping about it. Shall I look for it?”

“Again, maybe later. I’ll just need to see where all this leads. If I may change the subject, I understand there is a mysterious light that appears in one of the mansion’s windows. What can you tell me about that?”

“You want to hear about the whole show?”

“Certainly. The whole show!”

I folded my napkin, laid it beside my plate, and scooted back a bit from the table, hands in my lap, ready to listen.

“There are three main aspects to the ghost show. The first and most dependable is the apparent lighting of a candle

in the window of the room that supposedly belonged to Rebecca. It occurs at midnight almost every night – although there was a period of several weeks not long ago when that didn't take place. It flickers – eerily, I'd say – though burns brightly enough to light the entire widow. The second part is the silhouette of a lady – well, female figure, anyway – which appears behind the candle light. Several times a week and typically on Friday nights – the day of the week told to be the night of the lovers' tragic demise – the figure appears and often moves as if pacing about her room. Whether she is just standing still or moving, her white garment – a sheer, pure white, dressing gown – flows or ripples as if catching a significant draft, which would not seem unreasonable in such an old structure. The final occurrence is that, from time to time and fully unpredictably, a woman's figure – again dressed in the white gown – can be seen moving about on the flagstone path on the east side of the mansion. Those who have been close enough, report hearing her gentle sobs. She turns the corner around the back of the building and disappears."

"And those reports – of the sobbing – come from whom?"

"I really can't say. It may be part of the hundred-year-old lore, you know."

"You have witnessed all three aspects?"

"Yes. Down through the years it's difficult not to have witnessed it all. Well, not the sobbing – like I indicated."

"Can anything be seen behind the figure in the window?"

"Like furnishings? No. Just darkness."

"Can anything be seen through the window during daylight hours?"

"No. It is as if the room remains darkened even though it has a second window a few feet to the east. I hadn't wondered about that before."

"Can one see inside through that second window?"

"I really can't say. It's the west window that is always at the center of the appearances. The other is just pretty much ignored."

"How is it known that both windows are in her room?"

"There is a floor plan of the mansion for sale all over

town. It is just general knowledge, I suppose.”

“When she moves – paces as you describe it – is it the same path over and over that she takes – just back and forth in front of the window, for example?”

“Again, I hadn’t given that any thought before. But, no. It is actually more than that. She moves about the room in what I would describe as a random path or whatever.”

“You can see the whole room?”

“No. That’s not what I meant. She comes and goes from sight, but using one’s imagination you can envision the course she must take. Back and forth, close and far, diagonal movements, stops and turns around – just like a person pacing aimlessly about a space.”

“And when outside on the walkway – are her feet visible or does she appear to float just above the ground?”

Sarah paused to think before answering.

“I don’t believe her feet are visible – I mean it’s always foggy and darkness surrounds the lower quarter of her figure – like it trails down into the fog and shadows, perhaps.”

“Shadows at night?”

“Sort of. It’s like she is in a spotlight or something – a moonbeam, maybe. She can be seen but nothing else can be seen. Odd, I know.”

“As if all of this is not odd!”

Sarah smiled and reached to pour more lemonade.

“I suppose I need to see it for myself,” I said returning her smile. “Are folks ever allowed inside the mansion?”

“Oh, no! Never! Harry says that if we invade her space there is a good chance she will leave or at least keep to herself and never be seen again. That would devastate our economy and everyone is well aware of that. It’s more than enough to encourage all of us to keep our distance.”

“Certainly, there must be a caretaker or the place would have fallen apart decades ago.”

“Luke. Luke Preston. Seems he is somehow related to the original Rutherfords – by way of Mrs. I believe. As you’ve seen, it’s primarily a stone structure with a slate roof. The stone used to build it was quarried from the area cleared into a flat base upon which the mansion was built. The wood is native oak, I believe my husband said, like the creosote



treated beams in the mine tunnels. Not much maintenance is ever needed; staining or sealing the natural trim once every ten or so years, I'd guess. So far as I know there is no attempt made to keep up the interior – no reason to. Been sealed shut for nearly a hundred years the way the story goes.”

“On second thought, Sarah, I think it would be a good idea for me to begin looking through that box of things you mentioned.”

“It’s at the top of the stairs. Easy to locate. I’ll bring it down after lunch.”

“I think I’m done here. Thanks so much. I haven’t had dumplings like this since I used to visit my grandmother as a boy – well, it was I and not my grandmother who was the boy, you understand.”

It was cause for Sarah to spread her wonderful smile – not something I imagine she had genuine occasion to do very often.

“Let me help do up the dishes,” I said as I scooted back from the table and stood.

“We’ll leave them and do it all up together after supper.”

“I just may not make it to supper. I have some snooping I want to do before sundown.”

“Pot roast is better the second day, anyway. That’s what Kurt always said.”

“We’ll put that to the test, then.”

“Let’s find that box, now,” she said. “I’m suddenly eager for another pair of eyes to view it all.”

“Point me in the right direction and I’ll bring it down.”

“There’s pull-down stairs in the hall ceiling outside the door to your room.”

That quickly accomplished, I thanked her again for the meal and took what I expected to be a treasure trove into my room. I immediately noticed two things; the slip-on top of the white storage box was not dusty, suggesting it had been handled quite recently; and second, that it was lighter than Sarah’s description had led me to believe it would be – ‘overflowing’ had been her description. Inside I found it to be no more than two thirds full. I wondered about that but decided to keep it to myself for the time being, at least.

I was more impressed by what was not there than what was. There was nothing relating to the structural integrity of mine number six – the one Kurt had been commissioned to remodel. There were no references about the missing legal documents – birth, marriage and baptismal certificates. Notes regarding his research into the ghostly goings on were nowhere to be found – if, in fact, he had committed any of that to paper. It seemed clear that someone had carefully ‘cleansed’ the records and had done so very recently.

I tried to keep focused on my purpose – to research and write the ghost story. Other things kept creeping into mind – Kurt’s suspicious death, the auto accident that took the professor out of the picture, the missing file material, my well announced arrival, even before it happened, Sarah’s somewhat implausible reason for staying in Forbes Crossing rather than returning to be with her family, even amid her obvious loneliness. The fact that I had been denied a room at the hotel suggested, on the surface, at least, that my presence was not welcome. There was, perhaps, one other more devious explanation. Staying with Sarah – the only other available location – may have been arranged to provide me an opportunity to rub elbows with certain information not available elsewhere. Was Harry attempting to discourage me from writing the story or was he perhaps subtly nudging me to investigate more deeply? I was suddenly eager to meet his royal highness, Harry Thorpe.

I replaced the lid, slid the box under the bed, and used the key Sarah had provided to lock the door to my room, not that the old fashioned, flat end, single slot, key lock could really prevent anyone with a hairpin from entering. Momentarily I had to wonder if they even made hairpins anymore. I shook off the question and was soon walking the gravel street toward the café.

Again, it was Millie who greeted me.

“You come to sample my pie, didn’t ya?”

“I can’t keep any secrets from you, can I?”

I was happy to have been provided a plausible reason to be there.

“Got apple, chocolate, pecan, and peanut butter. What’ll it be?”

“I’m going to leave that up to you. What do you suggest for a guy like me?”

“Apple’s gonna be too sweet fer your taste. Pecan’s too rich. I’m thinkin’ chocolate or peanut butter. How ‘bout half a slice a each?”

“Would have been my choice exactly, given enough time to think about it. With coffee – black.”

“I remembered black. Commin’ right up.”

“Harry around?”

“Over at the store.”

She indicated with a hitch of her head as she removed the pies from the antique looking, dome-shaped, glass, display case that sat on the counter.

“Left out back just as you was comin’ in the front.”

I had to wonder if he was avoiding me on purpose. I took a seat by the window where I could keep a watchful eye on the store.

“I imagine you know everything about everybody around here – having lived in Forbes Crossing all your life like you said.”

“Ya got that! Seems like a long, long, time. Try me. You’ll see.”

“Okay. Let’s see. The caretaker up at the mansion. He also born and raised here?”

“Nope. His mamma was born here, though, a shirttail relative of the Rutherford clan. Luke showed up when he was in his early twenties. Me and him is about the same age. He’s always been quiet. Always stayed to hisself. I figure with his loner temperament he never found a place where he fit in, ya know? He probably thought good ol’ FC would be different, since his mamma had roots here. I’m guessin’ it wasn’t no different, though. Hard to get to know a stay-to-his-self-type, ya know. I’d say he still ain’t got no real friends here?”

“His mother still here?”

“She passed before he come back.”

“Is his caretaking job all that he does? Sounds like that doesn’t take much doing from what I’ve heard.”

“Sometimes he does odd jobs for folks. Doesn’t seem to take much to keep him satisfied. I’d starve on the little he makes, but then there’s a whole lot more a me than there is a

short and skinny old Luke. Why you interested in him, by the way?"

"I'm interested in everybody here. A story needs characters and I usually get mine from getting to know the local folks. Makes a book seem more genuine, I think, even if I fictionalize things."

Millie nodded thoughtfully, apparently accepting my answer at face value.

"So, am I gonna be a big star in that book, Mr. Marc?"

"How could this story possibly be told without my best source of information being a part of it?"

She blushed and looked away. I felt like I was taking advantage of a child. It didn't feel right and yet I had no intention of harming her. Besides, the interchange clearly made her feel important – not a usual condition for her, I feared.

"So, Luke still has no friends around here?"

"Not really. Not even Harry passes the time of day with him and Harry talks to everybody. I think they was close a few years back – before the accident happened in number six. I guess they drifted apart after that. It ain't unusual to not see Luke for weeks at a time."

"Have you seen him recently – last few days?"

"Nope. Not seem him for probably ten or twelve days."

"Where does he live?"

"Over on the other side of the hill – down slope from the mansion. Not seen it myself since I was a little tyke. Not a hiker. Imagine me falling up there? I'd never stop rolling 'til I hit the creek."

She chuckled and shook her head, clearly pleased with her little joke – also one that I suspected had been used many times before. It was an advantage to having few regulars in the café – just mostly short term tourists. The same stories became brand new every week.

My pie sat on the counter, apparently awaiting the fresh pot of coffee she had started when I arrived. I guess there was some logic to pie and coffee being served together as 'pie and coffee'. Eventually they arrived – coffee, pie and pie to be more exact.

"I get the idea that you like Sarah – the widow where

I'm staying."

"What's not to like? She's just about the nicest Yankee I ever have met – well, there's you, too, of course. Keeps to herself. Never comes in here but then no local women never comes in here – just men – a few a them is gentlemen, even."

She chuckled again and shook her head. I liked Millie. She was a breath of fresh air, as it has been called.

"Harry is one of the gentlemen, I assume."

It was a question and she recognized that.

"Oh, yes, Sir. Through and through. Kind and smart and the savior of FC, I'll tell you that."

"Sounds like lots of people owe Harry big time."

"Don't know about lots but what there is of us, yes. We owe him fer sure."

I hesitated to open the next topic but we seemed to be on a friendly roll.

"Harry ever require repayment?"

I hadn't framed it well, but Millie understood.

"Oh, no, Sir. Never. He says we're all equally important here. The old FC wouldn't be the same without any one of us. We all do our parts to keep those tourists happy and comin' back. He calls it our eternal mission – each one a us to fill our part and make Forbes Crossing a real, believable, Ozark hill village. Plain, good, folk – that's what we need to be. Just plain folk and since there ain't nobody never been plainer than me, I git along in the part jist fine – better than most, Harry always says."

Plainly, she took her role in it all quite seriously and her acknowledged success, proudly. I had to agree, she fit the part to a Tee. Actually, I suppose, she is the part."

By then I had sampled both varieties of pie.

"Fantastic," I said, garbled I'm sure through my full mouth. I pointed with my fork to both slices of pie and the mug of coffee.

It was not an exaggeration. SI had a momentary vision of just sitting there eating for a full week, leaving the village twenty pounds heavier. With some reluctance, I forced that fantasy on its way.

When finished, I dropped a ten on the table – food and tip – and left to cross the street toward the general store.

Surely Harry couldn't evade me forever.

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## CHAPTER TWO: Lay of the Land

“Harry?”

“Marc.”

We nodded in quiet recognition as I approached him. Harry and Ned had been chatting at the counter. As if on cue, our hands extended and we shook.

“You’re a hard man to track down, Harry.”

“And you’re not,” came Harry’s response with a somewhat reserved, single cheek, corner cracking, short lived, smile. “You comfy over at the widow’s place?”

Of course, he knew where I was staying. Everybody knew where I was staying. I assumed that in a village populated by fewer than two dozen residents the gossip chain was pretty short. The more I thought about it the more I felt certain it had been Harry who had orchestrated my rooming arrangement. I would wait to see which, if either, of my suspicions about why, panned out.

“I wanted to check in and let you know I was here,” I said in what appeared to me to be a stroke of fully unrehearsed genius – considering the previous conversation with Ned, which preordained me as a trouble maker.

“Good to meet you at last,” he said graciously. “Seems like I’ve known you for years – through your books.”

“I’ve just today become aware of your writing, Harry. This morning I finished the three books that I was able to locate. Fascinating stuff. I enjoyed your laid-back writing style. Refreshing in this day and age where the newbie authors so often seem to revel in sprinkling their work with words few folks in the known universe really understand.”



Harry's face and stance relaxed noticeably. A genuine smile briefly passed across his face. That was good. I never intentionally tried to put anybody at un-ease yet I understood many folks worked themselves into such a frame of mind when confronting a credentialed, potential, rival or critic – or debunker.

“So, you here to write about our ghosts, are ya?”

“That's what I've been doing for the past fifteen years. Well, not about yours in particular, understand – ghosts of the Ozark Mountains in general. I only recently heard about the goings on at Rutherford Mansion. Came to me in an unsigned email, actually. Never know how a good tip may turn up. For me, such stories are like the first blossoms of spring to a swarm of bees; I just can't resist them.”

“You're not a believer in the spirit world.”

Harry continued to get things out in the open between us.

“I'd rather think I am one who merely requires proof beyond rumor and lore. I've seldom closed the door ahead of time on anything in my life.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. Ned followed suit. Having been met with that reaction so frequently since my arrival, I mused to myself that these local folks must have developed unparalleled strength in their foreheads – getting exercised so regularly.

“Like I tell our visitors,” Harry said, “Hear the stories, see the sights, and make up your own mind – just always keep a lookout over your shoulder when you walk in our dark at night.”

“I certainly could never ask for more than that. Thank you. I'm eager to hear your acclaimed presentation about it all. According to the area paper you are widely known as a Class-A storyteller. One article referred to you as ‘the King of the spine-chillers’.”

I didn't report that it also said he seemed to thrive on the ego-feeding response of the audience.

Harry shrugged, not so much in modesty I assumed as in reaction to some awkwardness created by the tenor of my remarks. I think the man had hoped he would find me rude, crass and immediately unlikable. That would make it easier to

discredit my work if it turned out not to be to his liking. Apparently, it was not the case. Although advertised as minimally educated and uncultured, he was clearly a bright and perceptive man. I hoped he had not interpreted my remarks about his reputation as patronizing. That had not been my intent. They had been met with a smooth forehead. I assumed I had committed no foul.

Perhaps I, too, harbored at least a smidgeon of paranoia. That phrase about keeping a lookout over one's shoulder: had it truly been a simple quotation from his decades old patter or had it been intended to send a specific message – warning – to me? I guess we would see.

“Do you have any advice for me?” I asked, not really certain why I felt moved to make such a comment.

“Nope. I'd not want to be accused of either helping or hindering in your investigation – it is an investigation first and foremost, right?”

“I suppose so. A writer must investigate to accumulate reliable data before he can write – assuming his purpose is to remain true to the facts.”

It was my way of gently tempering the clear dig, which Harry had aimed at the concept of ‘investigation’, as well as contrasting my purpose with his. I intended nothing unkind. He wrote to draw crowds. I wrote to get at the facts. Both seemed legitimate pursuits so long as the readers understood which was which.

“I understand that entering the mansion is prohibited,” I said.

“I'd say frowned upon,” Harry came back as if playing with me. “Who's to prohibit that except the ghosts themselves? Those of us who believe in and treasure the spirits have serious concerns about invading Rebecca's privacy. It would not be to anybody's advantage if she chose to leave – chased away by the sudden belief that her century old safe sanctuary had been compromised.”

“I understand that concern.”

In all honesty, I chose not to openly agree to abstain from the ‘frowned upon’ act. I was sure Harry got my message. He made no attempt to influence me. That surprised and frankly confused me. I would ponder the

possible implications later. Initially, however, it gave substance to the idea that he really did seem to believe in the supernatural nature of the occurrences. If true, that would tend to move him low on a list of those who might be perpetrating a hoax for financial gain. Since he had been my primary and sole contender, that list suddenly vanished – for the time being.

I was struck by one other thing: Harry's good 'ol boy jargon easily gave way to polished, mainstream English when moved toward serious discussion. I needed to look into his background. I had assumed he had been born and bred locally.

I wanted to accomplish several things before sunset so I took my leave.

Clearly, Luke had the closest ties to the mansion and therein, perhaps, to the ghostly appearances – well, demonstrations, at least. He seemed to be a good place to begin. I picked up my camera from the trunk of my car.

Taking my cue from Millie's description of where he lived, I made my way toward the far slope of the hill on which the mansion stood. It was less a hill and more a huge stone outcropping – the same stone I assumed that cradled the labyrinth of defunct mines below. Few trees – albeit the one in front of and the one beside the mansion were huge – and only a smattering of tenacious weeds had found means of surviving near the top. The distant view from my room did the edifice an injustice. It was indeed massive. Up close that barren, natural, foundation along with the brown and gray tones of the building rocks combined to lend a cold, inhospitable, air to the scene.

The path I followed up the fairly severe slope in front came no closer than 25 yards of the structure – too far away to allow precise observation of things such as the state of repair of the wooden trim, windows, and doors. Perhaps I could ascertain more about that on my return trip. I noted that the path, twelve feet wide all the way from its base at Main Street to the wider, stand-and-gawk, area behind a split rail fence at the top, looked to have quite recently been re-laid – new ties along the edges and a substantial layer of fresh, brown, creek gravel between them. Off to the right at the top,

a narrow, clearly less used, dirt based trail continued around the side of the hill. I followed it and was soon headed down the opposite, far steeper, slope.

Having no reason to believe Luke would not be at or close to home I kept my approach out in the open so as to not provoke surprise, suspicion, or apprehension. The Hillbilly/shotgun connection was not all idle lore. My assumption had been in error. Luke was nowhere to be found. Closer examination of the small building suggested that it was not regularly occupied – better put, had not been occupied for years. The windows were too dirt laden to see through. Grass had grown waist high and the lower branches of a large pine tree curled upward as they had grown against the west wall.

Like the mansion, it, too, was made of rock with a slate roof, most likely constructed as a caretaker's residence. It was roughly 50 yards down the steep slope from the rear of the mansion and sat at the center of what had once been a small, level, clearing, long since overgrown by brush, thistles, and grass. Encircled by a ring of native pines, it had the immediate appearance of a place of confinement. The disfigured trees were engaged in a decades old battle for light, space, and life sustaining soil and moisture.

I tried the front door. It was not locked but took some shoulder to force it open. Filth dropped from the frame. There were two rooms – a living room / kitchen combination and a bedroom at the rear. Furnishings were still in place and were of 1960's vintage. Drawers and cabinets contained the usual. On a shelf in the bedroom I found a cardboard tube, which I took to the kitchen table and opened. It contained architectural plans for the mansion – copies of the originals I figured since they showed no deterioration. I re-rolled the plans and put them back into the tube. I would study them later back in my room.

I spent a half hour nosing around, hoping to get a glimpse into the man I only knew as Luke the Caretaker. There were several, dust encrusted, books standing at the rear of a desk in the bedroom. They dealt with mining – silver in particular – and smelting. The dates of publication were mid to late 1980s – some thirty or so years earlier. One might

think they were not out of the ordinary for a mining center, but having been purchased at least three quarters of a century after mining operations ceased? I entered the find in my list of 'odd' items along with the fact that Luke clearly didn't live there anymore.

If not there, then where? One intriguing possibility came to mind. I pulled the door tight behind me and started back up the path – a considerably more strenuous undertaking than coming down. The rear of the mansion had four entryways – two were off raised porches and two at ground level. I examined the lower two. The one on the east end of the building appeared to be as it had been a century before. The one to the west told a different story. The old flat key, single slot, latch had been changed out for a round, brass, modern lock. Relatively new, heavy brass hinges hung in place of the original black iron ones. Clearly no attempt had been made to disguise the modernization of the east entrance so everything appeared to be on the up and up. I assumed it had been the work of Luke. Perhaps he had arranged a place to reside there on the first floor. It seemed reasonable and, if that were in fact the case, his presence had clearly not frightened away the famous spirit.

I knocked, not knowing what to expect. If Rebecca's ghost answered, my 'investigation' would be soon concluded. There was no response after a half dozen knockings. I tried the door; it wouldn't budge. The windows were too high off the ground to allow me to see inside and the door was solid oak – probably original so far as I could tell. I walked around the building to see what I might find. In the foundation, adjacent to the ground on each end, there was a three-foot square, grated opening, framed for easy removal – well easy back in the mansion's heyday. The screws were thick with rust and mineral deposits. It proved too much for my pocket knife. Where was my brand new flat head screwdriver when I needed it? The opening led into a crawl space some five feet high. I could see the mammoth, six by twelve inch, oak beams that supported the first floor and the stone piers upon which they rested at twelve-foot intervals. A hefty breeze flowed in from the outside as if being sucked beneath the building. I wondered why. The air outside was still. I made

another note.

The exterior woodwork was in good repair – original, smooth hewn, oak, re-sealed within the past several years. Flakes of age-old whitewash remained here and there perhaps suggesting that originally – or at some point – it had been white – a clear improvement over the dark finish, I thought. Perhaps it reflected a woman’s touch. All the glass that I could see appeared to be original or at least very, very old – uneven of surface and rippled – manufactured by the old bubble method rather than one of the more modern float techniques.

Arriving again at the rear from where I had started my survey, I noticed a large, outdoor, fireplace toward the rear of the lot – rock of course. There were eight stone seats cozied up near two round stone tables. As I approached, I noted that the ash in the fireplace was relatively fresh. Taking a stick, I poked at it. An envelope, or part of one, worked to the surface. I picked it up. Mostly burned, the return address was still partially readable – the Majestic Hotel with a street address in Hot Springs, a resort and retirement city several hundred miles to the south. I blew and flapped it free of ash and slipped it into my pocket. Suddenly, I had the feeling there were eyes on me. I turned around and called out.

“Hello. Somebody there? Hello.”

I received no response but heard rustling down near the tree line just above the caretaker’s place. It could have been an animal. It could have been a person. In my experience – and contrary to popular séance portrayals – I had never heard a ghost rustle. For a long moment, I searched the area below with my eyes. As I was turning to face the mansion I caught a glint in the sunlight – its source was down below, slightly to the west. It seemed clear that if it were a person he didn’t want to engage me in conversation so I gave no indication of my sighting. Possibly the reflection from a belt buckle or even binoculars, I figured. Maybe a metal tag on a dog collar. Maybe kids playing ‘hide-from-the-new-guy’ there in the woods. It brought to mind that I had seen no children, and Millie had not mentioned any.

It was nearly four o’clock. I wanted to walk the grounds below that were adjacent to the mining area. I had traced a

map from one of Henry's books that purported to show their location. Most were situated east of and well below the mansion. Mine Number Six looked to be almost directly under the mansion – perhaps a bit east. It was the one that had collapsed and killed Kurt and his workmen.

I scanned the rear of the building one last time as I prepared to head back down the trail toward Main Street. I'm sure I saw movement behind a window in the center of the second floor. I snapped several pictures though feared it was too late to capture an image, had there really been one. I had learned from past experiences that eerie places created eerie mental images – often fully unreliable.

On the way down, I met a young couple coming up.

"Anything going on up there?" the young man asked, disappointment, perhaps in his tone.

"Only the sound of grass fiddlin'," I said, smiling.

They looked perplexed, as well they should have. It had been a dumb, though well intentioned attempt at humor. The surprise would be on me if, later, they informed me that they, too, had heard the music – would have been blue grass, I assumed. Perhaps all of that – my behavior – should also make it onto my list of odd things there at Forbes Crossing.

At the base of the path, I stopped and reconnoitered, using the map I had lifted from Harry's book. I decided to begin at the west end and work my way east, examining as many tunnel openings as I could. That would depend on how long daylight lasted. I wanted to begin with Mine Number Six, shown to be just east of the gravel trail where it met Main Street below the mansion. The entrance was not easily located.

After several unsuccessful combative forays into the bushes and small pines, I came upon the adit, as the locals referred to the entrances. It had been boarded over in such a manner that it would take much more than a screwdriver to gain entrance. It also appeared that the trees and shrubs had been planted for the specific purpose of disguising the opening. The sign touting Danger – Stay Away notwithstanding, I found a short length of 2 X 4 and pried a board loose only to find another behind it. Someone had taken great care to make certain no one entered. A reasonable gesture, I

supposed, considering the large number of excitement seekers and treasure hunters that came to town. In thinking back over Harry's book, there had been no discussion about this particular entrance. The only reference was the notation on the map. It seemed to me they were missing a great opportunity to further the ghostly aspect of the area – 'the ghost didn't like the noise and hubbub of having a mine below her mansion so she caused its destruction'. Perhaps that would be tasteless considering the loss of life – Kurt plus a dozen of his workers.

At any rate, access had been effectively disallowed. At least access from the front had been denied. I wondered about a second entrance at the rear, perhaps. The map of the tunnels showed that it curved gently to the west with several apparently unproductive short spurs off to the east. If the diagram could be believed, one of those came within several yards of the rear side of the mountain.

It would be up and over or around the side to reach the back. I was intrigued but decided to leave that for a period of more dependable sunlight. Harry's ominous darkness reference stuck in my mind.

The adit just next to the east was the one currently in use by the town to provide the daily tours and host the weekly Miner's Feast and Harry's big show. I figured I would see that as a tourist later so moved still further east to the tunnel designated as Adit Number One. It lay out in the open but was also securely sealed. There was a paper-under-plastic type informational plaque beside it, which described its history, pictures, and dates of importance. It had apparently been the original tunnel built before the Civil War.

I found similar settings at the four others – Adits Two, Three, Four, and Five – which lay still further east. One thing caught my eye – or mind, or whatever. As the adits progressed to the east, their lifetime yearly average output of silver decreased. Said in a more intriguing way, as they progressed west, the output increased. If that held absolutely true, Adit Six would have been the most productive and might explain the odd numbering system – six and seven being to the west – left – of one through five. The last two had been developed after the pattern of productivity had been



recognized. I had to wonder why attempts to build additional tunnels on to the west had apparently not been made. I was sure there was a reasonable explanation. I'd have to do a bit of digging myself – eyes to pages rather than back to pick – and see what I could find.

By eight o'clock the world of Forbes Crossing was nearly dark. I headed back to the café in search of something to eat. The ups and downs and ins and outs had given me a substantial appetite.

"Millie! Doesn't Harry ever let you go home?" I said closing the door behind me.

She smiled and raised her eyebrows. (See!)

"Long hours but that's good. Nothin' else to do here in FC come evenin'. You come to eat or chat?"

"A bit of both, I guess. First things first. What's wonderful on your evening menu?"

"Same that's on the noon menu – fried chicken, sirloin steak, catfish, and Harry's Casserole Surprise."

"I tend to stay away from surprises where eating is concerned. Any of the others will be fine."

"Steak it is then, since we're plum out a chicken and fish."

"Fine. Medium/well – almost no pink."

She smiled – no, grinned, I suppose. There was something different between the two expressions. I knew each when I saw it but was hard put to describe it specifically. It may have to do with the slight hunching of shoulders that traditionally accompanies a grin. I'm not certain and, hopefully, will not lay awake stressing over it.

"Corn on the cob, okra, and baked potatoes okay?" she asked.

Assuming that was what was left at the late hour I nodded and smiled as if it were precisely what I had been hoping for.

"I saved ya a piece a pie. Figured you'd be in eventually. Rhubarb. Double crust pies saves best."

"How thoughtful. Thank you. It's been years since I've had rhubarb. My mother used to make a rhubarb/strawberry cobbler that was the highlight of my summer as a boy."

Millie went into the back with my order. I wondered if

Harry were there. She had indicated he usually spent his time out front. Perhaps he was still avoiding me. She returned.

“Billy Joe will have things up fer ya in a few minutes.”

I was in the Ozarks so had no idea whether Billy Joe/Jo would be male or female. It bothered me some that it bothered me some – the not knowing.

“I haven’t seen any kids here in town,” I said figuring I would soon be regaled with the full and complete history of children there in Forbes Crossing.

Instead it was fairly straight forward.

“There’s just the Rakes kids – Melva Jean and Elmer. She’s goin’ on fourteen. He’s eleven. Nice kids. Dad was killed when Adit Six collapsed – along with the widow Wilson’s husband. Mom is Edie – Edie Rakes. Works at the store and does sewing. Not much a that needed here anymore. Harry takes care a her. Harry takes care a all a us.”

“So I hear. Sorry about the youngsters’ father. Where do they go to school?”

“The widow’s our teacher, now – sort of a outpost from the school in Eureka I guess you could say. They’d send a bus but it’s over a hour ride each way. That’s no way fer kids to have to spend their time, ya know?”

It had been one of those Ozarkian statement-questions that required the listener to agree with the statement – aloud – before the conversation could continue. I agreed and hoped that my furrowed brow appropriately indicated compassion for their plight.

“That’s it? Just the two?”

“Yup. Just the two. Not even been one in anybody’s oven fer years, if ya catch my drift.”

She winked and chuckled shaking her head in her private delight. I felt pretty sure I got her meaning so I nodded and smiled.

“I looked for Luke this afternoon but didn’t have any luck.”

“Ain’t seen him fer quite a few days. He’s usually gone fer a week or so at a time. Spirits probably ain’t real hard on things at the mansion so guess it don’t take much doing ta keep up Rebecca’s place, ya know?”

There it was again. I complied and answered.

“Yes, I can see what you mean. You say he lives in the small stone place behind the mansion?”

“Yup. Down the hill. Has fer years. Mostly a hermit. No friends, like I said.”

“Any idea where he goes?”

“May not go nowhere. May just stay ta home. All I meant was he don’t come to town fer weeks at a time. He gots a old pick up with a camper on it. I see him leavin’ town sometimes. Come ta think a it, I ain’t saw his smoke fer weeks.”

“His smoke?”

“From his chimney. That’s the best way ta know if he’s around.”

It didn’t fit what I thought I knew. Perhaps he kept a perennial fire going in the big rock fireplace behind the mansion. I probably would, given that beautiful setting and nothing much to do but enjoy the wonders of the outdoors. I changed topics as my meal arrived, apparently served by the very hands that had prepared it. It was Billy Jo, as it turned out, a woman in her late forties. She returned to the kitchen after, I assume, having had her turn at looking me over.

“The mines, er, adits, are all blocked off, I see. I suppose the rear entrances are boarded up as well.”

I was fishing, again, to see if any information about alternative access routes might be forthcoming. I felt sure I could count on Millie for some useful tidbit.

“Only two of ‘em has rear entrances – Number Six, which ain’t in use of course, and Number Seven. It had to have a rear exit put in because places what caters to crowds have to have ‘em – it’s the law I guess.”

“Yes. I suppose it is. You are full of interesting information. Those rear entrances don’t seem to be on the map I have.”

I took it from my shirt pocket and spread it out on the table hoping she would be able to pinpoint those places of entry.

“I’m no good with maps. Not been back there since I was a kid. Can’t help you. Why you want to find them? I thought you was here ta write about Rebecca.”

“I guess it’s just the tourist in me, Millie. I’m a snoop at

heart. Historical things have always interested me; I guess things here at Forbes Crossing aren't any different."

"It's a interesting place, alright. Not many places with their own ghosts I suspect."

"You're right there. Ghosts make places very special."

My comment appeared to both set her mind at ease about my snooping and bolster her ego – living in such a special place with its own ghosts. Millie certainly seemed to be a believer.

"Café closes at nine on Mondays. Rest of the week we stay open 'til one. I better git back there and help Billy Jo with the dishes. Call when you're ready fer your pie. More coffee first?"

"Yes. Great. Thanks."

She poured the coffee and left. I was alone in the café, understandable I figured – the one night it closed early would reflect the night of fewest potential patrons. I heard the front door open and close behind me. I turned to look. A boy had entered and immediately made his way – if somewhat tentatively – in my direction.

"Mr. Marc Miller, I guess."

"Master Elmer Rakes, I guess," I said in response.

"How you know my name?"

"How you know mine?"

"Everybody knows your name, Mr. Marc Miller. I prefer El, by the way. Elmer's too heavy. It has too old a sound to it."

"Okay, then, El it will be. I shortened mine for the same reason when I was a kid."

"Really. What's Marc short for?"

"Promise not to tell a soul?"

"Sure. Cross my heart."

And he did.

He looked around the room as if wondering from whom we might be secreting our conversation. His tone had been hushed. He slipped into the chair across from me, arms folded on the table. I continued.

"My mom and dad named me Marcus: m-a-r-c-u-s."

"I read that name in my history book – old days Greeks if I remember right."

"Very good. A+ for history today."

The boy grinned and nodded.

“Everybody says I’ve got great school smarts.”

I nodded to indicate my understanding, not necessarily to agree with the others since the two of us had just met. I sensed that he understood.

“Is there something I can do for you, new friend, EI?”

His grin grew.

“Well, Marc, shortened from Marcus – our secret – it’s what can I do fer you – that should have been for you. Ms. Wilson would have kittens if she heard that. You gonna tell her?”

“Never. Friends don’t tell on friends, the way I’ve always heard. I understand Ms. Wilson is your teacher.”

“Yup. And a good one, too. My sister and I both agree on that. It’s sort of like we are relatives with her or something – our dad and her husband died together in the Number Six collapse. Brought us close, ya know?”

“I can understand how that could happen, I guess.”

“I was too little to really remember my dad. You remember yours, I guess.”

“Yes. I was lucky to grow up with mine. Now, what’s this about you helping me?”

He leaned in close and again looked about the room. His tone grew confidential.

“I can do stuff for you that nobody else can do.”

He drew up his lower lip and ran off a series of slow, deliberate, nods as if to reinforce the genuine nature of his contention.

“Stuff like what?”

I tried to sound and look profoundly interested.

“You name it. I’m a first-class guide to places Harry’s guys never take folks. I can get you maps and books and diagrams and real pieces of silver ore you won’t find any place else. I can get you into places nobody else can get you . . . into . . . places.”

He grinned about the small structural problem he had experienced ending that sentence. At least he had recognized it. The more the young man talked, the more I was impressed with Ms. Wilson’s skills. I hoped he still treasured and could speak Ozarkian but I gave him credit for having mastered the

'outsiders' language as well.

"And is your service confidential? You know what I'm asking?"

He zipped his lips – a fully effective response.

"I hear you's here about our'n ghosts. I done read two a you's books. I liked 'em."

He slipped. How nice! Or had he? I soon realized I'd been had. He grinned his impish, ear-to-ear, grin up into my face.

"I bet that's more like what you expected to hear from me, right."

I returned his smile.

"Although I am ashamed to admit it, yes."

"It's okay. Henry says if I talk Ms. Wilson's way around the tourists, I'll blow our local image. We're supposed to be Hill Folk and I guess that means talking the way people around here talk. You talk great, by the way. A Yankee, right?"

"Southern Indiana. Some call it north. Some call it south."

"And what do you call it?"

"I call it southern Indiana."

The boy chuckled and nodded.

"We are going to get along just fine," he said indicating he believed that in the near future there was to be a 'we' between us.

I often came to rely on children to give me direction in new places. They knew everything that was really worth knowing and had few inhibitions about spilling the beans. I believed that I was careful not to take undue advantage of their honesty and naïveté.

"And just how much do you charge for your services?"

"Mom and I find that most folks are honest folks so I let my employers pay me what they think I'm worth."

At that moment, Millie returned with the pie – interestingly, I thought, two pieces. She also brought the coffee pot and an extra mug. She refilled mine, and set the other near my new young friend – guide – go to man. It was soon filled – well, half-filled to be more accurate.

"For me?"

His eyes grew big, just like kids' book talk about. I looked up at Millie and then back at Elmer.

"Yes, for you. If we're going into partnership I figure we need to seal it up right – also, Millie here seems to know just what you like."

I figured there had been a recent phone call between them.

He smiled up at her and winked. He then added half a mug of cream and enough sugar to send most of us into a fatal sweets overdose.

"Thanks, Aunt Millie."

Why I was surprised at the kinship I don't know. A small, Ozark village – of course everybody would be related.

"Are you two teaming up to work me?" I asked playfully, glancing back and forth between them.

"Oh, no, Sir," Elmer answered in all seriousness. "I'm working you all by myself and Aunt Millie's working you all by herself."

Millie was clearly embarrassed. Elmer clearly didn't understand why.

"Well good then. I'm glad to get that understood right here and now."

I winked at Millie.

He tucked a napkin into neck of his T-shirt and took a sip of the steaming hot coffee.

"Aunt Mille makes the best coffee. Harry's is never strong enough and Billy Jo's is way too strong. How do you like yours?"

"Exactly like this and black depending on the meaning of your question. I guess my vote goes to 'Aunt' Millie, also."

"I'll leave you two to your business and I don't want to know what it is. Stay as late as you want. Billy Jo and me is leavin' in five minutes. Do up your dishes, turn off the light, and make sure the door's pulled tight. Latch won't click if it's not pulled tight."

"I know. I know," Elmer said demonstrating a degree of exasperation. "I'll take care of it like I always take care of it. Run along and tend to your knittin'. . . knitting."

"This whole talking thing seems to present some problems for you."

“It does. Confusion at least. Enough to wear a guy out. I’m mostly just used to talking book style when I’m with Ms. Wilson and at the evening meal at home. Ma requires it, then. Says no use spending all that time learning proper English and not using it. It’s how Aunt Millie came to speak so good – well – fine.”

He grinned. I didn’t have the heart to tell him I always faltered over the ‘good or well thing’ in that situation, myself. I’d remember his substitute, ‘fine’, solution.

“Harry says if I keep up with my studies he’ll help me go to college if I want to.”

“Harry is really an important man in lots of folks’ lives around here, isn’t he?”

“He is that. He’s like my role model. Nothing’s more important to him than helping out other people.”

I nodded, hoping that would, in fact, pan out to be true.

“So, when do we start?” El asked.

“Start what?” I asked in return, teasing just a bit.

“I figure a writer guy like you wants a couple of things: into the mansion without anybody knowing it – it’s not really against the law or anything – and into Adit Number Six – also without being found out. Legally, that’s a little more iffy. There’s No Trespassing signs but I know a way where you’ll never see ‘em. I figure you can’t be expected to obey what you can’t see. I can also find out just how sweet Ms. Wilson is on you if you want me to. Aunt Millie has probably made her feelin’s known to you already. I can tell.”

“You can tell?”

“Her hair is fixed and her lips and cheeks are pink – lipstick and powder. Them is things a woman in heat is likely to do.”

The boy was fully serious. Still, his expression took me by surprise and I chuckled out loud.

“What?” he said studying my face.

“I just never heard it put quite that way before.”

“I suppose there are lots of things we say that don’t compute for you. I’ll translate. Just ask me. I’m really getting good at this double language thing.”

“I appreciate knowing you’ll be there to help. What about a late-night trek up the hill to the mansion? I’d like to



see the candle lighting and such. Think it will happen tonight?”

“Most likely. Your presence is well known. Folks are saying that the sooner you get what you came for the sooner you’ll leave us alone – no offence; that’s just what they’re saying.”

“And you believe Rebecca’s ghost has some way of knowing that, and more importantly that she will cooperate?”

“I didn’t say neither. We’ll see what we see.”

We did our chores as had been directed by Millie. El suggested I straighten the salt and pepper shakers and the tray of sweeteners on the tables while he ran home to tell his mother he’d be with me for a while. For all the mistrust about me, the town’s people seemed very trusting in a more general sense – leaving a business unlocked at night and trusting a child to be with a total stranger into the wee hours of the morning. It seemed an interesting contradiction.

El returned puffing, though clearly enjoying the state of near exhaustion. He carried a flashlight in one hand and a larger lantern – gas or kerosene – in the other.

He held them up one at a time making the appropriate announcements:

“Twelve volt, adjustable wide or narrow beam flashlight and a coal oil lantern that’ll burn all night if need be. Got matches, too. I assume you’re good for the batteries and fuel.”

“Yes. Certainly. Now or later?”

“On the tab’ll be okay. We trust you.”

“We?”

“Mom, Aunt Mill, and me . . . er . . . I.”

“Nice save, master Double Language King.”

He turned off the lights in the café and we were soon outside. He grinned and hitched his head suggesting a route different from the direct and popular one I had used earlier.

I kicked myself because I knew better. Kerosene was coal oil in the south or perhaps coal oil was kerosene in the north. Interesting.

Perhaps I was being so easily trusted with the boy because some other adult was shadowing our every move. I suppose I had no reason to resent that. In fact, I welcomed it,

if indeed it were happening. I'd been deep into such situations often enough before to know that sometimes bad things happened – both natural and man-made. An extra set of eyes and muscles on my side couldn't be anything but positive.

There was another possibility, of course. The youngster was clearly savvy and just might have offered his services to the highest bidder – or to family over an outsider. Perhaps he was being used to lure me into some unpleasant or potentially hurtful meeting or circumstance with those who might have reason to dissuade me from continuing my investigation there in Forbes Crossing. I had also been the butt of things like that. I would proceed from the standpoint of vigilant trustfulness – is that even a word? I'll ask a certain teacher later on.

It was obviously a little used route, lined by tall grass that bent low over the bared, rock pocked, red dirt, path. It was also steeper with poorer footing than the wide, well maintained, gravel trail used by the tourists. That was alright, I told myself. Privacy – secrecy – was preferred at that point. On several occasions, I was startled by small animals scurrying along on their nocturnal journeys. I wondered about wolves and bears. I knew for a fact they roamed the area. Clearly, El was not concerned. Was that because he knew for a fact the area was free of such animals or that his first, full-blown, spurts of testosterone were leading him to disregard even known danger in the style of the dauntless, male, adolescent that was just waiting to emerge from deep within his risibles? I chose not to speculate on an answer but did move to close ranks behind him.

We were soon at the top. The trail meandered around to the rear of the mansion and we found ourselves standing just behind the fireplace, which I had encountered and examined earlier. El shined the flashlight on his watch.

“Eleven ten. Lots of time yet ‘til the candle lights. Want to go inside first?”

“Inside. Really. You know a way in?”

Without answering he headed off around the west side of the structure. We were soon squatting beside the grate with its wooden frame and twelve vertical, metal rods. He pointed at it.

“I was here this afternoon and found the screws are rusted tight.”

“Not to worry.”

He grasped the tops of the two outer rods and pushed. Frame and all, it laid down inside.

“The screws are like fake. Don’t penetrate into the outer frame.”

He pushed it aside and made with another hitch of his head, a gesture, which I was coming to understand helped define the youngster. We crawled inside. He stood. Hunched down just a bit, I followed suit. Walking between the joists allowed fairly good headroom, which I could navigate from only a slightly hunkered down position. Near the middle of the building we began moving east, ducking at every step to avoid the huge beams running front to back. In the center of the space, from west to east, we stopped at a cement wall – old but perhaps not original with the building. It appeared to be an enclosure of some kind perhaps eight feet square. I speculated it might be a well.

We moved around to the back of the structure where El pointed out a plank door, four feet high and wide.

“Tell me what this is,” I said.

“You’ll see. Turn the horizontal bar up on your side of the door.”

I did as instructed, momentarily feeling just a bit intimidated by this overly confident, wet behind the ears, know-it-all, toddler. Perhaps just a slight overreaction.

At any rate, we opened the door to reveal an elevator shaft complete with car and working weight and pulley system.

“We get in, pull that rope, and it will take us to any of the three floors. Shall we?”

“You’ve clearly done this before.”

“And that’s now to your advantage, I’d say. You’re welcome.”

It had probably been accompanied by his endearing grin, but in the dark, that had to be left to my imagination.

“Who knows that you know about this?”

“Some Greek name-alike. That’s all.”

“I don’t understand why you are trusting me with all this when you hardly know me.”

“Like I said, I read two of your books and did I mention several dozen of your short stories?”

“No. You omitted that I guess.”

“Plus, Aunt Millie says you’re a good guy. Mom says it’s time the community faces the facts whatever they turn out to be and that you’re the best person for the job. Plus . . .”

He hesitated.

“Plus, what?” I pressed.

“Plus, I have this vial of pepper spray just in case you’re not the saint you’ve been made out to be.”

I broke into quiet laughter. I’m not sure why. Soon El was laughing with me – the tension, the absurdity, my embarrassment for having felt intimidated by an eleven-year-old. I don’t know why but for whatever reason we enjoyed the short-lived moment of laughter together.

“You can keep the spray if you’d feel better,” El offered. “Everybody, even Ms. Wilson, says I’m a very good judge of character and I judge you to be a good character.”

“And I do appreciate that but you keep the weapon. I hate them. Lead on. Let’s take a gander at the second floor.”

“Going up. Keep your hands and feet inside the car. I heard that in an old movie once.”

We arrived at what El proclaimed was the second floor. The elevator opened into a huge end to end hall. There were three, large bedrooms to the front and three to the rear.

“Should we light the lantern?” El asked.

“Not yet. We can see pretty well as is. Let’s find Rebecca’s room.”

“It’s in the middle of the hall to the south. I can show you.”

“You’ve been in there before?”

“Several times – lots, maybe. I’m never sure where one leaves off and the other starts – several and lots, I mean”

The things he mused over were so similar to my own wonderments that I had to speculate about our possible kinship. That would need to be continued later. He pointed out the door and turned the knob. He seemed to harbor no apprehension. The door swung into the room. It was dimly lit by the moon showing through the east window. The air was oddly stale, musty even, quite unlike that of the elevator and

the hall.

I approached the oddly dark window on the west side of the room. It was where the candle was said to appear.

“There is a problem here, El. This is not a window. There is a frame and glass panes, but . . . shine the light up close. See. Behind it is a mirror, not an outside opening.”

“So, a candle couldn’t show from it,” he said putting things together.

“That’s the way I see it.”

“I have never noticed that before. During the day it seems to be a window, I mean it seems like light comes from it. I’m sure of that. Reflection of room light from the mirror, maybe, huh?”

“That’s my guess. How closely have you observed it?”

“Not really closely, I guess. It’s the other window that I like to look out of. You can see right down into the crowd of tourists. I figured that old oak out front would keep me from having a clear view from that one – the fake one, I guess. You’ll have to see how it is out front. I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I but we will. Not tonight, maybe, but in the very near future. I have an idea. Run the beam from your flashlight along the baseboard. I want to pace it off in both directions to get a more accurate idea of size.”

We finished that in short order. I jotted down the measurements in my pocket pad – sixteen feet wide and fourteen feet deep from window to door.

“It’s five minutes to midnight, Marc. Should we stay or leave?”

“Leave? And miss the show. No. Let’s sit back in the far corner and see what may or may not take place in here.”

We found the spot and slid to the floor. El scooted close to me. He was clearly more apprehensive about things at this juncture than he had been earlier. He turned off the flashlight and we waited, hardly allowing ourselves to breathe.

Midnight arrived. At 12:01, according to my lighted watch dial, the hall door slammed shut. We heard what must have been the latch clicking. Above that, we heard wailing and thumping. It grew louder and softer; louder and softer. My eyes and camera were glued on the west window waiting for the candle to appear and light. It did not. If a ghostly

figure walked the room it was not visible to our eyes there in the dark. I thought better than to flash the light. There were, it seemed, footsteps in the hall just outside. The latch clicked again and the hinges creaked. The sound suggested the door was opening. The sudden draft confirmed it.

The boy clutched my arm and buried his face in my chest.

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### CHAPTER THREE: Holes and more holes

Sometimes it is difficult to tell if time is passing rapidly or slowly. That had been one of those occasions.

At some point the noises ceased – or at least became minimal – although the draft continued. I whispered to my young companion.

“Hand me the flashlight.”

I felt him nudging it into my side. I grasped it and found the switch.

“I’m going to turn it on now. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He tightened his grip on my arm. I clicked it on. The room appeared as it had prior to all the carrying on. The door was open. The breeze from the hall brought fresh air, a welcome relief from the stale, mustiness of the old building. El sighed. I directed the beam through the door out into the hall as I stood and pulled the boy up with me.

“How you doing, Buddy?” I asked.

“My pants seem to still be dry if that’s what ya mean. I’m okay. You?”

“Fine. That will be something to tell your grand kids about, won’t it?”

“If I live to have ‘em. We leavin’ now?”

“I suppose so. Tell me first, though, did you see anything – light, ghost, anything?”

“No, Sir, but that could be because I had my eyes closed most of the time.”

I chuckled and patted his shoulder.

“Whenever you can ease up on your grip there on my



arm my entire circulatory system will be appreciative.”

“Oh. Sorry. Really sorry. I was ready for anything, you know. I had the pepper spray aimed and ready.”

“You think it would have discouraged a ghost?”

“Ghost. Probably not. Bad guys. You bet.”

“So, you expected to meet up with bad guys tonight?”

“Sort of, I guess. Rebecca’s ghost, if that’s what it is, has never done anything threatening so I’ve never been afraid of her, it, whatever. But I’ve read enough of your stuff to know bad guys seem to love to use the ghost stuff to their own evil advantage.”

“I like the way you use words – in both languages. Let’s get out of here.”

“If it is bad guys, they may still be waiting for us,” he pointed out. “I got a alternate exit and I’d suggest we use it.”

“What? Where?”

“Follow me, if you think it’s safe to go out into the hall.”

“I believe it is. Which way?”

“Turn right. The back stairs is at the end of the hall – the Southeast corner.”

Despite his admonition to follow him, he fell in behind me. El’s hand engaged a death grip on the rear of my belt. We encountered no obstacles – physical, human, or ethereal – and were soon at the bottom of the stairs just inside the back door, the one I had found earlier that still had the original lock on it. I did have the feeling we had been followed so I switched off the light, repositioned it to focus on the top of the stairs and turned it back on. If there had been someone – something – there, it was not to be seen. We opened the door and left.

It was 12:15. We walked around to the front of the mansion to make our way down the tourist path. The young couple that I had encountered earlier in the day was standing there looking up at the window.

“Anything going on up there tonight?” I asked fully expecting a flat, disappointed, ‘no’.

“Everything that was advertised,” the young man said, clearly excited.

His companion continued.

“Exactly at midnight the candle came on much brighter

than we expected. Then a minute or so later the ghost appeared in her long white dress or robe and began moving around the room. Look for yourself.”

She pointed.

We turned around and looked up. The show was still going on. Like she said, there was the candle, flickering, and the white flowing garment, rippling, slowly moving about the room all quite randomly. El and I looked at each other. I snapped several pictures and we moved on down the slope.

“So, we seem to have a conundrum,” I said.

“A con what drum?”

“A puzzle. We were inside that very room just minutes ago and saw nothing, all the time these folks were seeing something. In fact, we just determined that window, which was presenting the show as we stood there, isn’t even a window. Yet, there was it, clear as could be.”

“A ghost window, maybe?” El offered grasping at straws, like most folks preferring some sort of explanation to none.

“A g h o s t w i n d o w?” I said, my tone and measured tempo pointing out the nonsensical element of his implication.

“Got something better?”

“I’m sure I will have before all of this is over.”

El nodded. It was more a polite response than one saying, ‘I’m sure you’re correct’.

Earlier he had been intentionally noncommittal – evasive, I thought – about his take on the ghostly goings on. I’d not press him to take a stand. After all he was eleven.

I offered to walk him home but, smiling, he politely refused saying it was just down the street.

“You keep the flashlight,” He said. “It’ll help you see your way home. See you in the morning.”

I wasn’t sure what all of that meant but accepted his turndown without comment. Upon reflection, it seemed reasonable – it was his village, the one in which he had grown up all quite safely. Surely it wasn’t the first time this adventurous lad had walked those streets after midnight. I turned and headed for my place. I was there within three minutes and as quietly as possible climbed the stairs to my

room.

I turned on the light that sat on the table between the chairs – after all, I needed to get my money’s worth from that new plug. Several things were not right – not that they were really wrong, I suppose. My door had not been locked. I was sure I had attended to that as I left. The three books on the lamp table were out of order. I had read them in order of copyright date. They were no longer arranged that way.

Perhaps Sarah had been in tidying up and just didn’t lock the door. That was the simple answer and I was tired. Simple answers seemed best just then. I got undressed, turned out the light, and was soon asleep.

\* \* \*

I felt a presence even before I opened my eyes. I hesitated a moment to think about who it might be – Sarah? That’s all I had; perhaps embarrassing for her considering my state of undress. I carefully formed slits of my eyelids and peeked. The move, which I had envisioned as being all quite clandestine, did not fool the intruder.

“Finally. I thought you were never going to wake up. Do you know it’s already seven o’clock?”

It was El draped in and around the far recliner paging through one of Harry’s books.

“And a good morning to you, too, I said drawing the top sheet across my midsection.”

“You don’t have to be modest around me. Don’t believe in it myself.”

“What brings you out so early?”

“Early? I just told you it’s already seven!”

“I can see we are slaves to different clocks.”

“Apparently. What’s on the agenda this morning? I figured you’d want to get a gander at those rear mine entrances back in the valley. Not sure why but yesterday they seemed to interest you.

“First a shower. Then breakfast. Then, we set a plan of action.”

“Okay. Bathroom’s across the hall. I suppose you know that. Ms. Wilson has gone out. I got ten pages left.”

“Haven’t you already read Harry’s books?”

“Yeah. Lots of times. Ms. Wilson says we can learn

something new every time we reread something.”

“You’ll probably finish before I’m done. I’m going to want to examine the new blueprints of the mansion. Can you get us a copy? I hear they are available. Take money from my wallet there on the dresser.”

“Consider it done. You know you do have a set of the originals in that cardboard tube on the window sill.”

“You been snooping through my things?”

“Not exactly. More like doing background research so I’m up to date on our investigation.”

“Snooping. Research. I suppose I can give you a pass on that. By the way don’t you sleep?”

“Need very little. I’ll go find us – procure, if you will – a set of plans.”

He left descending the stairs two – perhaps three – at a time. I showered and was mostly dressed and combing my hair by the time he returned. While I slipped into my shoes, El spread out the two sets of drawings on the table weighting the curling edges of the originals with two of Harry’s books.

We studied them together.

“Isn’t right,” he said pointing to Rebecca’s room on each copy. “Shows here on the original blue print that it’s supposed to be twenty feet long. You stepped it off at sixteen. Width is right, though. Fourteen. The copy circulating here locally shows it at sixteen feet, just the way we found it. Another Conundrum.”

“You remembered.”

“Like I said, most folks say I have really good school smarts. What you think gives?”

I took a pencil and on the original diagram drew a single line from the hall wall to the outside wall. It was four feet from the west wall as shown on that blueprint and included the real west window.

“Ah! Clever. One problem.”

“What’s that?”

“No way to get into that little space. No door from Rebecca’s room and no door from, the hall.”

“You been in the room just west of hers?”

“Probably. Sometime. Yes, in fact. Why? Oh. A door.”

He studied the diagram and shook his head.

“No. I’m sure there isn’t a door in there. Maybe it was a closet for Rebecca’s room and for some reason they closed off the door.”

“A closet with a window in it, EI?”

“Good point, and . . .”

EI seemed to delight in the dramatic pause.

“And . . . since there aren’t closets in the other bedrooms that seems unlikely. I read they used a piece of furniture to hang clothes in back in the old days. What was it called? Oh. Yeah. A wardrobe, I think. It wasn’t until the second quarter of the 20th century that closets began to replace them. Except that ain’t . . . isn’t . . . true.”

“Explain. You have me confused,” I said.

“In one of the upstairs rooms – third floor – there is a closet. In fact, I think it’s right above Rebecca’s room but only covers half of the wall – the end closest to the hall. I know that’s right because the window opens into a little – what’s it called, enclave?”

“I think you mean alcove.”

“Right. Why one little closet in the whole place and built back before houses had closets?”

“It doesn’t show on either blueprint of the third floor,” I pointed to the areas.

“I see. Odd.”

“That tells us what?”

“You sound like Ms. Wilson. Well, I suppose it tells us that it was added later just like the closed-in space below it on the second floor must have been added later.

“I doubt if somebody would go to all that trouble – to build two enclosures like that – just for the sport of it,” I said thinking aloud.

My phrase tickled EI’s fancy and provoked a grin and chuckle.

“So, then, you’re saying we need to discover the purpose or purposes of the structures.”

“Right.”

“I already got it – them.”

So, did I but I let the lad take the lead.

“Really. Give!”

“The box in Rebecca’s room is where the ghost stuff takes place – in front of the real window. I’m not sure about the details. I imagine the box – closet – up above that one has some way of getting down into the one below – a ladder maybe. It’s probably hidden so the casual closet peeper wouldn’t see it.”

“Excellent, young man. You know what this means, of course.”

“Another trip to the mansion.”

“Right.”

“I suppose you’re ready for breakfast, huh?” El said.

It had been a not so veiled way of indicating his own hunger.

“I am. Suppose you could manage some grub – just to keep me company?”

“You’re okay, Marcus Marc. Seems we have each other’s numbers, don’t we?”

“Seems so. One more thing before we leave,” I said, having an afterthought.

“If the new blueprints subtracted four feet from Rebecca’s room, it must have subtracted four feet from the room on the back side of the building – opposite her room – as well – or it would be obvious that the dimensions were off.”

El poured over the diagram.

“And it does, see.”

“We will need to go in and measure that one. What’s your bet?” I asked.

He thought for only a moment.

“I’ll bet it’s really twenty feet unless somebody closed off four feet to make it match the front room.”

“I’ll bet you’re right. Let’s put on the feedbag. I assume the café is open this early.”

“Harry’s there by five. Starts serving at five thirty, sooner if you don’t mind sittin’ and sippin’ in the dark. Coffee’s always ready early.”

I marveled at how many pancakes one eleven-year-old boy could put away. He knew when he’d had enough, however, and pushed back from the table.

“Harry makes the best pancakes – soft and fluffy and yet they hang together so you can butter the heck out of ‘em

and they don't get torn asunder – that's Biblical. You aren't offended by, 'heck', are you?"

"I'm not offended, period. Gave it up as a boy. Has no positive value. Only purpose seems to be to incite problems between folks."

"I like that. I guess I'm that way, too. Just never put it into words. We better get started. I feel a storm comin' in. Probably have 'til about noon. We get some real gully busters this time of year. Usually great lightning with 'em. You like lightning?"

"Guess I've never spent time seriously contemplating the aesthetic side of atmospheric electrical discharges. But, yes. I suppose I do, so long as they keep their distance. I guess we should do the outside stuff at the back of the mines, then, while the weather holds."

"I figured. If you plan on entering them we better get the flashlight and lantern."

"Be prepared, I always say. I'll go back and get the flashlight while you get the lantern."

"I, for one am usually prepared," El said as if it were a matter of pride. I set the Lantern out back. Let's go."

It took nearly twenty minutes to get from point Sarah's to point mine entrance. The choice had been up and over or around. El thought around was best. I didn't question his suggestion though did believe the other route would have been quicker.

"It's just Adit Seven that has a real back entrance. It was cut through back when Harry opened it up for tourists. Looks like they only needed to go about six feet. Leads into one of the unproductive shoots that was abandoned. Has a gate that's only unlocked when the tourists are in there."

"We can't get into Number Six, then?"

Didn't say that. Just said it doesn't have a real opening. Listen, please!"

He smiled up at me.

"I'll get you in there. Trust me."

The boy had certainly piqued my interest.

"So, I am assuming you have been in six, then."

"I guess I said too much too soon. I tend to do that. I can keep secrets good, but when it comes to other stuff I tend

to just rattle on – it's what mom says about me.”

“Since you've brought it out in the open, may I ask why you go in.”

“Dad's still in there, buried with all the others. I guess it helps me feel close to him. Like I said, I never really got to know him.”

“So, you're in there often?”

“Depends on 'often'. Once a month or so I'd say.”

“I'm eager to take a look.”

There was a narrow ledge – a trail – six feet wide and some twelve feet above the base of the hill. We followed it for perhaps a hundred yards. I got the idea it was the 'legal' access route – the way that avoided the prohibitive signs, El had mentioned. At last we made our way down to the valley floor. The entrance/exit had been filled in with football size rocks.

“Come on over this way,” El said motioning me some distance to the west.

“Mother Nature provided a way in over here. Got a real door and everything.”

He was right, of course. A set of double doors each six feet wide and ten feet tall – Thick, oak, timbers, assembled with cross pieces into a seemingly impenetrable gateway. To each side laying flat on the ground, were two huge quarried stone slabs perhaps twelve feet by eight feet by two feet thick. Each one must have weighed tons. Dug into the ground in front of the opening were more stones, two by eight feet, sized, it appeared to me, so the larger slabs could stand upright on them. I envisioned them guarding and disguising the entry. At the angles suggested by the base stones the area would have resembled a sandstone outcropping with no indication of an opening behind and yet offering easy access to those who knew about them. Another puzzle.

The doors were chained together and fastened with a large lock – a combination lock – not what I would have expected.

El approached it and began working the tumblers. In no time the lock was open and we were inside.

“A safe cracker as well,” I joked.

He smiled.



“I have my sources.”

Once inside we carefully closed the doors behind us. El lit the lantern and pointed.

“There’s a narrow crevasse up ahead to the left that let’s us into Six.”

“Where does this tunnel go?”

“Not sure. Just up ahead is another gate and lock – it’s a key lock and I’ve never been able to pick it.”

“This isn’t on the maps, is it?” I asked.

“Nope. Some kind of secret I reckon.”

“Have you ever asked anybody about it?”

“No, Sir. If it’s not common knowledge that means it’s not supposed to be known about, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, that seems right.”

“So, I never asked. Never needed to know, I guess. It serves my purpose and that’s all I need from it.”

“Very pragmatic.”

“We’ll go into that term later.”

“The breeze. Is there always a breeze in here?”

“Yup. In here but not over in six. Shine your light back above the outside door. See those grates. It’s like something’s sucking the air in from outside. Another set of grates above the gate up ahead. Must serve some purpose I suppose.”

“Like you said, that’s probably not of any importance to us. Where’s that crevasse?”

“Up ahead about thirty feet and over to the left. I think you can squeeze through.”

I could and we were soon walking mostly south through number six. Presently we came upon the pile of rock – the collapse – that fully blocked the tunnel.”

“Any way around it?”

“Not found one. Looked some.”

It was clear that it had been the roof of the tunnel and the west side – to our right – that had fallen in. Standing there I could see no way of ascertaining what might have caused it.

“Is the pile stable? Have you climbed it?”

“Been all over it. Thought I might find a hole or something. Didn’t”

I had a question.

“The pile is roof to floor and wall to wall. I’m wondering if the west wall that’s shared with that little tunnel we were in first, also has any rubble in it.”

“Don’t know. We could look if we could get past that second gate.”

“Let’s go take a look,” I said feeling there wasn’t really anything more to see in Six.”

We were soon back in the smaller tunnel, standing in front of the large gate – a near duplicate of the one at the entrance.

“Look?” I said pointing at the lock.”

“What? Oh! It’s not locked. What the?”

“I assume you’ve never seen it this way.”

“Nope. Never. Of course, after I discovered it was locked up with a key I never came back to check anymore – might mean somebody’s in there, now.”

“I’m going in,” I said not requiring the same of El. “I want to see if there’s anything that might be connected with the collapse next door in six.”

“El offered what he knew:

“It was a freak fissure that somehow weakened and cracked allowing the collapse.”

“That’s the story,” I said. “Having heard Sarah – Ms. Wilson – talk about the great pains her husband went to in order to make sure the area was safe, I have my doubts about natural causes.”

“You mean somebody killed all those men?”

“That’s what I hope we can find out.”

With no hesitation on the boy’s part it became another ‘we’ activity.

We moved beyond the gate to what I approximated was the same distance as the collapse in Six. There was clear evidence of a collapse in the smaller, west, tunnel where we stood but it had been cleared away. The mystery grew.

El held the lantern high and pointed along the roof above what debris was left.

“A ledge up there, see it?”

“I do.”

I ran the beam of my flashlight along it. Looked to be several feet deep with three to four feet of headroom.

“Can I convince you to climb up there and see what you can see?”

“Thought you’d never ask. I can do it easy. . . ily. Maybe we should make a trade. I can clip the Flashlight to my belt and it will be less cummerbund up there.”

“I believe the word is cumbersome and you are correct about it. Here.”

We traded. He was up the wall with little effort. His skill proved to be a match to his self-confidence. Having time to examine the area more thoroughly, it hit me that at that point the roof was higher by eight feet or more than that in Number Six. The ledge was above roof level next door. Of course, where the roof had caved in – fallen loose –there would be a void, an empty pocket, left up above, I supposed, but it couldn’t be seen because of the rubble below it.

“What do you see up there?”

“Two odd things. First, it’s dry up here. Not cave like at all.”

“That may be a result of this constant breeze – the airflow through here,” I suggested.

He made no comment.

“Second, there is a whole row of holes about two inches across and six inches apart. You probably need to take a look, if we can get you up here.”

Thinking better of it I had a suggestion.

“Let me hand up my camera. You snap a few pictures and I’ll look at them down here.”

I was soon clicking through an array of pictures. Suddenly I was overcome with that ‘aha!’ experience that accompanies great discoveries. The collapse in Six had not been natural but perpetrated by some evil, two legged, being.

“Those are holes made by a stone drill,” I said. “Can you see inside any of them well enough to estimate how far they run into the wall?”

“Yeah, I can. Looks like they go all the way through it, maybe three or four feet. It’s like a black world on the other side – the light goes in but doesn’t show anything. I can’t even see the pile of stone over there, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Come on down. We need to make some preparations

and then come back.”

El jumped to the floor and took a precautionary shoulder to the ground roll. Whether that had been necessary to absorb the jolt or was just something an eleven-year-old was wont to do I don't pretend to understand.

“Before we leave let's move on back into this tunnel to see what's here. It has me puzzled – not on the local maps, not spoken of – I just don't understand.”

El handed me the flashlight and picked up the lantern. He stepped out to lead the way.

“Fill me in on silver mining,” I said as we slowly made our way south. “The walls in these tunnels are nearly solid rock. How could so many miles of them have been cut out by hand back in the old days, and why do they run such a level course?”

“You came to an expert. I've wrote . . . written . . . about it – assignments from Ms. Wilson. First of all, these tunnels weren't mostly rock to begin with. They were like fingers of dirt and ore that were strewn here in long, narrow, ridges, before the rock was set in on top of it all during the ice age. It's that loose stuff that's been dug out. There really isn't such a thing as a silver mine. Silver occurs along with other minerals and usually in just tiny amounts – tiny percentages you could say. Like here, it was mostly lead with traces of copper, zinc, and silver. Silver was what was profitable back then. The minerals were smelted – heated and separated from each other – at a smelting building up the valley about a mile. Used natural gas and charcoal to achieve the high temperatures needed. Rutherford made his own charcoal in special brick kilns the way I hear it. You can still see the leavins of some a them up the valley.”

“Why so far away? I'd have thought the closer to the mines the better.”

“The ore contained lots of sulfur, SO<sub>2</sub>, and you know how bad that stinks. Mr. Rutherford moved it away so the town wouldn't be stunk up all the time.”

“I guess that makes sense. No market for the lead and copper back then?”

“Oh yes, just not as profitable. Mr. Rutherford got a contract to provide the US mint with silver and furnished lead,

zinc, and copper to a battery company up in Kansas City.”

“Interesting.”

“There’s more. You asked.”

He smiled and continued.

“They are not all horizontal tunnels. There are a couple of vertical shafts – one over in Number Two and a shorter one in Number three. Low grade silver in them for some reason but they had to be emptied so the tunnels that they rose up from could be worked safely. Rumor has it there’s one under the mansion. Never could find verification of that, though.”

We continued our walk into the darkness.

“How long are these tunnels do you suppose,” I asked.

“Half mile up here to the west. Closer to three quarters over at Five.”

We rounded a corner to the right, heading southwest.

“Well look at that,” I said. “I think we just found that vertical shaft under the mansion.”

“I’d say so?” El said clearly in awe of the find.

It was a mostly round, dark, hole in the ceiling, probably twelve feet in diameter. We moved to a spot where we could look up inside. I put the flashlight on narrow beam and aimed it inside. The top was well out of view but it clearly rose for dozens of yards. The sides were oddly smooth as if any naturally outcropping rock had been chiseled back to make the walls fairly even.

“What ya think, Marc?”

“Let’s try to put it all together. This narrow tunnel is generally not known to anyone. The huge stone remnants out front are what could have once been a carefully designed secret entrance – or exit. That may help explain why its existence is unknown. This vertical shaft, probably reaches all the way up to the mansion just like the lore suggests. Most lore has some basis in fact. What, of interest, have you already found in the crawl space beneath the mansion?”

“I’m beginning to get your drift. The elevator up there may not just go up into the house but it may be able to come all the way down here.”

“Right, like a secret escape route for the family in case soldiers or thieves invaded the home.”

“Or maybe part of the Underground Railroad,” El added

enthusiastically. “The Rutherfords were originally from Pennsylvania so were probably anti-slavery folks.”

“What a fascinating twist you suggest. Maybe we – you – can research that as a possibility.”

EL craned his neck to see up inside.

“If it is the elevator there should be counterweights hanging on ropes or cables. I don’t see any.”

“You’re right. We left the elevator at the second floor. That means it rises at least ten or twelve feet beyond that up to the third. Perhaps the weights are still higher in the shaft because of that.”

“Actually, the elevator goes plum up to the attic so we’re probably talking another twenty-four feet, so I think your idea may be right.”

“If so, it was built so folks could get down at any time but could only get up if the car was down here to begin with.”

El nodded.

“I see what you mean. Strictly for escape then, and built so nobody could use it to sneak up there uninvited.”

“Ingenious.”

I was impressed. Of course, it was still a theory we would have to check out from up above. The tunnel we were in continued into the dark but not for far.”

“What in the blue blazes,” El said as the beam from my flashlight revealed a most unexpected object ahead.

“That’s a bright yellow, heavy duty, dump truck!” the boy said, eyes wide. I imagined it was the first one he had seen close up – if ever at all.

“Seems somebody may still be mining, here, El. Any nominees?”

“If it’s somebody from around here there really aren’t that many candidates – Harry, Ned, Luke, maybe the Purdy brothers but they’re getting pretty old. It just doesn’t make sense that it’s any of us.”

I was intrigued by his use of the word ‘us’ but didn’t ask for clarification. We walked to a position behind the truck. El brought the lantern and sat it on the open tailgate. There were picks and shovels and a small gasoline operated conveyer. A wooden box sat against the wall. It contained tools including an ancient looking air powered hammer drill with a five-foot bit

– a two-inch bit like could have been used to make the holes El ran across on the ledge earlier. A few sticks of dynamite slid into the down-side end of those dozen holes could certainly have set off the rockslide that killed Kurt and the others, and resulted in the permanent sealing of Adit Number Six. The parts of the possible storyline grew more and more interesting. I wasn't sure how they might fit together but in my experience parts were always better than no parts.

“Let's get out of here before somebody finds us where they clearly don't want us to be,” I suggested – urged – insisted.

We were soon back at the entrance and out into what had become a sunless, dreary, day. Dark clouds billowed just above the hilltops.

“I bow to your prognostication, El. Think we can make it back up to the mansion before the deluge sets in?”

He grinned.

“Depends on how fast the old man can move his legs.”

I reached out and put him in headlock, ruffling his hair. He seemed to like the contact and made no real effort to free himself.

“Lead the way, young man. You'll be surprised at what these legs can do.”

We took off on the trot.

The thunder clapped.

The lightning flashed.

The 'old man' puffed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: Ghost?**

The mansion reeked of peculiarities. We headed first for the grate on the west side of the foundation – one made to look secure when, in fact, it was designed for easy access. It had been set back in place by somebody other than us. The night before we had not replaced it thinking we would be exiting the same way we entered. Moving on to the elevator shaft we found the car waiting for us there in the crawl space. We had left it clear up at the second floor. Had it returned by itself – unlikely, I thought – or had someone else been using it or merely repositioning it? Its lower position might account for the raising of the counterweights and why they were not visible from the tunnel below.

Once inside the elevator car El lit the lantern. I wanted to examine it from top to bottom. As with most such conveyances there was an escape opening in the roof – in this case an open hole, eighteen-inches square. The walls were not solid but had been constructed of rather flimsy, six inch slats set six inches apart. Making the car lightweight rather than sturdy had clearly been a priority. It had, therefore, probably not been constructed for regular use giving some credence to escape scenario we had spun earlier. There were two heavy duty ropes – an inch and a half thick which fed through foot square openings front right and rear left corners. Their size was, no doubt, to allow the counter weights to slip up and down through the car at some point. I assumed there was a system of wheels or pulleys in the attic designed to assist in some way with the ease of setting the car in motion and stopping it. The car itself was in disrepair with several of



the vertical slats hanging loose. The floor, other than for the rope and weight openings, was solid – also six inch pieces of wood – one by sixes.

It was amazingly balanced indicated by the small amount of effort needed to set the car in motion in either direction. Even El's young muscles could handle the navigation. It was a hand over hand operation on the rope – pulling down to move upward and up to go down. There were even several pairs of leather gloves provided on a small shelf beside the open slatted front gate. With minimal experimentation, I found that the gate had to be pulled down before the car could be set in motion. It was pushed up to exit and that seemed to set some mechanism that locked the car in place in the shaft.

Its width and breadth of four feet by four feet indicated that it had been built for no more than three passengers – two adults moderately comfortably. Clearly it went down far easier than up, lending credence to our previous idea that it was there primarily as an exiting devise.

“Floor Sir?” El asked at last, feigning formality.

“Second, please,” I replied in a similar manner.

We exchanged a smile over the playfulness.

He pulled on the front rope and I the one in the rear. It was more of a task than I had first imagined and was impressed that El had managed so well alone. Loaded with the two of us I estimated the total weight was in the four-hundred-pound range. The length of rope we pulled represented a distance far greater than the vertical distance we traveled – good use of those simple machines we all studied in eighth grade science. I was certain we would discover some sort of huge wheel and pulley system in the attic.

The door to exit the elevator on the second floor was marked with the numeral 2 (imagine that!). We pushed the gate up, opened the door, and stepped into the south side of the wide, open, hall. With light from the lantern we could make out details that we'd missed on our previous outing.

“Going to that back-side room opposite Rebecca's, first, are we?” El asked or perhaps suggested. He was not a patient soul.

I nodded while unfolding the blueprint from my pocket. El looked on and pointed.

“That one, there.”

We moved a few steps west and agreed it was the correct door. El turned the knob and pushed it open. We entered. He placed the lantern on a small, web covered, table that had clearly been sitting in the corner for decades. There was a sudden clap of thunder that shook the floor. Lightning flashed and lit the room. El raised his shoulders and clapped his hands to the sides of his head as if to protect himself from the unwelcome forces. I could see at a glance that the room was twenty feet long but I paced it off anyway.

“I guess that’s that,” he said picking up the lantern, ready to leave. Third floor?”

“Yes. Third floor. Let’s hope the elevator is still where we left it.”

It was. We reached the third floor and moved to the front. With little difficulty, we determined which room was the one above Rebecca’s. The door was locked. It made me think that perhaps we should not be so cavalier in our approach. It might be well to be more cautious, suspecting some adversary to be lurking in every shadow and around every corner. I didn’t verbalize it, not wanting to frighten the boy.

I searched my pocket for my room key. These old locks were really only good for keeping out folks who didn’t have one of two or three different keys. I handed it to El. Click. Click. Squeak. The door opened. He returned the key to my hand. We entered.

There was a wooden chair sitting near the center of the room. El sat the lantern on it. Just as the boy had described, the closet-like structure was to our right in the corner abutting the hall wall. It had a door, which was also locked. El reached for the key. It worked in that one as well. Gently, I pulled him back and put my finger to my lips. I wasn’t sure why but it was my way of beginning my campaign of greater vigilance. I was responsible for the youngster’s wellbeing.

I opened the door slowly, moving the beam from my flashlight up and down the widening crack as I opened it. With the door completely opened back against the hall wall, I held

the lantern inside the little space – wider than seemed reasonable for a clothes closet. Four feet. There was an enclosed opening in the ceiling – an entry into the attic, I assumed. There was one similar to it in my bedroom at home. I could see no such obvious opening in the floor. El got to his hands and knees sensing the problem.

“Got it!” came his announcement.

“Got it, what?”

“A flip up handle like thing. A steel ring. It’s recessed into the center of the floor. See?”

“I do. Which way does it open do you suppose?”

“Front to back – I mean I’d think it would open up against the hall wall. That means we need to stand down there.”

He pointed south.

“You please stand out in the bedroom,” I said. “I’ll see if I can pull it up.”

“You’re suddenly being a lot more cautious than you’ve been before. You know something I don’t?” he asked as he moved out into the room.

“Not really. Just being cautious like you said.”

He moved outside. I lifted. It was a hinged trap door as we had suspected. I pushed it back against the hall wall where it clicked into place – apparently, a catch on that wall we had missed. On its underside was an attached ladder – just like El had predicted. It hooked up with one from the area below. I shined the beam down into the area. El peeked in to take a look. At the front was the window, right where that window should be. Below us was a maze of contraptions, which I didn’t pretend to understand at first glance.

“Our ghost?” El asked.

“Most likely. Yes, I imagine so – at least the one seen at the window. It’s so crowded let me take some pictures from up here, first. Hold the lantern down into the area. He dropped to his stomach and it was soon lit.”

The ladder continued down the hall wall to the rear of the little enclosure.

“I’m going down into the room,” I said. “You can hand me the flashlight once I’m there.”

With the care of a sensible man of my age, I descended

the ladder. It felt firm and strong. The wooden rungs – one by fours – were not worn in the least, suggesting it had not been used very often in its long, lifetime. That seemed strange if it had been used several times a week to make the illusion work. Clearly the little cubical was not a new structure although it was considerably more recent than the mansion.

A white garment draped over a modified manikin hung from the ceiling – a ceiling I had not been able to see from up above. A draft of significant proportion rose through the trap door causing the dress to remain in a perpetual flutter. Its source was a vent grate in the west, interior, wall at the baseboard. It apparently exited from a similar one near the ceiling.

El dropped the flashlight into my hands. Questions formed in my head. I spoke them out loud.

“When did Rebecca’s ghost first begin appearing from this window? I don’t recall anything specific about that in any of Harry’s books.”

EL had some of the answers – or at least useful approximations.

“For sure on August 13th some twenty-five years ago – two years before the collapse in Six.”

“That recently. I assumed far longer ago than that.”

“There were stories about it happening much earlier. Not documented, I guess.”

El’s timeline was confused but I didn’t question him about it. If Kurt and his father had both died twenty-three years earlier, they would have been dead twelve years before El had been born. Also, it didn’t agree with Sarah’s information. It needed to be added to my page of oddities – a page that was filling up fast!

I took care not to light the window directly, hoping anyone who was watching would write it off as reflections from the lightning. The floor was essentially bare except for a box built across the end nearest the hall. The ladder rested on the rear cross piece to which the lid was hinged. It was two feet high and deep. A fairly constant, dull, squeak or muffled moan rose from it. I hoped El had not heard with the storm now raging outside. He had, however.

“What’s that noise? Sounds like quiet crying.”

Thunder.  
Lightning.  
Eerie shadows.

“It’s coming from the box, here,” I said. “I’m going to open it.”

EI moved back so only his eyes and forehead showed in the opening above. I grasped the front edge of the lid and raised it to a chorus of creaks and squeaks indicating that, like the ladder, it had not been used often. I had no idea what to expect – perhaps it was the ghost’s daytime retreat – a primitive coffin. My imagination was running wild. Where was my silver spike when I needed it?

Though fascinating, seeing its contents verged on disappointment. EI’s sigh from up above clearly seconded that reaction. His head moved back into full view. On the floor of the box, to the right, were two, twelve-volt storage batteries – car batteries. On the left was a small generator – alternator perhaps. A rod connected its armature with something inside the west wall. Rotating rapidly, it produced the moan from where it was cradled in a metal sleeve. Whatever the source of that rotation, it turned the generator, which kept the batteries charged. A wire ran up the hall-end wall to the ceiling. I focused the light up there for the first time.

“My goodness. You have to come down and take a look at this, EI.”

He was immediately by my side, again clinging to my belt. He began to verbalize a description of what he saw on the ceiling.

“Like a hanging track of some kind with branches and switches like a model railroad set up. The ghost hangs from it on a little wheel – like a wagon wheel with no tire. Between it and the ghost is a little platform with a motor and a belt up to the wheel. Ah! When the electricity is on, it flows through the draping electrical cord to the motor, which turns the wheel and propels the whole hanging thing along the track. The track runs all around the ceiling, back and forth, in circles and half circles, and several square corners. What’s that flat round gadget with the dowels sticking out behind the platform – like sticks of different lengths stuck in a wheel made out of a Tinker Toy set?”

"I can't provide the details yet but somehow it works to reset or trip the switches so on the next trip it can follow a different path. In that way, over time, it follows lots and lots of different paths. That's why no single pattern of movements can be detected. Ingenious!"

"I'll say. And hardly anything to wear out," El noted.

"And batteries that last at least a year – more likely four or five," I added. "The set up uses a timer that dependably turns on the act at midnight."

"What about the candle?" El asked moving to the window.

"Let's take a look. Oh. See! A gas line, an electrical on/off valve, and a spark ignition system. I suppose you've noticed the gas light fixtures on the walls throughout the mansion."

"I have," he said. "We have 'em at home. The unbelievably eerie suddenly isn't anymore. Funny how that works, isn't it? Like magic. Once you know the trick it's not magic anymore. Always disappointing to me. So, who'd go to all this trouble?"

"Who's making the money from it – the appearance of Rebecca's ghost?"

"All of us, I suppose. You're thinking Harry, but I can tell you Harry wouldn't cheat anybody like this. I mean it really is cheating the tourists. Harry's not our man, I can tell you that for sure."

If I had been on trial I certainly would have wanted a witness that would be as convincing for my case as EL was for Harry's.

"As I understand it from Sarah and Millie, everybody in town is like a part owner in the tourist business, is that right?"

"That's right, well except Luke. He's more like an outsider who comes and goes. It's just those of us who live within the village limits."

"Really. Luke makes no profit from any of this?"

"Nope. Just us original stock and Ms. Wilson because of her tragic loss here. Luke's not one of us."

"There goes my number two suspect," I said.

"After Harry, I guess."

"Yes, after Harry."

I still wasn't satisfied about Harry. I had no hard evidence to support a contention that he was the bad guy – just piles of motive. His financial empire depended on the ghost. His ability to take care of his 'flock' depended on it. His need to reap the applause and accolades of his audiences seemed to be of more than a little importance to him. His writing career was based solely in all of this. The ghostly aspects of Forbes Crossing had become his whole life. He was apparently going to great lengths to stay away from me – for fear, perhaps, that he would make some incriminating slip. No, despite everybody's devotion to the man, Harry had just moved back to the top of my list.

As to Luke, if all of this was not profiting him financially, what might be his motive to establish and perpetuate the ghostly hoax? If he were the one who was secretly working and profiting from the mine – the new, unnamed, tunnel furthest west where we discovered the truck and the elevator shaft – I would think he'd prefer that all nosey strangers, such as the tourists, stay away from Forbes Crossing so there would be less risk of being found out. If I had learned one thing from all of my investigations, it was that those who deal in clandestine activities will go to great lengths to keep prying eyes as far away as possible. That could mean that just being there in 'his' mansion could present more than a little danger for my young colleague and me.

"Let's leave this place for now. I'd like to return near midnight and watch the show from right in here."

"Me too," El said with a seldom voiced note of excitement in his tone. "I have to admit I really knew it wasn't a ghost but still, I feel disappointed. Does that make sense?"

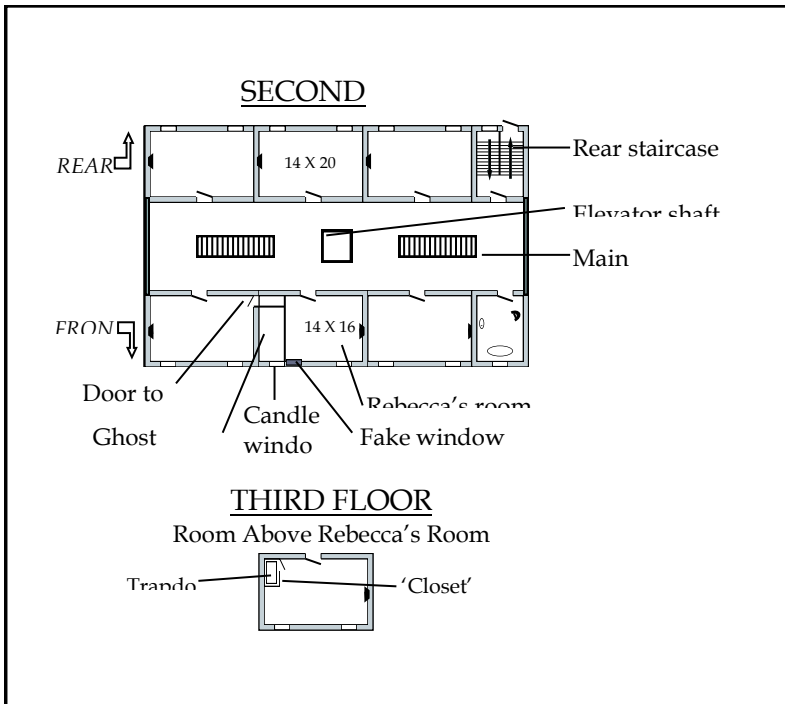
"Of course, it does. I couldn't tell how you felt about it."

He raised his eyebrows, back to being noncommittal if not outright evasive. I had to wonder why but again wouldn't press it.

We were soon back at the elevator.

"Want to see how far down this thing goes?" he asked.

His tone and dancing eyes suggested he really wanted to do that. I figured if I didn't say yes, he would manage to return and have the adventure all by himself. It would be better done with me along.



“Okay but with one rule!”

“What’s that?”

“If we come to a point where I think it’s no longer safe, we return to the surface immediately. You agree to abide by that?”

“Okay. It makes sense. I guess, really, we don’t even know if this thing goes down any further than the crawl space, do we. It’s all just like some story we concocted between us.”

“I suppose so. Want to make a bet?”

“If I can have the side that says yes it does go on down.”

The proposal was accompanied by an impish grin.

“I won’t make that one,” I said. “Let’s take it easy and see what happens.”

We hung the lantern from what seemed to be the



'lantern hook' in the center of the elevator car's ceiling and began working the ropes.

As we reached the level of the crawl space we both let up.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Guess so. Didn't think it would actually be scary."

"We don't need to go any further."

"Yes. I think we do. Ms. Wilson says nothing is much more important than discovering new knowledge."

"Ms. Wilson seems to be a wise person."

"She is."

Slowly and deliberately we returned to pulling on the ropes. Slowly and deliberately the car began to sink into the shaft. There are times when what you expect to happen happens and yet you find that it still comes as a surprise. That was one of those times.

Twenty feet into our adventure El nodded what was a clearly considered nod.

"It's like we thought. Are we good or what!"

It had clearly been rhetorical.

In his eleven-years old impatience, he wanted to speed things up.

"Keep it slow and easy. This crate is old and obviously dilapidated. We need to employ due caution."

My comment seemed to have been prophetic. At that moment, the ropes began slipping through our hands – faster and faster. El looked back at me, terror on his face. I'm sure my expression provided little reassurance. The speed at which we were dropping continued to increase.

I turned to the front of the car.

"See if we can force the gate up. That seems to somehow lock the car at each floor. Maybe that will do something."

Our combined effort lifted it half way. It was soon above El's reach but I continued to do what I could to force it upward. It produced an ear piercing, scraping, screech. El covered his ears. A stream of orange, red and blue sparks shot up like a 4th of July fountain from each side of the car. I smelled smoke. El removed one of the dangling slats, broke it over his knee and began pressing a piece of it hard against

the rear rope. Taking his lead I repositioned my left foot so the sole and heel of my shoe was doing the same against the front rope. Our acceleration slowed and presently – although in my reality it seemed like an eternity – we jerked to a gut displacing, sudden, and complete stop.

“Hand me a piece of slat,” I asked. “I want to use it like a shim to hold the gate in place.”

That done, I turned and held out my arms. El melted into me. His wet cheeks soaked my shirt.

“Well, I think that qualifies as a full-blown adventure, don’t you?” I said.

I felt him nod against my chest.

“Can you believe the phenomenal team we make – you and me.”

“I . . . You and I,” he managed.

“I began chuckling. He followed suit and slowly eased away from me.”

I sank to the floor and sat hard, allowing my rapid breathing to catch up with my runaway heartbeat.

“Flashlight,” El said.

I removed it from my belt and handed it to him. It was then I realized that, through it all, the lantern remained on the hook. Had it fallen we could have been engulfed in flames.

El aimed the light down the rear rope hole.

“About twenty feet from the bottom, I’d say.”

“Twenty is good, I’d say! Certainly better than no feet.”

He nodded and smiled back at me.

“I can get out through this floor hole and shinny down the rope,” he said already into an escape plan. Don’t think you can fit through it, though.”

“The rope hang all the way to the floor of the tunnel?” I asked.

“Seems to. Didn’t do that earlier did it? We couldn’t even see a rope.”

“Here’s a plan,” I said. “You use the method you just outlined and when you get to the bottom move away from the shaft in case this thing decides to drop again. Once you’re clear, I’ll pull myself up through the escape hole in the ceiling. What we have here is a basically circular shaft with a square car in it. There is an arched gap on every side. I should be

able to make my way down one side and hook up with the rope you will use. Get going now while we seem to be stable, here.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you down below. You be careful up here, ya hear!”

“I will certainly try,” I said smiling at him.

The boy was soon through the hole. He took the flashlight with him, hooked to his belt and focused downward. I watched, only able to see his formless silhouette from time to time against his light.

“I’m down,” he called.

I could see that. He moved out of sight to the north. The hole in the ceiling was easily within reach there in the seven-foot high car. I grasped the edge and with some difficulty managed to pull myself up top. I had left the lantern burning hoping there would be enough light escaping from between the slates to let me see what I was doing. It worked exactly that way. I let myself over the top at the rear and was able to reach through the boards and grasp the rope. I eased myself down until I was clear of the car, then went hand over hand the rest of the way to the ground. I also exited the shaft opening into the tunnel to the north, following El. All that time he had stood close, shining the light up into the shaft providing enough illumination for me to function.

He came to me and reached around my waist.

“I’ll tell you this,” I said.

“What?”

“If I am ever in a life and death situation again, I want you to be there with me.”

He pulled away and looked up at me.

“You want to risk my life again?”

“That was certainly not what I intended. I just meant that your quick thinking went a long way to saving our lives – the thing with the slat. That is what I would want to have along the next time – your quick wits.”

“I’ll be glad to help but hope you never need them again – them, being my wits.”

“Me, too.”

It seemed a strange comment – him being scared for me.

“So, what’s next?” he asked.

“You seriously want to stay with me on this?”

“Of course. This is a ‘we’ project. Remember – the pie, the coffee, the we?”

“I do. I’m quite sure, however, that your mother will not approve of your continued participation.”

“I think she will.”

“First, let’s get out of here. Then we’ll approach your mother.”

Not unpredicted had I thought about it, the first gate we came to was locked. Not only was it locked but it was locked with a shiny new combination lock.

“Let’s see if it’s the same as the one that’s at the outer gate,” El suggested.

He reached through the narrow space between the doors and worked at the dial.

“Different, I’m afraid. No success. Now what?”

“I suppose we tear down the door. Run back and see what tools you can find that may be of help to us. I’ll search here for a weak spot.”

He was back in five minutes lugging a pointed pick, with hammers, chisels and a crowbar slid under his belt.

“Okay. Nice selection. Let’s begin by seeing if we can remove this diagonal bracing piece. Two of the uprights look to be loose.”

I took the pick and after a few near misses, sank it between the brace and an upright. From there it was fairly simple to pry the brace out. El slipped the crowbar into the space and helped.

“Keep moving the bar further toward the ends,” I directed.

Within minutes the brace had fallen to the side. Using the chisel and hammer, three of the uprights had soon given up their places and we were able to slip through.

At the entrance, we found that the storm had begun to ease up. El tried out some of his big words.

“Precipitation is dissipating.”

“Indubitably,” I responded. He didn’t flinch. Neither did I. What fun!

“Let’s just sit and rest a bit before we move on,” I

suggested.

I found a small boulder and El plopped cross-legged to the rock floor.

“So, I guess somebody was – is – out to do us in,” he said trying to make it a matter of fact statement.

“Perhaps. There is some chance the old rope just gave way somewhere along the way.”

“Not likely. Too thick for one reason.”

“And I have another,” I added. “When I was on top of the car I saw that the four main ropes that held the car were all still in place – straight and taut. It was either a mechanical dysfunction in the pulley system up in the attic or intentional tampering with the ratchet system.”

“What’s that?”

“A safety device on these old fashioned, people powered, elevators – long before the newer inventions by Ottis – that controls the speed and which locks up the mechanism if it begins going too fast. I’ve seen models in museums. It could easily be disengaged by hand up there to allow such a drop. I’m also thinking that it is unlikely that the measures we took, as brilliant as they were, could by themselves have actually brought the car to a halt. The final jolt we felt reinforces that. I’m thinking somebody wanted to scare the water out of but not kill us. Whoever it was, re-engaged the ratchet just in time to save us from crashing into the tunnel.”

“Ever know a ghost that familiar with ratchets?” El asked mostly seriously.

“Never have.”

We allowed silence between us for several minutes. Eventually, I broke it.

“Bad day for the tourists, I suppose.”

“Won’t be any. Heavy rains like this flood the low water bridge you crossed getting here. May stay that way for several days.”

Not good for the local economy, I thought, but it will be easier for me to get to the bottom of things without them underfoot. I spoke again.

“I hear Harry is writing another book. Will that be number four?”

“Yup. It’s about how spirits are real conscientious

about leaving a clean slate behind – as few loose ends as possible. It's especially true when a family member is in danger. He says that like Rebecca, some have been known to stick around for a century or more before they're willing to let go and pass over to the other side. It's like a duty of honor, I guess you could say."

"Harry has let you read his manuscript?"

EI smiled at me.

"Ya don't have to be let to in order to, you know."

I figured I understood. He has his own clandestine methods. I didn't have to speculate for long.

"Harry writes all his stuff out by hand. When he rewrites a section, he throws the first one out. I'm what you could call pretty religious about going through the Forbes Crossing trash. I know stuff nobody else knows."

"Anything else you want to reveal about the new book?"

"I don't figure what I'm doing is wrong. Everybody'll know eventually anyway."

"I understand, I suppose."

"He says one spirit can only exert a certain amount of influence on either other spirits or on people that are still alive. When two work together they can exert twice as much and so a large group can often work wonders. It's hard to keep a large group of spirits focused and together, though. Spirits are really fickle and restless to get on with things. Sort of like me waiting for Aunt Millie to finish an apple pie laced with sugar and cinnamon, I suppose. I've been told more than once that I tend to get restless and peevish when I have to wait for things to happen that I think should have already happened. I can tell you I'm feeling that way about this whole thing."

"This, 'Rebecca the Ghost', thing you mean?"

"Yup. Need to get on with it and settle things once and for all."

"In the book does Harry suggest that there are spirits trying to influence Rebecca's spirit or is her spirit trying to influence another one?"

"Not got to that yet if it's one of his points. In the last part I came across he talks about how spirits aren't real accurate in the way they see things; like he says a spirit can't really tell if another being is a living person or a freed spirit.

Until a spirit gives in and passes over to the other side it may even forget it's not still a person. And they're terrible with time – no good concept of it at all. I suppose when you're part of eternity, that's to be expected. Still, sort of confusing, I suppose."

"I suppose," I said. "Any of that give you any theories about what's been going on?"

"A few. Like whoever invented that contraption up in the little . . . what? . . . Ghost Chamber. . . may have been influenced to do it by a spirit. Maybe by two – Rebecca's and Johnny's – two being more powerful than one."

"And what purpose is being served for the spirit or spirits by having the ghost-pretender-guy do what he does up there?"

"It's my theory that it must take a lot of energy or whatever for a spirit to stay visible to people. If Rebecca's spirit figures she has to stay visible – maybe to be sure she's around for Johnny to see if he ever comes around again – then she may have influenced the ghost-pretender-man to do her work for her – to save her staying-visible-energy . . . or whatever – make and maintain an image of her for others and Johnny to see, you see!"

"An interesting, if not fully cohesive, theory. You should really try your hand at writing."

He shrugged and wrinkled his brow. I didn't understand. So, what was new?

The rain stopped and the clouds, also, began to 'dissipate'.

"I need to go back to my room and try to organize all that I think I know," I said. "I do that best on paper with paragraphs and diagrams when I'm alone. You probably need to check in with your mother. Being out during the storm probably worried her."

He gave me a shake of the head and a look that said, 'Why can't I convince you my mom doesn't worry about me'. I thought the same way as his age, but later found out about my mother's much different take on my unexplained absences and dangerous exploits.

We used the lower trail on the way back, meeting Main Street where the graveled trail descended from the mansion. I

studied it for a moment.

“I’d have thought that after a rain like that there would be torrents of water pouring down that trail.”

“Used to but Harry had it fixed last month. Dug it all down about eighteen inches, installed drainage pipe – the kind with holes in it to take in the water – and covered it all up with new gravel. This is the best test of it yet. I’d say it’s doing fine.”

“Yes. I’d agree. They run into any problems – boulders, springs, anything unusual?”

“No. They did rupture the old gas line that feeds the mansion. No biggie I guess. I think he finally decided to go ahead and reconnect it. It took him a while to make up his mind.

It was another aha! thing for me. A month or so before my arrival, there had been a period of ten to fourteen days during which the candle had not been lighting at midnight. Initially I figured that could have just been a ploy to call attention to things in Forbes Crossing; to drum up trade for Harry’s several endeavors. It had been an email that included an article about it that first brought my attention to the ghostly goings on in FC.

Now I sensed another possible cause. The ruptured gas line prevented the candle from being fueled so it couldn’t light. That led to still another take – overly complicated I supposed. Perhaps Harry had used the refurbishing of the trail to intentionally sever the line so the candle wouldn’t light, so they would get wider media attention. Harry was shrewd. Even his loyal supporters there in FC surely wouldn’t deny that.

“Aren’t you hungry yet,” El asked.

“What time is it?”

“A little after one.”

“I think I have pot roast waiting at Sarah’s place. You be able to find some chow on your own?”

“Always have. No problem. Can I go with you tonight to visit the ghost chamber?”

“Certainly, if it’s okay with your mother. Meet me in my room about ten thirty. Will the café be open that late since there aren’t tourists?”



“Sure will be. A few may have got in before the high water. Anyway, it’ll be open. It’s Tuesday.”

“Let’s meet there for dessert.”

“See you then.”

I headed for Sarah’s. Sure enough I was met by the wonderful aroma of pot roast.

“Sorry about cutting out on you last night. Things came up. Smells great in here.”

“It’s the pot roast. Can be ready on five minutes notice.”

“In that case, I’m giving my five-minute notice. Let me go clean up.”

I was back down stairs and entered the kitchen as she poured the lemonade.

“I can make coffee if you’d prefer.”

“Lemonade is fine.”

We made small talk. I got around to El.

“I am enjoying getting to know young Elmer – El as he seems to prefer.”

“My advice is to follow him with care. He can lead you on a merry chase. Such energy. Really bright. Truly enjoys book learning. It’s all I can do to keep up with him. Seems to be getting more and more restless month by month. New hormones, maybe. I don’t know much about boys. Had three sisters, myself.”

“You hadn’t mentioned you were a teacher.”

“An old K-12 certificate. Only taught one year in a classroom while Kurt finished his Masters. This thing just fell into my lap a few years ago. It’s one way for me give back – repay the kindnesses these folks have shown me. Like I said, I’ll always be an outsider but they’ve waved lots of the distance that traditionally comes with that. I love the kids and we have great times together.”

With the meal finished I offered to help with the dishes and again she brushed it off.

“I’m sure you have more important things to do than the dishes. You scoot now. I’ll take care of things. Planned pork chops for dinner – supper. About six?”

“Great. Until six, then. Oh, there is one thing if you’re up to talking about it. Do you know in which direction Kurt was

planning to enlarge the main room in Number Six?”

“Yes. To the west. He had reason to believe there might be what he called a void pocket close by in that direction. It was like a huge bubble in the rock formation. If it had been there it would have reduced the work by some ninety percent he said. They would have just had to break through the connecting wall – like knocking out a wall into the laundry to expand a kitchen.”

“Do you know Luke Preston very well, the caretaker for the mansion?”

“Not really. He seems to keep to himself but then look who’s talking. I see him driving in and out of town once in a while – once or twice a month I suppose. Has a beat up old pickup. For some reason, he is considered even more of an outsider than I am and I believe his mother was born and raised here. That probably means Luke was too. I know he left early in life to live with a relative – in Tulsa maybe. After he finished college he returned here and started at the mansion. He’s a shirttail relative of the Rutherfords. At the time he came back, there was a short-lived rumor that he had married but something happened to his wife – she disappeared or something. It was as if he was under suspicion in it but apparently, nothing was ever proved because here he is. I guess there weren’t children. I’ve never heard anything about them.”

“What did he study in college, do you know?”

“I’m really not sure. Some sort of science, maybe. I know when he first returned he and Harry were pretty thick. Something happened between them. I haven’t seen them speak in years. It may have had to do with a deed Luke had to some of the property that Harry claimed on the hillside in front of the mansion. I believe the mansion is now owned by Luke’s cousin who lives up in Springfield. Inherited some way. He never comes down here. Leaves it all to Luke to look after. I’m not even sure why they tend to it. It just stands there. If it weren’t for the ghost story it wouldn’t be anything but a big old hard to reach, abandoned, house on a hump of rock”

“I haven’t seen Luke. Can you describe him for me?”

“Slight. Short. Dress pants and tuck in shirts, unlike the overalls and flannel shirts worn by most of the other men

in town. Wears a curved brim straw hat – fancy. As to his looks, he’s really quite unremarkable, I suppose. Narrow face and nose, eyes set close together, short forehead. Gray hair.”

“Is he the only Rutherford relative in town?”

“As far as I know, if you aren’t counting Rebecca. Harry could tell you for sure.”

“Thanks. You’ve filled in lots of gaps.”

I climbed the stairs to my room, got my yellow pad out of my briefcase, took a seat, and began jotting down random notes and questions.

Someone was still mining. It wasn’t known to the town’s people.

Who?

How did the person remove the ore?

In the truck, we found, most likely.

Where did he take it?

Perhaps, to the old smelting building.

Could that be producing the smoke Millie assumed was coming from Luke’s fireplace? It’s far enough away, in a place no one has reason to venture, to hide any activity.

I probably needed to hike up that valley. I put it on my agenda for Wednesday morning. Should I include El or go alone? I’d see. El’s knowledge of the area would be a distinct advantage. There would have been no discovery of the new tunnel without him. In turn, there would have been no discovery of the extended elevator shaft down to that new tunnel. He was probably a go.

I opened the second of Harry’s books. It had made reference to the local cemetery. I always found such places informative. There it was, shown on a map, near the edge of town, several blocks to the east of Sarah’s place. Perhaps still that afternoon. El’s input might be helpful. I could return with him later if that seemed necessary.

I stowed my smaller, ‘on the run notebook’ in my back pack and let myself out the front door. The sandy, red, soil didn’t hold water for long. I had learned that on previous trips to the Ozarks. The street that had once connected Main with the Cemetery had deteriorated into no more than a narrow, poorly maintained, path.

A few minutes later I spied it up ahead. The entrance

was marked with the obligatory well rusted, metal side poles spanned across the top by a curved, metal, sign bearing the cut out word C E M E T E R Y. The area was dotted mostly with small, white, stone, markers. A half dozen, closely clustered, larger, red granite, headstones designated the Rutherford Clan – Grandfather, Grandmother, Father, Mother. I was puzzled that no burial site was designated for Rebecca. I made a note to ask. It seemed strange that the village resident with the most notoriety was absent.

I walked up and down the lines of stones. I was used to the fact that in those small, Ozark, communities, given names were repeated from generation to generation. The same was true there. Oddly, it seemed to me, there were no dates of birth or death on any of the stones. A local eccentricity, perhaps. Maybe they wanted to remember that their people had been there, not when they had come or gone.

My stroll yielded little truly useful information. Interestingly, there were markers bearing the same names as most everyone I had met. I have to admit that a momentary chill crawled up my spine as I looked down on a marker for Elmer and Melva Rakes – the boy's grandparents I assumed. Like I said; names in back hill Ozark villages remained very much the same from generation to generation. So long as mine was not among them I figured things were satisfactory.

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## **CHAPTER FIVE: Would The Magic Be Gone?**

I spent the rest of the afternoon reading through the papers and articles Kurt had collected – at least those that had been left for me to see. I had to wonder about those things that had been taken. Had they been things that might have incriminated someone or were they just excess that had no relevance and would have slowed down my investigation or led me astray? Of what was left, the items that interested me most referred to the professor from the university – Dr. Fredrick Michaels. Several of those were articles I assumed Sarah had added to the collection after her husband's death. I had missed them the first time through – or – they hadn't been there the first time through. Maybe they had been added at the time my room experienced its rearranging. Hmm?

The doctor taught engineering and specialized in mining. That seemed to make sense. Interestingly, his middle name was Preston – Luke's last name. A coincidence? Not sure. In a copy of a memo to Harry soon after the collapse, the Dr. M. summarized his initial survey (assessment) with the conclusion that Adit Number Six should be closed and left as it was. Any attempt to remove the debris risked collapsing a large section of the hill overhead, possibly threatening the stability of the mansion. From what I had seen of the bowls of that big chunk of rock, that conclusion seemed improbable, but I wasn't a mining engineer.

Adit Number Seven was named as the tunnel of choice for Harry's purpose – developing a working section of a mine toward the rear with a large room near the front for dining and entertainment. It could be easily enlarged to accommodate

slightly over 100 people at a sitting. I had to wonder how Sarah came by that memo. Perhaps directly from Harry to explain why her husband's body could not be retrieved from the collapse. The 'how;' was probably not crucial and that explanation satisfied me.

Several other articles from Fayetteville papers had appeared following the doctor's death. The car he was driving missed a mountain curve between Forbes Crossing and Fayetteville and he was killed. It happened six weeks after the work had been completed in Number Seven. The vehicle exploded leaving little to be examined. The man's blood alcohol was very high so it was ruled accidental death naming alcohol as the probable precipitating cause. Clipped from the society section of an earlier Sunday paper was an article with pictures depicting the doctor's new residence – very expensive – well beyond the income of a college professor of the day. Its date coincided generally with the time he began consulting for Harry. The third clipping was the obituary. My! My! Guess who did show up as the sole surviving relative and heir – Luke Preston – a nephew of one of those once or twice removed kinds. It appeared that Luke inherited what the doctor left behind. The fourth was dated the day after the accident. It was a police notice of arrest – Luke Preston on a drunk and disorderly from the night before. Whoever gathered those four items together as a set had a clear purpose. I just had to wonder if Luke became intoxicated out of grief, guilt, or glee.

I refocused my attention back to the mechanisms we found in and about the ghost chamber, as EI had come to call that four by fourteen-foot enclosure.

Question: What was the bottom line source of power – the power that turned the rod, which protruded through the west wall? It had to be constant, dependable, and renewable. The house was not wired for electricity. Natural gas by itself held little promise. I opted to go with the breeze – a virtually unwavering up flow draft. I now understood that it originated in the tunnel down at the level of the valley floor and rose, probably through the elevator shaft, into the house. It provided natural air conditioning of a kind, the air being cool to begin with from the valley and then cooled even more from the

lower temperature underground. The air, flowing constantly through that natural conduit, dried what, under typical conditions would have left damp walls in the tunnel and elevator shaft. Because of that the anticipated, musty, odor was seldom present in the house.

I had noted that by the time the air rose to the level of the mansion, the force of the up-breeze was substantial. Since it depended on the same natural laws that govern air flow in chimneys and static ventilation stand pipes, the upward flow was nearly constant. There would necessarily have to be outlets in the attic to complete the system. I would check on them that very evening. Glancing at a picture of the structure I noted there was an abundance of chimneys. That was not uncommon in homes of the era, however; most rooms had been fitted with a fireplace. We would see.

It remained for me to discover the exact mechanism used to convert the up draft into useable energy. Enlisting the Occam's razor technique – in essence, the simpler the possible explanation, the more likely it was true – it occurred to me that a fan blade-like device, caught up in that air flow would spin. A spinning blade could be attached to an axel, which could be that rod coming through the wall. If part of the shaft's up flow was directed via a duct up through the wall to such a mechanism, there would exist the exact type of power source needed to drive the generator that kept the batteries charged and ready to power the motor that hung from the track on the ceiling. Why not just depend on the generator and skip the batteries? Power delivered by batteries, once charged, would be constant unaffected by possible variations in the force of the air flow.

I made a crude drawing (by that I mean a simple drawing, of course) and then several variations. I was convinced any one of the configurations would work. The basic system required a duct, which ran up through the wall. Architecturally, large structures designed in the era of the mansion typically had double walls separating the rooms. They were often set a foot or even two feet apart. It added insulation value and sound proofing. It also allowed recessing of fireplaces and chimneys, freeing floor space in a room. Opened up through the floors at the bottom and top of those



inner spaces, such a wall structure became a natural air duct all by itself. Openings would have to be cut between floors but that was easily accomplished by removing the baseboard, making a narrow entry hole and connecting the two floors by cutting an opening. With the replacement of the baseboard no one would ever be the wiser. I felt confident in my theory. That evening should provide proof.

As fascinating as all of that was to me, it was probably not really important in the larger scheme of things. I was after the mastermind behind it. I had found it relatively easy to access the mansion. Most any local could have certainly done the same. My theory did nothing to remove Harry from my list of suspects although I felt things leaning more and more toward Luke. His motive continued to elude me and motive was essential. Another thing I had learned through the years was to never count anybody out until all the information was in. In this case, that would have to include Millie, Sarah, Ned, Billy Jo, and even El, his sister Melva and mother, Edie.

There were moral and ethical issues that I always had to confront. Did it really matter whether or not a perpetrator was exposed when clearly no harm was really being done? Expressing a similar view, El had wondered if it were proper to cheat the tourists? Harry himself left it up to his visitors to decide. He just presented the lore. The rest was up to them. For those who wanted to believe, it probably provided some good things for them. For those who didn't, being able to debunk it probably provided some good things for them. It could easily be construed as a win/win situation. The tourists got what they wanted or needed and the town was able to survive economically. Was deceit ever truly justifiable, however? Was something like deceit always bad just because it was absolutely, inherently, evil? If that were true, then it should never be used, even when it clearly helped so many and harmed virtually nobody. Hmmm?

Such situations had posed interesting conundrums for me over the years. I typically chose to make it a search for the truth. It seemed that was the course I was following in Forbes Crossing. Haunted houses at Halloween were universally understood to be fake and still folks flock to them year after year. Most movies, TV programs, and fiction novels

all present the unreal as if it were truth and yet that deceitful aspect of their substance almost never comes under disparaging scrutiny. I just imagined that regardless of the outcome of my investigation here, the tale of Rebecca's ghost would live on.

The adventure earlier in the day had tired me. I took a nap.

I was down stairs a bit before six, thinking I might be of help in the kitchen. It was a fantasy I had clung to throughout my adult years. In truth, kitchens and I were a lot like water and oil. It's not that I had bad eating habits; I ate well. It was that in order to keep things that way I dared not let myself believe I could cook for myself. I'm told that fat, sugar, salt, pastries, and ice cream are not really the five basic food groups!

Fortunately, Sarah had everything well under control. She invited me to sit and poured coffee as she added some last-minute garnishes to the peas, corn, and squash.

"It seems like I've been doing most of the talking when we're together," she said. "When do I get to hear about Marc Miller?"

"Not much to tell other than what my publisher prints on the jackets and backs of my books. I was born at a very young age, as they say, and day after day things just kept happening. I've never married though I'm certainly open to it. I currently have a special lady in my life. I love having kids around and volunteer as a Big Brother and English tutor. My parents are deceased. I was an only child. I enjoy swimming and walking and occasionally watching informative TV programs. I'm not much into sitcoms or movies. My passion is writing and in order to indulge that I spend lots of time out in the field doing research. I'm not really a hermit but I do enjoy my time alone. Ever since I was a youngster I have reveled in just sitting and thinking. Many folks believe that's odd but I find a good think session stimulating, rewarding, and rejuvenating. Every day I try to think a thought, which I believe has probably never been thought before. I prefer Grape Nuts or pancakes for breakfast, Mexican or Chinese for lunch, and steak and potato for dinner. In and among all that I am a great fan of spaghetti and meat sauce served with Italian dressed salad

and an endless supply of bread sticks. Questions?"

"No, actually that was very good. It sounds like you have found ways to enjoy life and make useful contributions to society."

"I hope those things are true. You seem to enjoy cooking."

"I do. I had forgotten just how much until you came. You have been so appreciative of what I've prepared. Brings back very pleasant memories of the days before."

She had little to relate, spontaneously, about her current life. I guessed Forbes Crossing didn't provide many social opportunities. She seemed to know everyone but didn't really rub elbows with them on a regular basis. The Rakes children seemed to be the highlight of her life.

"If you really like having folks here with you and with the apparent hordes of tourists that flock to this place, maybe you need to get a bit more proactive in keeping my room filled – get that. My room."

"Actually, I am fairly confident things are going to change for the better just any day now. Certain things are in motion – Harry, the kids, things."

She beamed and that pleased me. I wouldn't press, figuring if she wanted to provide more details she knew how to do that. Still, I had to wonder.

By six thirty I had finished both a delicious main course and a huge serving of strawberry short cake, topped off with a lingering cup of coffee. Sweets needed coffee. Salt needed cola. Chocolate always required milk. With the coffee, Sarah had hit exactly the right note for me that evening.

I returned to 'my' room and continued making notes and writing some descriptive passages that I figured I could use later on – the multi-colored fountain of sparks in the elevator; the desolate, yet cleanly functional, main drag; the plain but engaging buildings that lined the expectant streets; and the cemetery – ominously stark and barren while at the same time peaceful and timeless.

I examined the pictures I had taken of the ceiling in the ghost chamber and tried to craft a description that would tell enough without presenting more detail than most readers would want. I decided several uncomplicated line drawings

would demonstrate in a few inches what I probably could say no better with words in a half dozen pages.

Drawing and painting – I enjoyed those activities but had failed to list them in my mini bio for Sarah.

I decided to walk the streets in the twilight, partly to just get the lay of the land but also to determine how many new tourists had indeed made it into town before the ‘low water bridge’ was inundated. I remembered the bridge well. It was single lane wide and approximately thirty feet long from bank to bank. It was constructed on forty-foot-long poles – a foot or so in diameter – spanned by thick, twelve inch, planking. During low water – regular – flow, the shallow creek below ran at a lazy pace, its clear water bubbling along over and around the small brown and red rocks that made the bed their home. The bridge was set into the banks at a slight angle, lower by a foot on the upstream side. That way, when high water arrived it would move up and over the bridge rather than push up from underneath dislodging it. An ingenious method of construction seen frequently in the Ozarks. As soon as the water level fell, the bridge was immediately ready for use again.

Back to the streets. It appeared there were really only three that were maintained – graveled at least occasionally. Main Street was four blocks long, running east to west, with the businesses – café, store, hotel – at the eastern end closest to where vehicles entered the village. The hill that held the mansion rose from there, behind the darkened hotel, to the north. Further west, Main was met by two unnamed streets at approximately one block intervals. They each continued two blocks to the south with houses sprinkled along both sides. The Rakes family lived in the house furthest from the downtown area. Painted white (whitewashed, I figured), it seemed to have been kept in pretty good repair. A small hill rose abruptly from its back yard and curved around to the north toward Main Street to set the western city limit. There were a tire swing on a long rope and what appeared to be an ever growing, if somewhat ramshackle, tree house in the front yard. A large garden consumed the west lawn. There were no mailboxes either along the streets or set beside the front doors. Mail must have been picked up somewhere – my guess was at the general store. The mine entrances stood

along the north side of Main Street, setting progressively farther back from the road the further east one went. Sarah's place sat a half block north of Main, just south of the row of adits.

Had I not known better, my experience – or lack of it – on those streets that day would have led me to believe it was a ghost town – no pun intended. I passed the young couple again. We waved and mouthed 'hello' but didn't stop to chat. Other than them nobody was out and about. I wrote it off to the older and therefore probably less active population. I didn't encounter a single car – moving or parked. Evidently the overflowing stream had, indeed, held the tourists at bay. I wondered where they parked when they were there; probably along the streets and perhaps in several grassy, vacant lots close to the downtown area. I'll say one thing for Harry; he had managed to keep the place an easygoing Ozark Mountain village. It probably worked to his advantage in more than one way – maintaining the image, for sure, but also, I imagined, with virtually no, long term, overhead. Harry was shrewd; no doubt about that!

"Hey. Mr. Marcus, Marc, Miller," came the now familiar, still soprano, voice of one Elmer, El, Rakes. What you up to? I saw you from my bedroom window – attic room – I love it. I feel like I'm close to eternity up there."

Again, he had produced an interestingly dramatic, if perhaps peculiar, comment.

"Just walking the town. Snapping a few pictures. I find it helpful when I get back to writing the story."

"Descriptive passages, right?"

"Right."

I smiled at his take and phrasing. He continued talking as he locked stepped beside me.

"I been thinking about how we're going to get into the mansion tonight."

It was a point I hadn't yet considered but if the elevator was still displaced it was one well taken. I knew if I just kept still he would proceed to fill me in.

"If the elevator is not available – like if it got damaged during our fiery adventure – then we'll need another way to get in. I got two. I imagine your flat key will open the back door –

the one we left through. Also, there is an air vent I've used on occasion. You may be too wide for it though. I could go in, open the back door and let you in. I think we have it covered one way or the other."

"Yes. Good thinking. The possible – probable – problem hadn't yet registered with me. What's your bet on the elevator?"

"Oh, I bet it'll be sitting right there where we need it in the crawl space. I'm just not sure I want to trust it anymore, you understand?"

"Yes, I do, although as I said, I think the bad guy just wanted to scare us – not really hurt us."

"A compassionate bad guy? That what you're thinking?"

"Stated that way it seems incongruous. You know the word?"

"Absurd, maybe?"

"Close enough. Absurd may have even been a better choice to begin with."

"You asked about Luke before. I saw him a little while ago – on foot – heading up the hill toward the mansion. It's where he lives, you know."

"I didn't for sure but suspected as much. I visited the caretaker's cabin down back and soon figured out he didn't live there. If he's our bad guy we have to move quietly and with extra caution tonight. Sure you want to come?"

"Do I love apple pie?"

His answer had been more convincing than would have been a straight forward, 'Yes'.

"It's odd."

"What?" I asked.

"Luke's hardly ever around and never clear down my way. It was like he wanted me to see him or something."

"If he's the bad guy, and if he thinks we suspect him being the bad guy, it may have been another attempt to scare us away from the mansion."

"That makes sense. You think it's him . . . he . . . Luke?"

"I really don't know."

In many ways it appeared Luke was the number one

suspect. My current problem with that was that the man's history didn't seem to show a compassionate side. Rumor had it he was suspected in his wife's disappearance. I had a growing suspicion he may have also been involved in his professor uncle's death. His very lack of human contact suggested a probable lack of empathy – concern for other's welfare. Why would he display a sudden turn toward compassion?

"I saw you were thinking, there," El said. "Come up with anything I need to know?"

I smiled at him.

"Yes, I was thinking and no, I produced no useful data."

"Thinking's good. Don't be discouraged over it."

I chuckled. Before the boy could request an explanation – and he would have – the street lit up around us – not daylight lit, but lit. I guess I showed a start.

"The street lights," El explained, pointing. Gas. That's old Mr. O'Leary, we call him – the lamp lighter."

"I know that reference," I said, "but must admit I'm surprised you do. It is the name of the lamp lighter from the old poem I loved as a child?"

"Really? Known it all my life, too. Makes old Bert feel special when we call him O'Leary."

"Some of the houses have natural gas lights?" It was my question.

"Most do. Mine does. A few over west have electricity – like Ms. Wilson's. The well for the town's water supply is over there. It's four hundred feet deep so has to have an electric motor that slips way down inside it – a submersible – or so I'm told. The main power line comes within a half mile. It takes a lot of water on a hot summer day to keep all the tourists fed, flushed, and hydrated. Harry keeps the rest of the town in gas – more Ozarky, I guess. I personally prefer gas light. It's softer and I like the flicker across the pages when I'm reading. Makes me think of Abe Lincoln and how he read by candle light as he stretched out in front of the fireplace."

"You Southerners allowed to speak the name Abe Lincoln? out loud?" I asked playfully.

El smiled a hefty smile but said no more. Another odd response from this normally loquacious youngster.

I looked at my watch.

“Let’s see. It’s going on nine. How about we take Millie by storm right now so we can get up to the mansion earlier than planned? Being cautious takes longer than the way we’ve been going about things.”

“She has a dessert waiting for us.”

“What?”

“Can’t say. It’s a special surprise for Mr. Marcus Marc Miller.”

And what a surprise it was – raspberry-rhubarb cobbler. In appearance, it could well have just come out of my grandmother’s oven. The portions were large. El added a scoop of ice cream to his. I savored my plain, the way God intended for it to be eaten. The lad graciously waited until I had taken the first bite. Then, it became every man for himself. Millie had remembered and more than that she had gone to a lot of trouble to make me happy. These Ozark folks were good people.

After picking up a second flashlight and replacing the batteries in the first, we retraced our path along the lower trail toward the rear of the big hill. I carried the unlit and recently refilled, lantern. I had forgotten how coal oil stinks. A question hit me as we began the ascent up the hill from the north.

“Ever hear why the caretaker’s cabin was built so far down the back of the hill? It strikes me that carrying tools and such to and from the mansion would have been an unreasonably strenuous task. There seems to be a perfectly level, natural terrace, no more than fifty feet from the top of this hill.”

“Never heard. Never thought about it. Should have. I’ll go to work on it.”

My thoughts continued.

“I suppose it could be related to the Rutherford’s need for privacy although if they had a butler, maids, cooks, and so on, there would have been little actual privacy anyway.

“I knew there was a reason I didn’t want to have a butler,” El said.

I felt certain he was grinning but in the growing darkness I couldn’t see. Neither El nor I had yet turned on a



flashlight. It seemed to represent our silent agreement to institute a super cautious approach that night. I was apprehensive about Luke's possible, prying, presence out there in the dark, and even more about him and us inside the mansion at the same time. It was his territory. Advantage, Luke! Maybe he thought that with the scare in the elevator we would now stay away. I said that as if I were sure Luke was the bad guy. I wasn't!

"Seen Harry today?" I asked figuring it would be well to ascertain the other major suspect's whereabouts if I could.

"He and Ned went fishing down on the White – left after the rain. He took Melva and me along once. After a rain the fish almost fly into your lap over there. I hate fish so I've mostly declined invitations since then. You eat what you pick, dig, catch, or shoot – that's mom's rule."

"Sounds like a good one."

"I mostly just shoot at inanimate things with my sling shot. I'm pretty good. I think I get more of a thrill out of picking off a twig from twenty feet than I ever would from killing some little critter."

"I can understand that. Killing anything other than a radish or a hamburger sends chills up my back."

El smiled and nodded. I continued.

I hear your mother works some at the general store."

"She does. Just when the tourists descend on it. Maybe forty hours a week or so. I help out some, too. I've sold some of your books before."

He made it seem like forty hours a week was merely half time. Like Millie said, I suppose, not much else to do there in Forbes Crossing. I would think caring for two youngsters would tend to fill her days, however.

"You help around the house, I suppose."

"Yes, Sir. Women inside work – men outside work. The wood chopping is my bailiwick – I love that word - bailiwick. Makes me feel like a pirate. And I spade and hoe the garden. I like working. My family is fun to be with. . . . It's hard not to end that sentence with a preposition. That's funny; I ended that last one with 'preposition' as well."

"Has anybody ever commented that you have an off the wall sense of humor."

“All the time. The more usual words are odd, strange, convoluted, outrageous, absurd – should I go on?”

“No. You’ve made your point and verified my take on it. I do like it. I didn’t intend to put you down about it.”

“I know you well enough to understand that. You worry too much.”

Sometimes he seemed just too wise for an eleven-year-old. The same had been said about me as youngster. Not bragging. It probably didn’t represent a good thing. Kids should be able to just be carefree kids. I sensed he took his responsibility as man of the house very seriously.

We passed the caretaker’s cottage and a few minutes later were near the crest of the hill. The boy still hadn’t even taken a deep breath. I was panting. We stopped, clearly for my benefit.

“Any way to get up onto the roof?” I asked looking up at the building silhouetted against the moon.

“There’s a ladder attached to the west wall if that would help?”

“I was really hoping for balloons or a friendly, off duty, stork but a ladder might work!”

I did see that grin in the moonlight. It was broad, genuine, and easy. It summarized his take on life – no pretenses, indomitable self-esteem, complete honesty, and ever helpful. (Not to mention his self-asserted, never ending, search for new knowledge.)

It was ten thirty, still time to search for duct openings or whatever.

“Up that ladder,” I said.

It was old, metal, and rusted.

“You’ve used it before, I assume.”

I pulled at several of its rungs – my way of kicking its tire before making a long-term commitment.

“Lots of times. It’s like my private place. I go up there to work on my tan.”

I didn’t want to know more.

“I’ll go first,” he suggested. “Both of us probably shouldn’t be on it at the same time. I think that maybe, it just might, perhaps, hold your weight.”

“You’re pulling my leg, right?”

“Stimulating your adrenalin was my purpose. It takes some effort to climb straight up this thing. It’s plenty strong.

Again, the wisdom. In a city, it would be called street smarts, I guess. I could live with that characterization better.

Both of us were soon safely on the roof – the gently sloping back side. The slate sheets were oversized – three feet long and one wide. The surface was slipperier than I had imagined. There was a swift, northeasterly, breeze.

“Always a breeze up here I bet,” I said.

“Always. Usually from the west. Up so high like this I suppose it’s natural. It’s higher here than most of the surrounding hill tops.”

He pointed in a circle.

The flow of air across the top of a chimney-like structure sucks the air from within it. I had this one nailed!

The elevator shaft was central to the structure and right there, as I had predicted, was a huge chimney-like opening. It was taller than the others by two yards and the opening was a good six feet square. We could hear the rush of the air as it exited the structure. Along the front and back walls were smaller chimneys as would seem appropriate for single room fireplaces. At each end of the building were two larger ones. It all seemed in order for the style of its era – other than the central opening, of course.

Later, inside, I would discover incoming ventilation grates in the baseboards and exits near the ceiling in every room in the mansion. It had, in fact, been ingeniously designed to stabilize the temperature of the air inside the building. It utilized the constant 57-degree temperature of the earth to cool the structure in summer and warm it in the winter.

“I suppose we are finished up here,” I said looking around.

El folded his arms across his chest.

“You haven’t given me the slightest clue what we – you – found.”

“I will explain once we are safely inside. It’s down the ladder, I guess.”

“Or not. There’s a stairway that opens onto the roof near the far end. I happen to know the combination to open it.”

“Another combination lock?”

“Sort of and sort not of.”

It was like he had said, a door that led to a stairwell. The combination to which he had referred was the proper placement of nine wooden dowels – some had to be pulled out and others pushed in – on what may have been the original three by six-button keypad. It took him no more than ten seconds to work the mechanism.

“How did you crack that combination? You know how many possibilities there must be?”

“Given time I think even you could figure it out.”

Thanks a lot for that vote of confidence, kid, I thought to myself. He continued.

“Look at the ends of the dowels as they protrude from the holes. Determine where each one is soiled from dirty and oily fingers? See?”

“I do. OH! I DO!! Fascinating! The ones soiled on the ends get pushed in and those soiled along the sides get pulled out, the soiling mimicking where fingers have been placed down through the decades.”

“The smart homeowner would seal them with varnish and keep them clean,” he said quite seriously.

“Where does this stairway come out?” I asked.

“Two places. There’s a side door that gives access to the attic. At the bottom of the steps the door enters the hall on the third floor.”

“We have time to peek at the attic before we go on down,” I said.

“Okay, but be prepared to lose your toupee if your wearin’.”

“I’m not but thanks for the warning. I suddenly have the last piece of a puzzle. I’ll explain.”

We entered the attic. A near gale force breeze rushed from dozens of duct openings in the floor on its way out the central chimney I had just examined on the roof. The whole attic acted like a giant manifold. I explained its operation to El.

With perhaps too much gusto, I said: “Again I say, ‘hats off to the genius who invented this!’”

“I think you’ll find that was Leonardo de Vinci. He did a

similar thing for a king's castle in Europe. In that case, though, he fired air in a cave below the building and sent it upward through a duct system to heat the rooms in the winter time."

"Now that you say that, I guess I do remember about it."

"So, your hat's off to whom?" he said sounding ever so much like a heavily bespectacled, overly strict, hair in a bun, schoolmarm.

"To the late and great Leonardo."

"We do have fun, don't we," he said placing his hand on my shoulder.

"Yes, we do. I'll always treasure that between us."

"Downstairs?"

"Yes. Second floor. I want to take a gander into the room next to the ghost chamber; the one to the west. You've been in there, you say?"

"Yup. I been everywhere in here. Not in there recently. No closet or door that I remember if that's where you're going with this. As I remember it's being used for storage."

"That may hold some promise. Lead the way if you will."

We were soon inside. El had remembered correctly. It had several pieces of furniture stored there along with large pictures leaned against the shared wall in which I was interested.

"Quietly, now, help me slide these big pictures out of the way, over against the outside wall. It's okay to cover the window."

They were heavy, constructed with wide, ornamental, wooden frames and wood slat backs. It took several minutes.

"What we looking for?"

"A way into this wall."

"Wouldn't we have seen that hole over in the ghost chamber?"

"We didn't and that's what intrigues me."

"I'm confused."

I explained to him about old homes like this having been built with double walls and how a hole on this side, therefore didn't mean there had to also be one on the other.

"Like secret passages between all the rooms."

“Sort of. Most would be too narrow but you have the idea.”

With the last frame out of the way, I searched the wall with the light.

“Sure looks like you found your hole. It’s like a close fitting, little square door all papered to match the wall. Not really secret but it doesn’t stand out. Put a dresser or wardrobe in front of it and you’d never know it was there.”

“Let’s open it,” I said.

I began pressing along its edges. El looked puzzled – until it clicked open out into the room.

“Like a pressure operated lock, huh?”

“Right. Now get that flashlight in here and show me the fan blade.”

“The what?”

We lit the area.

“A fan blade! How in blue blazes did you know that’s what we’d find? Doubt if I ever saw one spinning that fast before.”

I gave him the quick explanation: “Updraft, suddenly constricted into a smaller duct, creating great speed, driving the blade, which in turn drives the axel that spins the armature on the generator in the box in the ghost chamber.”

“Now I’m thinking you’re the genius for figuring it out. Look at that blade go! Surprised it hasn’t pulled this room up ten feet.”

It had been an attempt at humor but he was right. The amount of energy being produced was overkill times ten. Having seen what I was after we closed the door and reset the pictures.

“Look around this room and tell me what seems wrong.”

He worked his light systematically up and down the walls and across the ceiling and floor.

“Besides that genetically challenged spider in the corner up there, that can’t seem to complete a web symmetrically, you mean, I suppose.”

“You suppose correctly.”

“Then it must be the different and newer wall paper on the adjoining wall – the one that’s had the little door installed in it.”

“What does that tell us?”

“That most likely the door isn’t original with the mansion. In fact, the fan has actually been installed much more recently.”

“Why do you say, much?”

I wondered if he had also noticed that the door was made of plywood – not available when the mansion had been build. He had still a different take on things.

“Because that wall paper was ordered out of a paper sample book at the general store and if memory serves me, I think it’s in the oldest sample book we have. Give me fifteen minutes and I can tell you what year it was probably bought and hung, and that will tell when the door was cut and the whole ghost thing got underway. Give me another hour under the cover of darkness and I can look through the records and probably tell you who purchased it. Now that’s like a clincher, right?”

“Who’s the genius at this moment?” I asked.

He raised his hands above his head and jogged in place, Rocky style. It was a piece of cultural symbolism I would not have suspected he would have had contact with. (I know, El will chastise me about that preposition!)

“Listen, Champ, or is that Chump? I think it’s time we move next door. It’ll soon be time for the show.”

He nodded: “And tonight we will have almost all of the answers. No more mysteries. No more deceit. No more magic. And no more exhausting pressure on the local spirits.”

He sighed a huge and wearisome sigh. It seemed to confirm the genuine nature of his comments

Up until his last phrase I was with him. Perhaps he had taken the passages in Harry’s new book as truth. Perhaps he knew something I didn’t. Perhaps, with some luck, he and I would survive the night without finding ourselves in danger from either the Mad Wallpaper Hanger from the physical realm or the agitated, exhausted, spirits from the ethereal – perhaps!

## CHAPTER SIX: Still More Questions

We made ourselves comfortable, taking seats on the box that housed the generator and batteries at the rear of the black-walled ghost chamber. I had the sudden urge for popcorn and Milk Duds. There was a nearly full moon outside but interestingly none showed into the room. It remained pitch dark. The window had been coated in some way so it let light out but not in. I supposed that was so binocular peepers could not examine the interior of the room from outside. The show would begin at any moment.

Click!

Scratch!

Whop!

The candle lit. It stood a foot high, was made of gas pipe painted white, and sported a yellow flame nearly four inches high. It flickered in the gently wafting breeze that worked its way from floor to ceiling. I assumed the typical blue flame of natural gas had been somehow altered – amount of air in the mixture, some yellow burning metal coating the inside of the pipe, whatever. For some time, the ‘ghost’ just hung there in the shadow. I couldn’t understand how it could even be seen from outside. Five minutes into the performance we heard the noises. The same noises we had heard in Rebecca’s room the night before but now we understood. It was a combination of sounds produced by the motor that moved the manikin around the track, which hung from the ceiling, and the small metal wheel grinding against it as it turned. Occasionally there would be a click from the switches as they changed positions for the next pass.



There was a second Click, Scratch, Whop. A far dimmer gas light lit in the front, right, corner under the window at floor level. The circular, concave, mirror behind it directed its soft beam back and up into the room, subtly lighting the flowing white garment as it began moving around the room.

“We better move down onto the floor,” I said. “Sitting up here we may be visible from outside.”

I really doubted it. The visual trajectory from ground level out front was severe and the bottom of the rear wall could most likely not have been seen. Still, I wanted to take no chances. I had missed the secondary light during my first examination of the chamber. In all of their simplicity, the several mechanisms worked flawlessly.

“Problem!” El said at last.

“What?”

“We’re going to have to sit here through the entire performance because if we try to climb the ladder to get out, we might be seen in the spotlight thingy.”

“You’re right. Settle in, I guess. How long does it last?”

“Sometimes five minutes. Other times as long as twenty.”

“I suppose we can manage twenty minutes, can’t we?”

El nodded.

“I want to get some pictures of this ingenious ceiling track.”

“Take a video, why not?” he asked.

“That option had escaped me. Thanks.”

I adjusted the camera setting. It had been a good suggestion. I was somewhat surprised that El was that familiar with digital cameras. Forbes Crossing hadn’t struck me as an epicenter of cutting edge technology. But then there were the tourists who undoubtedly came outfitted with all manner of such equipment.

Our stay was uneventful. Eleven minutes into the performance the ghost stopped moving and the spot light went dim. The candle burned on into the night as was the tradition. We climbed to the third floor, closed the trapdoor, and were soon making our way across the big hall toward the back stairs.

Exiting through the back door, we walked north toward

the rear slope staying in the shadow of the mansion as cast by the bright moon. We turned and surveyed the building. The light in Luke's room went dim. I had to wonder if that were because he had spied us. I motioned El to the ground. We knelt just below the rise to the back yard. We could see but I felt certain could not be seen.

"Maybe he's just going to bed," El said.

"Maybe – or maybe not."

The door opened and a short, slight, figure emerged. He made his way around the mansion to the west – our right. His steps were short, quick, and deliberate. He carried no light that we could see.

"Was that Leon?" I asked.

"That was Leon," El answered.

"Any idea where he's going?"

"Maybe to take a leak.

"He would turn out the gas lights to do that?"

"Probably not."

"It may be a good chance to take a look inside. You ever been in there – inside his room?"

"Once. It didn't look like he locked the door. That may mean he's not intending to be gone long.

"I just need a minute or so to get a feel for things in there."

"There is one inside door on the south wall that leads into the first-floor hall. There are two windows on this side and two on the west. We can use that other door like an escape hatch if he comes back."

"By the time we know he's coming back, it will undoubtedly be too late. Once he enters the room, we'll have no time to make an undetected exit. I think this is a solo caper just for me, El. You stay out here and be my eyes. If you see him returning you can give me a signal of some kind."

"A night owl hoot, like this."

He demonstrated. I agreed.

"You sure you're okay about being out here alone?"

"I stopped being afraid of the dark years ago. I always think of it as my friend. It's like an equalizer. I may not be able to see the boogeyman but I figure he can't see me either. I figure I can outrun him. Always heard he was a clumsy oaf."

I smiled into the dark.

“Okay, then, here I go. I’ll leave the door open a crack so I’ll have a better chance of hearing you should you need to hoot.”

For some reason, that hit us both as being humorous and we shared a brief chuckle. I hurried to the back door. It was unlocked. I entered and kept my flashlight pointed low.

It was an unremarkable room half again as large as the bedrooms upstairs, probably having been built as maid’s quarters I decided. There was a built-in bed, a dry sink, cupboards, chairs, a table and small refrigerator – gas powered I assumed and clearly a recent addition. I remembered there were lots of gas refrigerators in the non-electrified sections of the Ozarks.

I looked through the cupboards and drawers. They were virtually empty. An odd find was a container of window cleaner. Although a good amount of it had been used it had certainly not been used on the panes in that room. There was also a small can of grease and some 3-in-one oil. One cupboard was devoted to containers of food – canned vegetables, bread, cereal, pancake mix – just the usual. The refrigerator also held typical fare – fruit, milk, and so on.

A small lock box sat at the back of a base cabinet. It was, as the name implies, locked. My how I wanted to get a peak inside. It would be fully illegal for an officer of the law to take it without a warrant. Private investigators, however, were given far broader snooping privileges. Even Harry agreed I was ‘investigating’ so I assumed the right of seizure and picked it up. I would return it as soon as I had found a way into it and had examined the contents. It just might have been Luke who pilfered material from Sarah’s box of papers so perhaps it could be classified as a goes around comes around occasion. Of course, I had no proof it had been Luke so the premise was shaky.

“Hoot! Hoot!”

Where was that hall door? Yes. Just behind me. It was locked. I should have checked that first thing. I fumbled for my room key hopeful it would work. Where was it? There in my left pants pocket. I tried to slip it into the opening. Something seemed to be blocking its entry. The outside door

opened. Instinctively I crouched low. I saw what I assumed was Luke silhouetted there. He turned and closed the door, several times as if trying to figure out how it came to be standing ajar. I heard a click, which I figured was the door being locked. This was not good.

Luke flicked his pocket lighter and lit the wall lamp closest to the door. It cast minimal light and I remained in the shadows across the room. I really needed to get out of there. I searched my options. Hope Luke immediately got into bed and wait for him to fall asleep. Make a run for it hoping the startle factor allowed my safe and anonymous egress. Open a conversation with him as if I had been waiting for him to return so we could talk.

None of those seemed viable.

Luke opened the refrigerator and proceeded to pour a glass of milk. He took a seat across the room facing away from me and picked up a paper. It wasn't as good as being asleep but it appeared to be the best I was going to get.

I felt up along the door again in search of the knob and lock hole below it.

Click!

I had done nothing that would have produced a click.

Click! Click!

Again, doubled that time.

"Matilda, that you?" Luke said without turning around.

Something rushed across my legs. I gulped. It was his cat who was soon at his side sharing the milk Luke poured into a saucer beside the chair. I hadn't pegged Luke as a cat person. In some way that tempered my picture of him as the bad guy.

I had dodged the bullet from inside the room but what about the clicks from the hall door. Had somebody else planned to invade Luke's place that evening and was I about to get caught in the crossfire? I remembered what El had said about darkness being an equalizer and hunkered down to take advantage of that."

There was another click – perhaps more of a clunk – a quiet, dull, grating sound.

Then I heard it – a whisper – faint, raspy, hushed.

"Language King calling Marcus Marc."

The door slowly swung open into the hall, just a crack at first and then enough so I could see El's smiling face peaking in. He hitched his head. I picked up the metal box and silently crawled out into the hall. El closed the door more quietly, I imagined, than any eleven-year-old boy had ever closed a door in all of recorded history.

I wanted to hug the stuffing out of the lad but that would have to wait. I stood and we quick-walked across the hall to the back stairs that we had used previously. Outside again and not wanting to be seen with Luke's lock box, I suggested we stick to the shadows.

"You saved my supper in there, you know." I said as we started down the slope.

"Yes. I know. Probably worth breakfast, I'd say."

"At least. Don't you ever think about anything but food?"

"Until I hit puberty I suppose food will be my main interest."

It was funny. It was sad. There were no eligible girls to be found in Forbes Crossing. Maybe he would return to school at Eureka. I let that possible solution comfort me for the moment. With a brief hug, we parted company for the night.

Back in my room I worked on the box lock. It was anything but heavy duty. I didn't want to damage it and yet in the end that was what I had to do. Medium sized, flat blade screwdrivers were good for more than repairing lamp plugs. I'd buy him a new lock. Rather than containing file folders the papers were just stacked, bottom to top. I hesitated long enough to consider how I might use that to my advantage. The oldest material would probably be on the bottom. That brought to mind another possibility. Any older material that I found near the top had, most likely, been revisited more recently. I took my time and noted the sequence of the dates on any items that bore them.

I had hoped to find material that looked like what was missing from Sarah's box. I had not yet confided the theft to Sarah. I hadn't wanted to upset her. It meant, however, that I could only surmise what had been taken. In the end, it didn't seem to be in Luke's box. The contents were like the

contents of most such files – dull and boring until some specific piece of information was called for. The warranty on the refrigerator dated its purchase some ten years earlier. The title to his old pick up suggested it had been purchased at about the same time. There were no receipts for deposits of money and no checkbooks or what appeared to be accounting sheets. I hoped to find the title to the huge dump truck that sat in the new tunnel. Nada.

All in all it was a disappointment. I would get a new lock and furtively return the box first chance I could manage. I slipped it under my bed, turned off the light and got into bed. A few minutes later I got up and locked my door leaving the key in it the way El had found it left in the hall side of Luke's hall door.

The next morning El was there again – in the chair, chomping at the bit for the old man to wake up.

“How did you get in here? I left my key in the lock.”

“You have to turn the key slightly so it can't just be pushed out from the other side.”

“So, you pushed it out. I repeat, how did you get in here?”

“I borrowed a sheet of Ms. Wilson's newspaper, slid it under the door, pushed out the key with my pocket knife, it fell onto the paper, I pulled out the paper with the key on it through the crack under the door, inserted the key, and here I am. I may have learned that technique from one of your books or stories or maybe a Raymond Masters Detective mystery.”

“Did you ever think a locked door might mean I didn't want anybody coming in?”

“I considered that but this is us – you and I. I figured you only locked it to keep out a bad guy and we both know I'm not a bad guy.”

I had to chuckle.

“What? I'm right, right?”

“Yes, you're right. I can't tell you how glad I am that our paths have met. You continually bring me sunshine. What time is it?”

“Considering the late night you had, I let you sleep in. It'll soon be eight.”

“Five hours of sleep. How do you do it?”

“Like I said, I’ve never needed much. So what’s next?”

“I need to make a phone call. Cells work from here, don’t they?”

“Seem to. I see the tourists with ‘em to their ears all the time. Who you callin’?”

“Sheriff Chance. He’s become a good friend to me – assisted me with investigations in the past, next county southeast. I figure he can get some information I can’t.”

“How can I help?”

“I need the VIN from that big yellow dump truck. That’s the . . .”

“Vehicle Identification Number. I know. Find out who it’s registered to and we’ll probably know who’s working the mine. I give you an A+ in vehicle tracking. I’ll go get it while you shower and shave and stuff.”

“Maybe I need to go along. I don’t want to put you in a potentially dangerous situation.”

“I’ll be careful. If it doesn’t seem safe, I’ll back off. As often as I’ve been in there I’ve never seen anybody. I’ve concluded the mine’s only worked at night. I’ll be fine.”

I understood that short of tying him to a chair while I showered I had no way of prohibiting him from going to do what he was so sure he could accomplish so easily.

“Okay. You will be careful, cautious, watchful, vigilant.”

El sighed and nodded.

“I’ll meet you at the café as soon as your ‘winning’ mission has been finished.”

Again, he nodded, offering a delayed smile as the ‘winning’ thing kicked in. The two nods had been significantly different. The first suggesting patient exasperation while the second suggested eager involvement. Smiles, grins, nods. Who’d have thought such simple acts could be fine-tuned to send such complex and varied signals. There I go again!

\* \* \*

El reported no problems as he joined me at what had become the ‘we’ table in the café.

“The inner gate was chained and locked and the boards we pried off were still layin’ on the floor. I doubt if anybody’s been in there since we left. I figure whoever’s workin’ it has

backed off since you arrived. It might mean that same guy's involved in the whole ghost thing."

"Good thinking, El."

"I thought so, too."

He grinned.

"And the VIN?" I asked.

His grin extended as he handed me a slip of paper. At first glance it appeared blank. Was that his way of indicating the VIN had been removed? My puzzlement must have shown on my face.

"It's a rubbing. It seems my wise and experienced partner failed to provide me with a pencil so I put the paper over the raised numbers on the dash plate and pressed them into the paper. Look close . . . ly. It's all there."

"Again, good thinking! I ordered for you, by the way. Well, I told Aunt Millie you'd be arriving and she said she'd take care of it. How's she related if I may ask?"

"My dad's older sis, and yes you may ask."

"Another question. I assume there must be an exit road from beyond the Smelting Building that accesses some highway or country road."

"That wasn't a question but I understand the meaning of your inquiry. Yes, there is. Unnamed gravel road. Crosses the Buffalo River and goes south west to just east of Snowball. Going north it meets up with a Missouri single lane asphalt slab that winds northeast. Never been up that way so can't say just where it goes."

"Good enough road to carry that big dump truck filled with ore – mostly very heavy lead ore?"

"I suppose. More likely the truck hooks up with the railroad spur just on west of here a few miles. Not a regular train run anymore but I know some still back in there from time to time."

"You've been there recently?"

"A month or so back. Me and Melva – Melva and I – went over to visit the Purdy's. They are family friends. Have three kids in and around our ages. We go and stay the night sometimes. I saw a string of empty coal cars settin' and waitin' by the loading dock. It's high so trucks can back up and dump gravel and such right into the waitin' cars. Seth,



that's the Purdy kid my age, says the cars will park there for a week at a time waitin' to get loaded. The gravel quarry up their ships all over the four-state area. His dad's a foreman for the quarry."

"Is there a Purdy girl?"

"Yes, but I don't see the relation to the train or the shipping of ore."

"There isn't."

"Oh, I get it. Yes, she's my age. Yes she's said to be pretty. Yes, I'm just awaiting my hormones to descend on me to see if I'm going to be interested in her as anything other than a fishin' buddy. I know how it works. Don't really understand it but I know."

"I don't suppose my car would make the trip up the valley to the spur."

"Probably not. It's rough terrain. Funny! Going by way of terrain to find the train."

I acknowledged his humorous word play with a quick smile.

"It's only an hour walk. We could be there by eleven. Millie will pack us a lunch. Gonna be a great day to be out and around. Sun, breeze. You got hiking boots?"

"I do. Just not sure we really need to make that trip. Let me think on it over breakfast. There is something that's been bugging me since last night. Luke. He's a little man – frail even. I just can't envision him working a pick and shovel down in that mine. He must have help – somebody of size and muscles who can be counted on to keep his mouth shut."

"Could be Jeb."

"Jeb? More please!"

"Jeb Curtis. He's slow of mind but strong of back."

"That's a great phrase. May I use it?"

"If it's worth a slab of pie to finish off breakfast."

He smiled. I nodded. We had sealed the deal.

"Fill me in about him – Jeb."

"Well, he's mom's age – your age. Never went to school. Lives with his mom – Bertha – on the south slope of Hobb's Hill – that's the hill in back of my place. Helps farmers, mostly. I like him. Stays to himself. Can't remember ever seeing him here in town. His mom comes in occasionally to

get things from the store. Sometimes I help her carry stuff back to their cabin. She's nice. Not much for talkin', though."

"Would he tell you if was working the mine and who he was working for?"

"I don't know. He's a very loyal sort. Might trick him into it but I wouldn't feel right doing that – considering his slowness and all."

"I applaud you for that. Perhaps we could try the direct approach, and just ask him outright."

"What would you do without me?"

"Spend a lot less on food, for one thing."

He nodded and smiled.

"I can go try to find him after breakfast. Better if I go alone. Strangers tend to set him off."

"Sounds like a plan. I need some time to collect my thoughts and formulate a plan that holds some potential for bringing this thing to an end. I'll make my calls while you're away."

"Calls with an 's' as in plural?"

"Plural, yes. I'll fill you in when you get back."

Breakfast arrived – a short stack and sausage for me; a half dozen for El, with milk, coffee, and orange juice. It seemed like a good time to bring up another topic.

"Where did Harry go to school?"

"High school or college?"

"Both, I suppose."

"High school someplace over east of here. He went to a small, Baptist college down south of here, in Conway, maybe. Not sure. I can find out.

"Won't be necessary. I just figured he was educated beyond the good 'ol boy act he puts on here for the tourists."

"Not really an act. It's how he was raised up here in Forbes Crossing."

"Yes. I understand what you mean. It wasn't intended as a putdown."

"I know."

"Would you say he's mechanically inclined?"

"Harry? You mean can he fix stuff?"

"Yes, I guess that's what I mean. A tinkerer."

"I'd say so. He helped me make a bike out of parts I

drug home from the dump. He keeps his old truck running. He installed new gas lights in the meetin' room in Number Seven last year. I guess I'd say he was handy that way. But, if you're tryin' to make a case for him being the bad guy you're on the wrong track. Harry's honest, like I said before."

"Does Harry have a computer or access to the internet – email and such."

"Not from here. Maybe from up in Eureka. He's up there to do banking at least once a week. Sometimes I ride along. I've never seen him internetting or computing while I was with him. There is a internet café up there. We walk past it on the way to the bank. Sometimes I go in and get us coffee to go. Why?"

"I may have mentioned that I'm here because I received an email with an article attached about the ghostly candle suddenly not being present in the window. It was the first time I had heard about Forbes Crossing and the Rutherford ghost things. Not sure how I have missed it all these years."

"And you think Harry sent the email?"

"I was really just wondering if it would be a possibility. Someone sent it to me anonymously. I have to wonder why – for what purpose? It could have been just because the person thought I would be interested – knowing me as a ghost writer. It could also have been because somebody wanted to lure me here for some reason. Someone from here might have been seeking help if they thought nefarious activities were underway or I could have been brought in solely for the publicity they knew one of my books would bring to Forbes Crossing and how that would increase tourist traffic."

"You're here and I guess that's what's most important," El said, choosing not to comment on or evaluate any of those possibilities.

He had missed my basic concern – that I was being used. That only really bothered me if I believed it was for improper reasons – for somebody's selfish, illicit, purposes. The only plausible possibility that had come to mind was Harry wanting to increase tourism. I seemed to be the only one who allowed himself to wonder that. Certainly no one Forbes Crossing would.

After his six pancakes and a piece of apple pie El was

ready to go see what he could find out from Jeb and his mother. After more coffee than I needed and three pancakes – a short stack was still three in Forbes Crossing like it had been in my youth – I returned to my room to . . . ruminare. El would have liked that.

I slipped into the recliner that gave me the best view of the mansion. I had really not spent time examining that view before. A glint caught my eye. It originated from a third-floor window. Perhaps it had been a reflection off one of the old time, rippled, panes. I moved my head from side to side attempting to recreate it should it have been the angle at which I was viewing it that caused the glint. I couldn't. It happened again and again. It could have been binoculars or some sort of spy glass focusing on my room or me in particular. The lens of a gun sight, even. I stood and walked to the wall beside the window. I pulled the drapes. They were too narrow to completely cover the window. I peeked again from the opening left between the drapes. The glint continued at irregular intervals. It was as though something were being adjusted – directionally adjusted. That could be a gun sight. More likely it was from a spy glass of some kind. Although I couldn't tell for sure it appeared to be a single reflection – mono not bi.

Two can play that game. I got my own binoculars and searched the area on the mansion window. Although I couldn't be certain, it looked like some sort of large, single, lens was indeed being arranged to focus on my room through my window. Even more interesting, it utilized the gap left between the drapes as if the person on the other end of the 'gadget' was counting on that to be here. He knew about it. I was being studied – or targeted. I moved to the bed, which was out of line of sight/fire, and puffed a pillow up against the headboard. I needed to think things through. Slowly my state of unease left and I got back to work.

I kept coming back to the same quandary. If Luke were behind it, why was he behind it? What could I do without his specific prompting that would benefit him? An idea came out of nowhere. Perhaps if tourism were increased significantly because of me, his relative who owned the mansion could sell it at an inflated price. Still, how would that benefit a new

owner or the present owner for that matter? The mansion made no money from the tourists. And, under any circumstances would anybody actually want to buy the old place? Remodel it into a second hotel, perhaps. That might suggest some collusion between Harry and Luke. Haunted hotels had become a big draw during the past fifty years. There was at least one just up the road in Eureka that garnered fairly expensive room rates. There was another idea that might or might not connect Harry and Luke; if it were Harry who wanted to buy the mansion, he would need financial backing. Maybe the proceeds from the new mining operation were earmarked for that. Even if the purchase of the mansion played no part, Harry had promised a college education to El. That didn't come cheaply. I had no way of knowing how wealthy Harry was and if such an expense would burden him.

Upon reflection, the ideas sounded more like desperate attempts on my part to find closure than anything substantial. It has been said that a cigar in a dream is sometimes just a cigar. Perhaps the email had been nothing more than just some stranger's – perhaps a reader's – fleeting good will. The mining operation, however, still remained to be explained but only, I suppose, if it were in some way associated with the ghost stuff. I needed to find out for sure who owned that land through which the new tunnel ran. Clearly what I really needed to do was to define more clearly what I was doing in Forbes Crossing. Perhaps I had been distracted by the multitude of peripheral facets I had run across.

I had thought my mission was clear – to write the story of the Ghosts of Rutherford Mansion. The tangential details would only be important if they were related to that primary purpose. I traced my misgivings to my gut.

It said they were all related – the mining operation, the ghost chamber, Luke, and Harry. I was reminded at that moment that I had not witnessed the ghost of Rebecca roaming the mansion grounds. Being an unpredictable and only occasional event, I wasn't sure how I could manage that – short of patiently extending my stay indefinitely.

Suddenly, I had an idea. I would 'leak' to El that I didn't believe the ghost ever really walked the grounds but I was

willing to spend a few hours that evening – say between ten and midnight – watching for it. El would then leak the leak to Millie, Harry, Ned, and somehow to Luke. If it were a staged event and if any of them felt it was necessary that I witness that appearance, I imagined it would be there for me.

If it were some genuine spiritual emergence, then, who knew? El seemed to indicate the spirits around Forbes Crossing might have a direct line to the happenings in the physical world. The theory seemed to be that the ‘energy’ flowed back and forth between the realms. But would it be a spirit that was trying to use me? I was more than a little skeptical about that. I’d like to hear more about Harry’s latest book. He seemed to have a unique take on that energy and how it passed between the ethereal and the physical worlds. His theory of the ‘delayed passing’ of spirits struck my fancy as it was new to me. A spirit or group of spirits might hang around – either as spirits or in some degree of human form – if there was essential business that had to be attended to, like one of them had been put upon in some way or was being misrepresented, perhaps. Did this include such things as zombie’s – the living dead? I didn’t pretend to understand the concept. Like I said, it was new to me. It did seem to be core to the century old lore about Rebecca waiting around for Johnny so I doubted if it had been original with Harry.

El certainly had given me no indication that he had reason to question it. Harry may have decided that part of the story needed to be bolstered, thus this new book. Whether it was Harry’s fiction or Harry’s legitimate understanding of ethereal processes really didn’t matter I supposed. Promoting it in a new book was probably a stroke of genius. It was something different there at Forbes Crossing from the run of the mill ghost stuff dispensed elsewhere. If I were to also promote it, it could be considered a double stroke of genius.

Like El and Sarah and Ned and Millie, I too, liked Harry. I didn’t know Luke, but for some reason I had let myself come to dislike him. Shame on me! It made it easy to allow myself to focus on him while, perhaps, letting other legitimate suspects slip by.

That brought me to the central question: Suspect of what? If it were merely the person who had constructed and

was maintaining the show in the ghost chamber, then that was fairly straightforward and benign. If it were broadened to include whoever was working the mine and whoever had tried to scare me off with the elevator incident, then the apparent intent to inflict bodily harm was involved and I needed to find the culprit.

Okay then, what possible reasons would there be for the elevator thing – remembering that the boy's life and well-being were put in jeopardy along with mine. It was not an act that someone who cared about the boy would set in motion. That apparently left out everybody I knew in Forbes Crossing. Possibility One could be to discourage me from continuing my investigation into Rebecca's ghost either because it might expose the fraud or might call unwanted attention to Forbes Crossing and its residents. Hmm! Did someone have reason to want to keep from being discovered? Possibility Two could be to keep me from exposing the mining operation. Possibility Three could be to keep me from riling or exhausting the 'waiting spirits'. All of these suggested such a person would not have been the one who set me up with the email; clearly he didn't want me here.

The best working hypothesis, then, seems to be that there have been at least two forces at work: one that drew me here and another that was working to get me to leave. If so, it would suggest they were probably working separately and neither was aware of the other's intention or requirements before I arrived. The physical and ethereal at cross purposes? Of course, I was skeptical about that.

I see three possible bottom lines: Maintaining profit for the surreptitious miner; Augmenting profit by way of increasing tourism for Harry and his village; and, Freedom for a trapped restless spirit so it can make the passage. Perhaps a fourth: revenge by one or more spirits on whatever force – spiritual or physical – it or they believe is responsible for some reprehensible occurrence that requires them to stick around. Again, this last one would rate lowest on my scale of probability. It might, come to think of it, be a real live, living and breathing, person attempting to arrange freedom for the spirit of a departed relative or friend – one of those hangers on. Aside from Rebecca and Johnny it might include those

men who died in the collapse and could not be properly laid to rest so have been unable to make the passage. That would bring several possible parties of interest to mind: Sarah, El and his family, Millie (since El's dad was her brother), and any other resident who lost a loved one.

I am so pleased that this little think session has cleared up everything!!!

Let me ask it another way: What can I be pretty sure about?

I took out my list of odd things. Strange as it seemed everything about the ghost chamber pointed to Luke. He had easiest access. Only he could have done the building and remodeling of the walls. Had it been anyone else he would have heard it. The work had been done years before he began spending so much time away and clearly, he had never lived in the caretaker's cabin. He was my number one contender where the chamber was concerned and yet I still had no plausible reason for him to have established and maintained Rebecca's ghost. The concave mirror in the ghost chamber had to be kept clean and shiny. He had a partial bottle of glass cleaner in his cabinet that was certainly not being used around his room. He also had oil and grease stashed beside it, which was needed to keep the mechanisms working. Currently the axel needs grease. I found it dry, which caused it to make the moaning sounds El and I heard. Luke had been away, maybe until yesterday. Perhaps it dried up during his absence.

Harry won my vote for having drawn me there. I'm not sure which of the several possibilities might represent his motivation; to increase tourism seemed to be the best bet and yet according to reports the town was regularly overrun with visitors. I was intrigued by his reluctance to interact with me. I suspect he wanted me to do my thing unfettered and uninfluenced. I don't understand why. If true, he wants me to discover something that for some reason he can't or must not uncover. Does he think I am more tuned in to the ghosts – spirits – than he? Surely not. It remains a puzzle but if these basic premises are true, he gets my vote for having pilfered Sarah's material. He removed the things he knew would distract me from his purpose for me. A partial answer may be



found in what he left for me – the incriminating array of clippings about Luke, for one. That would tend to suggest that it was actually the collapse in which he was most interested. An interesting possibility that he may want me to look into something that took place years ago. Why me? Why not him or somebody he could hire? I wondered if he had discovered the new mining operation and put one and one together into the same hypothesis that I had – Luke had forced the collapse to protect his mining operation. Again, what would keep him from confronting Luke or starting an investigation of his own? The more I learned the less I understood.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: Answers?

The questions continued but suddenly there seemed to be a number of reasonable, if tentative, answers. It was a good time of day to make my calls.

I dialed the hotel in Hot Springs – the one named in the return address from the partial envelope I found in the ashes of the fireplace behind the mansion. It was a hunch but then it I made my living from hunches.

“Majestic Hotel. Front desk. Manny speaking. How may I help you?”

“This is Luke Preston. I’ve misplaced the dates of my next reservation. Could you verify it for me?”

“You’re joking, of course, Mr. Preston. Your penthouse can be made ready on an hour’s notice. Will you be coming in today?”

“No. Just checking to see if Manny still had his sense of humor. Actually, I may come down on Sunday. See that things are in order just in case.”

“Yes sir. You remember the meeting of the board of directors next Wednesday, of course.”

“Oh, yes. I remember. Later.”

I hoped my demeanor had not been too un-Luke-like. Apparently, Manny bought it. He sounded old. Maybe his hearing was just poor enough that he didn’t recognize the phone voice as being different. A penthouse in a resort town! On the board of directors of the swankiest hotel in that resort town! Apparently old Luke had done well for himself over the years – the inheritance and the mine, I assumed.

I hoped the next call would be as successful.

“Sheriff Chance. Marc Miller. How are things in your corner of the Awesome Natural State?”

“Naturally awesome like usual of course. What are you up to? Where are you?”

“Chasing ghosts again. This time northwest of you, over at Forbes Crossing.”

“I thought that place was abandoned years ago. Guess I don’t get over that way very often anymore. Is this a social call or can I help you in some way?”

“We both know how many social calls I make to you so I assume that was sarcasm. All quite shamelessly, I need some information. I figured you could find it for me. I have a VIN and I need to know who owns the vehicle.”

“I’m here in the office. Read it out and I’ll have the answer in less than a minute.”

I read him the number and he gave me the information. It was most certainly not any of the possibilities I had contemplated but it seemed to help confirm another suspicion. Bertha Curtis – big, slow, Jeb’s mother. I’d just have to see how that played out.

“Does she have a driver’s license?”

“I just looked. No, she doesn’t.”

“How about her son, Jeb?”

“Just a minute. . . . Nope. No license in Arkansas, at least.”

“I’m not surprised on either count.”

“One more thing, Sheriff. It may be a bit more involved. Can you tell me if Luke Preston has a criminal record? He seems to live back and forth between here and Hot Springs.”

It took several minutes.

“Nothing recently but in his younger days a string of minor stuff. Drunk and disorderly, spousal abuse, three counts of battery, forgery. He spent minimal jail time. Seemed to have a savvy lawyer from Missouri. Somebody named Rutherford. There is also reference to a situation in which he was a person of interest in the disappearance of his wife many years ago – over in Oklahoma. My part of the story ends there. Not sure whatever came of it.”

“Thanks so much. You’ve made my day. Buy yourself a cup of coffee and pretend I paid for it.”

“Same old Marc. Good to hear from you. Stay clear of those Malevolent Spectors.”

It had been what I was sure he thought was a humorous reference to two of my books written about ghostly happenings down in his neck of the woods, *The Malevolent Ghost of Charlie Chance* and *The Specters of Carlton County*.

I needed one more piece of information about Luke. I called a long-established newspaper in Tulsa and was soon put in touch with the archivist. I laid out the story about Luke and his wife’s disappearance and asked if she had any recollection of the story or someway of locating it.

“That was before we had things on computer. Probably on Microfiche. The computer might give me some references attached to his name. Luke Preston, you say. Let’s see... Yes. Okay. Give me five minutes. Hold or have me call you back.”

“I’ll hold if that’s okay.”

“That’s fine. I’d suggest you get a cup of coffee.”

It seemed like a good idea. With my cell phone on speaker I made my way down stairs and called out for Sarah. She was in the kitchen. The coffee pot was sputtering, filling the room with that wonderful aroma of a fresh brew. Could she read my thoughts?

“I’m on hold, here, but could sure use a cup of your good coffee.”

It was soon poured and we sat across the table from each other.

“I have a question for you that may be none of my business whatsoever and is certainly in no way meant to imply criticism.”

“My. You have a way of getting a girls’ attention, Mr. Miller.”

I appreciated her playful response.

“The drapes in my room. They don’t cover the rear window. It just seemed odd, I guess since everything else about your house demonstrates your impeccable taste and meticulous effort.”

She looked puzzled.

“I’m not sure what you mean. I made those drapes myself. I made them extra full, in fact. A room that large

needs something bulky at the windows to be in balance.”

“We have a mystery, then, I guess. Can you come up and take a look at what I’m referring to?”

“Certainly. I love a good mystery, myself.”

Upstairs, she walked directly to the window and examined the drapes.

“I can’t understand. This is not the way I made them. I mean it is the material I used but a good third of it is gone. I don’t understand.”

“I am beginning to. Who has had access to the house recently?”

“Access. Before you arrived, you mean. Nobody that I know of – well Melva and Elmer, of course, but I’m not the socialite. Nobody else ever comes.”

“I assume that like the others here, you don’t lock your doors.”

“Goodness no. I don’t even have a house key. The only one I’ve seen since I moved in is the one I gave you. Outsiders tend to want to be able to lock their room.”

“So, somebody could have just walked in when you weren’t here.”

“Yes. But why? It’s confusing.”

I pulled back the drapes, handed her the binoculars, and directed her to look at the middle window on the third floor of the mansion.

“Some kind of mirror or something – circular – maybe a telescope?” she said thinking – asking – out loud.

“Good eye. That was my take, too. I believe somebody’s watching me and in order to do that they had to make sure the drapes couldn’t close. It took planning ahead and knowledge of my trip long before my arrival. Can you determine how the drapes were altered?”

She looked them over end to end.

“Eighteen inches was cut off the outside end of each panel. They were re-hemmed by hand. Very nice work. My bet would be on Edie – She’s the only other seamstress in Forbes Crossing. When they were re-hung, they were hooked so the gap comes in between them rather than at the ends.”

“Avoiding the issue of why, do you think either of her children would have removed them from your house?”

“I can’t imagine that. No. I’d say no.”

Tulsa began speaking again. I explained and Sarah left, baffled and clearly upset.

“The Preston fellow was a suspect in his wife’s disappearance. They had been married just two months. She was wealthy – an old oil family. He inherited close to a million back in the days when a million actually meant something – one of three heirs listed in her will. He was never charged and the case was never solved. That help? I can fax or email what I have here if you need it.”

“No. Thank you. You have been extremely helpful. One more thing if you have it. How did his wife die?”

“Her car ran off a bridge at night and she drowned.”

“Thanks again.”

In the least, Luke had accumulated a sizeable fortune between the passings of his wife and the Professor. I noted the similarities. In the extreme, Luke had been responsible for their deaths. Attorney or not, if I were the Rutherford who owned the mansion I’d keep a healthy look out over my shoulder whenever I found myself driving alone through the darkness. With so much money, why would Luke persist in the struggle to work the mine? It could well be a poor boy obsessed with amassing the largest fortune possible. Luke continued to present more questions than answers.

I had to wonder what anyone might think they could gain from spying on me through the window. There was nothing I could think of that they could learn from that, other than knowing when I was here. My actions were unremarkable: I sat in a chair and made lists. I washed up. El and I had short conversations. I went to bed. I got up. There was no way they could see what I was writing. And, it had to be something this person was thinking – planning – about well before I arrived. He also had to know I would be staying at Sarah’s place. That had me baffled. The modification of the drapes would be discovered and most likely traced to Edie who would probably give up the person who hired her. That discovery had to be something, which, in the end, would make no difference to the one who was responsible.

I have given virtually no thought to Ned, the storekeeper, in all of this. He was a big, burly fellow who, at

least in his younger years, could have worked the mine. On the surface, at least, his allegiance would seem to be with Harry although I knew nothing about his relationships with Luke or Bertha Curtis. Having lived here all his life I imagine he would be well versed in both mining and the ghost lore.

I decided to go through the material in Luke's lock box one more time and more methodically. As I boosted it up onto the table between the chairs another glint of light caught my attention. This time it was reflected from the mirror over the sink in the corner. I let it pass that time. It made sense. I was not blocking the reflection so it flashed off the mirror, which hung at the end of the trajectory there in the room.

In the process of being distracted, however, I failed to place the box fully onto the table and it fell to the floor. It landed on its side, fell open, and the contents spread out onto the floor. I picked it up and placed it on the table then began assembling the papers and envelopes that had fallen out. Odd. There was a rectangular metal plate – heavy, a quarter of an inch thick – among the contents. It had not been there the first time I went through it. Or, had it! “A false bottom,” I said aloud.

I separated out what would have been stashed under the plate. It would be material I had not examined earlier. I figured how it worked. Simplicity itself. Put the papers to be secreted on the bottom of the box. Insert the friction-fit plate on top of them. Add the rest above it. Unless something happened to disturb the plate – like it had when it fell – no one would ever be the wiser. Just what was so important to have been secreted at the bottom?

A number of things fell into place immediately. However, it added little to my understanding of the overall situation there in Forbes Crossing. Items of interest included a vehicle registration for the dump truck – in Bertha's name; a marriage license between Luke Preston and Bertha Curtis; a birth certificate for Jeb Curtis Preston; a 99 year lease on a penthouse at the Majestic; papers showing Luke to be a major shareholder in that hotel in Hot Springs; a diploma indicating a BS in Mechanical Engineering; and bank account and stock information which showed large monthly donations to a boys' boarding school two counties to the east. I knew that school.

I had been there. I had written about it. Why the donation? It didn't jive with anything I thought I knew about Luke. The man just didn't seem to have a charitable hair on his head.

Like I said, interesting but only marginally relevant to anything ghostly. There was one more, brown, envelope. Inside was a hand-written document signed by Professor Fredrick Michaels. It was a threat directed at Luke. Michaels wrote that unless Luke came up with a significant increase in his monthly 'stipend' – I interpreted that to mean hush money – he would reveal to the authorities that Luke had paid him to state falsely in his report of Number Six that it was unsafe for further occupancy when in fact that was not true, and, further, that he would implicate Luke in the explosion that caused the cave-in and loss of life. Motive for murder, I assumed. It also stated that should anything happen to him a copy of that same document would be automatically mailed to Harry Thorpe. I had to wonder if that had been an idle threat or if it had, in fact, been sent and received. If so, it added intrigue to intrigue because all along Harry would have surely known about the mining operation and would have understood how the professor most likely met his death.

If Harry knew, why was Luke still in business? Were they partners? Everything I knew about Harry told me that was unlikely. What was Luke's connection to the boys' school? Later, perhaps, I would make a call and look into that. At the moment, I heard El clamoring up the stairs.

"Got info," he said offering me half of the diagonally cut sandwich, which Sarah had obviously just fixed for him.

"No thanks – for the sandwich, not the info."

He smiled and flopped – legs across an arm – into the far recliner. I allowed myself a second to wonder if no one had ever instructed him on the proper use of a chair. Just as rapidly it seemed fully irrelevant. I sat also and listened.

"Jeb works the mine for Luke, who – you'll never believe this – he calls . . ."

"Dad?" I added filling the dramatic pause El figured he was setting up.

"Yeah. You knew? How?"

"I didn't know last time we spoke. Ran across it in Luke's lock box. Luke and Jeb's mother were married twenty



some years ago. Anything else from Jeb?"

"He clearly loves the work. Says he fills three trucks a week. I figure that's ten tons, more or less. That's 20,000 pounds. This ore runs about .005% silver. That comes to 100 pounds or 1600 ounces a week at, say fifteen dollars an ounce. What's that, about \$24,000 a week? Plus, of course the worth of the copper and lead. Somebody's doing okay."

"I'd say. He gave Luke up easily?"

"It's my impression that he hadn't been asked not to talk about it. Odd. I've never heard anything and I hear everything."

"Maybe Jeb just doesn't have anybody to talk to."

"You're right there. I suppose Luke knew it was safe."

"New topic," I said. "These drapes. Ever see the material anywhere before?"

"Yeah. Mom was working on them last week. They needed to be shortened or something."

"Do you know who she was working for?"

"Ms. Wilson, I guess. Who else would it be?"

"That, my friend, is the question."

"Huh? I don't get it."

"Look at them. They don't close. Sarah says she knows they used to close because she made them. If she needed them fixed why wouldn't she have done it herself and why would she want them not to fit the window?"

"I see the problems. I'll ask mom. I assume you've asked Ms. Wilson."

"I have. She was unaware the alteration had been done."

"I don't understand why all the fuss over your drapes, do you?"

I pointed out the window up in the mansion and explained my theory.

"That still doesn't make any sense. What would somebody want to see in here for?"

"You got me. I can't figure it either."

"You gonna cover up the gap?"

"I haven't decided. If that glint is from a riflescope, then maybe I should. I think I'll just stay out of the line of sight and see what happens. The natural place of focus in here is

actually on the mirror back there, so unless its aim gets moved around, the chairs and bed seem safe. I don't think it could reach the bed in the corner under any circumstances."

"Do we need to go up to the mansion and check it out?"

"Perhaps later. It – the telescope or gun scope – was being adjusted earlier this morning. We know it wasn't there yesterday. If somebody stays with it all the time, it might not be safe to be up there."

"You know what room that is, right?"

"Yes. The one with the closet and entrance into the ghost chamber below. Like I said, we were in there yesterday."

"Guess we're done in there, anyway, right?"

"For the time being at least. Back to the mining. Did you learn whether Luke does the smelting or if he just ships the ore off somewhere else?"

"Jeb really doesn't understand about things like that but he says they dump into the railroad cars like I suspected. He says there are armed guards there at the train. I imagine either Luke or the buyer of the ore pays them to protect it until it gets to the smelting place."

"I'm sure you're right. Assuming your mental calculations are correct, that's a very valuable cargo. I have another assignment for you."

"Great! What?"

"I still haven't seen Rebecca's ghost walking the mansion grounds at night. I want to see if I can make that happen this evening."

"I don't understand."

"If it is a hoax, that means somebody is making it happen, right?"

"Right."

"I need to have you spread the word that I am skeptical about it ever appearing but for the sake of fairness I'll give it one more chance. I'll be somewhere within view of the mansion between ten and midnight tonight. We'll be ready with the camera and some other tricks I have up my sleeve just in case it shows up."

Ever thoughtful El took it a step further.

"According to Harry's theory it's possible the ghost could get the message as well and show up on its own – as a

not hoax if you understand.”

“I do. I think I’m prepared for that. What I need you to do now is to leak my message about being there around town – Harry, Ned, Aunt Millie, your family, even Bertha if you don’t mind making that trek over the hill one more time.”

“Glad to. It’s a great day to be out and around. I promised Jeb bubble gum. I can I take it so it will all seem legit. He only likes Double Bubble – the old fashioned pink kind.”

“Didn’t even know it was made anymore. I loved that stuff as a kid myself.”

“The store always has it. It has lots of old fashioned thing. Part of the Hill Village image, I suspect.”

“Let’s meet at the café for lunch. You call the time.”

“I’ll need til noon.”

“Noon it will be, then. After lunch, I want to look around the mansion grounds – just the east side where the ghost usually walks.”

“You think it will be safe? I mean, with the possibility of a gun and all.”

“Can we access it from the east so we can’t be seen either from Luke’s room or the person now on the third floor?”

“We can. Wear your hiking boots. No real trail and lots of sharp rocks, but we can make it that way. We’ll take a straight shoot from this house through the woods for the first 100 yards. It gets chilly late, remember. Wear a jacket tonight.”

“You sound like my mother.”

He grinned.

“I guess that can’t be all bad, then, huh?”

We both understood that it had been rhetorical. El took one more, studied, look up at the mansion through the binoculars and left. I had notes to make and thoughts possibilities to consider.

\* \* \*

“The special’s a open face beef sandwich with mashed potatoes, gravy, string beans, and okra.”

It had been Millie’s clear choice for us as we took seats at our table in the cafe. I assumed some delectable dessert would be offered later. I’d have to diet until Christmas once I

left this place.

As one, the two of us nodded our approval of her suggestion. Once she left, El leaned close to deliver his report.

“Got the word around. Won’t be anybody in town who won’t know. I figure Jeb and Bertha probably have a way to let Luke know. I can pretend some kind of business with him and locate Luke up at the mansion if you think a direct approach like that would be best.”

“I think we’re good to go. Thanks. I don’t know what I’d do without you on this one.”

He gave me a strange look and squirmed just a bit more than usual. I was getting used to responses I didn’t understand and couldn’t decode. It seemed to just be a part of the Eccentric El I had come to know and enjoy.

We finished off lunch with pineapple upside down cake – not on my top ten list but Millie’s was excellent. I imagined that given time hers could grow on me – and me on it.

We returned to my room where I changed into my boots. I slipped my new screwdriver into my pocket. It had become my go-to tool on this outing. I had asked El to bring his sling shot and some ‘non-lethal’ ammo. He chose dried peas. An excellent choice for what I had in mind. With two flashlights, our outfitting was complete.

The walk through the woods, though up a moderate incline, was relatively non-stressful. We encountered a variety of little beings – birds, rabbits, squirrels, and even a doe with her two beautiful bambi’s. The trees were lush and spread enough to allow a variety of flowers and ferns to grow at their feet.

“You been to the cemetery, yet?” El asked out of the blue.

“I have.”

“You okay with it?”

Again, a very odd question.

“Neat and well kept. Clearly folks care about it. A cut above lots that I’ve seen.”

Having had no idea to what his comment referred I went with the generic response. There was no follow up so I was left in the dark. Later I might bring it up again.

The climb up the final hundred feet or so was a challenge but we were soon standing alongside the building.

“So, what we after up here?” El asked.

I crouched and ran my fingers across the ground next to the foundation. El followed suit, his way of trying to answer his own question I assumed. After a time, I spoke.

“Fog. Haze. Mist. I understand it is almost always present during Rebecca’s walks along here.”

“Not almost. Always. I think you’ll find ghosts are drawn to fog and such. Hasn’t that been your experience?”

“Often, yes, I suppose. For Rebecca, it’s an always occurrence, you say.”

He nodded not feeling the need to repeat himself.

I began a closer and more thorough search of the ground and foundation.

“Can we get under the house through the grate here on this end?”

“Sure can. Just like the one on the west. Want in?”

I nodded and we proceeded to push the framed grate inside. It took considerable more effort than the other had. El explained.

“Doubt if this is used often. I suspect I’m the only one who ever uses either of them and I almost always use the other one. It’s away from view down below.”

With the grate set aside we crawled in. I stood, bent over somewhat to clear the rafters. My interest was the lower foot or so of the foundation. It took all of ten seconds to find what I suspected.

“Copper tubing,” El said in a matter of fact manner. “I must say I’ve wondered some why it was there. Never had reason to really investigate it, though.

“Now’s your chance. Tell me what you see.”

“Well, it seems to run the length of the wall.”

He followed it with the beam from his flashlight to the rear corner.

“There is gets buried or rises out of the dirt whichever direction you’re tracking it, I suppose. Up here it has lots of little off shoots – much smaller tubes – that go into the wall. I don’t get it.”

“I’ve seen enough in here. We need to peak around

back.”

Still clueless, El led the way back outside and we replaced the grate.

I walked somewhat cautiously to the rear corner of the building and peeked around to make sure we were alone.

“I don’t find what I was hoping for, El.”

“And that was?”

“Some kind of a big box or tank or bulge in the wall. Something big enough to contain a water tank and a firebox.”

“Like that huge fireplace, maybe?” He said still puzzled.

“Yes. Like that maybe. I don’t feel safe crossing the yard to it for fear Luke might see us.”

“We can circle around from back where we came up.”

“Let’s do that.”

It took a good ten minutes to reach the area just behind the fireplace where we could enter the yard hidden from view so long as Luke stayed in his room. I had wondered about its massive size earlier. My closer examination that time made it clear that at some point after its construction the fireplace had been expanded at the rear. The chimney was extra deep – exceedingly deep. I had noticed before that the ash left in the firebox extended well back under the chimney opening. That was unusual. Fires were built out front under the grate.

“I want to boost you up so you can look down inside the chimney. Just describe what you see.”

The structure was a good eight feet tall but kneeling on my shoulders he had a good view.

“Not like any fireplace I’ve ever seen before. It’s really two chimneys. The one on my right is what you’d expect – open all the way down. About ten inches square and full of soot. Can you imagine the stories that soot could tell about all the good times folks had cooking out and such down through the years?”

“I can, sort of. You should write about that later.”

I handed up my camera.

“What’s on the other side?”

“It’s bigger. Two feet square. There is a copper or brass tank occupying the upper two thirds of the space. There is a copper tube like the one under the house but maybe twice as big around. Comes out of the top and bends back down

and seems to disappear into the bottom of the firebox. I assume it goes underground. Oh! Underground and then back to connect up with the tube underneath in the crawlspace. I still don't get it."

"What comes from heated water and looks like fog?"

"Ah! Steam maybe. I get it. Your phrase made that way too easy. I could be offended, if I allowed that!"

He jumped to the ground wearing a grin.

"You think the fog is created by the steam machine as part of another ghost hoax?" he asked.

"Does that make sense to you?"

"It makes half a sense, I guess."

"Half a sense?"

"So, it makes fog. It doesn't make a ghost."

"So, it doesn't. There are several possibilities, I suppose.

EI immediately had an idea.

"Like somebody dressed up like the ghost walks through the fog, which makes it all seem eerie and ghostly."

"That's one possibility. Another might involve some kind of a projection system that shows a movie of the ghost moving along the wall shown against the wall of steam."

"That's a pretty neat idea. There is one more, of course."

"And that is?"

"That the fog is dispersed just to make the real ghost feel comfortable so it will appear and go for a little stroll up along the mansion."

"I must admit that one had not yet occurred to me. Interesting."

"I can tell you don't buy that one," he said, some disappointment in his tone.

"You can? How?"

"You said, 'interesting'. If you had agreed it was a real possibility you would have said something more like, 'Good thinking, EI'.

"Sometimes it seems you know me better than I know myself."

EI grinned and nodded. Clearly, he agreed with me.

"I'd sure like to see what's going on up in that third-floor

room,” he said.

“Me too, but I’m not going to risk life or limb over it at this point and I need you to agree not to investigate it without me.”

“Okay. I can do that but it’s not what I want.”

“I understand. Put on your good remembering hat for me. Visualize the rear wall of the ghost chamber. See the wire that goes up the wall and then loops out to the motor that hangs from the track?”

“Yes. And the other one.”

“Tell me about that. I don’t remember it and it’s the point of this whole exercise.”

“It runs on up into the ceiling. That’s it. It disappears into the ceiling.”

“Do you remember it showing up along the wall of the closet up on three?”

“No. Do you?”

“No. It must either enter the wall and go on up to the attic or run through the space between the second-floor ceiling and the third floor, floor.”

“Floor floor?”

“You know what I mean, Smart Alec.”

“Why you interested in that?”

“A projector needs power – electricity – probably lots more than easily provided by a few batteries. It could help account for the overkill electrical production by the generator in the box.”

“I see. More than merely interesting, I’d say.”

Grin met grin.

“Let’s do some hypothesizing about where a projector would need to be positioned,” I said pointing back toward the side yard where we had begun the sojourn.

“Can’t really see the area well from here,” El said.

I agreed and we made our way back to where we had started. Impersonating a mountain goat was clearly not my thing. I noted several possible locations. The eave protruded nearly three feet and although it sat some forty to forty-five feet above the ground it was a possible. There were two ancient trees immediately adjacent to the mansion – one in front that has been described and a second, similar in size,



just to the east. It spread its limbs above where we were standing. The trees in the woods topped out a dozen feet below the top of the ridge on which the mansion stood. If a tree were involved, there was only one contender.

“Talk to me about that birdbath over there,” I said to El. It was made of many individual stones laid up to form a four-foot circular base some three feet high. It sat near the rim of the ridge on a line straight east from the rear wall of the mansion.

“Well,” he said beginning his response and grinning, “Dirty birds tend to use it to clean up, I imagine.”

It drew my chuckle. He was quick-witted – no doubt about that.

“The structure’s history, perhaps.”

“Don’t really know. It appears to have been constructed out of the same sort of stones as the addition to the fireplace. See how they are brown to tan tones like the mansion but have a pocked finish not seen on the building. Like rejects, maybe.”

“Or later finds. Any idea when it was built?”

“No. Mom might or Harry. I can ask.”

“We can live without that information. I don’t want to make any waves in the wrong direction at this point. Let’s look it over.”

The water container across the top was a thick brass basin, nearly a foot deep and surprisingly clean. Someone was regularly taking care of it. It had no drain. The sides of the structure into which it fit, were rock and mortar, as already noted.

“This what you’re looking for?” El said as he knelt on the south west side of the structure – the side facing the mansion.

“What you got?”

“A loose stone about six-inches’ top to bottom and a foot wide.”

“Will it come out?”

“Yup. Want it out?”

“Yup. Want it out!”

Another set of grins.

It was there, a set of three very expensive looking

lenses staring at us from behind a glass enclosure. At first I couldn't figure how it was accessed for maintenance and such. Then it occurred to me. The water container across the top was most likely removable. The weight of the water held it securely in place – thus the necessity for regular care and replenishment. The power line was undoubtedly buried; finding it was not necessary at that time.

“Look inside here,” EI said. “Over to the side, there. A plug and socket. It's unplugged right now. Before it can do its thing somebody will probably have to come out here and plug it in.”

“I suppose that arrangement is in some way related to security, privacy, keeping the secret. It may be to protect it or the stuff in the box up in the ghost chamber from lightning strikes. I can't go further than that with it. A switch would seem more logical. I assume there must be a remote switch as well. Surely somebody doesn't just stand out here in the open turning it off and on.”

“Maybe the real switch is in the battery/generator box?” EI said trying to help.

“A good bet, I'd say. We had no reason to be looking for any such thing so we could have easily missed it. It may be in the pictures I took. Put the stone back in place and let's get out of here before we are spotted – if in fact we haven't been, already.”

“One more thing, Marc. Look here. The plug won't fit into the socket. The plug has three prongs. The socket only two.”

“So, perhaps another safety feature. To engage the projector, one has to have the proper adapter. Though more cumbersome, it would be far more secure than a switch. Fascinating.”

We closed it up. Our short excursion had taken far longer than I had anticipated but it had resulted in solid new information. It now seemed that not only the window scene but also the walking the grounds scene were cleverly instrumented hoaxes. I supposed I was ready to go home and try to salvage some kind of a story from this Forbes Crossing outing. The outdoor goings on really interested now me, however. I needed to see how it looked, now that I had seen

how it worked. I would meet the ghost as scheduled and stay one more night.

“Let’s be on our way,” I suggested.

“Nap or pie?”

“The boy with the hollow leg. I guess I’ve worked up enough of an appetite and am sure I don’t have to ask you. Pie or some such thing it is.”

The pie turned out to be a hot fudge sundae – three scoops – ‘The El and Mel Special’ according to the menu. For some reason, it made me realize I had not met either Edie, his mother, or Melva, his sister.

“Are you going to let me meet your family, or are they just figments of your imagination?”

It was worth a grin and a response.

“Sure. We can walk over after we’re done here. They’re canning tomatoes and peaches this afternoon. I’ve been harvesting for them all week.”

I had to wonder when he had time for that but didn’t bring it up. El had neatly avoided explaining or even really describing his sleep habits so I wouldn’t press. What wasn’t essential to my mission was none of my business. I always worked according to that tenet.

\* \* \*

Smoke poured from the chimney of the small, white, frame house. The doors and windows were open.

“Gets pretty hot in there during cannin’ time. I’ll bring them out here.”

“Don’t let them ruin anything on the stove.”

“Mom wouldn’t allow that.”

He returned shortly with his family in tow.

“This is my mom, Edie, short for Edith. This is my sister Melva, a combined form of our grandparent’s names Melvin and Velma. Family, this is my new friend and famous writer, Marc Miller, actually named Marcus by his parents in honor of a Greek somebody-or-other.”

He held out his hand as if to shake mine. I was momentarily puzzled but played along.

“And I’m El, my short form for Elmer, named after my father, George.”

“What? George?”

“George Elmer Rakes. Got you going there, didn’t I?”

“Son, you’ve had me going since the moment you waylaid me in the café.”

“He does have a way of getting what he wants, if that’s what you mean,” Edie said extending her hand.

Melva performed a curtsy of sorts. They were dressed like they had just stepped out of Little Women – the less affluent side of Little Women. It was all a part of Harry’s grand plan, I figured. We chatted for a few moments, filling time and saying nothing – yet leaving with the feeling we had just made new, good, friends.

“I’d show you my room but it’s a mess and I can tell from yours that that’s not your preferred life style.”

“That’s up to you. I seldom cast judgments on how others live their lives – within the limits of law and ethics, I suppose.”

We said our good-byes and agreed to meet at the café at nine that evening. El walked me to Main Street where we parted. I went back to my room and, I supposed, El to his. I hadn’t brought up the drapery dilemma with Edie, figuring that was best dealt with between the boy and his mother. I would get the full story that evening.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT: Oh, My!

I arrived at the café fifteen minutes early hoping to have time to pump Millie for a few more tidbits.

“El will be along shortly. I’ll settle for coffee while I wait.”

Millie brought a mug and the pot. She poured. We were alone as seemed to always be the case. I motioned for her to sit.

“I sure am glad I got that email about Forbes Crossing,” I began. “To think I might have missed getting to know you and to sample your delicious fare. I need to thank whoever it was – buy him a meal or something in return for that favor.”

“You been doin’ that. Thought ya know? It was El who got the email idea. Maybe I shouldn’t a said that.”

“It will remain our little secret but thank you. You know why he wanted me to come?”

“I think I may a said too much already.”

“Let me change the topic then. Do you know anything about how the mansion came into the hands of the Rutherford up in Springfield?”

Millie got confidential in tone and leaned forward.

“It was a mess, I can tell you that.

She settled in clearly more comfortable dishing this kind of gossip.

“Somewhere in the pass to pass to’s of the various owners dying off, it got down to a choice between the Springfield Rutherford and The Forbes Crossing, Preston, that’s Luke. The way I heard it, they was both removed equal from the original blood line, but Rutherford, being a lawyer, got

the judge to rule in his favor – him having money to keep it up and all and to keep it in the family name. Harry was dead set against Luke gittin' it fer some reason he never let be knowed. Luke was mad as a hatter over it. Said terrible things about Harry. There was talk about tar an' featherin', an' runnin' Luke out a town on a rail. Never did come to that."

"When was that?"

" 'Round the time a the cave in. Ma was still alive and she passed over jist before the tragedy."

"One thing puzzles me about my being here."

"What's that?"

She furrowed her brow as if wondering whether or not it would be something to which she should respond.

"There were no people staying at the hotel and yet the man at the desk there said there was no room for me. He suggested Sarah Wilson's place."

Millie giggled into her hand.

"Well, you have to understand 'bout things here. We got no eligible men the right age to court Sarah. Harry always sees to it that when the likes a you comes to town, he gets directed over to the widow's place. We'd all like her to find somebody again. It's jist how it is."

It explained several things, mainly how the drapery guy with the scope would have known ahead of time where I would be staying.

"I'm flattered, but as I've told Sarah, I have a woman in my life – not married but we are very loyal to our relationship."

"I figured. Can't say Harry don't keep tryin'."

She giggled again.

"Way back when, he tried to git Luke an' me together – when Luke first come to town. After the tragedy, lots of things changed around here."

"I guess I've never heard if Harry is married."

"Was. She died of small pox when their son was ten. Harry sent him off to boarding school. Said he warn't no pappy. The boy done good the way I hear it. Never does come back here. Harry don't talk 'bout personal things. After the cave-in, Harry took El under his wing. Tried to be a man in the boy's life. Did okay I think. There's talk about him sendin' El over to that boardin' school next year if it's needed."

“If it’s needed?”

Millie brushed it off with her hand, for some reason clearly sorry she had said it. I didn’t press but my how I wanted to. El arrived spewing playful verbiage.

“El the Language King is here, Lady and Gentleman. Where’s his food, lowly kitchen maid?”

He rapped on the table with his fist as he took a chair.

Millie directed a stern look in my direction.

“He wasn’t never this obnoxious ‘fore you arrived, Mr. Marc Miller.”

“I’ll be leaving tomorrow. I hope my bad influence will be short lived.”

Millie stood.

“Supper or sweets?”

“My vote is both. How about you, Sir?”

“Sir? What happened to Mr. Marcus Marc Miller?”

“I’m practicing for later on. Harry likes me to be well mannered.”

“And somehow you got the idea I don’t”

“Didn’t mean that. I seem to have dug a verbal hole from which I will not easily be able to extract myself so I capitulate without further specification.”

“He never did used to talk like that, I can tell ya fer sure.”

It had been Millie’s, head shaking, parting shot, as she stood and pointed to the menu on the wall behind the counter.

“What can I extract from the kitchen for you, gentlemen?”

“I’ll have the number one or whatever is left, whichever makes it easier,” I said.

“Me, too.”

Millie left the room.

“I got some stuff,” El said again assuming a confidential demeanor.

“What?”

“The drapes. It was Bertha who got mom to do the work. I figure that leads directly to Luke. Also, the wallpaper. I checked the store records. It was bought by Bertha, too. Another Luke link I suspect.”

“Nice work. Pretty much like we figured, I suppose.”



“Pretty much. I’m still concerned about that gun scope aimed at your room. I think we should go up there and take it out.”

“We don’t know it’s a gun, El. More likely just a telescope. If some action still seems necessary in the morning, we’ll do just that.”

“Morning may be too late, Sir!”

His phrase was delivered with more than a little emotion. I didn’t understand. I assumed I had become important to him but this reaction strongly implied panic of some sort. Panic only arises when somebody feels very certain something bad is, indeed, going to happen and they are relatively helpless to do anything to prevent it. Could it be El knew something diabolical that he was not or could not share with me? Some sort of timeline, maybe. I had come to feel there where more than a few ‘could nots’ in our relationship.”

I let it go but would heighten my level of alert both to what El did and said and to what went on around me. I changed the topic.

“So, Millie tells me you may be headed away to school next year.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I’ll know for sure in the next day or so. It’s private so I assume you won’t ask any more about it.”

Taking a cue from his early response to me, I zipped my lips. He smiled, somewhat uneasily I thought. These people were peaking my interest in ways I had seldom known before. I would, however, honor their privacy. Perhaps Harry and Edie had a relationship that was more than just friends. I said I wouldn’t pry. I supposed that allowed private conjecture, however. Mine suddenly burgeoned.

Perhaps:

Luke felt he had been wronged as a legitimate heir to the mansion. Perhaps that was in some way connected to his mining operation. He was obviously making a great deal of money from it. It may have been his way of laughing at or taking retribution against his relative. The very public mansion made no money. His secret mine was making him rich. Here’s a scenario that catches my fancy. Luke came back to care for

the Mansion, discovered the elevator shaft and the tunnel into which it led. Having had scientific training of a sort – engineering – he determined that the ore in there was of high enough grade to make mining lucrative.

He began working it – only at night after the town was asleep – and transported the ore by dump truck up the valley to the waiting railroad cars. Any sounds that were heard he attributed to Johnny's ghost working the mines as atonement for having let Rebecca die. It just fed his lore. In order to gain access into the tunnel for the truck and equipment he toppled the huge stones that had disguised the entrance for decades – back when the sole purpose of the tunnel had been for the security of the Rutherfords and perhaps as a part of the Underground Railroad. (That long, deep, off-shoot, valley running north would have made an ideal, secret, route, into Missouri and freedom.)

It seemed a safe move since the little village was mostly populated by middle aged and older adults who had no reason to visit the back valley. At some point, he engaged the assistance of young, strong, closed mouthed Jeb, probably the reason behind his marriage to Bertha.

When Luke discovered that Kurt was planning to dig west toward his operation, Luke arranged the collapse in Six using the long holes and dynamite. Taking it one step further, Luke used his still positive relationship with Harry and in some way arranged for the workmen who had knowledge of the secret tunnel to be in Number Six at the time he would set off the explosives. Two birds with one stone, so to speak. The secret was silenced. He then arranged for his professor uncle to become the consultant, paid his uncle a large sum to seal Number Six and move on to Seven. That preserved his operation. He later killed his uncle to tidy up the whole scheme. He probably would have done that regardless, but the written extortion threat from Michaels may have hastened it. Why would he have kept that note? Probably so he could take it out from time to time and gloat. Since there was no one else who could praise him for his devious achievements he had to praise himself.

The question remained why he would work so hard to perpetuate the lore surrounding Rebecca's ghost – if it were,

in fact, he who had arranged it. Also, why did he let El and me live in the elevator ‘accident’? Perhaps it was as simple as wanting to save the elevator. Just as likely, he understood that our disappearance would launch an investigation and that could put him out of business and dig up old issues he’d rather keep under wraps. Both may have played a part. And, of course, if Harry – El’s recent mentor and protector – found out about Luke’s part in the boy’s death or disablement, Luke figured his own days would be numbered.

El had patiently allowed me my quiet think time. I had a question for him.

“Do you have any ideas at this point why Luke keeps doing the ghost things? I find it hard to come up with a really good reason. Harry still stands to gain the most from that and I have reason to believe Luke would not help Harry in any way if he could avoid it.”

“Got one . . . idea.”

“Will you share it with me?”

“Sure. I’ll do like you do to me and ask some questions.”

I was impressed he had noticed my preference for the Socratic Method.

“What does the ghost stuff do?” he began.

“It brings in lots of tourists and therefore lots of money.”

“Let me try it another way. If you had a secret that wouldn’t be all that hard to find out about and you wanted to make sure nobody did find about it, what would you set up?”

“I see. A diversion! Something to keep other people away from the secret. You may just be the genius that I’ve come to suspect you are. To keep his mining operation secret from the townspeople Luke needed some all-encompassing diversion that would keep them occupied far away from his doings. So, he invented the ghostly appearances. It focused all the attention on the mansion way up the hill. It probably grew beyond what he had intended when it started attracting so many tourists – Harry’s stroke of genius, no doubt. It may have been at that point that he moved to a quiet, nocturnal, no loud machinery, type of operation.”

“If I said all that, I must really be good!!!”

He grinned.

“I heard you say it – Master Language and Email King.”

We passed a knowing glance during a silent moment. He raised his eyebrows above a sheepish grin and hunched his shoulders. He understood that I knew it was he who had set me up to come to Forbes Crossing believing I could solve the several mysteries and make the answers public. He needed me to discredit the ghost stuff for some reason. Why he or he and Harry couldn't do that, I still didn't understand. I hoped that later that evening answers would emerge for the several loose ends that continued to plague me.

A question came to mind. It was not new but I had pushed it from my focus.

“Who do you suppose owns the land that holds the mine that Luke is working?” I asked.

“Harry – well the Village Committee, actually, I guess. It owns everything up to the tree line just below the outcropping the mansion sits on. Up to the top of the graveled path.”

It came in a flash. Currently conjecture but I imagined fact in the end.

Harry! That sly old dog. He had something on Luke – probably proof of one or more of his murders. He was using that to force him to keep working the mine and turn the earnings over to him. It didn't necessarily change anything about El's theory concerning the distracting aspect of the ghostly lore. Harry didn't want his source of income to be revealed so required Luke to make sure nobody discovered the operation. Luke alone maintained the hoax and Harry, oblivious to that, maintained his belief in the ghosts. If there were a financial paper trail from the mine, I was sure the earnings from it would be traced right back to Harry's bank accounts.

I was coming to understand that local ghost theory held that the spirits had a number of limitations when it comes to influencing mortals. If there were no ghost, if Rebecca's spirit were to be proved a hoax on all counts, then how did spirits play any role at all? I still hadn't accounted for the ghost of Johnny, of course. That aspect had remained well in the background. Like El had pointed out, what course of action

would one pursue to keep a major secret? Keep it out of the spotlight. Erect some diversion to protect it. I had to wonder if Johnny could be the real key to all of this.

Suddenly, I realized I knew virtually nothing about him. I thought I had debunked his existence with the discovery – assumption – that any pick to rock sounds heard in the mines at night could be attributed to Jeb working in Luke's new mine. Then there was El's suggestion that a spirit might be able to influence a mortal or another spirit to do its bidding – to make it appear that Rebecca's ghost was present even though that fake was only a stand-in to preserve the 'real' ghost's energy as it waited around for whatever was necessary to release it to the 'other side'. Perhaps Johnny was sharing his energy and together they managed to force the hoax to continue. Like most lore, there seemed to be an answer for every eventuality. And like most lore, it really explained nothing.

My thoughts had been rambling. Succinctly, now, what conclusions had I reached – conclusions I felt would stand the test of facts as they were likely to be uncovered?

Luke returned to Forbes Crossing to care for the mansion after it had been willed to his Springfield, Rutherford, relative. Along the way, he discovered the mine and began working it for his own benefit. Fearing discovery, he established and promoted the Rebecca and Johnny ghost lore as a diversion to protect the privacy of his mining operation. He found Harry to be a ready and able, if unknowing, accomplice. The lore soon became viewed as fact. At some point, Harry discovered the mine. Also, at some point, Harry came across proof that Luke had caused the deadly collapse and perhaps had committed one or more other murders as well. He used that to force Luke to work the mine for him and for the benefit of the village and the boy's boarding school.

Why was it necessary to have me expose Luke when he was already being punished by having to work the mine and give up his earnings? For one thing, it required him to stick around Forbes Crossing when otherwise he could have afforded to live in luxury anywhere. Harry never learned – never allowed himself to learn – that the ghostly appearances were a hoax. Harry grew to feel tremendous guilt about having allowed the professor to talk him into leaving the men's

bodies in Number Six – never to get a proper burial and therefore, according to his beliefs, never to have their spirits released to the other side. As the years went on, his ongoing research into ghostly behavior suggested to him that if the perpetrator of their deaths were to be exposed, the spirits could be freed. However, the guilt of that person had to be established by an outsider. The tremendous energy that the men's spirits could be exerting on an insider might force that person to the wrong conclusion – leading him to carelessly concoct any means of closure. Harry had undoubtedly passed on those beliefs to El, who, idolizing the man, also believed them. Either Harry set up the boy to contact me – using his wife and subtle influences – or, more probably, I figured, El just took it upon himself to see that I was enticed to his village.

So, if I were to expose Luke, the mine operations would have to be reorganized – not any real problem if the village was willing to bring in outside help to work it. Other than Jeb and in a few years El, there were no strong young men left in Forbes Crossing.

It was a neat fit to the facts and yet it left me fully unsatisfied. What was it that bothered me so? And how did the deal with the drapes fit in? Perhaps it was a gun as EL kept insisting, and perhaps it was Luke who had figured out he had nothing to lose by killing me. Dead I couldn't expose him. If caught, being convicted of having killed once or a dozen times really made little difference and his track record up to that point suggest that he might very well get away with mine.

We finished the meal with pumpkin pie ala mode. I had forgotten my jacket so El insisted that we detour back to my place and pick it up. We entered my room. The light on the table would not light. Neither would the others. Before either of us could turn on a flashlight a specter appeared. For some reason the two of us retreated from it into the front corner, to the west of the window. In the opposite corner stood . . . well, Rebecca or at least the upper half of Rebecca. Darkness lay below. She waved and smiled. Her expression quickly changed to anger. She pointed at us and shook her finger. She made no sounds. El gripped my belt. I gripped the drapes to my left.

The ghost's left side began to fade in and out as the

view distorted. Clearly it could not be some physical person standing there costumed. Suddenly I made a connection. I pushed the drapes further from me – toward the middle of the window. The ghost’s entire side to our left faded away. I pulled the drapes back toward me. The entire image returned. I pulled the drape back a few inches from the window frame and looked up toward the mansion. I moved El’s trembling body into position and physically pointed his head up the hill. We watched together as the lens, which we had seen earlier, flickered from the powerful beam of light it was directing in our direction. I waved my hand up and down across it where it entered between the drapes. The ghostly image momentarily darkened in its path. I shined my flashlight at our ghost. El followed suit. At such close range its image faded, revealing what? The large mirror over the sink. It was a natural screen to catch and enhance such a highly-focused beam of light. Had I not have stumbled onto the glints from the mansion window earlier, I wondered how the illusion might have affected my investigation.

“I doubt if he can see inside this room so he won’t know what we have discovered. Let’s find my jacket and get out of here. He can occupy himself for as long as he pleases.”

I felt El nod there in the dark. I grabbed my jacket from the back of a recliner and we left the house.

“So, I guess that was probably supposed to be the final bit of ghostly proof to run you out of town, huh?” El said suddenly managing a braver countenance. “Luke must be a real Doofus. If he’d read anything you’ve ever written he’d know nothing like that would ever scare you off.”

El had become an enigma – the things he clearly knew about the goings on, the things I guessed he knew but wouldn’t or couldn’t discuss, and the things he obviously did not know. It was the second of those that had come to concern me the most.

We repeated our approach to the mansion through the woods to the east and by a few minutes before ten were bellied down at a point from where we could peak over the ridge and take in whatever might be about to occur. If the show were to be another hoax, as I believed it would be, Luke was probably already surveying the area for my arrival. It

might have been better if we had just climbed the graveled path out front but I had become cautiously skittish since the possibility of my possible demise had entered the picture. I hoped that even without my clear presence the show would go on. I kept watch into the darkness over my shoulder.

From our vantage point we could see neither the front window which housed the projector focused on my room nor the projection opening in the birdbath. We talked in whispers even though I had no reason to believe low tones would have been heard.

“You remembered the slingshot,” I said giving him credit for his mental prowess by not phrasing it as a question.

“Got it. Why I got it?”

“If – when – the ghost appears, and when I give you the word, I want you to load up a half dozen peas and pepper the image with a powerful shot. If it’s a ghost it won’t be hurt. If it’s a projected image, we’ll just hear the peas hitting the mansion wall. If it’s someone actually there pretending to be the ghost, I bet we’ll get a tell-tale reaction. Aim for the head and shoulders. The garments might provide a protective shield.”

“Seems like it will be difficult to tell if it’s a ghost or a projection. Neither one will react to the peas.”

“I imagine if it is a projection we will be able to discern dispersed light in front of it in the mist, like projector light shining through smoke. It will come from the direction of the birdbath.”

“You are good, Sir. Very good! I knew I had made the right choice.”

‘I’, he said. Not ‘we’ but ‘I’. I took that to mean he had acted alone and Harry probably had not known of my impending arrival. I had, as everyone indicated, been recognized from my picture on my books. I looked at EI and thought to myself, ‘You are good, EI. Very good!’ I made a mental refinement to the boy’s emerging title: EI the Language and Email King and Perfectly played Catalyst

I wondered if the bright moonlight would affect the image in any way. I figured the darker the night the better the effect. However, the brightness might camouflage the beam from the projector so it might be a wash. I wondered how the fog would be presented – all at once or released just a tiny bit



at first working up to a full-blown mist. I was clearly eager to get things going.

With my binoculars, I surveyed the foundation for the openings from which the mist would flow. I spotted several points of reflection, which I assumed were the copper or brass nozzles attached to the ends of the tubes. Those ends had been cleverly recessed so they would not be detected by the casual observer. There was one indicator of their presence – only noticeable after the fact, I imagined. Above each outlet the steam had cleaned off a short, upward, plume of the century old crust of grime from the stones.

EI grew noticeably restless. I handed him the binoculars hoping it would occupy the time for him. We waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. Eleven o'clock came and went and still nothing. Eleven thirty. Eleven forty-five. Perhaps, since I hadn't showed up out front, the event had been called off. Perhaps it wasn't a hoax after all. Perhaps EI was restless because he knew nothing was going to take place. My mind played through an opus of perhapses.

At 11:58 the mist began gathering – slowly, gently, even softly if that were possible. The scene did not develop exactly as I had predicted but then Luke was a mechanical engineer and I imagined knew how to make the illusion work. At first the fog hung close the ground, lying there, just above the cobblestone path. Gradually its substance grew and it bellowed in easy clouds higher and higher. It topped out at twenty feet from where it dissipated into the night sky. The bottom built in thickness and bulk. It went on that way for many minutes. The mansion wall became mostly obscured. It gave every suggestion of being nothing more than an unremarkable fog, gathering between the building and the woods to the east. It was an extraordinary sham, I would give Luke that.

Twelve fifteen. Twelve thirty. The fog remained in place. Tiny rivulets of water – steam precipitated in the cool night air – made their ways across the lawn in our direction. Would naturally occurring fog do the same? I didn't really know but doubted it.

Twelve thirty-one. The area of fog lying at the south edge of the building – our left – gradually brightened – not

brilliant but several cuts above what it had been lit only by the moon. It immediately drew our attention. El nudged me and pointed. It wasn't just a wish fulfilling fantasy inside my head. Bright became white. White became a gauze-thin, many layered, flowing garment. A beautiful face with long, golden, hair appeared. The dress and hair moved as if caught in a late summer breeze. It was a perfectly calm night. The fact of quiet air would affect neither a ghost nor projected image I imagined. It began moving north along the path. The area behind it darkened as she moved on.

I nudged El. "It's time for the peas," I whispered.

He had been ready for hours. He braced it at arm's length against the ground in front of his face, pulled the rubber straps to his shoulder and released its load. We heard it pepper the wall behind the image. There was absolutely no response from 'Rebecca'. It had not been dress up time for Luke. Eliminating that left us with no clear answer. I crawled, elbow on elbow in basic training style, up and over the ridge hoping to get far enough to view the projector light. I looked. Apparently, I wasn't far enough. I moved forward another six feet. Still no light from the birdbath. As I was moving ahead for a third time, the image arrived at the north edge of the mansion and disappeared. I stood and walked to the birdbath. El was quickly on my heels.

The stone was in place. I removed it to feel the lenses, thinking they would be hot from use. They were as cool as the night air. El pointed to the plug. It hung there, limp, unattached to the socket.

Now, some, like El, would surmise that we had just proved the existence of Rebecca's ghost. I surmised only that I had been outfoxed by an evil mastermind who had planted the obvious for me to find as a diversion from the actual sources of fog and projection. Diversion had, it seemed, become Luke's specialty.

I had my story, if not the true and complete version. It would put Forbes Crossing back on the map. It would help maintain a thriving economy there among the good and happy people of that delightful, Ozark Hill Village.

\* \* \*

Back in my room I shared my intentions with El. I

would write the story as we had just witnessed it, and assemble the evidence we had accumulated against Luke and put it into the hands of the local authorities. If El and I had been able to add up the parts and presume a conviction, I was certain a judge and jury would do the same.

El stood and offered me his hand.

“I’ll say my good bye here and now. Even the Language King doesn’t have the right words to express our appreciation for what you’ve done for us.”

“And what is that, my friend?”

He looked at me with unmistakably surprise.

“Why freeing our spirits of Forbes Crossing to pass over to the other side where we’ve been waiting for them to go for decades.”

I had hoped that his response would clear up at least some of my many unanswered questions about Forbes Crossing and its people. It hadn’t. I accepted that.

We both wiped a tear from our cheek. He closed the door behind him. I began packing for my long trek the next morning.

\* \* \*

The sun was well above the horizon by the time I began my trip home. Driving slowly east on Main Street, as I began to take my leave of Forbes Crossing, I noticed the town’s people gathered there in an open lot on the right – odd, I thought. I had not expected a bon voyage assembly – Harry, Ned, Sarah, Millie, Billy Jo, Edie, Melva, Elmer, and a man standing behind El’s family where a father might stand in a family portrait – El was beaming up at him. The others, I assumed, were the remainder of the residents I hadn’t met – mostly men. One other man I didn’t recognize stood with his arm around Sarah’s waist. They all wore wonderful, if perhaps stilted, smiles. Notably missing were Luke, Bertha, and Jeb. I pulled to a stop in the street.

The young couple I had noted on several occasions approached me from behind, walking hand in hand down the center of Main Street. I pushed the car door open, got out, and stood there, attentively viewing the gathering from across the top of my car. No one spoke. They made no sound at all. My puzzlement grew. The residents raised their hands high,

palms in my direction. I was moved to return their friendly gesture. As they lowered their arms, their images began to distort as if a wall of heat waves had been set between us. Slowly they faded from view in an unmistakably ghostly manner.

The young couple stopped within feet of me. The woman extended her hand.

“I’m Rebecca Rutherford and this is my betrothed, Johnny Thorpe. Thank you for getting all of this settled once and for all. The spirits of Forbes Crossing, so long held captive by deceit, dishonor, and greed, have at last been freed to the other side and the two of us can now make our long-awaited passage together.”

They crossed the street and joined the others, gradually fading into that ethereal cloud of nothingness.