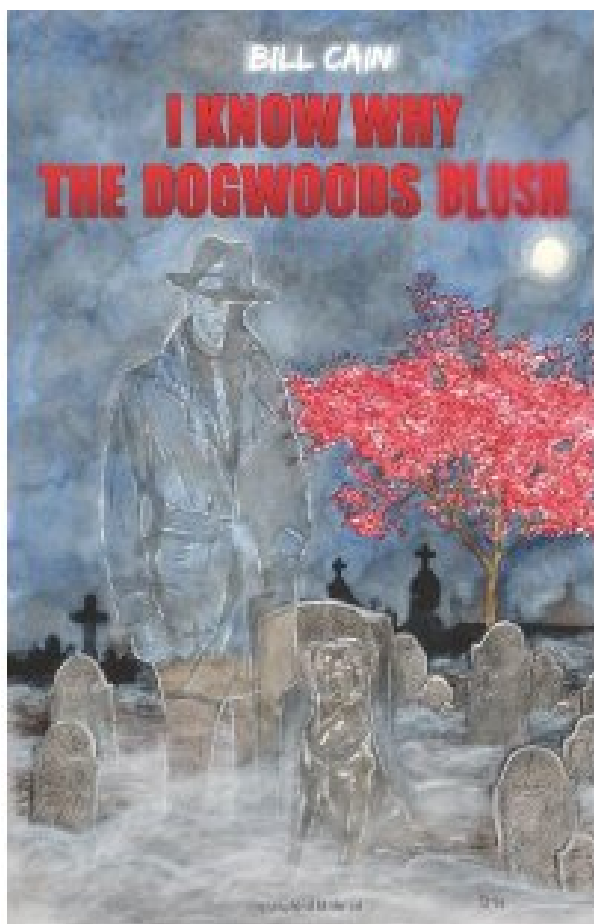


BILL CAIN

I KNOW WHY THE DOGWOODS BLUSH



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*To my parents, William & Evelyn, who gave me life;
To my wife, Renee, who saved my life;
And to my children, Amanda, Sting and Nick,
who complete my life.*

Prologue

It is easy to go down into Hell; night and day, the gates of dark death stand wide; but to climb back again, to retrace one's steps to the upper air - there's the rub, the task. **Virgil (70 BC - 19 BC), *Aeneid***

He had obviously experienced pain before but it had been nothing like this! This was the ultimate contradiction. He sensed searing, white hot agony from his head through his spine to a level beyond human reckoning. Yet despite the agony he felt dulled and numbed as though he were drugged. His head felt thick and solid as if his brain matter were heavy concrete with no ability to sense emotion or perform basic cognitive reasoning. As he struggled to maintain some form of balance or composure, he suddenly came to the realization that he was truly in agony ... intense agony of both the body and the mind ... he just was not able to *feel* it. One thing he definitely *did* feel was the emptiness of his soul. It was as if he were devoid of any grasp or understanding of eternity.

Lying face down in cold and damp red clay he began to regain some tiny piece of clarity of thought and recollection. He pushed himself upward with his arms and was surprised to find that his arms worked quite well. He became instantly aware that despite the pain he recognized but could not feel, he was immensely strong ... much stronger than he had initially sensed himself to be. A light rain

was falling and a heavy mist permeated his surroundings. He held out his hands and observed them with wild fascination. They shook with enthusiastic anticipation although he could not recall why he felt such rabid emotion. Whatever feelings lay submerged deep within his subconscious, they remained too deep for him to access. Strangely this did not concern him. He was overwhelmed with the silent assurance that all would be made known to him in time. He understood somehow that this eventual time of understanding had not yet arrived.

Some deep survival instinct from a primeval past urged him to stand and examine himself for any physical injuries. He sat upright and ran his hands over his legs, arms and torso. He could find no evidence of any injuries to cause alarm. The rain began to fall harder. Again (more by sensation rather than actual feeling) he surmised that it was not very cold. He saw no condensation from his exhaled breath and felt no physical discomfort from the elements. It was as though everything was as it should be despite his confusing circumstances.

He instinctively lifted his hands to his face. After running his hands along the curves of his chin, cheekbones, lips and nose, he recognized nothing to spur his lagging memory of his identity. He casually observed that he was clothed in some type of uniform. It was filthy and in complete disrepair. Some deeply archived part of his memory cried out in shame at the sad state of his once proud attire. He knew that his shoes had once been shined to the level of the brightest mirror. His once brilliantly glossy brass buckle and opulent buttons were now caked with dirt, clinging in desperation to a uniform worn with the ravages of time and caked with filth that appeared to be years in the making.

His hands were clean. As he peered deeply at his long and powerful fingers, he was astonished to find them snowy white and

spotless. No dirt at all lived in the lines of his hands, not even under his fingernails. He had a brief flash of extreme pain in his right hand ... no, not the hand ... the *fingers*! He clearly remembered extreme pain in each finger of his right hand. Whatever had been the cause of that pain was undeniably absent now.

His head began to clear even as the heavy mist from the driving rain thickened. He looked left and right to gather his bearings. He suddenly became overwhelmed with the sensation that he had been in this unknown place for a very long time. He deduced that his “recovery” had been going on for hours at the very least. Maybe even for days. It seemed plausible that someone had dumped him here for some nefarious purpose, but whatever that purpose might be was still beyond his ability to recall. That was when the nightmare engulfed him like liquid fire.

He screamed in agony as he felt the flames burn into his muscle tissue, searing his skin away like a surgical scalpel with incredible speed and relentless aggression. He rolled to the left and right but was completely engulfed as his body was mercilessly consumed by the fires that clung to him with wicked determination. He screamed aloud and the fire immediately sped down his windpipe, sucking the oxygen from his lungs and making it impossible for him to exhale or inhale. He now saw a clear image of himself, his flesh and muscle tissue completely consumed by perdition’s flames, his lips, eyes, nose ... all the soft tissue of his body ... gone, vaporized by the heat of the flame. His body was little more than a charred skeleton smiling in a grotesque mockery of the physical specimen he once proudly displayed. And just like that, the image or vision was gone! He again ran his hands over his face, arms and legs. There were no burns, no scars, no pus filled pockets of infection or plague. The illusion or memory of the dancing flames playing Mephisto’s waltz on his skin was already fading.

Like a toddler suddenly aware of his surroundings he realized that he was sitting between two marble slabs of immense size. The trembling in his hands increased significantly as his eyes wandered to the head of the slabs and locked onto the tombstones that bore mute watch over the ongoing revelations of the moment. His mind might be cloudy, his memory nonexistent and his understanding impaired, but even he understood that this was a cemetery. He had grown up as a boy in ... was it Georgia? Yes, it was Georgia! Of this he was certain! Images of gently swaying dogwood trees played a whimsical tune in his mind and the faint scent of honeysuckle wafted and lingered briefly atop his senses. The images of the mighty oak trees covered with Spanish moss slowly came into focus, giving an unearthly aura to the setting. This place was known to him after all. What was it called? Oh yes! He used to call them graveyards back in the day. This glimmer of recollection made him want to smile but try as he might, he found that his facial muscles seemed frozen in a solemn “poker face” that strictly forbade any show of emotion. He pressed his fingertips to his lips again to confirm his belief and finding it to be true made him feel no more or no less troubled. It was simply as he felt it should be ... at least for now.

Despite the overwhelming gloom and almost solid chemistry of the darkness, he could see very clearly. There were hundreds of tombstones around him. He felt ‘closeness’ to all of them. It was as if he knew them personally. The bodies of the former living forever entombed beneath their stony silence felt like family. And then he saw the name on the stone before him! It was not just any name. It was *the* name! A very special name! It was *her* name!

He crawled on his hands and knees and peered closely at the marker, his face scant inches from its hard, unfeeling surface. His lips silently mouthed her name as his trembling fingers gently traced the etching in stone ...

*Angel Debbie Bronson
Beloved Wife, Acclaimed Entertainer
Born April 16, 1952*

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for by doing so some have entertained angels unaware.*

... and then he sat back and cried. Not sobbed or wept ... *cried*. He cried the type of wail reserved only for those who have lost hope and whose pain soars beyond human understanding. He had no idea how long he cried. The stone angels who stood watch over the various tombs scattered throughout this sacred resting place said nothing. Perhaps they cried as well. Or maybe it was just the steadily falling rain that ran down their anguished faces.

Just as quickly as it started, the crying stopped. In that moment he realized that the rain had also stopped. In the far horizon the faintest glimmer of sunrise began to creep atop the heavenly arching trees like the comforting glow of a firefly. Now everything became clear to him. His memory roared back to life and rushed throughout his being like a runaway mine car. He looked to the tombstone next to Angel's even though he already knew what it would say before he even read it.

*Jeremiah Bronson
Beloved Husband, Heroic Soldier,
Gentle Pastor, Devoted Sheriff
Born December 6, 1950
Died May 8, 1995
Though his body lies in eternal rest,
his example shines to us still!*

Example? Yes, he would certainly show them an example! His

righteous vengeance will be a force of nature, a thing of beauty so awesome that the angels in Heaven and the imps of Hell will stop to take note of its urgency! What was once so difficult to understand was now crystal clear! Jerry Bronson died amid the fire and flash of betrayal on that hot spring evening of 1995. But he was better now. Born December 6, 1950? No, he had been born tonight amid the rain and thunderstorms of a humid Georgia spring night. But unlike the innocence of his initial birth he was born anew with complete understanding of why he had returned to the land of the whispering pines and blood red clay. They thought he had been wiped clean, the very memory of his life whittled down to a catchy epitaph on an expensive marble slab. His eyes began to glow with the red essence of rage. His hands clinched into massive fists of iron. They had forgotten about him! They thought they were safe! But they were not safe! And he remembered! God save them ... he remembered everything!

As the first rays of the sun stretched its awakening fingers across the purple sky, he heard an old familiar sound in the distance. For a moment his rage evaporated in the morning sun. It was old Blue Boy! He was barking! What a beautiful melody he made!

Chapter 1

The greatest friend of Truth is time, her greatest enemy is Prejudice, and her constant companion Humility. **Charles Caleb Colton, 1780-1832**

Morning broke as usual for the “good and right” Reverend Roman Spindola. Everyone in town referred to him as the “good and right reverend.” He protested it from time to time, but in the grand scheme of things, he liked the sound of it. At age 79 he was a few weeks shy of the obligatory birthday celebration that he knew his parishioners would demand. It was the same every year. They would ask him how he would like to celebrate the blessed day and he would gently smile and wave them off, asking that no fuss be made over him. “Make a donation to the poor in my name,” he would say as he would smile and gently touch their hands or faces. But it never made any difference. They would throw a ‘surprise’ party for him that would likely force many of them to do without necessities in order to pay the expenses. To protest was folly. God indeed moves in mysterious ways.

His alarm went off at 5:30 AM, just as it had every morning for the past 60 years. It was one of those old fashioned clocks, the ones that rang with a “clang clang clang” that got louder and louder until you eventually pushed down the button atop its rounded and cold metal head. He had been gifted more modern digital clocks that

offered a wide variety of gentle and enticing wake-up options over the years. But the “good and right” Reverend Spindola liked his old clock. It had belonged to his father and despite the differences they had over the years, no doubt he loved the memory of his father and the lessons he’d learned from him.

The fact that Reverend Spindola loved his father came as no surprise. He loved any and everyone who had ever crossed his path in life. Of course some were easier to love than others. But ever since that vision appeared to him on the way home from school at age 16 he was determined to love everyone as his Savior commanded. For the most part that had been easy to do. Not *always* but *mostly*, may God forgive his indiscretions and shortcomings.

Spindola was born in Timmonsville, Georgia. His father had always determined for Roman to leave Georgia to make his mark on the world. But from a very young age for reasons he preferred not to disclose, Roman decided to stay put and minister to the needy right here in his hometown. As a result he had never traveled outside his home state.

He did travel to the ‘big city’ once. Invited by the Governor to speak at a prayer breakfast in Atlanta in 1952, Roman took the bus and had a compelling conversation with an unwed teenage girl named Rosa Andrews. Rosa was on the run from an abusive home in Miami to who knows where? Rosa ended up coming back to Timmonsville with the good reverend. He found her a job and a place to stay safely sheltered from the horrors of her upbringing. She soon gave birth to a beautiful baby girl that she named Angel. And what an angel that child became! Rosa never spoke of the father. There were all kinds of rumors and self-righteous talk about Rosa and the circumstances of her life. But despite her illiterate beginnings and possible learning disability, Rosa raised Angel with dignity and grace. Now in her late 50’s,

Rosa still dropped by every morning to make coffee for the reverend and ‘tidy up the place.’

He smiled as he thought of her and it urged him to get moving. She would be there precisely at 7:00 AM. He put on the coffee pot and poured enough water to make a single cup of coffee as he always did. He would drink it before she arrived, then clean up the evidence so *she* could make his coffee for him when she arrived. It was a game they had played since she gave birth. It made her feel needed and important and he understood that perfectly. He even made an intentional mess on the floor, spilling some sugar and dropping last night’s tea bag to add to the mix. He smiled as he envisioned her chiding him on his messiness and asking, “What you ever gonna do when I’m not here to look after you, Father Roman?”

Of course he was not a ‘Father.’ He had explained this to her many times but it made no difference. “Bless you, Father,” she would reply with those soft, brown eyes that always melted his heart.

She would always fight back tears when anyone spoke of Angel. But who did not? No mother should ever have to endure what poor Rosa endured with gentle, sweet Angel. And Angel’s husband, Rosa’s son-in-law? What a tragedy! If ever Roman felt like he’d had a son it was that young man. He immediately chastised himself for dwelling on such sad thoughts and carefully measured his coffee. Soon the sweet aroma of French roast would make its way through the kitchen. He opened a window, attempting to hide the smell before Rosa arrived. The game continued.

It was still dark outside but the morning light would illuminate the horizon very soon. The dogwood trees were in full bloom. That was always good business for Timmons ville. The little town was known throughout the tourist trade as the ‘City of Dogwoods.’ It was what kept the town afloat in the tough economic times of

the last 50 years or so. Timmons ville had been an agricultural boom town in the early 19th century, making millions for the rich plantation owners who used the slave trade to finance their massive intake and export of cotton, corn, and tobacco. A major railroad hub of the south with quick links to Mississippi and Florida, the Timmons ville of the early 1800's was one of the best kept secrets of the south. That all changed when the Civil War ended.

The emancipation of the slaves ended the agricultural boom of the region. Soon afterward the rails stopped running. Many rail lines were severely damaged by Union soldiers who spread through the county following Sherman's march to the sea. With no slaves to gather the crops, the plantations fell into ruin and the railroads became massive graveyards of iron and rust. Abject poverty descended on Timmons ville like the wrath of God. Many citizens were forced to sell to the carpetbaggers and head west to start anew. Those left behind felt the agony and anguish of the postwar south and bitter reconstruction. A common local phrase, coined just prior to the surrender of the local Confederate government, was "Enjoy war, for peace will be hell!"

Lawlessness became the norm for Timmons ville from the post-Civil War era until well into the 20th Century. Political corruption ran rampant and the office of the sheriff became a joke of injustice and ineptitude. The Klan held the real power in the area. Night raids by these terrorists in white, ghostly hoods were commonplace. The old oak tree on the corner of Main Street and Jefferson Davis Avenue became well known for the bodies of young black men, Jewish immigrants, and other 'undesirables' that hung there for days at a time until a relative or well-meaning resident finally cut them down and buried them without ceremony or recognition. Like the ghost towns and silver mine boom towns of the old west, Timmons ville

and her residents lay stagnant, waiting to die an inglorious death after a less than stellar life.

It was Reverend Spindola's father who changed all of that ... or at least who began the change. Moving to Timmons ville from New York City after immigrating from Rome, Frank Spindola opened his Spindola Pharmacy on the town square in the summer of 1915. By 1920 he was voted to the city council. By 1930, the year Roman was born, Frank was elected town mayor. Spindola Pharmacy became known for miles around as the best drug store in the south. Clients traveled many miles just to chat with Frank and get his business. Many who could not afford a doctor would seek his medical advice. More than half of the babies born, broken bones set, and abrasions mended in the county were the result of gentle Frank's care ... free of charge of course. With the Great Depression in full swing, Frank's medical care was no small thing. More than a hundred residents commonly credited Frank with saving their lives or the lives of fellow family members.

It was in the early 1930's that Frank planted the first dogwood tree (his personal favorite) in front of the old courthouse on Robert E. Lee Circle. The town appeared brown and decayed in the early spring and Frank wanted to dress it up as best he could. Soon other merchants, perhaps spurred by the beauty of the little tree and its tremendous draw on life (birds and bees were immediately attracted to its fragrant branches) began planting dogwood trees in front of their businesses. Within five years, dogwood trees blossomed by the hundreds across the suddenly reenergized populace. A local festival began in 1936 and the rest, as they say, is history. Every April since then, the annual Dogwood Festival in Timmons County draws tourists by the thousands from all over the country.

At age 12, Roman asked his dad why he loved the dogwood so much. "It's to honor our Savior, the Lord Jesus crucified," Frank

explained. "Each petal along the edge of the flower shows a nail wound and blood stain from the cross. The center of the flower clearly shows the crown of thorns." When Roman expressed confusion, Frank placed a fatherly hand on his shoulder and explained.

"Legend has it that the dogwood was the tree that the Romans used to crucify Jesus. So in shame the tree pleaded with God to forgive it for the sin it committed and never to allow it to be used for such a heinous crime again. God agreed and made the tree too frail to support the weight of a human. Today the dogwood is a living monument to its eternal shame but it also serves as a contract with God that it can never be used to kill again. Do you understand, Roman?"

"Since the Romans killed Jesus and my name is Roman, did I kill Jesus, Daddy?"

Frank smiled with the compassion only a father can exude. "Of course not, son! I named you Roman so you would never forget the place of your birth and to remind you of where you will end up again someday, God willing."

As the young are apt to do, Roman immediately accepted his father's comforting answer and jumped back to the discussion of the dogwood. "What about the pink dogwood trees, Daddy? Why are they pink?"

Roman never forgot his father's answer. "They are pink because they blush, son," Frank answered. "They blush at the shame of their eternal sin." Roman closed his eyes at the memory of the vision and forced his mind to move on, continuing this painfully sweet journey down an all too familiar memory lane.

Frank dreamed of his son becoming a Catholic Priest when he realized that young Roman had a penchant for spirituality. Being a devout Catholic, Frank and his family attended the local Presbyterian

Church as there were few Catholic Churches in the south at the time and certainly none in Timmons County. Frank openly boasted to any and all who would listen that his son would one day be a priest and maybe, God willing, return to Rome as the Pope! Oh yes, Frank had a very strong plan for young Roman. But as Roman liked to say, "If you want to see God laugh, tell Him your plans." And of course there was the vision. Always the vision! Roman shivered as the goose bumps arose on his arms at the memory of that night. And right on cue the coffee was ready.

When Frank died in 1975, Roman was ministering from his small mission and existing on next to nothing. If not for Jerry Bronson, the pastor from the Shepherd of Peace Ministry, Roman was certain he would have starved. His father, perhaps the wealthiest man in Timmons County, had not spoken to him for almost 30 years and had never attended one of his services.

When Roman's mother passed away on his 7th birthday, he was certain that his life would never be the same. He had been right. Why Roman's mind continued to delve into these thoughts of the long ago dead on this morning when he tried so desperately to think instead of the living he did not know. As he sipped his coffee (which he had to admit was so much better than Rosa's) he gave in to the guilty pleasure of looking back for a moment, revisiting those old memories he'd tried so hard to suppress.

Frank's passing had been hard on Roman, especially since rejection was the only gift his father passed along to him. Or so he thought. After Frank died from the massive heart attack that took him from this world much too soon, Roman learned that he'd been left everything in his father's quite impressive estate. He was a wealthy man. But instead of squandering that wealth on frivolity, Roman bought the small, one-bedroom cottage where he still lived today. He bought the controlling interest in the struggling orphanage

with the help of his good friend and protégé, Pastor Bronson, who had been raised in that same orphanage. The rest was placed into a trust fund that provided scholarships to the orphans who lived out their lives without adoption in the county while paying Rosa a fair wage as the orphanage housekeeper for life. That's what he was certain his Father would have wanted ... continue to help the people of Timmons County in any way possible. He was certain of it even though his father had never been at peace with Roman's desertion of the Catholic Church and refusal to study abroad. Truly a prophet is a stranger in his own land.

Roman stepped out on the small front porch as the first rays of sunlight began filtering through the slowly dissipating rain clouds of the night before. It was early spring but the nights and early mornings were quite cool, especially after a hard rain as had fallen the night before. He had heard the distant rumblings of thunder as he lay down to sleep the night before. With the still dripping eaves and fresh smell of rain on the wind he knew it had rained long and hard throughout the night. It had been lost on him as he slept, however. Roman always slept the deep and restful sleep of the innocent. But that poor sheriff! Roman would never get over that awful tragedy. What sane person could? At least those who committed the awful deed had been punished and were even now enduring the judgment of God. If only the knowledge of this could bring him peace. But it never had. He supposed it never would.

He turned to go inside and wash out his coffee cup when he heard a familiar sound. He stopped immediately and twisted back to the direction of the sound. He turned so quickly that he winced. His stiff and aged neck was not accustomed to such rapid and forceful movement. The sound had come from the old cemetery. Not many folks used the old cemetery anymore. The new, commercialized one off the new highway north of town was now the "popular"

place for the elite of Timmonsville to be buried. It was better positioned away from the old and not so storied past that the old place represented. The old cemetery plot was just out of sight from Roman's little porch, but sound sometimes carried well on the early morning breeze that blew from the swamp just on the other side of the field of stone. He stood in abject silence, his heart racing at the memory that unique sound brought to him. After a moment, when he heard nothing more, he decided it had been his imagination. He was surprised that his eyes were moist. "Silly old man," he chuckled. "Now you are hearing things."

He turned to go back inside when he heard it again. And again! He turned back to face the direction of the cemetery. There could be no mistaking it now. It was a dog barking. Not just *any* dog or *any* bark. It was a distinctive bark ... a combination bark and howl of an excited and goofy family pet that had brought many hours of laughter to Roman and the dog's master. But that was impossible! And yet there it was again. It was old Blue! Roman didn't even notice as he dropped his coffee cup. He didn't hear as it shattered in tiny, broken pieces on his hard and unforgiving concrete porch.

Chapter 2

Home is a place not only of strong affections, but of entire unreserve; it is life's undress rehearsal, its backroom, its dressing room. **Harriet Beecher Stowe**

It was still dawn when he stood before the rotting and termite infested doors of The Valhalla Theatre. How he got there he did not know. Nor could he recall for sure why he was there but he certainly felt a compelling need to go inside.

It was still early morning in downtown Timmons ville. Traffic was sparse. The old diner was open selling those awful biscuits and greasy eggs across town and the all-night gas station was putting out its stale burritos and yesterday's newspapers. Otherwise it would be a couple of hours before store vendors began opening their doors. There were flyers all across town promoting the annual Dogwood Festival next week. The local bed and breakfast, still run by Willie and Erma Goodwin, was already sold out in anticipation. All of this seemed familiar to him, but the thoughts (or memories) passed through his mind like the watered down tea old Betty served at the diner.

He walked to the door and paused briefly to gaze upward at the marquee. "CLOSED FOR REPAIRS," it read. "GRAND REOPENING MAY 8." The memory floodgates suddenly

exploded! He recalled the first time he ever went inside the Valhalla. It was the summer of 1961. He was eleven years old and Sister Agnes from the orphanage had arranged to bring the children to a showing of *Ben-Hur*. It had won many Academy Awards in 1959. He still recalled how magnificent Charlton Heston appeared as the young Jewish prince who defied the Roman Empire in the role that cemented the emerging actor as an international superstar. The thrill of the battle at sea and the excitement of the chariot race still brought out the emotion of a young, orphaned boy seeking his place in the world much as the fictional “Prince of Hur” had sought to do in this magnificent film. The words from one of the powerful dramatic moments in the film rolled off his tongue despite his difficulty in speaking ... “And if my mother and sister are dead, you will wish they still lived, Messala!” His throat hurt as he spoke the words and his voice sounded raspy. He coughed and gagged slightly, feeling the dirt and dust that had settled among his vocal chords stir and shift deep within him. Still it felt good to speak aloud again. And the sentiment seemed appropriate. They would all wish *she* still lived! *Every last mother’s son of them!*

He gripped the door handle. As expected it was locked. With no effort at all he crushed the knob and pulled the entire locking mechanism out of the dead-bolted door. Casting the entire mess aside he reached through the gaping hole in the door and turned the deadbolt, unlocking the door from the inside. He seemed unimpressed with his amazing strength. It was simply as it should be.

Walking inside he paused and took a deep breath. The inside was a wreck, riddled with the tell-tale signs of massive, ongoing renovation. Scaffolding blocked every aisle, paint cans were stacked high, the smell of new concrete permeated the air ... it was clear

that the place would be bustling with activity in a few hours. He would be long gone by then. He knew what he was looking for.

He strolled down the hallway and could not resist taking a peek through the velvet red curtain at the stage and the matching velvet covered chairs. He was surprised to see the chairs had already been renovated ... replaced actually ... by modern plush “rockers” much larger than the old ones. Even from the back stage he could see that the new chairs were made of hard plastic instead of the custom oak and pine that made up the ones from his childhood. “Progress,” he scowled softly, shaking his head in disgust and somewhat amazed at how little magic the theater now held for him. He realized that whatever drama the Valhalla held for him in the past had actually emanated from *her*. It was here that he first spoke to her even though they were just children.

It was a summer night in 1962. He had just turned twelve and had made enough money doing odd jobs around town and running errands for Reverend Spindola to buy a ticket to see *Old Yeller*. The place was packed with kids who snuggled between their parents to watch the antics of the old canine moocher who, in a tragic twist of karma, lost his life by saving the ones he loved. He arrived just as the curtain rose and wandered timidly down the darkened aisle, trying to focus his eyes in the gloom lit dimly by the red aisle lights. He was too shy to climb over anyone to an open seat. A few of the kids snickered and pointed at his ragged, obviously hand-me-down clothes that never seemed to properly fit his gangly physique. That’s when he heard the voice.

“Would you like to sit here?” He stopped and looked sheepishly to his right. He almost lost his breath when he saw her. He’d seen her before of course. She came with her Mom, Rosa, to the orphanage everyday to help clean, mop, and sweep the floors. He’d always wanted to talk to her but was just too shy. She always smiled

at him but this was the first time she'd ever spoken to him. Her voice sounded just as he'd imagined it to sound ... like heaven. He cleared his throat and squeaked a response.

"Are you talking to me?" Angel looked at him and batted her beautiful eyes, giggling.

"Who else, silly! There's an open seat here." She patted the seat next to her for emphasis, laughing the laugh that only little girls can accomplish while effortlessly placing a piece of popcorn in her mouth with her other hand. His knees trembled as he took a step sideways and sat next to her, his hands folded in his lap. He stared at the screen, fixated on the cartoon feature blaring out to the audience. The faint smell of her perfume wafted across his face as he closed his eyes and breathed in with a sigh.

"I'm Jeremiah Bronson but you can call me Jerry. People call me Jerry. I don't have any parents." Her soft answer belied the innocence and inexperience of her years.

"I know, Jerry. I see you all the time out at the orphanage. And that's okay. I have a mommy but I don't have a daddy. That sort of makes us the same." He smiled and by the end of the movie he was certain of two things ... he would NEVER get over the death of Old Yeller ... and he would love Angel Andrews until the end of time.

In the years to come he would return here many times to see her acting in the various stage plays and local drama ensembles that became not only the highlight of Timmons County, but the entire region. Her name rose to the top of the entertainment pages of various southern newspapers. Talent scouts from as far away as Nashville came to see her play piano, sing, and perform on stage. She was offered multiple scholarships to myriad universities. It was her sure ticket out of the trash heap of Timmonsville. But she turned it all down. She did it for him because she loved him. And now? Where did her choices take her? Where was she *now*?

He felt the rage swell inside him again and he shuddered at the venom and power that coursed through his body like a river of fire. He needed to get on with it and grab what he came for before the first workers of the day arrived. He knew he had to travel since *they* were scattered all over the country now. Two were no longer living. Paul Wolverton had been killed in a knife fight in a bar somewhere in Kansas in 2003. He did not know how he knew but he knew all the same. Rollins was also dead, killed by his own sick drug habit. But Sanchez, Ewing and Fast were still living. He needed to find them and kill them first. That meant he needed clothes ... a disguise. Something appropriate for the justice he was about to dispense yet subdued enough to allow him to be seen among people without arousing unneeded attention. Once they were dead, he'd come back here ... to Timmons ville ... for the final act in this morbid play of "death after death."

He performed an abrupt "about face" (like any accomplished soldier) and strode down the backstage hallway to her old dressing room. He had made this trip so many times before that he could do it in the dark. Not that it would matter as he sensed that darkness held no mystery for him anymore. He could see in the dark as well as the daylight. The slowly awakening sun provided some illumination to the deserted building, filtering through the dusty opening of the sunlight above the dressing alley. But again it meant nothing to him. He arrived suddenly at the door he sought. It was her old dressing room ... number 41. It still had her star and name etched on the gray glass of the opaque window. "Angel Debbie Bronson. PRIVATE." He again tried to smile. He still could not do it. Perhaps it was still too soon or perhaps he was no longer capable of smiling. He was certain he had managed a smile when he saw old Blue back there, but he could not be sure.

His massive hand grasped the knob, dwarfing it entirely. A

gentle twist and the door opened without protest. The small town mentality of Timmons ville struck again ... the dressing room was unlocked. As he entered he looked left and right, then up and down, conducting the perfect 360 degree sweep that had served him so well over the years in dangerous situations. He had made the grave mistake that fateful night in 1995 of letting down his guard before his so-called 'friend.' He would never make that mistake again!

All of this thought process vanished immediately when he saw the haggard, filth encrusted hobo staring back at him with ghostly red eyes. He immediately took his familiar battle stance and reached for the revolver that hung by his side for over 15 years, grasping at the air as he tried to engage the hobo with a gun that was not there. To his surprise he glanced down to his hip and saw that there was no pistol ... no holster ... no weapon of any kind. But that was nothing compared to the shock of recognition that suddenly blasted into his brain like a rampaging freight train. This was no desperate hobo that glared at him from the dark corners of the room! It was his own reflection in the full length mirror! He stared for a moment into the oval surface that had seen more than its share of stunning events in its lifetime.

Somewhat in disbelief as he blankly stared at the image before him, he staggered toward it much like the zombies in those old late night shock films he used to watch while working the projector at the drive-in. He stumbled and almost lost his balance, reaching out and grasping a metal folding chair for support. But he never took his eyes off his own reflected image. He was indeed wearing a uniform but it was so ragged, he scarcely recognized it. It was tattered and covered in filth, entire patches eaten away by the ravages of time and the various insects and rodents that infiltrated the moist, warm dampness of the South Georgia nights. But that was why he had

come here ... to find clothing that he knew must be stored in the various costume lockers of the old Valhalla.

It was not so much the clothing and its sad state of disrepair that tugged at his sagging collective emotion. It was his face! He had once envisioned himself to be the picture of gentleness and compassion. What he saw staring back at him was no such image at all! Instead he saw a monster consumed with anger and hatred, yearning for revenge long overdue. Justice had not been served! He was not content to simply observe as the crushing weight of divine punishment rained down on pleading sinners exposed to the unyielding wrath of the Almighty. He would only find absolution in *becoming* the instrument of that wrath! The bitter discourse of that determination showed clearly on the gaunt face frozen in an eternal grimace. Even more evidence of his burning soul yearning for destruction showed in the eyes. They burned neon red like searing laser beams from a surgeon's nightmare scalpel, slicing through the object of their gaze with deadly efficiency. He reached out and touched his mirrored image, tracing the lines of his face, the curve of his cheeks, gently caressing the filth in his hair still thick and black but hopelessly matted and worn. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came forth. He felt the burning sensation of tears attempting to push through and flow freely but none came. As bad as this appeared to him, it was nothing compared to what they did to *her*. With that thought his anger took charge again. Any moment of reflective self pity evaporated in that instant, forever burned from the pages of his mind.

Moving with alarming speed and taking great strides with growing confidence and determination he glided with animalistic ease down the hallway toward the costuming storage room. As he passed the polished mahogany walls they seemed to whisper memories of past times and events to him as if the walls themselves

recognized the return of one of their former fans and friends. They called to him to hearken back to the days of Peter Pan, the Lone Ranger, various Broadway productions and Winnie the Pooh, all bolstered by the roar of children laughing and the giddy applause of the entertainment starved populace who filled those seats every Friday and Saturday night for over 30 years. But it was only when he heard the word 'Cinderella' from the friendly spirits living within those walls that he paused for a brief second.

It was a balmy summer night in 1976. He had arrived just before the curtain went up on the premier. As usual he slipped in the back with a smile from old Henry Cousins the security guard. Henry always gave him a knowing wink when he arrived for her performances. He made his way past the crowded hallway packed with various performers dressed as medieval noblemen and ladies-in-waiting, loitering and looking for their cue to take the stage and hit their mark. Amid all the 'organized chaos' backstage, all went silent when he saw her. And then she turned and saw *him*. In that moment time stood still. She smiled and he knew that his heart would never be the same.

All of that was gone now. He pushed roughly inside the costume room and began rifling through the trunks and hanging clothes on display from past and possible future venues. In a matter of moments he found what he needed ... a dark suit with an overcoat and wide-brimmed fedora. It would allow him to move freely among the living without drawing attention to himself. He stripped off his uniform and boots, leaving them in a heap on the floor. A quick shower in the adjoining dressing room followed by an equally quick change and he started for the door. It was already light outside. He could hear the ever increasing activity of the small but lively city streets.

As he stopped to take one last look around something caught

his eye. It was almost hidden under various plastic and leather props from countless plays and skits performed on stage but it almost called out to him, pleading to him to not leave it behind. He walked over to it and pushed away gaudy Mardi Gras masks and silly monkey suits. He held it up and looked at it closely. It was a solid white mask with ghostly eye sockets but no mouth or nose, designed to cover the face of a performer. He recognized it as a rip-off of the old Herbert Lom mask from the 1962 version of *Phantom of the Opera*. He had never actually seen the film ... Pastor Spindola frowned on movies depicting murder or violence of any kind ... but the image was striking. Like the title character of that old film he could use it to hide his features from those who opposed him until the moment came to reveal his true identity.

He placed the mask over his face. As expected it fit perfectly. Beneath the cold, hard features of the somber facade he felt the first twitches of a smile. He whirled about, his overcoat spinning like a cloak from a gothic gremlin's cape. The kindly spirits of joy that spoke to him earlier after recognizing the courting young man from the 70's now hid in mute silence. They now trembled in fear of the god of wrath now marching down the aisles. The long night of terror was about to begin! Next stop? Baton Rouge, Louisiana! He intended to be there by midnight this very night. His pain would soon become *their* pain!

Chapter 3

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.

Edmund Burke

It was nearly 9:00 AM before Sheriff Dick Spear made it to his desk and sat down with his morning cup of coffee. He poured it into his unbreakable ceramic mug emblazoned with “SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL SHERIFF’S ASSOCIATION” across the brim. He had his usual exchange with his secretary upon entering the courthouse that provided his office.

“Where did you sleep last night, Glenda?”

“I don’t have to answer that, Sheriff! I know my rights,” she’d snap back.

“Don’t make me have to come over there and cuff you while I search you, Glenda,” he’d snort in response. She’d roll her eyes and grin just as she had done in the nearly 12 years that she’d worked there. This banter was all good natured fun. There was nothing going on between them. Glenda Peterson was happily married to her husband who ran a pool installation and cleaning service up highway 44 about 10 miles from town. He stayed in business working pool maintenance contracts with local YMCAs, schools, county parks and hotels in a three county area. If not for that option he’d have gone under years ago as there was not a single

resident in all of Timmons County who owned a private swimming pool on their property.

“Any calls for me this morning, Glenda?”

“Deputy Sherrard is on a job,” she answered as he walked past her. “Said he got a call about a break-in at the Valhalla that happened sometime last night. He’ll be in after he checks it out. Mrs. Elders called and said there was a peeping tom trying to watch her undress for bed last night through the bedroom window.”

The sheriff smiled. Poor old Mrs. Elders had been complaining about a peeping tom at least once a week for the last 15 years. She was close to 100 years old and had never married. Her father left her with a minor fortune from his less than upstanding business accounting firm when he died. That had been almost 50 years ago!

“Anything else?” He sipped his coffee and picked up the small stack of mail sitting in his in-box.

“Just one more thing. Pastor Spindola called and said it was urgent that he talk to you. I asked him what it was about but he said he’d drive in and talk to you in private. Said he’d get Rosa to drop him off here by ten.”

“That’s curious,” Spear mused. “I don’t think I’ve spoken to the ‘good right reverend’ in almost a year now. Wonder what’s on his mind?”

“Probably thinks you need a confession. And he’s probably right!”

“Now Glenda, don’t go putting your impure thoughts and lifestyles on my back,” he laughed. “Just send him on back when he arrives.” But Sheriff Spear’s bold exterior was a sham. There was something that had been eating at him for days now. He had a premonition of a coming storm that would forever change life in this small town where he’d been raised and had always called home.

In many ways, Dick Spear was the biggest celebrity to ever come from Timmons County. His dad had been the legendary lawman 'Big Ben' Spear who served as sheriff for almost 50 years. 'Big Ben' was elected sheriff the same day that Frank Spindola was elected mayor back in '30, beginning what most of the old residents called the 'Golden Age' of Timmons County. While Mayor Spindola started the town on the path to financial success, Sheriff Spear began cleaning up the brothels, moonshine runners, petty crooks and Klan gatherings that marked the early 20th century history of the region. Big Ben's picture still hung on the wall of the sheriff's office as it had since 1938. Each and every day when Dick entered that small but storied room, he'd sit in the chair once occupied by his legendary father. He'd look up at the painting of 'Big Ben' Spear in all of his glory.

He genuinely missed the man who had been his inspiration from birth. "How are you, Dad," he'd whisper. "I wish you were here with me today." There were legends that still made their way into most dinner conversations concerning Big Ben. For example, there was the time he walked into the middle of a Klan meeting in 1949 and urinated right onto the burning cross, zipped up his pants and challenged anybody there to fight him man-to-man. Then he began to call them by name, mocking their stupidity at thinking the gaudy hoods made them anonymous to him. No one stepped up. The power of the Klan was never the same after that.

One night in 1959 he got a call about a burglary at the old Clements place. When he got there he discovered that it was a set-up and Malachai Clements, who was running moonshine with his apelike sons from their barn, had hired a teenaged punk from Alabama named Jordan Messner to ambush Ben and kill him. As Ben got out of his cruiser the man walked out of the shadows and pointed his .22 caliber pistol right in Ben's face. Ben smacked

Messner so hard in the chest that it knocked him to his knees. He dropped that pistol in the weed infested crabgrass. Ben picked it up, looked at it, spat a big chew of tobacco out of his mouth and drawled, "This ain't no pistol, boy! This here ain't nothing but a toy! Let me show you how it works!" He rolled Messner over on his belly, fired two .22 caliber slugs into his buttocks, then tossed the pistol in his squad car. "Get your sorry ass back to Alabama, boy," he said as he got behind the steering wheel and drove away, leaving the Clements boys and old Malachai standing in the shadows staring after him in disbelief. The next week the Clements moved away after the "mysterious fire" that burned their barn and destroyed their moonshine still.

But it was the gypsy incident that clearly became Ben's best known legend of all time. While driving on routine patrol along the old county road behind the cemetery near the swamp, Ben happened upon a gypsy camp calling itself 'Bronson and Sons' in early spring of 1950. There had been reports of theft and gambling in the area and Ben was determined to put an end to it. He demanded to see the boss of this traveling band who moved from county to county with their small carnival, sideshow, fortune telling, prostitution and the like. The old gypsy clan boss ... a scary old eccentric named Vladimir or some such name ... told Ben he was in grave danger and needed to move on. When Ben said he was thinking about running all of them into the county jail, (which was a bluff since the old jail only had room to house twelve inmates at a time and there were over 50 gypsies in this group) Vladimir clapped his hands. From the shadows walked the biggest man Ben had ever seen. He was almost seven feet tall and weighed at least 400 pounds with well defined arms and a massive torso covered with coarse hair. He was completely bald but sported a bushy beard. Golden earrings adorned his ears, nose and one nipple.

"This is Bruno," Vladimir cackled. "He kills any man who crosses us! He is part wolf, part bear, part lion and all killer! You will leave us now, sheriff! You will never bother us again!" Big Ben never even blinked. He spat his tobacco juice right in the eyes of that giant. As the behemoth bellowed, clawing at his eyes, Ben kicked him squarely in his "manhood," driving the sharp toe of his cowboy boot deep into the man's lower entrails. Bruno collapsed in a heap on the dirt as everyone looked on in shock ... everyone but Ben.

"I'll be back out here tomorrow morning at sunrise," Ben said. He tugged on his belt and walked toward his car. "Anybody still here at that time will be cuffed and spend the next 30 days waiting for the circuit judge to make his way back through the county."

"I *curse* you, Sheriff Spear," Vladimir shouted, invoking ancient slogans in an unknown tongue. "The powers of Beelzebub himself shall stalk you and cause you to scream in terror until you beg him to end your torment through death!" Ben spat again and looked Vladimir directly in the eye.

"Don't know of no Bell-ze-bub from nowhere, boy! But if he's here when I come back tomorrow, I'll sure as hell cuff him and toss his pointy tailed ass in jail with the rest of you poor goobers. Now ya'll get on out of here before I really get mad."

Ben returned as promised the next morning. He was alone with no back-up. It was precisely sunrise. The gypsies had all cleared out to the very last man, woman and child. There was scarcely a sign that they had ever been there. He did a slow walk around the area and nodded, satisfied with the outcome. He was about to get behind the wheel when he heard a faint rustling in the dry leaves gathered against the base of a Cyprus stump. As he moved closer, he saw something moving beneath a pile of Spanish moss. For an instant he thought it was an animal of some kind, but then he heard the whimper and his eyes widened with disbelief!

Immediately pulling a handful of moss away, he was horrified to see a newborn baby boy. The infant's umbilical cord was still attached and not even dry. He was softly crying and flailing away helplessly as ants crawled over his little body. Big Ben scooped up the boy and held him in his arms, brushing away the ants while running to his car. He called dispatch and ordered them to have Doctor Rollins meet him at the clinic immediately. Thinking twice, he rescinded that order and said he'd just drive out to the doc's house himself. No one ever found that gypsy band again although Ben asked every sheriff in the southeast to be on the lookout for them. After several weeks he gave the baby over to the orphanage. Sister Agnes named him 'Jeremiah' after her favorite Old Testament prophet. Doc Rollins wrote the name 'Jeremiah Bronson' on the birth certificate, naming him after the gypsy camp that obviously left him behind. Everybody figured that when the boy was adopted, his new parents would change his name. But no one ever did adopt little Jerry. Money was tight and people feared his unknown origins.

Jerry continued to live at the orphanage even though he spent a great deal of time with the Spear family. Pastor Spindola became his mentor and that boy went on to ... well ... that was another story for another time.

Ben was 45 years old when Dick was born in 1950 just a few short weeks after the gypsy incident along the county road. Dick always wanted to grow up and follow in his legendary father's footsteps. He would have done so had it not been for that horrible night in 1979 when Roscoe Parker and the 'Broken Bones Motorcycle Gang' roared into town. It was the worst night in the history of the town except maybe for that other unspeakable night of the murders in 1995. Anyway, the incident with Parker and the gang ended the life of Big Ben and it launched the life of another who jumped right

over Dick and into the spotlight. Dick served five years as his dad's deputy and sheriff in waiting. He then served the next 16 years as deputy to the new sheriff, finally winning the special election in 1996. Hard to believe all of that happened almost 15 years ago!

Spear's musings had completely consumed his attentiveness. He was startled when Glenda stood over him and shouted, "HELLO! CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?" Spear smiled as he swiveled around in his chair to face the doorway where Glenda stood locked in an arm embrace with Reverend Spindola.

"Sorry, Glenda. I guess my mind was somewhere else."

"Careful, Sheriff," she chided as she playfully pointed a finger his way. "God is listening." She smiled as she gave a stiff head nod in the direction of Pastor Spindola who looked especially frail and tired to Dick. Dick rose and extended his hand to Spindola, giving Glenda his patented 'get lost' look. She raised an eyebrow and stepped back, gently closing the door as she left.

"Reverend Spindola! How good to see you again! How long has it been?"

"Too long, I'm afraid. I wish I could come by more often, but with my health and the continuing, growing need at the mission and orphanage there just isn't time."

"Don't sweat it, Pastor. Most folks think not seeing the sheriff is a good thing. Can I get you some coffee?"

"No, thank you, Dick. As you know Rosa makes my coffee every morning. I would never think of drinking any prepared by anyone else." Dick nodded and smiled in appreciation of the comment. Everyone in town except Rosa knew the game that Spindola played with her. Or maybe she knew as well and just played along. What harm did it do? "Actually, I'm here about something else ... and I don't quite know how to say it."

"You've known me all of my life, Pastor. You can tell me anything.

What is it?” Spindola turned in his seat, obviously uncomfortable with the knowledge he held and not quite knowing the best method of sharing it with his eager listener. God forgive him, but he had never really trusted Sheriff Spear. He was certainly not the man his father had been. But then again Spindola knew that he was quite different from his own father so who was he to judge? “God forgive me for my shortcomings and indiscretions!”

“I heard Blueblood barking this morning,” he said, blurting it suddenly and with a “matter-of-fact” finality. “I heard him loud and clear coming from the old cemetery. No dog ever had a bark like that and I’ll never forget it.” For a second Spear sat speechless, his arms folded across his chest. Then he smiled, leaned forward and rubbed his forehead as a man already fatigued and bored with the conversation.

“Pastor, look, I know what you think ...”

“I know how it sounds, Sheriff,” Spindola interrupted. “I know it sounds crazy. And I know there are probably dozens of explanations you have stored up that you are about to share with me about how that would not be possible and about what you think I *really* heard. In fact I *knew* that before I even came out here. I knew you’d laugh and choose not to believe me.”

“If you knew all of that, Pastor, then why did you bother to come out here and tell me?” Spear was surprised at the tone of his own voice. It was stern, totally devoid of the softness he usually used when speaking to the elderly voters of Timmons County. He was normally even more careful with his words when speaking to one as gentle and obviously compassionate as Pastor Spindola. Maybe he was just tired. Or maybe it was because he knew that the incoming crowds of the looming Dogwood Festival would bring him sleepless nights that he no longer breezed through. Maybe it was because he knew deep inside that Pastor Spindola didn’t trust

him or especially care for him. Or maybe it was something else, something he didn't really want to face. Maybe it was because he suspected that Spindola just might be telling the truth!

"When I anticipated your response I asked Rosa to drive me out to the cemetery to have a look. So she did."

"And?"

"There were dog tracks everywhere coming from the direction of the swamp. It appeared that the dog jumped the back fence facing the bog and made his way across the various plots to the southern base of the fence." Spear stared into Spindola's eyes for a moment before he burst into laughter.

"Okay, Pastor! I'll be on the lookout for a dog that jumps fences and walks around graveyards at night. Can you give me a description?"

"You know what Blue looks like, Dick. He looks like a powerful black lab except he's bigger than a purebred due to whatever mix he is. And he's got that white patch just over both eyes that glow like beacons in the dark. And that distinctive bark! You know all about Blue, Sheriff!"

"That's right, Pastor, I do know all about Blue since I'm the one who gave him to Jerry and Angel for a wedding present. They said he was the best gift they ever got. But he's *dead*, pastor! We all miss Jerry and we all miss Angel and we all miss Blue, but they are all *gone* from us! I'm not going to waste my time going out to the old cemetery to look at tracks and chase a phantom dog you say was barking this morning. It'll take a lot more than that to move me out of my chair today!"

"Then let me give you something more, Sheriff," Spindola sighed as he sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. "His grave ... it's been opened. The grave is opened, the casket is opened, and there is nothing inside." Spear felt his insides turn to raspberry jello.

He gripped his thighs to keep his hands from shaking and cleared his throat.

“Could you say that again, Pastor?” The door unexpectedly burst open as Deputy Sherrard barged inside, hat in hand, deep circles of sweat spreading out on his uniform shirt around his neck and arm pits. “Good grief, Tracey! Can’t you see I’m in a meeting? I don’t like to be bothered when I’m in a meeting.”

“Sorry, Sheriff, but this is important! I thought you’d want to know right away and maybe come check it out for yourself!”

“I already know about it, Tracey. Glenda told me about the break-in at the Valhalla. If something was stolen, make out a report and start asking questions. Kids have broken in there before. What’s the big deal?”

“It ain’t what was stolen, Sheriff! Uh ... um ... it’s what he left behind in there.” There was a long pause that seemed to last an hour.

“Well, Tracey? You’re acting stupid! What was left there?”

Deputy Sherrard nervously licked his lips, gripped his hat until his knuckles turned white and glanced toward Pastor Spindola before looking back to Sheriff Spear.

“It was an old sheriff’s uniform. It looked like the ones they used to wear before I worked here,” Sherrard fumbled. “It was dumped in the costume storage room along with some muddy boots that were falling apart. The uniform was filthy and smelled awful. There are big pieces missing and the thread has pretty much disintegrated. It still had a name tag on the shirt though. I saw it plain as day.”

“What was the name on the tag, Deputy Sherrard?” It was Spindola asking. Sherrard swallowed hard, looked to Spindola, then back to the sheriff. He blurted out his answer with great anxiety.

“The name on the tag was ... BRONSON!” Then he turned to Sheriff Spear. “Sheriff, I think that uniform belonged to Sheriff

Jeremiah Bronson!” This time it was Spear who dropped his coffee cup, barely noticing as the unbreakable mug shattered, scattering coffee all across his previously clean hardwood floor.

The ever present painting of Big Ben Spear hung on the wall above. From his position of honor, Big Ben seemed to be looking on with great interest. Dick looked up at the image of his father. As he often did, he wished Ben were there to tell him how to proceed. Unfortunately, Big Ben Spear smiled but said nothing.

Chapter 4

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the state of Louisiana and to the motto for which it stands: A state, under God, united in purpose and ideals, confident that justice shall prevail for all of those abiding here. Louisiana State Motto, Adopted 1981

A rlo Sanchez awoke with a start from a drunken sleep. It was nearly 10:00 AM, much earlier than he was accustomed to rising. He sat bolt upright in the flimsy, mite infested foam mattress he had pulled from a roadside dump that lay atop the old Army cot he used for his bed. Taking a moment to regain his bearings and remember exactly where he was, he huffed, belched, and crashed back on his pillow. He angrily twisted to his right and plunged his face into the ashtray that lay on the makeshift nightstand by his bed. Cursing and gagging as the gray ash from a dozen cigarettes clung to the moistness of his mouth and nose, he lashed out at the tray, knocking it across the room of his trash strewn trailer. It crashed along the far wall, disturbing the swarm of flies feasting on the rotted rind of a watermelon fermenting in the morning Louisiana sun that beamed through the small open window.

His head still rang from the drunken binge of the night before. He sat on the edge of the cot and began visually searching for a bottle among the many that littered the linoleum floor. He hoped

he'd find one that might still have a swig or two of cheap liquor remaining. Finding none, he cursed again and kicked at the pile, sending three bottles skipping across the floor in the opposite direction from the ash tray. The noise disturbed a mouse feasting on a half-eaten crust of bread now dried and rock hard. It scurried for safety through the inch wide gap of the non-existent seal along the bent, twisted, ill-fitting door.

Running his hands through his hair as he groaned, Sanchez noted that he smelled bad. He knew it must be a really awful smell if even he noticed. Maybe he'd make some effort to bathe today beneath the outdoor faucet he used to boil water and heat his noodles from time to time. But maybe he wouldn't, either. Who cared? Certainly not him.

"That stupid dog!" He mumbled various profanities as he lay back down and stared at the water stained ceiling. It was the dog that woke him from his alcohol induced slumber, barking incessantly outside his trailer door. It had begun very early while it was still dark outside, but Arlo had been too hung over to run the animal away. As the morning wore on, the barking intensified and he finally gave up any hope of sleep. It was a unique bark, one that Arlo could not recall ever hearing before. It was not that unusual for a stray dog to find its way to Arlo's place. He'd been here for almost five years as the unofficial caretaker of the old National Confederate Cemetery, about 20 miles outside the city limits of Baton Rouge. In all that time there had been maybe two dozen visitors to this God-forsaken dump.

Arlo's old partner in crime, 'Mo' Morrison, hooked him up with this job as caretaker when Mo was an assistant to the county commissioner. Mo and Arlo linked up after Arlo took off from South Georgia, making his way west while he waited for the news to die down about the murder of that sheriff from Timmons ville.

He knew that deputy ... what was his name? Spare, or Steer or something like that ... he knew he would be looking under some rocks and hiding places that Arlo didn't want to be associated with. So Arlo met Mo through a mutual acquaintance. He helped Mo with some 'hobbies' that you might not find on a standard job resume. Mo came from a rich bayou family and was fresh out of law school. For just a few favors he would help Arlo make a new start and protect him from any ghosts lurking that might one day arrive snooping around Baton Rouge. That was before Mo was arrested and locked away on those child pornography and molestation convictions.

Despite that unexpected turn of events, Arlo still had the job. The county gave him the trailer rent free and it stood along the wood line about 100 yards behind the cemetery. It had no electricity or running water, but it was a place to hang. He had access to county water by the aforementioned outdoor faucet behind the trailer. There was a gas line that still worked, allowing Arlo to at least operate the gas operated stove to heat water and scramble eggs.

The job paid \$400 per month, enough to keep Arlo supplied with liquor and the occasional poker game down at Sally's Place. The local community charity organization gave him a monthly ration of canned food and staples. He was not averse to spending a night or two per month at the mission downtown since it came with a free meal and a hot shower. All he had to do was listen to some ranting preacher for an hour about the coming of judgment day. He'd snooze through the sermon to pay for his meal and shower. Life was actually pretty good, all things considered.

In exchange for that \$400, Arlo was expected to keep the weeds pulled from the graves and rake the dirt lots to keep them presentable. He did neither. Few visitors ever came to this old dump. The few who did were usually tourists or civil war buffs looking for

an old relative or tracing some family heritage. He'd never received any complaints.

Who cared about these losers buried here anyway? The Confederates of Louisiana were pretty much the first ones to fold and the Union Army occupied New Orleans by the end of 1862, a full three years before the war ended. The rebels who fought after that were little more than farm boys with squirrel guns, or so Arlo believed. It was not as if Robert E. Lee of Jefferson Freaking Davis were buried here.

He was paid in cash on the first payday of each month by the county clerk. He'd drive his old rust-bucket truck into town 2-3 times a month to do his business. Otherwise it was just him and his bottle.

Because this place was so deserted, it was not unusual for folks to dump an unwanted dog or cat by the cemetery. He figured most people did not even know about the trailer or about him. A traveler on the poorly maintained dirt road (if you could even call it a road) could not see the spot unless you actually wandered to the back of the cemetery and looked for it among the trees. When the strays would wander up, Arlo would just bash them in the head with a rock and toss the carcass on his trash dump behind the trailer. If the animal's owner didn't want it, he sure as hell did not. It's not as if any animal worth any money ever got dumped in this hell-hole!

Now that damn dog was barking again! He was just outside the door so Arlo figured this would be as good a time as any to go add him to the bones and rotting carcass collection behind the trailer. He scratched his greasy head and stood looking around for an appropriate weapon to use. Leaning in a corner of the trailer was a broken broomstick. "That'll do," Arlo nodded. He recalled breaking it while swinging at a raccoon who had forced his way into the trailer through that ever widening gap in the door between the jamb and the frame. He swung at but missed the furry varmint who

squealed, hissed and scurried over the trash piles to effortlessly slip through the opening. “Yeah, I gotta get that fixed.”

Arlo coughed as he spoke. His wheezing lungs reminded him that he’d not had a smoke all morning. He fumbled though the accumulated garbage on his nightstand and found the pack of generic non-filtered cigarettes buried beneath the rubbish. He cursed again when he realized there was only one cigarette left inside. He shook the pack, exposing the cancer stick from the opening, then pulled it out with his lips. Casually tossing the pack to the floor, he looked around for a box of matches. Suddenly the dog barked again, this time sounding very close, as though it were already inside. It was so loud that the bark caused Arlo to jump and curse, almost spitting out his cigarette in the process.

The dog’s bark sounded different now. Before it sounded goofy, a bark indicating a playful “anybody in there?” tone rather than a threat to do harm. But this bark was guttural, definitely ferocious, and obviously dangerous. Maybe Arlo needed to find something more than a broken broomstick. He knew of just the thing.

“I’ll fix your sorry, flea-bitten ass,” Arlo chuckled as he staggered toward the beaten and battered dresser that was the only piece of actual furniture in the place. “I’ll fix it good!” As he reached for the top drawer he heard a scratching sound behind him. He turned to see the raccoon had returned. It was digging through a greasy paper sack deposited from a fried chicken dive earlier in the week. Cursing again, Arlo threw the broomstick at the masked bandit who hissed and scampered across the floor behind the stove.

“I’ve got you now, you fat piece of crap,” Arlo screamed, picking up the broomstick and leaping across the room to the stove. He peered behind the appliance to see the raccoon wedged tightly behind it. Realizing that it was trapped, the furry mammal began crying. It tried tearing frantically at its surroundings to

find an escape. “Ain’t got nowhere to go have you, you little maggot!”

Arlo jabbed mightily at the raccoon’s haunches with the jagged, pointed end of the broomstick. He broke skin past the fur and impaled the muscle tissue of the creature. It screamed out in pain and fear. Arlo pulled back the stick and examined the blood stain on the tip. He laughed aloud. His twisted mind now devised a better way to kill this beast while simultaneously providing entertainment. He looked around for the lighter fluid he used at times to burn trash (which was against county policy) on winter nights. He knew he had some buried around here somewhere.

The dog suddenly barked again and crashed its body against the front door! The force of the blow shook the trailer as though an earthquake tremor rocked the hellish acre on which it stood. The combination of the thunderous bark and corresponding “THUD” on the door caused Arlo to stumble back. He lost his balance and fell backwards, hitting his head on the nightstand and sending the pile of refuse atop it flying across the room. Sensing the moment was right, the raccoon raced from behind the stove, screeching the whole way. It ran across Arlo’s chest and in a flash was through the opening between the door and the jamb, leaving a thin trickle of blood in its wake.

Arlo lay there for a moment considering what just happened but began to laugh as he heard the dog outside going ballistic amidst the screaming of the raccoon. “At least that took care of the raccoon.” He pulled himself up and brushed himself off, a slight shiver running up his spine as he thought of the raccoon actually running across his chest. He remembered that raccoons were common carriers of rabies. That was the last thing he needed to worry about. While he’d never heard any reports of rabies in the area there was always a first for everything.

Still unable to find those matches, Arlo noticed he still had the

unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. Maybe he'd left them in his dresser drawer? He walked over and pulled it open, instantly recalling why he'd headed to the dresser in the first place. Lying there next to a box of shells was the .32 caliber pistol he'd stolen during a burglary in Mississippi a couple years back. He'd fired it a few times and was decent with it, resulting in a squirrel or two for dinner over the years. He picked it up and opened the chamber, confirming that six bullets remained encapsulated within. Flicking his wrist to bring the chamber back into place, he nodded and walked toward the door. By now the dog would have killed the raccoon so this was a good time to step outside and kill the dog. Maybe then he'd finally get some sleep.

With barely a nod, Arlo yanked open the door with his left hand and led with his right arm fully extended, gun cocked and ready, prepared to fire at the canine nuisance he fully expected to see waiting on the other side. He looked left and right, closely scanning the entire area to his front. There was no dog, no raccoon, no blood ... there was no sign of anything out of the ordinary. He skipped down from the doorway and took a few steps into the damp black dirt that made up the soil of the local area. He saw the prints of the raccoon leading clearly into the forest to his right. But there were no dog prints anywhere. He turned to look behind him. He'd taken 5-6 steps away from the trailer. All he saw on the ground were the prints of the raccoon and his own bare feet which he'd just made as he walked outside.

"That's mighty odd," he mused. "I'll keep this thing handy for the next day or two just in case that pest shows up again." As he turned back toward the trailer, he got the uneasy feeling that he was being watched. He looked all around but saw nothing out of the ordinary. He'd never been much for supernatural hocus pocus or that voodoo bunk that sold to the stupid out-of-towners who flocked to the bayou looking for their fortunes to be read. In all the

years he'd lived on the cemetery grounds he'd never seen or felt any kind of unnatural presence.

"I've been out here too long," he protested to no one in particular. As he turned and walked back inside the trailer he noticed an extraordinarily pink dogwood 10-15 feet inside the wood line. It was so striking that he stopped to stare at it for a moment. He had not seen one so blatantly pink since he'd left Timmons ville almost 15 years ago. How strange that he had never noticed it here before, but as large as it was it must have been there since well before he'd moved in. Shaking his head he went inside, still unable to find any matches. Already forgetting about the dog and the tree, he slammed the front door several times until it finally stuck. Satisfied, he stretched out on the cot and closed his eyes.

Although he did not know it, Arlo had already made two critical mistakes that morning. His first was in assuming that just because he did not see the dog meant that the dog was not there. His second was in his failure to notice that in the frantic scuffle behind the stove, the raccoon had broken a tiny gas line that fed into the back of the appliance. The break was even now causing a steady stream of poisonous, highly flammable odorless gas into the confines of the trailer. As he closed his eyes and began to nod off he was awakened again by a sudden jolt. The dog was at his door again. Arlo felt a stab of fear for the first time as he listened to it bark, howl and moan. It suddenly didn't sound much like a dog at all. It didn't sound like any animal he'd ever heard in his life. He swallowed hard and kept his eyes glued to the door, hoping for the first time in his tenure as groundskeeper that a visitor would come to ask a question. But no one came. And after a few tense and eternal moments, the howling ceased. All he could hear now was the gentle breeze, softly and whimsically making its way through the swaying moss ... and the blushing dogwood trees.

Chapter 5

I have always considered it as treason against the great republic of human nature to make any man's virtues the means of deceiving him. **Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)**

Sheriff Spear took a walk away from the curious crowd gathered around the grave site in the old cemetery. He'd seen the evidence left in the old Valhalla costume room and had called in the county coroner and graves registration team to examine the clearly vandalized grave of the late, great Sheriff Jerry Bronson. But word travels fast in Timmons County. A crowd of about 25 curious onlookers already gathered to see what the commotion was all about. He put up the yellow police tape and was waiting for the county recorder to show up and take photos. He'd call Jess Taylor to remove the casket and seal off the open grave. Jess was a local contractor with his own equipment. He was also cheap. After that, Spear would start asking questions. Hard questions! And he would get his answers. This kind of thing had to be resolved and resolved quickly, by as early as tonight if possible. It was the kind of thing that could shake the confidence of the community.

Pastor Spindola arrived later after listening to poor Rosa's confession. The wild stories of Sheriff Bronson having risen from the grave had been hard on her, as would be expected of a caring

mother-in-law. After consoling her as best he could, Reverend Spindola caught a ride to the cemetery with Deputy Sherrard. Rosa departed to spend her lunch break at the *Dove of Peace* assisted living home as she did every workday and weekend. It had been her routine for the past 15 years. Spending time with the ill, elderly, and helpless made her feel stronger. It was what had kept her going during these past difficult, impossible to survive years.

The “good and right reverend” walked up to Sheriff Spear who stood staring at the open grave with his hands on his hips. Spindola paused a moment to gather a handkerchief from his back pocket and wipe his brow. He really felt his age today! The beating sun did little to make him feel younger. He wondered if he should carry a cane to help him with his balance? He could pass it off as a distinguished upgrade to his wardrobe rather than a physical necessity, though he knew no one would believe him. It was definitely getting harder and harder to function. He felt much older than his 79 years and counting. And he’d certainly never felt older than today ... than this very moment.

“So what now, Sheriff? Still think I was hearing things that were not there?”

“It’s not like you to use sarcasm, Reverend. Very unbecoming for a man of your profession.”

“I meant no disrespect, Dick, and certainly didn’t mean to offend you. But it’s clear that something amazing has happened here. This is proof that the dog I heard barking out here earlier this morning was old Blueblood. And the empty grave means ...” Spear turned angrily to Spindola, cutting him off.

“It means what, Reverend? A barking dog and a vandalized grave mean just *that* and *nothing* more. Someone illegally exhumed the remains of Sheriff Bronson, probably last night, although we don’t know that for sure. Whoever did that stripped him of his

uniform and dumped it in the storage room of the Valhalla. I'd like to think it was a prank, but this was the work of someone much more devious than a prankster. Whoever did this could also be dangerous. But as vile as all of that sounds, that's *all* that it is. No boogie man, no ghosts and no miraculous resurrection."

"And the barking dog ..."

"Was *just* a barking dog," Spear interrupted again. "Look Pastor, Jerry was my best friend. We were practically raised as brothers. No one cried harder than me at his funeral. But he died almost 15 years ago and he's still dead. You're a minister, not a voodoo witch doctor. Don't you preach that only Jesus can come back from the dead?"

"Quite the contrary," Spindola cautioned. "The scriptures tell us of many wondrous instances concerning the miracle of resurrection. Who are we to question the will of God? In his letter to the Church of Corinth, the Apostle Paul wrote, and I paraphrase, *'Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised.'* Just because we can't explain this does not mean that it didn't happen!" Spear stared at Spindola for a moment before he shook his head in disbelief.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this! You expect me to believe that Jerry is alive and walking around, along with his dog, like nothing ever happened? I'm too busy to listen to this, Pastor." He turned to walk away when Spindola called out to him. Spear stopped but did not turn back around.

"What is it, Pastor?"

"I know that this seems fantastic, Dick. But I have seen the supernatural before ... twice! And God help me I will never forget it. It haunts me to this day. " Spear, still facing away, grimaced and placed his hands on his hips.

"I'm listening."

"It happened first when I was seven. My Mom was very ill and I was playing in the back yard with several other children who were visiting with their parents. The adults were all inside sitting with her. They were waiting for her to die. People used to do that back then ... it was 1937 ... but I didn't understand that. All I knew was that my mother was quite ill and people had come to visit us. We had a wrought iron gate around that old house ... do you remember it?"

"Of course I remember it, Reverend," Spear nodded with a hint of disgust. "Jerry and Angel lived there for all of those years after they bought it from you. I was the first one on the scene after it burned down ... I was the one who found Jerry's body in the ashes!" Roman nodded with a tinge of sadness played across his face.

"I'm sorry, Dick. My mind is not so nimble as it used to be. Nothing about me is, for that matter!"

"It's okay, Rev," Dick assured. "Go on."

"I was playing tag with one of the other boys when I saw my mom walk outside and begin heading toward the gate. I stopped running and Corey Hamilton couldn't stop in time. He ran right into me and knocked me down. My mom kept on walking with a casual pace as though she had all the time in the world. Corey yelled at me that I was crazy! I pointed and explained that my mom was leaving. Corey looked in her direction, then repeated that I was crazy and ran off to play with the other children. That's when I realized that *he could not see her*. None of the other kids even noticed her at all. *I was the only one who knew that she was there!* And she was leaving." Spindola shivered at the thought and his voice began to crack. By now Spear had turned around to give the pastor his full attention.

"What happened next, Pastor?" Spindola cleared his throat and continued.

"I ran after her! I called and called to her but she kept walking as though she clearly knew where she was going. She continued heading away from the house ... away from me. She passed right through the gate. She didn't open it or go over it like I always did. She just ... she just passed through it with total and complete ease. From the other side she stopped and turned to face me. She smiled and wagged her finger for me to come closer."

"And did you?"

"Oh, yes indeed. I walked up to the fence and pressed my face between the bars. She held out her hand to me and I stretched to meet her touch. But try as I might, her fingers were just barely beyond my reach. I was crying and the other kids gathered around me. They could not see her or hear her. They were completely unaware that she was there. And then she spoke!"

Spear felt genuine compassion for Spindola. He no longer looked like an ill old man. He looked more like a frail and frightened little boy.

"What did she say?" For some reason Spear removed his hat and held it in his hands. Observers might say it was because of the heat but he did so out of respect for the memory of a lost loved one. It felt as if the dead were passing by as vivid and real as if he were the honor guard for a funeral procession. Spindola wiped away a solitary runaway tear that tried to escape down his cheek, then cleared his throat.

"She told me that it was okay ... that I would be fine. She told me not to worry for her because she was also going to be okay. It was simply that she had to go away. I begged and pleaded with her to take me with her!" His mind wandered briefly and his eyes had a faraway look, much like a man in a trance and clearly living in the past. A faint smile pursed his lips. "I did love my mother so! She was so wonderful ... so beautiful!" Abruptly, he regained his

composure and continued. "But she said I could not go with her. She said that I must stay and follow my own destiny. She said I had important work to do right here in Timmons County and she would one day be so proud of me."

"So is that why you stayed here all of these years?"

"Partly, but it was mainly what she said to me next that made me stay. She knelt down, blew me a kiss, and said, '*One day I'll come back for you, my darling. Wait for me!*' And then like a wisp of smoke in a driving wind ... she was gone. I stood back and looked at the other kids. They were all gawking at me like I was some crazy loon. And then I heard kindly old farmer Bainbridge's wife calling to me. I went to her and she took me by the hand, leading me inside to momma's room. My father, whose face was red and tear stained, told me that my mother had just died. She was gone from our lives ... forever!" Spindola's face suddenly grew terse and determined. "But I knew it was not true! She was gone but not forever! She told me she'd come back for me and I have always believed it to be true. Even now I believe it to be true! My mother would never lie to me! So yes, I'm still here because I'm waiting for her. She *promised* me."

"Even if I were to accept all of this as genuine fact, Pastor, what does this have to do with Jerry's open grave?"

"It's a *sign*, Sheriff. I always knew there was something special about Jerry Bronson. If he's come back then we may be experiencing the end days ... this could be the long foretold resurrection of the dead! It means my mother could also be coming back any moment ... coming back for *me!*"

Whatever sympathy Spear held for Spindola suddenly vanished. If something bad was going on in Timmons County then he had to resolve it quickly. He was wasting time. He replaced his head gear and pulled it down smartly with a defiant tug.

"I've wasted too much time here with you, Pastor ... no offense."

"None taken"

"But I have a crime to solve. Listening to old ghost stories, even those as personal and touching as yours, is not going to help me solve it. Now if you'll excuse me?" Spear didn't wait for Spindola to respond. He turned and began walking toward his squad car while barking orders to the deputies to keep people back and to call him when the official photos were taken. Then he remembered something Spindola said and stopped, turning back to him again before he got too far away. "One last thing, Padre? You said you'd experienced the supernatural twice. What was the other one?"

Spindola stiffened, recalling the terror he felt at age 16 when he saw the vision, heard the screams, saw the blood. Asking forgiveness as he prepared to lie, he answered, "I'm sorry, Dick. You must have misunderstood. I have no other personal experiences with the supernatural. Sorry for the miscommunication." He wondered if his face blushed red with the shame of the untruth he'd just told. If so, Sheriff Spear gave no indication of seeing it. He grunted, then turned and walked away.

Amid the confusion, angry voices of the onlookers who wanted to come closer and blaring police radios, Pastor Spindola seemed lost in time. He looked longingly back to the empty grave that once held the man whom he had loved like a son. He recalled the story of Lazarus, a close friend to Jesus according to the book of John. When Lazarus died, Jesus arrived for the funeral saddened by the loss of his friend. Spindola silently mouthed the words he had memorized so many times in the past, "Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!' And he that was dead came forth!" The tears were now flowing freely and unopposed down his cheeks. "Are you out there, Jerry? Have you been called back to the land of

the living? And if so ... why? What can this possibly mean? What are you planning to do?" There was no reply to his silent questions ... only the warm Georgia wind pushing through the trees and the ever squawking sound of the police radios behind him.

Chapter 6

Often an entire city has suffered because of one evil man. **Hesiod (800 BC)**

Erma Goodwin was up before sunrise to make the biscuits and put them in the oven. Her biscuits were the talk of the town and had been for over 40 years. She was an outstanding cook who could rival any of the southern chefs who paraded on their own talk shows and rubbed elbows with the Hollywood celebrities. It was her cooking that had made her the most pursued girl in Timmons County during her high school days. While those “other girls” had long ago lost their glamorous looks, beautiful hair and girlish figure, Erma was still an amazing cook, better than she’d ever been.

Her tasty southern cuisine was what inspired her husband, Willie, to finally declare his multiple business ventures a failure and open their home as “Willie and Erma’s Kozy Kottage” back in 1977. Willie proved to be quite the market promoter and their son, ‘Little’ Willie (God rest his soul), was a decent carpenter. Between the two of them and Erma’s mouth watering dishes, they renovated the old farmhouse and opened it as a Bed and Breakfast to immediate positive response. Despite the opening of a few franchise hotels north of town, there was rarely a night when the “Kozy Kottage” had an open room. They rented four bedrooms at \$50 per night, netting close to \$6,000 per month before taxes. The price included

a home cooked breakfast which was where Erma excelled. In all of these years, she'd never had a single complaint. Not one! During the spring they'd raise their rates to \$55 per night to take advantage of the demand for folks who traveled in to enjoy the dogwoods and take part in the festival. Erma thought that was "taking advantage of good folks," but Willie explained that it was a natural aspect of America's "capitalistic heritage."

"That's what our boys are fighting for over there, Erma," he'd explain in that slow drawl of his. "And it makes us a clear profit of an extra \$300 per year! Maybe even more! How can we argue with numbers like that?" No doubt that Willie was the brains of the family.

Despite such amazing revenues awaiting her, Erma always felt somewhat sad as the festival approached. That awful night back in 1979 when those bikers came to town weighed heavily on her mind. They had only been operating the Kottage for two years then. The business was just starting to show signs of life. They were so proud. Willie Jr. had decided to forego college and stay home to help out. He was such a good boy, that Willie! He was so good with his hands! He could build anything with wood and he never needed any diagram or plans. He had them all in his head. He was going to be a very rich man one day. That's what everybody said.

Then those bikers came into town. My God, we all thought the Devil himself had come to town! All the fires ... the screams ... the smoke. And poor Sheriff Spear! He was over 70 years old but he didn't back down an inch. And what they did to him! She still shuddered at the thought of it.

Poor Junior tried to stop them. He'd died right here in her kitchen, trying to protect his parents from that awful man and his evil gang. At first she wanted to die, too. But she and Willie Sr. had clung to each other for the strength to carry on. She still loved the kitchen

and felt close to little Willie when she was cooking something. That boy loved to eat and always made certain to tell her so. What a sweet boy he was! After it was all over and Pastor Bronson saved the town, he came to talk to her about how little Willie died right here that night. Erma wanted to move away and never come back. It was Pastor Bronson who changed her mind. He pointed out that this place was now sacred. It became something holy because it was the place where little Willie had breathed his last breath. He'd died for such a noble and heroic purpose ... trying to save the ones he loved most. So Erma and Willie Sr. decided to reopen the Kottage in honor of their son.

They were first in line to vote for Pastor Bronson to be sheriff the following year. One thing was certain ... Timmonsville had been blessed with some good sheriffs. First it was Big Ben, then Pastor Jerry (most people still called him 'Pastor Jerry' even after he was elected sheriff) and now Ben's son, Dick. There was not a county anywhere in the USA with a better string of sheriffs than Timmons County! That's what Erma always said. And who could possibly argue with Erma?

With the biscuits now baking in the oven, Erma turned her attention to the rest of her breakfast menu. No one ever left the Kottage for the day still hungry. To tell the truth the Goodwin's profits were much smaller than they could be because Erma spent so much of the cost of the room on her extraordinary breakfast. But it made her happy and she and Willie Sr. had been successful for a long time. Why change the formula for success? She certainly did not intend to.

With everything in the kitchen under control, Erma wiped her hands on her apron and began setting the table. Three of the four rooms had been occupied the night before. The travelers, all Yankee tourists on their way to Florida, would be down soon to sip coffee

and enjoy their specially made southern breakfast. There were some folks around who still harbored a grudge against Yankees because of the Civil War. Erma didn't understand that way of thinking. "Them Yankee dollars spend just as good as anybody else's," she'd always say. Again, who could argue with sweet old Erma?

The front door to the Kottage opened just then. Erma could hear the jingle of the little bell that hung above the inside of the door. The bell added to the charm of the rural interior and exterior of the place. Lots of visitors commented on how pretty it sounded.

"Willie, is that you?"

Willie had been in the barn earlier, retrieving freshly laid eggs for her various dishes. He normally went back after delivering those eggs just to look around and take in the morning air. She suspected that he felt close to little Willie when he did so. That was what they used to do together when their son was growing up. When no one answered, Erma made a final check of the grits on the stove and walked into the foyer to see who had entered at such an early hour. She was somewhat startled to see an elderly man dressed in fine embroidered, apparently hand-made clothing and silk scarf standing politely at their makeshift check-in desk. He was holding the feather pen they kept attached to the guest book with a strand of red yarn. Red had been little Willie's favorite color.

"Can I help you, sir?" Erma felt slightly uneasy for some reason, but her fears faded when the man spoke. His smile and smooth charm immediately put her at complete ease.

"Why yes, you can, Madam. I assume you to be the remarkable Mrs. Goodwin?" Something about his voice sounded very familiar to Erma. It was foreign for sure, but from where she had no idea. Erma was not exactly a world traveler. Her trip to South Carolina with her husband to visit Charleston in 1970 (when they stayed in the Bed & Breakfast that inspired them to open their own) was

pretty much the extent of her life outside Timmons County. She knew it was not Asian and not Spanish. All other languages sounded like Greek to her.

“Yes, I’m Erma Goodwin. And you are?”

“Ah, forgive me, Madam. I normally don’t have such bad manners like presuming strangers to know who I am. It’s just that seeing you surprised me as you are so much more beautiful that I had been led to believe.” Erma, accustomed to compliments on her cooking but never on her appearance, noticeably blushed. She liked this man!

“We spoke on the phone several weeks ago. I made the reservations with you then to stay here beginning last night and continuing through the dogwood festival next week? Once I confirmed that the rooms were indeed available, I agreed to pay using cash in advance and in full. I mailed the money right away. You did get the money, didn’t you?” Now Erma smiled and glided more than walked behind the desk.

“Of course I remember you! Yes, we got the money just fine. You were very generous! Did you know that you sent more money than we charge for the rooms? I will be happy to give that part back to you.” The man smiled with a gentle understanding that touched Erma’s soul.

“Not at all, Ma’am. I believe in paying what something is worth. Even paying above your rates, this trip is a tremendous bargain for me. I assure you I will not have wasted a dime on that deposit.”

“We expected you to arrive last night. My husband even waited up until almost ten o’clock! He finally gave up and came to bed.” She began looking through her guest reservation ledger. “Let me see, I know I have it written down somewhere in here but I don’t see it right away. What was your name again?” He ignored the question, shifting to her comment about his arrival.

“I am so sorry I did not make it last night. I fear that this trip

is only partially pleasure related. I have quite a bit of business to attend to while I am here and some of it forced me to get a late start here last night. I ended up pulling over by the road and snoozing through the night. I hope I have not caused you any trouble by doing so?"

"No trouble at all, sir. Since you'd already paid in full for the next week your room was ready for you at any time. Would you like to take your luggage upstairs now? I have you staying in room number four. That is our best room in the house. It used to belong to our son. He sadly passed on to be with God now. We call it our VIP room. I just know you'll love it!" The man nodded and almost bowed, giving a quasi salute to Erma in the process. "Now if you'll just sign our guest book, you are just in time for breakfast. I do hope you are hungry."

The stranger smiled. "Ravenous," he said. "I have an appetite that many say will be hard to appease!" He took the feather pen and signed his name in a single, deft stroke.

"You do have a way with words, mister," Erma smiled. "I'll bet you like to cause trouble, don't you?" He feigned shock, placing his hand to his chest and theatrically lifting his chin.

"Not I, madam. I am as tame as a kitten. Now I'll unload my bags and join you for breakfast." He turned and walked back out the front door, the little jingle of the tiny bell tolling its melody again. Erma watched him depart, then looked at the name in the guest book as Willie Sr. walked in behind her.

"Was that a new lodger I just saw as I came in the back?"

"Yes," Erma responded. "He's the gentleman who was supposed to arrive last night. He was delayed."

"Very good," Willie exclaimed. "I was worried about that. What was his name again?"

"Vladimir," Erma answered, reading the name from the guest

register. “Vladimir Buchinsky. He seems like such a nice man, too. Not from around here, though. I wonder what he’s doing here so early? The festival don’t start for another week or so.”

“Now Erma, don’t get started probing into people’s lives like you do,” Willie chided. “He has the right to be anyplace he wants to be, especially since he already paid us more than the room’s worth. Maybe that’s how they do it wherever he comes from. Like you said, he ain’t from around here.”

Somewhere in the far distance, a dog barked. Erma looked out the kitchen window but didn’t see anybody but her new lodger, pulling a suitcase from his trunk. “That’s right, Willie,” she whispered to no one in particular. “He definitely ain’t from around here.”

Chapter 7

Tis after death that we measure men. **James Barron Hope**

He stepped off the train in Baton Rouge well ahead of schedule. He'd intended to arrive by midnight and he'd made even better time than anticipated. He'd thumbed a ride to the Alabama line and hopped a freight train from Dothan to Mobile. While on the freight train, a couple of drifters joined him and began to make small talk. He'd asked them if they knew of a way to make some quick money as he needed fare to get to Baton Rouge. Those idiots pulled knives on him! They'd decided that his clothes looked expensive, so he must have some money or at least something of value. The fools! Common sense dictated that someone with money would not be hitching an illegal ride on a boxcar filled with shingles and building supplies. He'd tried to explain that to them, but they became belligerent and pulled their knives. How typical of the petty criminal mind!

The first one (the one the other man referred to as "Butch") came at him suddenly, lunging for his belly with the sharp blade extended. But Butch might as well have been moving in slow motion. Butch looked terrified when his arm snapped like a brittle twig in the hands of a master builder. Who knew there could be so much blood spewing from a protruding broken forearm?

The other one? He thought Butch called him “Patty.” Maybe that was short for Patrick? Didn’t matter. Patty was much more cooperative after poor Butch lost his arm. He started pulling cash out of his wallet, pockets, boots ... these guys had plenty of cash. It was certainly cash garnered from terrorizing the innocent, robbing the helpless or playing a con on the naïve. By the time Patty handed over his cash and helped the screaming Butch hand over his as well, he had more than \$1,000 that they’d offered in exchange for their lives. In exchange for their lives? He’d never intended to kill them. He’d just wanted advice on how to make some quick money to buy a train ticket to Louisiana. They’d turned on him without warning and without mercy. It was so typical of the criminals with which he’d dealt over the years. So many of them mistook compassion for weakness. But they all learned in the end.

The ones he was seeking? They thought they’d gotten away with it. They thought they were free and clear of the terrible thing they’d done. They mistook his kindness for weakness, too. And now they would pay the ultimate price for that mistake, just like Butch and Patty were learning today.

Although he didn’t physically hurt Patty, he believed that Patty suffered the most from the encounter. When he broke Butch’s arm and Butch started screaming like a wounded pig in a slaughterhouse, Patty gasped in shock and backed up until he found himself braced against the far wall of the boxcar. He kept shaking his head and whimpering, “Your eyes! Please don’t look at me with those eyes! I’ll give you anything you want but please don’t look at me with those eyes!”

He shook his head as he tried to digest that one. How else was he supposed to look at Patty? What an idiot! Still, he guessed that he understood how Patty felt. He’d seen his own eyes in the mirror back at the Valhalla Theatre in Timmons ville and he didn’t

especially like what he saw. His eyes had been bright red back there. Not bloodshot as if they were tired or irritated. It was his actual pupils that radiated a searing red. He supposed it was the anger that burned inside of him that made them glow that way. Pastor Spindola always told him that the eyes were the window to the soul. Oh, let's be honest here! It was not just Pastor Spindola who said that ... it was an old saying that everybody said and knew well. But when the 'good and right reverend' (that's what *everybody* in Timmons ville called him) said it, it sounded fresh and new. He wondered for a moment what the Reverend would say to him now, the way things had turned out. He guessed he'd find out soon enough. After his business was finished out west he was going back to Timmons ville to finish everything right and proper. He'd see Spindola again then. He knew that meeting would not be pleasant but he'd have to think of that later. Tonight he had business in the bayou.

He had not thrown Butch and Patty off the train. They volunteered, asking that if he'd just open the door, they'd jump. So he did. And they did, somewhere around Riverview just north of the Florida panhandle. Stupid fools! Good riddance. With the money they "offered" him, he'd bought a ticket from Mobile to Baton Rouge and his timing had been perfect. Here it was barely after 10:00 PM and he was standing in the train station in this historic Cajun town, strolling toward the city lights in search of a taxi. He felt anticipation rise within him. It took all of his discipline to not appear giddy, much like a little kid anxious to tear open the gifts beneath the tree on Christmas morning.

Baton Rouge had changed a great deal since he'd last visited here. He had come here once in the 70's as part of his outreach mission with the church. He'd returned in the late 80's to deliver a prisoner on the run from the Louisiana state police. He had cornered the guy hiding in a deserted farmhouse out on the old county road. What

was that guy's name? Sun something? Sunderland? Sutherland! Yes, that was it. Sutherland was the punk's name! He'd grabbed that little girl while she was on the way home from school. He had hurt her so terribly. He thought he'd killed her, but the spirit in that little girl ... was it Dina? Deana? Donna! Yes, it was Donna ... her name was Donna. Sweet little Donna survived that attack despite being so severely brutalized and thrown down that sink hole in the marsh. The state police got a positive ID from Donna on Sutherland and knew he was on the run heading east in a stolen pick-up truck. He'd gotten the call around midnight from Bobby Penny who ran his all night wrecker service that an abandoned truck was parked out at South Fork Road just off the highway.

Angel asked him to call for back-up but he never felt the need for back-up. He'd seen the police blotter reports that came over the teletype and he had this Sutherland punk sized up just right. Any man who would hurt a child in such a vicious way ... well ... he knew how to handle such 'men' if that was even the word to call them. Most said that Sutherland was an animal. He disagreed. Not even the animals treat their young in such manner.

He'd caught Sutherland asleep in the old farmhouse around 2:00 AM. He didn't even pull his gun. He kicked him awake and asked for an ID. Sutherland rose quickly and said he'd have to check his truck for his license. What he didn't know was that the sheriff had already called in the plates to the Louisiana police. They had verified that it was the stolen truck Sutherland had fled east in. So when Sutherland suddenly lunged at him, he almost laughed out loud at the obviously telegraphed attack. It was more than six weeks before Sutherland was deemed medically recovered enough to travel back to Louisiana for incarceration. He'd driven him all the way to Baton Rouge personally to hand him over and thank little Donna for her courage in testifying against him. A year or

so later, Sutherland was released on some technicality in the arrest warrant. He heard that Sutherland was arrested a couple years after that somewhere up north for attacking and this time killing a little girl in Vermont. But the Sutherlands of the world had their day of judgment coming. And today the first name on the docket was Arlo Sanchez!

On the train he'd overheard some passengers talking about some great storm named Katrina that had really hurt Louisiana, especially New Orleans and parts of the Mississippi Delta. He found it perplexing that he had no memory of this although he seemed to have an uncanny understanding of Arlo Sanchez. He knew exactly how and where to find him and the rest of that sick band whose days were rapidly coming to an end. He'd always believed that after death the dark glass would become crystal clear. In many ways life seemed as complex and confusing after death as it had seemed before. Let the philosophers argue the merits or demerits of that logic, he mused. Justice must be swift and blind and at this moment he was blind to anyone's needs except his own ever mounting thirst for sweet vengeance!

The passengers on the train remarked that Katrina was so scary since it seemed to have a will of its own, showing no mercy to any, smelling of death and riding on the wind of carnage and destruction. But the wrath of the hurricane named Katrina would pale when compared to the wrath he was about to unleash on Arlo Sanchez. And unlike Katrina, this would be no act of God ... this was going to be very personal!

Exiting the station he immediately made eye contact with a cabbie standing outside his yellow cab. He waved his arm to hail the cabbie and ask if he were available. The cabbie waved back and he was in business. As the cabbie, a large black man in jeans and white tee shirt, moved to get behind the wheel, the traveler

was stopped by a smiling prostitute somewhat older than one might expect to be on the streets. She was smiling broadly and wearing a skirt a couple of sizes too tight beneath an extremely revealing, sheer blouse. She had not seen his face yet ... the dim lights of the flickering street lamps and his large black fedora pulled down across the lower border of his forehead kept his face obscured.

“Hi, stranger,” she warbled, smacking gum and placing her hands over her forearms to hide the track marks. “My name is Angel. Would you like to party with me tonight?” ‘Angel,’ whose real name was Sally Perry, had been walking the streets of Baton Rouge for more than 20 years since she was 14. She looked so much older than her 34 or so years. Her haggard appearance was the result of a rough childhood and even rougher adulthood.

When she introduced herself as ‘Angel,’ the stranger lifted his head. This allowed her to look directly into his eyes. Those eyes transformed from shadowy darkness to brimstone burning red in a microsecond. Sally thought she’d seen it all on the streets in her sad and troubled life but she’d never seen anything like this!

She tried to back away but her legs would not move. She was paralyzed, frozen in place, a statue welded to the concrete. She felt helpless and at the complete mercy of the demolition machine that now gave her its full attention. She closed her eyes tightly but even so she could still see those red, searing eyes that burned through her hard exterior façade to the soft, defenseless depths of her soul. When she spoke her voice trembled. “I’m so sorry, sir. So very, very sorry. Please forgive me! I never meant to bother *you* ... sir.”

He sensed that she was no threat to him so he made no effort to physically touch or restrain her. Instead he leaned forward to her face, his nose scant inches from hers. She shivered in utter, abject terror. “You said your name was Angel,” he whispered, his voice as

dark and menacing as a hissing viper coiled to strike. "That's not your name, is it?"

She had no voice to reply so she simply shook her head, indicating that his assumption was correct.

"Then do not use that street name, Ma'am. Change it to something else. Angel is a very special name to me. Do you understand?" Again, she could not speak but she nodded over and over, keeping her eyes closed as tightly as possible. Without another word he walked away from her toward the cab with the anxious cabbie waiting behind the wheel. The cabbie had yet to see the stranger's face but he had seen the less than cordial exchange between him and "good time" Sally. He laughed to himself, trying to imagine what had just gone down. He pulled a cheap cigar from his pocket and bit down hard on its bitter tip, breaking it away and spitting it out his window onto the trash infested curb. From the way this guy was dressed, the cabbie speculated he must be some kind of an actor, a wacko, or a cop.

"Don't pay no attention to ol' Sally over there, friend," the cabbie laughed as he struck a match to light his cigar. "She don't mean no harm. She's just trying to make a living like everybody else in this God-forsaken world." When he still had not heard the door open he turned to see that the stranger had stopped again, this time talking to the blind beggar who always sat under the corner street lamp while holding his meager coffee can in the hopes of getting some spare change. Around his neck was a cardboard sign sporting the poorly written words, "ABANDONED BY GOD." The driver, Marvin Stancil, was now becoming agitated at having to wait for his fare. Maybe he should start the meter running already? It would serve that dude right! And why the hell was he talking to that old beggar over there?

Fifteen feet away, the beggar sensed that someone had stopped

before him. He could sometimes make out the faint outlines of things even if he could not clearly see them. Like a little blind bird who strains upward with an open mouth sensing the return of its mother to the nest, the beggar held his coffee can upward with frail, disease covered hands. "Spare change, please?" Can you please help me with spare change? I ain't ate all day, mister. Can you please spare me some change ... friend? Please?"

Marvin strained to hear what was going on but they were too far away. With the stranger's back to the cab, Marvin could not see his face. The man stood motionless over the beggar and Marvin suddenly felt somewhat uneasy. There was something about the man that made him uncomfortable. He fancied just driving away and coming back in an hour. But like coming upon an awful car wreck he found that he could not look away.

The stranger reached into one of the inner pockets of his flowing overcoat. Butch and Patty had generously "donated" all of their loose change. Most were quarters but there were a few dollars and half dollars in the pile. He estimated that he had about \$25 in coins that weighted his coat lining. He gathered it all in a massive fist and dropped it all into the beggar's coffee can.

The sudden dramatic shift in the can's weight took the blind man by surprise. He almost dropped it. Holding on tight he reached inside and felt the contents bestowed by this so far mute benefactor. Realizing the extent of the offering the poor man began to laugh, his smile revealing rotted teeth and infected gums. "Wow, mister! This is the most I ever got from one person!" The stranger got down on one knee, looking into the blind eyes of the beggar who still smiled with jubilant excitement. He reached forward and slipped a \$50 bill into the man's dying fingers.

"I just slipped you \$50, old man," he whispered. "Spend it wisely." Although the stranger whispered and the old beggar's ears were not

what they used to be, he heard each word as clearly as though it had been shouted into a microphone with crystalline clarity. There was something special about this voice. It was powerful and dangerous but not menacing ... at least not to him. The old man's sightless eyes grew wide, his long evaporated dignity trying desperately to come back.

"Why are you doing this? What do you want of me?" In answer the stranger stood and reached out, grasping the handwritten sign that sat tilted in the beggar's lap.

"I want your sign, old man. Just your sign. That's all." He gently took the cardboard sign, folded it in half and tossed it into the open trash can three feet away. He knelt again, leaning in to address the bedraggled and broken shell that sat before him. "God has not abandoned you, old man. Don't let your blindness rob you of your sight." For the first time fear shown on the man's pain-etched face. Sensing that the man was now standing over him, he looked upward.

"Is that you, Lord? Have you come to take me away?" The stranger shook his head in pity rather than disgust.

"No, my friend," he gently answered. "I'm just a lonely pilgrim trying to find my way back home. I'm no different from you. So be at peace. All will yet be well." And with that he walked away, again approaching the cab. Marvin waited inside, the meter now running. Sally, having seen the whole exchange, was still standing very still, hoping that her lack of motion would grant her invisibility.

Still sitting in disbelief, holding his coffee can in one hand and the \$50 bill in the other, Eddy "Echo" Goldstein began to shiver. He had not felt such intense cold since the night he almost froze to death as an Army private in Korea while patrolling the DMZ in 1965. But even in his drug crazed and clouded mind he knew that this cold had nothing to do with the weather. For the first

time since he'd been blinded by drinking the homemade alcohol his cousin sold him more than a decade earlier, he was thankful to be blind. He was certain he had just been in the presence of the Most Holy High. And as Rabbi Steinberg had drilled in his head many years ago, to see the face of God is surely to die!

When the stranger effortlessly glided into the back of Marvin's cab his face was still obscured. The light inside the cab was busted so it was dark in the back seat, making it impossible for Marvin to see much of anything. "My meter done already running on you, mister. I start the meter running when the fare hails me down. So you already owe me \$3 before we even start. We clear on that?" The stranger didn't answer the question. Instead he gave his instructions.

"The old Confederate Cemetery on Jackson road ... as quickly as possible." Marvin began to laugh.

"Old cemetery on Jackson Road? Man, you really are out of your mind. Ain't nothing good going on out there this time o' night. I ain't about to go out to no Jackson Road this time o' night, no sir. So pay me my fare and you can get someone else to take you out there but it won't be me!"

"What is your name, driver?" Marvin felt the hairs on his neck stand up. There was something ominous about the voice of his fare. He nervously looked into the rearview mirror. In the darkness of the back seat he could make out the outline of the man who sat there and nothing else. But what made his blood freeze was the eyes. They were glowing a bright red in the darkness of the Louisiana night!

"Marvin's my name," he stammered. "My name is Marvin."

"Do you have a last name, Marvin?" His voice sounded cold and authoritative. Strangely it did not sound threatening.

"Let's just leave it at Marvin for now ... sir ... if that's okay?"

Marvin nervously glanced into the rearview mirror. He suddenly noticed that sweat was running down his face and dripping off his chin.

“Let’s not waste time arguing a point that needs no debate, Marvin. You have nothing to fear from me. You provide a service that I require and I’m prepared to reward you for the same. So get this cab in gear and let’s get going. Do we have an understanding?”

In his mind Marvin wanted to say, “No, sir, we are not even *close* to an understanding!” But he thought the better of it. It was clear that this man, whoever he was, was no strung out weirdo like the ones who routinely rode in Marvin’s cab. The finality of his voice left no room for doubt ... this stranger was a man used to obedience with zero dissent. So all Marvin could do was nervously nod, stare straight ahead while gripping the steering wheel with all of his might, and reply, “Okay, mister. I’ll do it. I’ll do it for you.”

Sally, the prostitute formally known as ‘Angel,’ still stood frozen and trembling on the sidewalk. Try as she might she simply could not will her legs to take her away. She suddenly felt a wave of nausea overwhelm her like a person in shock who finally realizes that they survived a near-death experience and have a sudden understanding of their own mortality. For the first time in her life, Sally realized just how small and insignificant she really was in the overall scheme of the known ... and unknown ... universe.

She watched the cab pull away from the curb, then began digging into the small purse that hung casually across her shoulder. With trembling hands she pulled the small brown bag containing the bottle to her lips and drank feverishly. As she replaced the bottle in her purse she finally found her strength and turned abruptly to run home and call it an early night. When she did she was startled by one of her cohorts, ‘Trini,’ who had just arrived to attempt to attract customers from the train depot.

“Why so upset, Angel? Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay,” she snapped. “And don’t call me Angel no more. My name is Sally! Call me Sally!” Trini looked confused, her brow furrowed in large ripples.

“Fine by me, girl,” she quipped. “If you are leaving that’s just more customers for me. What happened to you anyway? You look like you seen a ghost!” Sally looked directly into Trini’s eyes like a woman drowning and desperately grasping for a life raft just out of reach. The look on Sally’s face made Trini uneasy.

“Not a ghost, Trini,” Sally blurted out, her face hardened with fear and stress. “No, not a ghost. What I saw tonight was ...” Her voice trailed off.

“What did you say it was, Sally? I didn’t hear you.” Sally swallowed hard and pulled in close to Trini.

“I said it weren’t no ghost, Trini. It was ... judgment!”

Chapter 8

*I would rather be a coward than brave because people
hurt you when you are brave.* **E. M. Forster (1879 - 1970)**

Mike Ewing arrived around 9:00 PM at the out of the way VFW club near Leavenworth, Kansas. He had been coming here on most nights for the last couple of years to slow down and unwind. He wasn't getting any younger. The wild, beer drinking, women chasing days of his youth had long since passed him by. Besides, his income was not what it used to be. He'd been drawing social security for the last three years and he had that small disability pension he still got from the Army, courtesy of Hanoi, 1971. And he still did the occasional odd job by wiring homes for home theater or security alarms. He had always been good with electronics. He just never had the drive to pursue it beyond the bare minimum to get by. His obvious disdain for people also complicated his employment status.

Mike had never felt especially close to anyone, not even in his youth. His dad had been a career soldier and was always harping about duty, honor, country, and crap like that. But Mike never bought it. Growing up on the east side of St. Louis, he was a tough, street-wise kid, even if he didn't look it. Standing nearly six feet, he weighed maybe 145. That was a good ten pounds heavier than he'd

weighed the day he got the draft letter from Uncle Sam in 1969. He went to Vietnam because he had no choice. It was something which his father, a proud veteran of World War II and Korea, never understood. That's where he met Jerry Bronson, who was something else to behold! He was good at *everything* ... a natural leader from a small town in South Georgia who commanded respect and had an uncanny ability to get the most out of everyone in the unit. Maybe that's why Mike hated his guts!

Paul Wolverton was another story. Paul was the consummate screw-up and spent about as much time in the central holding facility (the place where you locked up soldiers for a few days rather than sentencing them to a jail term) as he did out of it. He loved killing those gooks though. And he had been very good at it. Men, women, kids, north or south, none of that mattered to Paul. He just liked to fight, hurt and kill. He and Mike stayed together when they got discharged and their travels eventually took them to Timmons ville, where "goody two-shoes" Jerry Bronson found work for them and a place to stay. After the big pay-off they got in 1995, Mike and Paul headed west, eventually ending up in Kansas, where Mike bounced from one electronics job to another. He'd made decent money but nothing to brag about. Paul was usually drunk, unemployed and/or recovering from a bar fight.

Mike had been there two years ago in the biker bar in Kansas City where Paul took on some less than hospitable gang bangers not impressed with Paul's belligerent nature. When the smoke cleared, Paul was dead, killed from a punctured lung caused by an 8" stiletto that still protruded from his rib cage. That was when Mike decided to cool his wild days. He tried finding a bar more suitable to a man in his mid-sixties. He joined the VFW mainly because they had the cheapest beer in town and he knew no one would bother him here. He tolerated all these idealist baboons who

flocked here on a regular basis to drape themselves in the flag, sing old Army songs and argue about which service had the toughest sergeants or weakest officers. He knew them all now ... Redmond, Olds, Sinnott, Sullivan, Boyd, Whitney ... heroes all. They all made him puke! They would gawk and fawn over his Purple Heart like it was some kind of badge of honor. At least that medal had kept his disability pension coming for all of these years. It was also most likely the reason that Bronson had trusted him and took care of him when he came to Timmonsville. Yep, ol' Jerry Bronson had been one amazing piece of work. What a stupid bastard he was!

Ewing and Bronson arrived at Ft. Benning in the same basic training class in the summer of 1970. Ewing was drafted and had no choice but to either show up or head to Canada. He wished he'd done the latter, but at 19 he was still too afraid of his old man to try anything like that. And of course Bronson was the All-American small town hero who volunteered, turning down a football scholarship to Georgia Tech to "serve his county with honor and distinction." What a bunch of crap. He'd breezed through basic training and for some reason kept thinking he'd help Mike Ewing along the way. What? Did he *look* like he needed help?

When basic training ended, both Bronson (now already an E-4 ... corporal) and Ewing (still an E-1 ... private) came up on orders for Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home of the 101st Airborne Division, the legendary 'Screaming Eagles.' This historic unit had forged its name in the fires of World War II from Normandy to Bastogne and beyond. Bronson was so very happy to be going to the "Band of Brothers," but not Ewing. He knew that an assignment to the 101st could only mean that Vietnam could not be far behind. At least they'd get an additional \$50 per month for parachute duty. And as he'd predicted, within six months of arriving on station the unit received its marching orders ... a one year deployment to the

Republic of South Vietnam, an Asian vacation courtesy of the US government! What a bunch of crock!

It was during the train-up for deployment that Wolverton joined the unit. He and Ewing made a decent pair but despite their obvious disdain for Bronson, he kept looking out for them. By the time they deployed three months later, Bronson was already an E-5 sergeant while Ewing and Wolverton still bottomed out at E-1.

They arrived in country on March 25, 1971. As bad luck would have it, the Eastertide Offensive began five days later when 200,000 North Vietnamese soldiers under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap waged an all-out attempt to conquer South Vietnam. General Giap gambled that the timing was right thanks to several factors ... U.S. troop withdrawal, the strength of the anti-war movement in America (likely preventing a U.S. retaliatory response), and the poor performance of South Vietnam's Army in the past year. Ewing was on the front lines as North Vietnamese Army troops, artillery and tanks rolled into South Vietnam. The U.S. response was brutal and in less than a week of intense fighting, American forces halted the offensive. Estimated losses to the North Vietnamese Army were thought to be more than 100,000 with at least half of their large caliber artillery and tanks lost as well.

On April 2, airstrikes against the North Vietnamese were authorized under the name "OPERATION FREEDOM TRAIN." At first these strikes were in support of the South Vietnamese forces. Later the restrictions against attacking North Vietnam were lifted and the effort changed to that of the interdiction of supply lines. By mid-April, virtually all of North Vietnam had been cleared for bombing raids for the first time in more than three years. On May 10, the name of the operation against North Vietnam was changed to "LINEBACKER." Directly in the middle of it all was Private Mike Ewing, Private Paul Wolverton, and the "great American

hero,” Sergeant Jerry Bronson. The fateful day of reckoning for Ewing came on May 15, 1971.

Deployed along a supply line near Hanoi, Ewing’s unit, Dog Company, 501st Regiment, came under intense enemy artillery and small arms fire while “moving to contact” (a military operation designed to flush out concealed enemy forces). Dog Company was to assist Easy Company, a unit already pinned down. Some poor sucker on point (Ewing couldn’t remember the sap’s name) was killed instantly. SGT Bronson immediately moved to the head of the column and obliterated two enemy bunkers. Spotting four Viet Cong snipers, Bronson killed all of them, evacuated a wounded fellow soldier, then returned to lead repeated assaults against enemy positions, killing several more Viet Cong. Moving to attack two additional enemy bunkers, he grabbed Ewing and shouted, “Come with me!” Being so small and scrawny, Ewing tried to resist but was pulled along by the much more powerful and commanding Bronson. The two drew intense enemy fire as both men were wounded and blown from their feet by an enemy grenade. While Ewing lay screaming with a non-life threatening leg wound, the more seriously injured Bronson arose and single-handedly destroyed an additional bunker.

It was at that time that Wolverton arrived and was shot in the shoulder by a sniper. He fell to the ground, dropping his M-16 beside him as a hail of bullets began raining down on their position. Seizing Wolverton’s M-16, Bronson fixed a bayonet and charged through the deadly fusillade to silence the other bunker. He returned to evacuate Ewing and Wolverton and replenish his ammunition only to return to the forefront to continue the fight. When the forward element was ordered to withdraw, he carried Ewing on his shoulders to the rear. As he returned to evacuate Wolverton, he was taken under fire by snipers but raced beyond the friendly troops to

attack and kill them all! After evacuating Wolverton, he returned to cover the retreat of the entire 501st. When he ran out of ammo, according to the citation that followed, Bronson engaged in hand to hand combat, supposedly killing a dozen Viet Cong infantrymen with his knife and bare hands.

Even to this day, more than 35 years later, Ewing still hated that story. He'd contemplated 'fragging' Bronson a couple of times but the opportunity never arose. At least not then. That great opportunity came 25 years later in Bronson's own backyard. And boy did it feel good! He'd have done it for free, especially when Wolverton agreed to join in, but getting paid made it even sweeter! And his wife! What was her name? Angela ... Angel ... something like that? Now that was one sweet looking broad! What a shame that he never had a shot at her! She'd have actually been one to remember. Curse that idiot Dick Spear and his "devotion." Spear had saved her from Ewing but in the end she'd bought the farm anyway.

"Hey, Mike!" Someone was shouting his name. It broke his concentration and reminded him that he was sitting at the bar in the VFW. It was Leon Teague, the Korean War vet who usually tended bar on week nights.

"Hey, Leo," Ewing acknowledged, raising his beer mug in recognition. "What's up?"

"It's that dude who calls you here sometimes ... Fast, I think he said? Anyway, he's on the phone back here." Teague pointed over his shoulder at the antiquated heavy black telephone that sat on a shelf behind the bar. "You wanna talk to him tonight?" Ewing rolled his eyes and shook his head in negative.

"Hell no, Leo! Tell him you have not seen me in awhile ... please!" Leo didn't verbally answer but gave a thumbs-up as he flipped a white towel over his shoulder and sauntered back to the

phone. Ewing could not hear everything Leo said but he caught the gist of it. Leo was telling the caller that he'd not seen Mike Ewing in almost a month and yes, he'd pass the message that Fast had called if he saw him. Then Leo hung up, gave Ewing a smile and a wink and began polishing glasses. "Thanks, Leo," Ewing smiled. "I owe you one!"

Ewing took a final swig of his beer and left a dollar bill on the bar. It was barely 10:30 but he was tired, his head ached, his back hurt, and he was just generally in a foul mood. He certainly didn't have the patience tonight to listen to these rednecks spout their old war stories and babble on about love of God and country. Maybe he was coming down with something ... a bad cold maybe? With summer coming on it was possible. Summer colds were the worst! That's what he'd always heard. But more likely than that, his aches and pains could be attributed to the lack of sleep he'd suffered in the last couple of weeks. It seemed that every time he lay down and closed his eyes, he'd hear some stupid dog barking right outside his window. But every time he'd go investigate he could find nothing. He'd return inside, lie down, close his eyes and ... you guessed it ... the barking would start up again. But he'd just as soon lie awake listening to the barking than sleep anyway. Sleep brought dreams, dreams so vivid that he'd awaken screaming and drenched in sweat. He'd had them for awhile when he was in physical therapy following his medical discharge from the Army. No matter how hard he tried he just could not erase those horrible memories from his mind. And the dreams seemed so very real!

His psychiatrist told him that vivid dreams are common following a traumatic event like being wounded in battle. He called them "night terrors." He eventually realized that these night terrors would not go away. You just had to learn to live with them. Over the years the night terrors subsided, but recently they had started up

again, only worse than before. He kept dreaming that he was being chased by a big, black dog with huge sharp teeth and a powerful, bone crushing bite. Just as this dog would bear down on him he'd be stopped by something else ... something worse ... something that stood in the shadows or lingered in the dark.

This man or thing ... whatever it was ... was absolutely terrifying. Among all the night terrors Ewing had ever faced, this one was by far the worst. And Ewing could feel the hate ... the anger ... the old time "fire and brimstone" annihilation! But worst of all were those red eyes that seemed to burn right through his skin! It made him nervous and kept him looking over his shoulders even now as he walked to his old Chevy van that sat on bald tires in the VFW parking lot.

"Get a grip, Ewing," he muttered to himself as he took a deep breath and inserted his key. And it was at that very moment, just as the ignition turned over, that he heard it again! It was that infernal dog barking, so loud and so ferocious! It sounded as if it were just outside his window. Ewing gasped and fearfully looked to his left in the direction of the awful sound. As it always was ... there was nothing there.

Chapter 9

Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery. Malcolm X (1925 - 1965)

Marvin was normally quite vocal with his passengers, but tonight it seemed disrespectful to make small talk. Even so, after several minutes of uncomfortable silence he tried to speak. He hoped to break the tension that threatened to blow the windows from the cab.

“So why go to that old bone yard so late, mister? There ain’t much to it, not even in daytime. And there ain’t no lights out there. I’ve heard stores of strange things that goes on out at that place in the dark. Not that I’ve ever seem ‘em but people has told me things from out there. Bad things.” Marvin looked into the mirror for a response ... any kind of response ... but his passenger said nothing. At least, Marvin sighed to himself, his eyes were no longer glowing.

“You got any ancestors buried out there, mister? I hear some folks has found their great granddaddies buried out there. But most of them graves ain’t even got no marker. And they is lots of ‘em buried there and you can’t find no evidence of a grave at all! But all these stories I heard was told by folks who went out there in the daytime. I never heard of no one going out there at night.”

No response. Since the stranger said nothing but did not seem angered by the ongoing commentary, Marvin decided to keep talking. He found it made him less nervous. He glanced down at the meter. Without another thought, he reached down and casually turned it off. Hopeful and smiling he looked into the mirror again and said, "Just wanted you to know that there ain't no charge for your fare tonight. This trip is on ol' Marvin! So just relax and we'll be there in no time!" The rider made a small shift and Marvin knew he was finally going to say something. *Anything* would be better than *nothing*.

"Your charity is refreshing, Marvin, but unnecessary. I am fully prepared to pay you for this ride ... to *give you what's coming to you!*" Marvin didn't like the sound of that. Was that a threat?

"No, sir, don't you even worry about that, sir. No, sir, not at all. This ride is for free for you. Absolutely!" He glanced into his mirror again, hoping for some reaction. The rider sat motionless. Silence permeated the cab.

"They got lots of stories about the old cemetery, y'know? Some are really old ... ones my granny would tell me from back when she was just a girl. Did you know she grew up not far from there, no more than five miles at best? At least that's what I think she said. And she told me that sometimes late at night the ghosts of those confederate soldiers gets up and walks around. They thinks they are still alive and the war is still happening. You know what I'm telling you? I'm telling about the war between the north and the south ... the civil war? Have you ever heard of anything so crazy as that? I mean, ghosts walking around and all? Do you believe in stuff like that, mister?"

Again Marvin looked into his mirror, nervously awaiting and hoping for a response. He continued staring, unable to avert his gaze. No answer. Fighting the panic swelling inside his chest, Marvin tugged at his collar, finding it difficult to breathe and impossible to swallow. Was this man going to kill him?

“So why go to the boneyard so late, mister? Ya do know it’s done closed for the night, yes? And it’s so dark you won’t be able to see or find nothing or no one there. So you already know that, right?” Marvin’s persistence finally paid off.

“I’m looking for someone, Marvin,” he stated flatly with no emotion. “The midnight gloom poses no problem. This man is well suited for the cover of darkness. Now please concentrate on your driving. You are weaving into the left side of the road.” Marvin let the words sink in, then turned his gaze back to the road.

“Oh, God!” Marvin yelled as his cab indeed was drifting off the road to the left. He jerked a hard right to get it back into the correct lane. While there were no other cars on this lonely deserted road there were ample large trees draped in Spanish moss that lined the path on either side. Their outstretched branches formed a natural and unworldly arch that overlooked the road and partially blocked the eerie glow of the fog-enshrouded full moon. To hit one of those trees head-on would likely be fatal. Marvin whistled softly and urged himself to regain his composure. But all he could say was, “Sorry, sir! Won’t happen again, sir!”

The eternity filled minutes it took to traverse the remaining seven miles passed with no conversation between the two. While the entire trip had only taken twenty minutes, Marvin had found plenty of time ... too much time ... to reflect on his life and the things he’d still like to try before it ended!

The cab pulled neatly and silently into the front of the old Confederate cemetery. A heavy fog rolled from the low ground and covered the earth, seemingly alive and moving to the beat of an unseen and silent band. Consumed with fear, his hands trembling and his stomach about to burst, Marvin gripped the wheel and stared straight ahead.

“We’re here, sir. The old cemetery, just like you asked! And there

ain't no charge or nuthin' like that!" Afraid to look into the mirror or turn to face the silent passenger, Marvin continued staring ahead into the darkness. No answer came from the rear seat. Summoning all of his courage, Marvin turned and reverently asked, "Did you hear me, sir? I said ... what the hell?" Marvin's blood ran cold. There was no one in the back seat!

Seeing his opportunity to escape, Marvin yanked the transmission into gear and screeched his tires as he sped away from the cemetery. Dirt flew in all directions as the cab's wheels spun against the soft clay before gripping the rough asphalt pavement. He didn't even bother looking back as he rocketed away from the centuries old resting place of the local dead. He thought he had experienced fear before but he had been wrong. Fear was a living and unforgiving monster and Marvin had looked it in the eye and still lived to tell of it. He instinctively made the sign of the cross as he disappeared into the night, silently thanking the infinite powers of the universe that he was not the true object that the mysterious stranger was seeking. Whoever that man was, God help him! God help him indeed!

From the shadows of the night's gloom, the stranger watched the cab fly away. He felt no need to stop it or speak to Marvin a final time. Marvin had accomplished his purpose. Now it was time for him to accomplish his mission as well.

Standing all around him were the ghosts who regularly roamed these forgotten grounds. More than fifty restless souls gathered and watched with him as Marvin raced away. Present were the obligatory soldiers, orphaned children, weeping mothers and lonely men. Perhaps they were curious to see who this new visitor might be. Or perhaps they, like he, were curious to finally see justice served. He looked into their faces and walked away from them without speaking ... their stories were sad but they were not what had brought him to this place. Besides, he seriously doubted that

any of the ghosts in this place could boast a story more crushing than his own.

He now faced the cemetery, looking overhead at the rusting and dilapidated arch that stood above him. It read "NATIONAL CONFEDERATE CEMETERY." At one time it appeared that a fence had encircled the grounds. If so, it had long since fallen into disrepair. There were entire sections that no longer even existed. It was clear that few visitors ever deemed it necessary to make this venture. Most graves, as Marvin had explained, were unmarked. The uneven arrival of visitors would normally go unnoticed except for a small bouquet or token left on a marker or gravestone. Despite the thick fog, overhanging trees and thick darkness he found that he could see everything clearly. In the distance he heard the old familiar bark of a dog. No, not a dog ... *his* dog. The slight hint of a smile pursed his lips.

"He's here," he spoke softly to no one but himself. "I knew he'd be here." He took a few steps forward, standing just on the edge of the grounds and just outside the overhanging arch. Then he unleashed a shrill whistle that awakened a covey of swallows nesting in the trees overhead. They took wing and screamed their protest as they fluttered wildly around the burial grounds before returning to their night resting spots. Looking left and right while alertly scanning the depths of the area for any movement and seeing none, he whistled again, paused, and continued a third time. "Come on, boy," he coaxed. "I know you are in there!"

Lying awake and trembling in the darkness of his solitary trailer, Arlo Sanchez sat upright in his cot. "What was that?" He asked the question aloud even though he was alone. When he realized it was the sound of a man whistling he smiled from ear to ear. He thought he'd heard a car pull into the cemetery lot but had not been certain. He could not recall a visitor ever arriving so late at night. "Maybe

that's the idiot who owns the dog I've been hearing," he rejoiced. Jumping from his cot he pulled on his sweats and sandals, bursting shirtless from his trailer. He felt silly for the unfounded fears he'd experienced earlier in the day. He'd go meet this man, they'd have a laugh and he'd finally be rid of that infernal canine and his irritating barking.

Back at the archway entrance, the stranger stood erect, seemingly waiting for something. Growling sounds echoed from the darkness. It sounded guttural and menacing like a large ravenous wolf or rabid large hound ... a hound from Hell. The sound seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Showing no signs of concern he tilted his head to listen more closely and pinpoint the origin of the sound. From every corner of the cemetery, dozens of angry, vicious dogs emerged, completely surrounding the man. Each appeared ready to attack as one, their anger rising in a crescendo composed from man's darkest nightmares.

These were the ghosts of the dogs murdered by Arlo Sanchez, their bodies cast on a rotting trash heap just within the woods. They had once been family pets, a happy birthday or Christmas gift to a laughing child who no longer wanted them. They'd been abandoned and sought refuge from Sanchez. All they had received from him was death. Now they roamed the spirit world in a pack, seeking their own revenge for their brutal betrayal or perhaps salvation from a caring master. As a single entity, they howled their anger to the skies and prepared to attack this stranger who seemed able to pierce the veil separating the living world from that of the dead.

In response, the man broke into a wide smile, sank to his knees and opened his arms wide. "Ah, you're right on time, boy!" At his words all the dogs suddenly went silent and disappeared back into the murky darkness ... all except one! That dog charged forward and leapt into the arms of the now laughing stranger.

“Is that you, Blue? Is that you, Blue boy? Come here, boy! Come to your daddy, ol’ Blue boy!” The man hugged and petted the dog with uncontrolled joy as the dog reciprocated, running in circles and barking as happy dogs are apt to do before returning to his master for more hugging and petting. This dog was nothing more than an excited and goofy family pet. “Oh, Blue boy,” the man exclaimed, his once cold voice now quivering with emotion. “I’ve missed you something awful, Blue boy!”

As if reacting to some unseen alarm the man suddenly stood erect. The smile slid from his face like the last vestiges of sunlight across a western sky as the sun sinks into the far horizon. The dog sensed it immediately, his wagging tail now stilled. He followed the gaze of his master toward the rear of the burial grounds. The temperature suddenly dropped twenty degrees throughout the graveyard. The trees grew silent. There was no wind blowing in a night that only moments ago seemed alive with the sounds of the forest. Now it lay as quiet as an arctic winter.

“We’ve come to the right place, Blue boy. Much to *his* eternal regret, we’ve come to the right place!” He reached into his overcoat and pulled out the mask ... the Herbert Lom-inspired Phantom mask. He placed it over his face and the white featureless visage seemed to emit an unearthly glow. As if knowing what to do, Blue scampered to the left and disappeared into the fog. The stranger’s eyes began to glow a bright ominous, angry red. “Let’s get to work, Blue boy.” He began marching in a slow, methodical manner toward the back of the grounds ... toward the trailer of Arlo Sanchez.

Chapter 10

The gods visit the sins of the fathers upon the children.

Euripides (485-406 BC)

It had been a long day for Sheriff Dick Spear, but even though it was now nearing midnight it was not close to being over. He would have stopped off at the old diner for a cup of coffee but it had long since boarded its windows and locked the doors. Even now, in these modern times of continuous entertainment and instant gratification, it was impossible to get a cup of coffee after 10:00 PM in Timmonsville. Most folks here said that was all part of its small town charm. On most days Dick Spear would have agreed. He did not feel that way today. He wearily climbed out of his patrol car, not even bothering to lock it as he slammed the door and began his climb up the steps of the court house. He unlocked the door and walked across the darkened rotunda without even bothering to turn on the lights. When you've made the same few steps every day of your life since your childhood you could do it with your eyes closed. Lights were for chumps!

Moving through his own office door with ease he now decided it would be wise to illuminate the place. He flipped on the light while heading to the now cold and long abandoned coffee pot. Glenda did a good job of keeping the place tidy and presentable. Despite

all of their flirting they had never been an item, even though the teenage grapevine clearly indicated that she was sweet on him when they were both 16. But his heart had always belonged to another and *her* heart had always belonged to another still. He had believed he had found a way to fix that problem 15 years ago but that had not ended anywhere near as he'd planned. In fact it made matters even worse than before. The gods of fate were indeed cruel.

He chose not to make a pot of coffee after all. Instead he found the jar of dehydrated instant coffee and decided to zap a cup of water in the microwave and add the freeze dried crystals for a quicker caffeine hit. The flavor was nowhere near as good but in the mood he was in tonight he doubted he'd care.

After things didn't work out with *her* he had resigned himself to the belief that he'd never marry. And he never had. He'd barely even dated. And who would have believed that? He was still a handsome man, physically fit and the respected sheriff son of a community legend who gave his life protecting the good people of Timmons ville. His insurance settlement from that horrible event guaranteed that he and his mother would live out their lives in ease. That had certainly been true for his mom. The late Mrs. Cindy Spear died of diabetic complications and a grieving heart five years after Big Ben was killed. From that moment on the family inheritance fell to Dick.

He could have taken that money and moved to Florida like he used to dream of doing, living out his days swimming, sunning, and fishing while sleeping till noon and going anywhere he pleased. But he felt an obligation to his father's memory, so he stayed in Timmons ville. And by staying he hoped to one day catch the attention of *her*. But she never even gave him the time of day. Being a single man in a small town didn't sit well with some of the folks. The eventual rumors and whispers of his sexuality or preferences

came into question. But without any chance of loving her he delved completely into his job. Later he focused on caring for his grieving and dying mother. That garnered him a great deal of sympathy from the townsfolk. He was the first choice of everybody when they wanted to fix up a special niece, cousin, sister, etc. But he always had an excuse to decline. After awhile people just accepted the fact that he was never going to marry and the subject just died. But he still dreamed that one day she'd notice him and fall for him. It could still happen, you know? Hope springs eternal. That's what his mom always used to say. He hoped that was true!

Following the special election of 1995, after the death of Sheriff Bronson, he'd served as county sheriff with distinction and honor. He had no doubt that he would be the sheriff here for as long as he wanted to be. He always thought that would be a long, long time, but that was before today. The 'ding' from the old buzzing microwave alerted him that the water was heated as he'd appropriated. He opened the door, added the instant crystals, stirred and sipped. The grimace on his face indicated that maybe he should have made that percolated pot after all.

Taking the steaming cup with him to his office, he again paused and looked up at the painting of his legendary father, Big Ben Spear. He raised his cup to the painting in a salute. "How are you, Dad," he said aloud. "I wish you were here with me today." He'd never meant it more than he did right now. He'd asked everybody in Timmons County, or at least it seemed that he had asked them all, if they'd noticed anything strange in regards to the old cemetery in the last few days. No one had seen or heard anything. The wild stories were already spreading across the county, ranging from alien UFO sightings to supernatural phenomena to young folks playing pranks and showing no respect for authority or dignity. He blamed Spindola for the supernatural stories. It didn't help that the 'good

and right reverend' was so respected by everyone in the community. If he were some 'fire and brimstone' prognosticator it'd be easy to discount him. But when Spindola spoke everybody listened intently.

He stacked his feet on top of his desk and sighed, then tried to connect all the dots of the day. Nothing made sense to him ... none of the pieces fit. He decided that a little touch of bourbon might make the coffee more tolerable. He reached into the bottom drawer and pulled out the bottle that had helped him through more than one long and lonely night. "Don't lean too heavy on the bottle, boy," he could hear Big Ben say. "But a little touch ever now and then don't hurt nothin'," he'd add with a wink and a smile.

Dick hated death and the price it had extracted from his life. With that cheery thought he doubled the amount of whiskey he usually enjoyed as it spilled over the brim of the cup. "A little coffee with my whiskey," he chortled. But even he found no humor in his tired voice. He took a healthy swig, then repeated his thought process to make sense of the day's events. One thing that did trouble him kept creeping back into his mind. More than a couple of folks expressed concern that some members of that old biker gang, the Broken Bones, might have crept back into town. There were still plenty of residents who remembered firsthand what happened that night back in '79 when Roscoe Parker and his band of maniacs roared into town hell-bent for death and destruction. No one remembered it more than Dick himself. When you see your father screaming in agony, burning alive and nailed to the side of the local mission, it's something you don't *ever* forget. He drained the coffee/bourbon mix in a final gulp, then refilled the cup with straight bourbon. He drained that as well. He looked up at the painting of his dad again. There was Big Ben, still smiling and on the job. "How are you, Dad," he whimpered again, his voice not quite as steady as it had

been just a few moments earlier. "I wish you were here with me today."

He guessed it was normal that some would fear the graveyard desecration to be a return of the Bones to Timmonsville. While he knew that Roscoe Parker had died in prison a couple of years after being sentenced to life without parole, he knew that there were sick idiots in society who worshipped mass killers like the Bones. Some might try to start a new gang in honor of the old ones. But all of the original members of the Broken Bones were dead. Sheriff, or rather it was *Pastor* Bronson who took care of that.

Yes, it was Pastor Bronson, not yet elected sheriff, not even considering *running* for sheriff, who once again saved the day that night. And Dick? He was the deputy! It was his dad screaming and crying as he burned alive on that church wall! It should have been Dick Spear who saved the town that night! But it wasn't. It was *Bronson*. It was *always* Bronson. It had always *been* Bronson. And tonight, 15 years after his death, it was *still* Bronson who everyone spoke of! He reached for the bottle again, but to his dismay it was empty.

Suddenly, a thought sparked and came to life from a long buried memory. The ones who were on the prowl that night in 1995? He knew them well. Perhaps they were the ones behind this! He sat upright as it actually made sense! Wolverton, Sanchez, Ewing, and Fast! They, or at least one of them, could have come back to cause trouble. Maybe they wanted more hush money? If so they'd find that they'd made a huge mistake. He let them leave with their lives before but if they'd come back? Well, he might not be so forgiving this time.

Wolverton was dead. He remembered that immediately. Fast was now a lunatic frightened of his own shadow living somewhere out in Washington state. Tacoma, was it? But Sanchez and Ewing

were still alive. Yes, it was probably Ewing. That evil bastard was capable of anything. He'd send out an all points bulletin (APB) in the morning to confirm where Sanchez and Ewing lived now, although he recalled they were in Texas or Oklahoma or someplace out west. And then an awful thought came to his mind. If they had returned to desecrate the grave of Bronson, they might also be planning to ...! He could not bring himself to finish the thought. Grabbing his hat he rushed out to his patrol car and revved it up. He needed to head out to the Dove of Peace assisted living home. If Ewing had come back to town, Dove of Peace would be where he'd be headed next. And if he had indeed returned? Sheriff Spear didn't even want to think about that!

As the sheriff's car spun away into the night, a solitary figure sat perfectly concealed beneath the pink dogwood trees that lined Broad Street. The sheltering trees coupled with the sheriff's intense concentration to get to the Dove of Peace as quickly as possible gave him the perfect cover. Vladimir Buchinsky laughed and reached into his pocket, pulling a well-worn leather pouch from his inner coat lining. He gently opened it with aged hands hopelessly stained from years of rolling his own cigarettes and touching vast amounts of unholy objects. His fingernails were long and sharp, perfectly manicured.

After unwrapping the leather pouch, he pulled a clear plastic bag from within it. He didn't open the clear container, but upon seeing the murky brown content, he chuckled and returned it back inside the larger soft-leather pocket. Taking a deep breath, he removed his tobacco container from the opposite pocket and began rolling an acrid smelling cigarette. Licking the paper with his bulbous tongue, he sealed it, placed it between his red, chapped lips and lit it with a snap of his fingers. He inhaled deeply, then exhaled as his chuckle became an ominous laugh.

He smirked at the pompous egos of these people. They lived from moment to moment, thinking that winning a single battle or small skirmish would end the war with them victorious! Typical American overconfidence! He had waited more than 50 years for this event to finally run its course. True, he had not expected it to take this long. It should have all ended when Dick Spear was just a boy. For some reason, his assassin had failed him. He'd never have believed that to be possible!

The bikers had served him well but that was to have been the final blow, not the first! Something had gone wrong with his avatar at some point along the way. Looking back on it now, Vladimir felt that this failure had actually worked to his advantage. By returning to the place where Ben Spear had so publicly humiliated him, he had shown that his dark gifts were more powerful than ever. They were so powerful, in fact, that even death itself could not stay his hand!

Still he would need to investigate the cause of his avatar going so far off kilter when it had been presented plenty of opportunities to seal the deal. He suspected that it was this Christian puppet, Spindola, who was at the root of the problem. He smiled and took another deep drag from his smoldering cigarette. The burning black tobacco sizzled as it evaporated the damp exterior of the moisture sealed paper.

Spindola's faith was worthless when compared to *his* unique time tested black arts. And now, at long last, the circle would be complete. On the anniversary of the fiery death of Ben Spear, his family line would be obliterated! His pathetic son, Sheriff Dick Spear, would meet the same fate as his arrogant father. It should have been Spear the elder's comically inept act of kindness that triggered Vladimir Buchinsky's greatest revenge spell ever! But now he would see it happen with his own eyes! This would be

even better! This year the namesake trees of the annual dogwood festival would literally drip with blood! He took a final drag before dropping the flaming embers on the sidewalk. He crushed it out just as he intended to do to Dick Spear and all the worthless cows who resided in Timmonsville. Soon! Very soon!

Chapter 11

Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once. Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, It seems to me most strange that men should fear; Seeing that death, a necessary end, Will come when it will come. **William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar**

Arlo's fear and trepidation vanished as soon as he heard the man whistling. He was cranky and his head hurt from being trapped in the trailer all day, afraid to leave thanks to the never ending howling of that stupid dog or whatever it was that lurked just outside his door. He had not even been able to smoke. He had a few cigarettes still languishing in their crumpled pack but his matches were nowhere to be found. He probably had a stash in his truck but he had been afraid to go looking for them. At least it was finally over. He figured that anyone who would show up at midnight in a deserted graveyard looking for his lost dog must be okay. As his fear dwindled he didn't feel the need to bring his gun. He left it sitting on his cot by his pillow. No one had ever accused Arlo of being a smart guy. But even had he thought to bring his pistol with him it would not have mattered. In the end we all die alone. How strange that even though we understand that death is always lurking just beyond the horizon we seldom are ready when he suddenly comes to call.

Arlo stretched, yawned, and took a deep breath. The night air seemed cooler than normal for this time of year. The slight crispness gave the impression that the air was also very clean. The thought crossed his mind that there was a stale, unpleasant odor inside the trailer. He had not noticed it until he finally ventured outside. He'd have to check on that later. But for now he felt refreshing chilled oxygen fill his lungs, even though he coughed as he exhaled. Years of smoking will do that to a man, he thought. But so what? Of course he knew that smoking would probably do him in one day. Who needed to live forever anyway? Certainly not him! Who wants to live forever in this sewer of a world? Whatever was awaiting him in the next life, he figured it couldn't be any worse than what he had been though already. Of course that was how he felt right now. He would surely change his mind in the next few seconds!

The overhead clouds cleared momentarily, allowing the moon to finally illuminate the fog enshrouded markers of the Confederate dead. For some reason the whole place seemed more attentive than usual. It was as if things ... unseen things in the dark ... were watching with muted but exuberant anticipation. But anticipation of what? It was then that Arlo came to the outermost border of the cemetery just inside the overhanging arch. And that's when he saw *him*!

He was simply standing there, motionless and silent but emanating a strange fluorescent glow. Or maybe that was just Arlo's imagination. It could have been an optical illusion. The ghostly white, featureless mask reflected the moon's glow, giving the appearance of ... he had to acknowledge it ... the appearance of a ghost! Arlo stood frozen in time for what seemed an eternity but in reality only lasted a few seconds. He finally found the words to speak.

"Hello there," he shouted. "I'm Arlo ... Arlo Sanchez." He laughed in an effort to break the tension. It didn't work. "I'm the

caretaker here. I live out back.” He paused and pointed behind him in the general direction of his trailer, smiling in a vain effort to mask his terror. But he never took his eyes off the man who glared back at him, burning red embers dancing like fire in the sockets where only eyes should exist. “Are ... are you looking for your dog, by any chance?”

“Yes,” he answered. The voice was not particularly menacing and for a moment, Arlo’s spirits lifted. He began laughing and babbling like an excited school boy.

“Oh, that’s great! I have good news for you! I know he’s here somewhere. I have heard him barking most of the day although I ain’t seen him yet. But I know he’s here. I’ll help you look for him if that would help you any. Would you like that?”

“I know where he is, Arlo Sanchez. He is what led me here to you in the first place.” The voice sounded angry now. It was a controlled anger like someone enraged but still maintaining complete control over volatile emotions. Arlo’s uneasiness returned. Even though he had volunteered his name earlier, the stranger mouthed it back in such a way that gave Arlo the impression that he already knew *exactly* who Arlo was. There was something oddly familiar about that voice ... like a voice Arlo had not heard in years but still a voice he should know. Maybe if he got him to speak some more he would remember who this person might be.

“You say your dog led you here to find me? No need for that. Most folks here know who I am and where to find me.” He nervously licked his lips and coughed. “What did you say your name was?”

No answer ... just the continued glare from those red eyes that seemed to be getting larger and brighter all the time.

“What was it you needed from me again?” He’d decided to change his approach. “I mean, what do you want?” Finally, much to his dismay, Arlo got his answer.

“I’ve come to *kill* you, Arlo Sanchez. I’ve come to make you pay for your sins, something you should have done a long, long time ago!” Arlo gasped and staggered back. It was not only the shock of the words but the cold and unfeeling manner in which he spoke them. Not to mention that as he spoke he suddenly lurched forward, moving toward Arlo with a deliberate and determined gait. Arlo clearly understood that this was the advance of a predator moving in for the kill!

To add to the mounting panic, from his left, moving like a speeding torpedo through the swirling sea of heavy fog, the dog was racing toward him. It was the first time Arlo had actually seen him. If hounds did inhabit the depths of Hell, then this must be their king! It was enormous, solidly built, a perfect killing machine! Its fangs bared, Arlo suddenly felt as if he were a struggling swimmer in a dark and restless sea, crying out to the sky for rescue as he saw a grinning great white shark speeding toward him instead. At last his legs regained their solidity and he turned to run, screaming as he raced back to his trailer that now seemed to languish an eternity away. Despite his soul piercing screams, Arlo could clearly hear the steady “thud” of the dog’s paws behind him! Its hellish growls grew louder and louder until it seemed the vibrations would cause the earth to shake beneath its thunderous pursuit!

“Oh dear God,” he pleaded, still running as fast as he could go. “OhsweetJesus!Please!PLEEAASSSEEEEEHELPMEEEEEEEE!” As he ran, his life quickly passed through his mind’s recall. He saw it all ... more than sixty years of depraved living fast forwarded though his sick forehead at light speed. For the first time he noticed the religious and somewhat menacing monuments sprinkled throughout this garden of stone. He zoomed past an intimidating but crumbling statue of a warrior angel, his once proud but now decaying sword still pointed skyward in a protective stance. While

not stopping, Arlo read the sand battered words on the base of the statue ... "PROTECT US, O LORD, FROM THE WILES OF THE WICKED ONE." "Michael, warrior of God," Arlo panted, "help me! PLEASE!" If the angel was moved by the plea, he did not show it.

Arlo made it to the trailer and leapt across the threshold, slamming the door quickly behind him and bracing his body against it. That was not enough as something (he assumed it was the dog) slammed into the door with the force of a battering ram. Arlo was knocked across the room like a ragdoll, crashing over the cot and tumbling to the other side. As panic took hold Arlo flipped from his back to his knees and stared at the now doorless entrance to his trailer. To his surprise the dog was not there. But in the distance he could see the man-demon moving with a slow but deliberate pace toward him, the ever glowing eyes shining brightly and cutting a swath through the darkness.

Muttering whatever prayers he remembered from a lifetime ago, he fumbled frantically along the dark floor. He suddenly shouted in triumph as he found what he sought at last. His hand tightly gripped the cold handle of the .32 pistol. He arose with newfound courage, holding the gun in unsteady hands and pointing it at the opening six feet before him.

"Come on now," he shouted, his confidence rising. "Come on in here you devils! Arlo's ready for you now! Arlo's not afraid of you no more!"

For a long moment there was no sound ... no indication of movement of any kind outside. Arlo found that to be odd. He had never heard such absolute silence in all of his life. No crickets, no night breeze, no owl ... just total blackness and absolute silence. Again he felt the overwhelming presence of unseen watchers, ghosts of the interred residents of the Confederate National Cemetery

taking in the unfolding tableau with ever mounting suspense. On second thought it was not suspense ... it was mute inevitability!

Arlo saw the dog first. It was hunched low to the ground, its growls deep and guttural. It was the most awful sound Arlo had ever heard. It was not attacking ... it was just standing in the doorway, its back paws still outside the trailer while its front paws were inside. The four legs were spread wide, its head low to the ground. And now Arlo could see that the eyes ... the eyes of this demon dog ... were also glowing a bright red. He took careful aim, lining up the pistol sight to a point between the eyes of the dog. At this range, even though under tremendously stress, Arlo knew he could not miss. "Prepare to die, you devil!" He placed his finger on the trigger and was about to squeeze when the stranger, looming large and terrible, suddenly rose from seemingly nowhere to fill the doorway. His eyes now burned so brightly that Arlo actually held up his hand to shield his eyes.

"Devil?" His tone was one of outrage! "There is no devil here, Arlo Sanchez, unless you refer to yourself!" He was pointing his finger at Sanchez as a judge clearly identifying a condemned man. "It's time to give the devil his due, Sanchez, for all the terrible things you've done in your life. Time for you to pay your debts, to pay what you owe for the terrible things you did to my *wife* ... to my *dog* ... and to *me*!" With that, the man skillfully entered the trailer, his head almost touching the ceiling. Whatever confidence Arlo once held was now long gone!

"Debts? What are you talking about? I've never done anything to you, mister! I swear, you've made some kind of mistake! I've never seen you before in my life!" Sanchez was genuinely confused. His eyes were wide with fear, his voice pleading like a beggar on the streets of Calcutta. In response, the stranger looked downward, lifting his hands to the mask that clung tightly to his chiseled features.

The mask pulled away from his visage neatly, now cradled in his powerful, rock hard hands. With growing dread Arlo looked on in horror as the man lifted his face for him to see. When Arlo saw it, he screamed in abject denial as the last vestiges of his sanity fled his mind with his dying screams. Yes, Arlo recognized this man. *Dear God in heaven, he recognized this man!*

“Do you still claim that you do not know me, Sanchez? If you do, you deceive only yourself! And I surely know you!” His voice was now like a terrible declaration of damnation! “Ol’ Blue Boy and I certainly ... know ... YOU!”

That was the last gasp of Arlo Sanchez’ sanity. “NNNOOOOO,” he screamed as his finger tightened on the trigger. Unknown to him, the gas leak caused by his scuffle with the raccoon had continued unabated all day. The trailer was filled beyond capacity with the lethal but odorless flammable natural gas. It was the reason his head had hurt so intensely earlier. He had been spared until now only because he had been unable to find his matches. Everything now seemed to move in slow motion. Blue Boy went airborne, launching himself at Sanchez like a heat seeking missile locking onto its target. Only the stranger saw the truth, shouting out his warning just as Sanchez squeezed with all of his might!

“You fool! Don’t pull that trigger or you’ll ...” He never finished. The .32 exploded with awesome finality, intending to launch a steel jacketed messenger of death toward the leaping dog. Instead the spark of the gunpowder drenched muzzle ignited the very air of the trailer into an explosive fireball that vaporized the trailer instantly. The sudden heat and leaping gas powered flames from the leaking stove immediately engulfed the overhanging trees. Within seconds the forest was a burning hell, sending small rodents and birds fleeing deeper and deeper into the woods to escape their otherwise certain doom. In a scant five minutes the entire cemetery, which though decayed and

largely forgotten yet had stood in continuous testimony to a war that shaped the personality of a nation, was completely destroyed.

Some say that fire is the ultimate cleanser ... the best, the ONLY way to cleanse the world from evil in all of its murky forms. From the ashes of righteous fire new life can emerge, free from the fetters of sin and human frailty. As the flames grew larger and hotter, fueled by the continuous flow of natural gas from the shattered gas line, two figures emerge from the inferno. Both are unharmed. One is canine ... the other? Something definitely more than human!

"He didn't listen to us, Blue Boy," the man said, leaning down to pat the head of the happy dog that wagged his tail mightily upon receiving his master's attention. "But his kind never does." He walked away from the flames to the white but rusting heap parked under the menacing oaks. It was Sanchez' old truck. It had not yet been touched by the advancing flames. The stranger opened the door and the dog leaped inside without hesitation. Not even checking for keys, the man placed a finger on the ignition. The truck roared to life.

"This is our ticket, old boy," he said to the panting and happily contented dog. "I don't think Arlo needs it anymore. So settle back and relax, Blueblood." He pulled the transmission in gear as the truck rolled away from the flames toward the street. Eventually people would come to battle the ever growing blaze. Perhaps they would even find enough remains of Arlo Sanchez to determine the identity of the charred, burned bones that represent all he left behind. But by then both man and dog would be long gone.

"Let's go to Kansas, boy!" The dog barked in response as the old truck wheezed and spat its way northwest. Behind them the forest raged and blazed. Everything was destroyed except for a single pink dogwood tree. It stood unharmed as the fires consumed any and everything else in its path.

Chapter 12

I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. ... The old men are all dead. ... He who led the young men is dead. ... I want to have time to look for my children and see how many I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever. **Chief Joseph, Chief of the Nez Perce People, October 5, 1877.**

Reverend Spindola's morning was dragging on much later than usual. He was having a hard time accepting it. Funny how we tend to drift into habits that seem trivial, but those habits take on great significance when trifled with! He was anxious to speak with Sheriff Spear to see if he'd been able to unearth any clues about the desecration of Sheriff Bronson's grave. He used the term 'desecration' with disdain only because he did not want the good people of Timmonsville to know what he really believed to be the root of this inexplicable event. Many people were saying they believed it was the doing of the evil murderous biker, Roscoe Parker, returned to the little dogwood lined village to exact revenge. Of course, that was crazy! Roscoe Parker was dead, killed in prison ... an assassination they called it ... in 1981. It was impossible for him to have returned. But if indeed Jerry Bronson had come back, was it self-righteous to think that Parker could not return as well?

He had prayed all night for illumination on this great mystery. Sadly, like the Apostle Paul spoke in his writings, he still saw through the glass darkly.

He had not been able to speak with Sheriff Spear to get an update because Rosa had arrived early and stayed late. In fact, she caught him with his “early morning cup of coffee” and had not even noticed. She was quite stressed and rightfully so. Rosa had still been visiting the Dove of Peace assisted living home at midnight last night when the sheriff arrived to see if everything was okay. Rosa asked why the sheriff would suspect any trouble at the center, but he told her it was “standard police procedure” or some such nonsense. Rosa didn’t accept that explanation for a second and neither did Spindola. She stayed all night in fear as a result of the sheriff’s “routine procedure,” then arrived an hour early for her morning game with the ‘good and right reverend.’ She stayed late to talk with him, seeking divine blessing and assurance that she had nothing to fear. She was so very afraid that the evil which crushed her so severely 15 years ago had returned to finish the job. Spindola gave her all the encouragement he could but he suspected that she saw the truth in his eyes ... he was afraid, too.

When Rosa finally left, Spindola called the sheriff’s office. Glenda informed him that the sheriff had not yet come in. Dear God, Spindola hoped that Spear was taking this seriously. At the least, this grave invasion mess meant potential danger to the citizens of the county from someone with a serious axe to grind. And at the worst? Picture the end of life as we know it on the planet. You don’t get much more serious than that!

Glenda promised that she’d have the sheriff call as soon as he got in. Spindola thanked her and hung up, reminding her of church services coming up on Sunday. As he returned the handset to its cradle, he gazed out the front porch window to the direction of

the old cemetery where Jerry Bronson's body once lay. He'd like to think that Jerry had been able to rest in eternal peace but he suspected that his spirit had been restless from the start. Like Dr. Rollins, Big Ben and various other members of the city council, Spindola had been certain that the parents, or at least the mother, of that little black haired baby boy would eventually show up. When they finally gave up hope of that happening, they'd all believed that he would be adopted straight away. But the local people were a little spooked by the whole thing ... a baby left behind by the rogue gypsy clan that had been somewhat unsavory during their stay in the county. In fact, after Big Ben ran them off, he began to receive criminal complaints for months to follow. The townspeople had been afraid to speak when they thought old Vladimir could hurt them. No doubt, Vladimir Bronson (if that had been his name) was an evil man. Spindola was thankful that he'd never crossed paths with him again.

Big Ben considered adopting the boy. But with his wife only months shy of giving birth to their own son, plus his concern that it might not look exactly kosher for the man who found the baby to adopt him, he decided against it. Still, he raised the boy as if he had been his son and little Jerry became close friends with Ben's son, Dick. Most everybody thought of them as brothers anyway. Dick and Jerry became early and lifelong best friends.

But no one loved that boy and nurtured him from childhood to manhood like Reverend Spindola. He'd have adopted him if it had been acceptable for a single, unmarried man to do so. But he never even tried, knowing what such a 'scandal' would do to the community, the boy, and Spindola's own struggling ministry. Many slanderous gossips were already whispering that Spindola must be gay. If he wanted to be a priest, why not be Catholic? No one seemed to understand, least of all his late father, Frank. It saddened

him to think of that failed relationship again. He had now lived to be older than his father, yet when he thought of him he still felt like the inadequate and “not quite good enough” child.

Frank had never believed Roman’s story about seeing his mother at the moment of her death. And Roman never had the courage to tell him about the other one ... the vision he’d had when he was 16. His father was so very proud of the role he’d played in planting the dogwoods that sparked the regeneration of the town’s economy. If Roman had told him what he thought he saw, his father would have had him committed to a padded cell. Roman had never told anyone about it. Perhaps he never would.

Little Jerry Bronson’s imagination was intense and his desire for knowledge endless. Spindola would visit the orphanage to do volunteer work for the mission and Jerry would latch onto him like a tick! He smiled at the thought. Jerry was a tick for sure, but he never sucked out your life blood. Just the opposite ... Jerry had been a tick that pushed the lifeblood back into you. He made you feel younger ... important ... loved! He had been special from the very beginning.

Spindola had been the first to hear Jerry say he was turning down his football scholarship. He’d decided not to play football for Georgia Tech. He’d decided instead to join the Army in 1969. Everyone in the county expressed outrage! The most vocal critic of this decision had been Coach Bubba “Ox” Olson, who watched Jerry set every school athletic record in all sports over his four year high school experience. Many townsfolk felt as if they had missed out on the opportunity to become famous along with their suddenly popular adopted son. That senior year with Jerry at quarterback and Dick Spear at tight end, the team went undefeated all the way to the state championship. The school was named the #1 high school football team in the nation by all the major sports publications. Jerry

could have gone on a full scholarship to any school in the country. After Jerry committed to attend Tech, Dick Spear followed suit by also agreeing to go to Tech. Sportswriters were already ranking Tech's recruiting class as the best in the nation.

The war in Vietnam had reached critical mass by 1969. Jerry looked at it as a 'good versus evil' equation and he wanted to do his part to fight for his country. He had grown up in a world where he didn't know anything about his origins, but one thing he knew for sure ... in America the caring people around him had set him on the right path and surrounded him with love. Couple that with living in a society where he was free to choose his own destiny and he was proud to be a part of the American dream. Naïve or not, he wanted to do his part to spread that dream to the people of South Vietnam. Roman laughed slightly as he recalled the emotionally charged conversation that night. "The people won't understand, Jerry," he cautioned.

"Give them time, Rev," he smiled with that golden boy charm exuding confidence. (He had begun calling Spindola 'Rev' in junior high. Darn those free spirited kids of today! Still, he had to admit that it had a kind of endearing charm to it). But the bottom line was that Jerry had been correct, at least in his prediction of how the people of Timmons County would eventually forgive him for his decision. When the news came back from "over there" that Jerry was a war hero, was shooting up through the ranks ... he'd even been recommended for a battlefield commission to lieutenant following his actions in 1972 ... he became a bigger hero than he'd ever been while carrying a football or hitting a baseball.

The only person in town who appeared to still hold a grudge had been Jerry's 'brother,' Dick Spear. When Jerry refused the Tech scholarship, the school angrily withdrew their offer to Dick as well. It turned out that most schools assessed Dick was only

good because Jerry carried him on his back. Rev knew that Dick had some harsh words for Jerry but he also knew that they worked out their differences in private. Jerry wanted Dick to go into the Army with him, but Dick had no desire to wear an Army uniform. So he stayed home, got a degree in criminal justice from the local community college and began working as a deputy for his father, Big Ben. Everyone figured that he would be the heir apparent to the sheriff's office when Ben stepped down. While Dick did eventually become the sheriff, it didn't happen quite the way people expected. But who could have possibly predicted the turn of events that began when Jerry returned from Vietnam?

Everybody in the county showed up for Jerry's heroic homecoming on that December night of 1972. Since leaving home three years before, Jerry had only returned a precious few times. He'd remained in constant touch with Rev and his beloved Angel. They were the only ones who knew how he had struggled mightily during his time in Vietnam. While the media focused on the atrocities committed and the college campuses shouted to make love instead of war, Jerry became an icon to his fellow soldiers and his hometown. When the news broke that he would be home for Christmas, the athletic association decided to throw him the best welcome home bash anyone had ever seen! There were bands playing, children laughing, women crying and men applauding when the bus showed up at the station. The crowd cheered with an anticipation that would have seemed appropriate for Elvis in his prime. And no one was clapping louder than the Rev. His boy was coming home from war! No father had ever been more proud of a son!

But instead of a war hero with a chest full of sparkling medals stepping off the bus, only a few weary out-of-towners heading further south stepped onto the bus station floor that night. No one

had any knowledge of a soldier nor had they seen one when they boarded the bus from Atlanta earlier in the day. Confusion spread through the crowd as the music died. Everyone stayed as they ate barbeque and enjoyed the social event of the decade, but it was not the same without the guest of honor. John Adams, (who was quite proud of his name, patterned after the eloquent second president of the USA) and a Purple Heart winner from WW II, reminded everyone that Army orders can change without notice. Jerry was still coming home ... it's just that the date had changed and he had been unable to let everyone know. That seemed to satisfy everyone and the party dissipated shortly afterward. Everyone agreed that they'd do it again when Jerry did arrive. The second party never happened, but that was because Jerry nixed the idea himself.

Roman had gone home after the event broke up and was preparing for bed when he heard the knock on his door. To his surprise, there stood Jerry, looking tired but happy. Clinging closely to him was his love, the ever opulent Angel Andrews. As they hugged and laughed and talked into the night the tone became much more serious. It had been Jerry who intentionally missed his own welcome home party. Only Angel and Rosa had known the truth. They had driven south to pick up Jerry from the bus station in Tallahassee. He had no desire to attend a celebration bash for his military exploits, not when he had made such an important decision ... or more accurately, important *decisions*.

Roman sat attentively as Jerry explained how conflicted he felt upon returning to the USA. It was not uncommon for soldiers to feel remorse, fatigue, or delayed battle stress once safely home and in the arms of their loved ones. In the Civil War they called it cowardice but by WWI the term "shell shocked" became a part of the ever growing American cultural vernacular. Today we call it post traumatic stress disorder and the military spends millions of

dollars to prevent and treat it as needed. It was more pronounced in Vietnam than any previous war thanks to the never ending television coverage and the vicious anti-war protests that targeted young soldiers as murderers and baby killers. Young men who deployed into the depths of darkness thinking they were answering their nation's cry for help returned home branded as evil creatures not even worthy of the most common human decency.

But what Jerry felt had nothing to do with any of that. It was a genuine remorse in the taking of human life ... even the life of the enemy ... even when taking those lives meant saving the lives of his fellow soldiers. Sergeant Bronson had been good at killing. His military records and citations confirmed over fifty kills of Viet Cong regulars and North Vietnamese soldiers during his twelve months served in the blood soaked jungles of that little war torn nation. Jerry confessed that the number was actually much higher, easily surpassing 100. Jerry had discovered to his dismay that he was very, very skilled in the art of taking human life. He even admitted to enjoying the feel of power that rushed over him when he knew that he was about to deliver the death blow. It just came as naturally to him as breathing ... just as easy ... just as satisfying.

Now "after the fact," he felt stained by the blood of his victims. In shame he refused his commission to lieutenant. He informed the Army that when his original enlistment expired this coming April, he would leave the service forever. It was a very heavy and emotional night and conversation. But as any loving father would react, Roman's emotions focused on pride in the decision of a man who had seen more of death than anyone deserved. And after seeing death face-to-face, Jerry still valued life ... any life ... as the most precious gift on the planet.

"Do you remember the story you told me once, Rev, about the blushing dogwoods?"

“Of course I do, Jerry. It was a story I learned from my father ... they blushed pink because of their shame for participating in the death of Christ. Why do you ask?” The answer Jerry gave the Rev at that moment sent waves of electricity down his spine. The look on Jerry’s face, the poignancy of his voice, the sadness and acknowledgement in his eyes ... all those aspects merged together as Jerry spoke the words that would define the rest of his life.

“I know why the dogwoods blush, Rev. I am guilty of the same sin as them. The Jewish Talmud says that if you save one life you save the entire world. If that’s true, then to take one life is to kill the entire world. So I’m as guilty as that original dogwood tree that drank in the blood of Christ during His crucifixion. But I swear to you tonight in the presence of God Himself, I’ll never kill another human being again! I give you and the people of Timmons County my word on that!”

Oh, the electric emotions that ran rampant that night! Roman’s heart had burst with pride at Jerry’s words. As they embraced, they, along with Angel, believed Jerry’s days of dealing death were over for good. The next year, following his honorable discharge from the Army, Jerry went into the ministry. In the following years that wrapped up the decade of the 70’s, the teacher became the pupil. Jerry Bronson the soldier transformed into Jerry Bronson the founder and pastor of the Shepherd of Peace Mission. Jerry’s insights into spiritual revelations amazed and educated the masses daily, including the ‘good and right’ Reverend Spindola. Jerry’s efforts led to the expansion of the mission to a point that at times almost 1,000 caring and lost souls would pack into the makeshift building and tent where Jerry espoused his message of faith, forgiveness, and salvation. As talented as he had been as an athlete and soldier now paled in comparison to his skill as an evangelist. And when he married Angel? Well, that became the social event of the century!

Looking back on it now, Roman could discount any of the much hyped weddings of the 20th century ... Grace Kelley, Liz Taylor (any of them), Princess Diana ... none of them compared to the day when Jerry and Angel became husband and wife. Roman, who presided over the ceremony with much pride, had only one question for the jittery but calm groom as they waited for the bride to appear ... “What took you so long, my boy?”

Ah, those were happy, happy days! It seemed that peace and prosperity had finally settled in for good for Roman, Jerry, Angel and the town. That all changed the night Roscoe Parker and the Broken Bones roared into town. It was also the night that Jerry broke his vow to God. But did he have any choice? It was not for Roman to decide. Who was he to judge Jerry for that night? If not for the vision he’d experienced at 16, Roman might have done the same thing. Even so, he had tried. He had picked up that shotgun and pointed it at another human being! He had pulled the trigger! He hung his head in shame at the memory. “May God forgive me for my sins and indiscretions!” Again his mind drifted back to that vision when he was 16. Would he ever erase the memory from his mind? He could still see that dogwood flower dripping blood, screaming in pain, pleading with him to?

Spindola’s daydreaming was abruptly interrupted by his ringing telephone. Forcing himself to rise from his chair and reach for the receiver was hard and getting harder all of the time. Perhaps he should see the doctor soon. Even pushing 80, he knew it should not be this hard to simply walk across the room to answer a ringing telephone. His trembling hands reached down and grasped the handset, slowly lifting it to his ear.

“Pastor Spindola?” The earpiece squawked before he could even speak. “Is that you?” Instant recognition beamed from Roman’s face.

“Hello, Sheriff! I was hoping you’d call. Glenda promised that she’d tell you I was waiting as soon as you got in.”

“I haven’t seen Glenda yet, Pastor,” Spear replied. “I’ve been working from home and on the road all night. I need to talk to you. Can I come out to see you?”

“Absolutely! I’ll see you shortly.” He returned the handset to its cradle and gazed longingly in the direction of the old cemetery. He found himself wishing for the sound of ol’ Blue barking in the distance. But he heard nothing today ... just the gentle spring breeze through the dogwood trees and, in the far distance, probably on the state highway north of town, the unmistakable whine of a motorcycle engine.

Chapter 13

Heaven hath no rage like love to hatred turned!

William Cosgrove, 1670 - 1729

Dick Spear had loved Jerry like a brother since they had been kids. Everybody knew that. There was rarely a Thanksgiving dinner, Christmas gift exchange, birthday party or backyard game of pick-up basketball that those two weren't together laughing and giggling as little boys commonly do. They were not brothers in name or blood but they were brothers all the same. They'd made a pact when they were 12. It was a solemn promise sealed in blood that they'd always be there for each other. Okay, maybe the blood part was not true but a little wad of saliva rubbed between your hands is a solemn contract for life when you're 12. Spear's mind drifted back to those happier times when he thought his dad would live forever, Jerry would be his best friend for life and he'd be crowned the sheriff of Timmons County. But dads don't live forever, sheriffs are not crowned, and best friends ... well, they just don't stay best friends forever.

Dick suspected that Spindola blamed him for the estranged relationship that emerged between him and Bronson as they reached late teenhood. That was the typical response you'd get from practically anybody in Timmons County. "It's a shame that

Dick couldn't accept that Jerry was just the better of the two at everything," folks would say. They'd even say it to Dick's face! Or even worse they'd say it to someone else *knowing* that Dick could hear every word! And he was just supposed to smile and acknowledge that it was true while continuously extolling the virtues of the late great Saint Jeremiah Bronson, the bastard king of Timmons County!

He'd suffered those indignities all his life, but things began to truly unravel when they were 14. It was becoming clear that Jerry was better than Dick at everything ... sports, academics, popularity, charm ... it was always the same. "Dick is good," folks would say, "but Jerry is amazing!" Then they'd get that gleam in their eyes just by mentioning his name, as if by saying it out loud made the speaker special. Losing out on that football scholarship had been the worst. At least when he was scheduled to go to Tech, Dick could pretend that he was just as good as Jerry. But when Jerry decided to become the next generation Audie Murphy, it exposed Dick as the pale shadow he was.

He used to pray that Jerry would be killed in Vietnam, that some 'Charlie' would slit his throat while he slept or that he'd become a POW and be tortured to death. A favorite fantasy of the time was hoping that Jerry would panic and desert his troops under fire. He'd be branded a coward, court-martialed and sentenced to the scrapheap of life reserved for those guilty of massive failure. But Dick's wishes never came to fruition. Jerry came home a bigger hero than ever, then catapulted into the realm of the gods when he became "beloved *Brother* Jerry!" Yet through all of this, Dick kept smiling, maintaining the façade of brotherhood that he'd kept up all of his life. Things could not get any worse than this, he told himself. And then it did get worse. As it always does! It can *always* get worse!

My how Dick loved Debbie “Angel” Andrews! Everybody did, and rightfully so. But unlike Jerry, Dick felt totally at ease with Angel. They dated casually for a short time after Jerry left for the Army. While most of the town naturally assumed that Jerry and Angel were an item, Jerry made no formal effort to make her his own. Even when Angel turned down those offers to go to college and sing, supposedly because she wanted to wait for Jerry to come back home, Dick stupidly believed that he actually had a chance with her. She told him to cool it one night at the drive-in when she thought he was getting too “friendly.” If you can’t even kiss your girl after weeks of steady dating then she’s not really “your girl.” That became clear to him when Jerry showed up back home after returning from overseas, announced that he was going to become a preacher, and “BOOM!” He tells the world that he and Angel are getting married. “At least,” Dick thought at the time, “it clears the way for me to follow my destiny and become the sheriff when Big Ben steps down in a few years.”

It was about then that Dick became his dad’s deputy sheriff. He even made a big splash early on when he’d answered an All Points Bulletin (APB) from the state police that they were in pursuit of a known drug dealer and mob enforcer in a high speed chase just west of town. It was Dick who headed the fleeing felon off and made the big arrest. It had made all the local news and got Dick front page headlines in the *Timmonsville Reporter*. “CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK,” the headline read. There was that photo of Dick, looking all macho and “in charge” beside his cruiser, three bullet holes clearly displayed in the windshield from the gunfight the fleeing culprit instigated as he was apprehended. “Just doing my job,” Dick was quoted as saying. “It’s no different than any other red-blooded American would do to keep his community safe!” They even sent a reporter from one of the national law enforcement

magazines to interview him although the article was never printed. Still, it remained the best day of Dick's life. Even Big Ben had been proud.

All of that changed when Roscoe Parker and his goons marched into town! Despite that horrible night, Dick could have emerged the hero. He *should* have emerged the hero! Again it had been Jerry Bronson, the newly anointed pacifist, who saved the day. But even he couldn't save little Willie Goodwin or the hapless sheep who didn't understand the danger and walked right into hell as blind, dumb idiots! And he couldn't save Big Ben. Ben died knowing that his son ran and hid when the going got tough. Dick had prayed for Jerry to wear the brand of "coward" but that prayer had been answered by turning the brand back on the one doing the asking. The last shred of dignity Dick Spear held ... his 'birthright' of following in his dad's footsteps as sheriff, disappeared the night of the Dogwood Festival in 1979. And who was now to become the lean, mean sheriff that all the community idolized? Who else? Did he even have to say his name again?

He knew that anyone with an ounce of morality would condemn him for wanting Jerry Bronson out of the way so he could have the #1 spot on the local celebrity pedestal. He also knew that it was one of the mortal sins of history to covet the wife of your neighbor ... even worse, he supposed, if it was the wife of your best friend.

There were still good aspects to his relationship with Jerry. When Bronson was elected sheriff, he made a big production of telling everyone that he was keeping all of Big Ben's deputies on the payroll, especially "my brother, Dick, who will remain as the deputy sheriff for as long as I wear this badge!" Everyone applauded and the two men embraced and smiled for the flashing cameras but those words stung like poisonous darts. In fact, it was that very night that Dick determined that he would become the sheriff much

sooner than later and he'd do it on his own terms. He never gave up hope that Angel would belong to him one day as well. Today he sadly understood that this dream was impossible. Jerry was dead and despite Spindola's crazy theories of the end days, he was still dead! People just don't rise from the dead and wander around their old stomping grounds like they do in a cheap Dracula movie!

On their wedding day it was Dick who served as best man. He smiled and clapped and threw rice, but in truth that was the day that he knew beyond any doubt that he *hated* Jerry Bronson. To cover his true emotions he'd given them Blueblood for a wedding gift. Jerry had always loved animals and he especially loved Big Ben's beautiful black lab, Blackjack! When Blackjack skipped curfew one night to meet up with the neighbors' visiting female German Shepherd, six puppies were the inevitable result. The clear pick of the litter was ol' Blueblood. He looked exactly like a lab except for the white spots over his eyes. It was Angel who named him Blueblood.

It was supposed to be an ironic name since the spots clearly indicated that he was not of "pure lineage." Jerry immediately christened him "Blue" and a legend was born ... again. Even the *dog* of Jerry Bronson had to be the *best* of everything! Blue went everywhere with him and in an amazing defiance of nature, he was still living and in relatively good health over twenty years later. He still rode with Jerry on patrol and sat patiently at his feet when he went into the office. Everybody from the wino in the slammer to the girl scouts selling cookies loved ol' Blue. They especially loved his bark. It was such a goofy sound ... part howl, park giggle, part bark ... and everybody would laugh at it *every time*! Ol' Blue died the same night as Jerry. It had not worked out the way Dick had planned. He understood that some people would have to be hurt but he never meant for one of them to be Angel. That was just not supposed to happen!

Just thinking about that night again drove him to white hot anger. Fifteen years now and it still enraged him! She would have been his all of this time but those idiots screwed it all up. The Korean was not supposed to have been involved with Angel. He could have the other women but not her! That had been the deal. They all got too greedy. That was not his fault! It was Sanchez and Wolverton and Ewing who were really to blame for what happened to Angel. And that fag Bobby Fast was worthless! He could have done something but he just froze like the pathetic coward he was!

Spear cursed in frustration and slammed his fist against the steering wheel as he pulled into Spindola's driveway. He put the car in gear and stepped out as the Rev stood waiting on the porch. He waved warmly. Spear still believed that Ewing or Sanchez might be behind this grave desecration mess of the day before yesterday. But he needed Spindola's help to keep the people calm while he tracked down the truth. Too many people were already being whipped into a frenzy about the possibility of the dead walking the streets of Timmons ville. He intended to convince Spindola to help him drive that notion from the collective conscience of the town ... the old coot still carried at least that much influence.

Sheriff Spear returned Spindola's wave and began walking toward him when Glenda's voice came over his radio.

"Sheriff, are you there?" Spear stopped and shouted to Spindola that he needed to answer this dispatch but would be right there. Reaching inside his open window he grabbed the mic and acknowledged Glenda's signal.

"I'm here, Glenda. I'm talking with Spindola. What's up?"

"We just got a call from a Sheriff CJ Mullins in Louisiana. He said he needed to pass some important info to you right away!" Glenda sounded nervous. That brought a smile to Spear's face.

Glenda sometimes liked to think she was Nancy Drew or some such foolishness.

“Good! Does he have an update on Arlo Sanchez?” There was a brief pause on the other end before she responded.

“How did you know he was calling about that, Sheriff? Are you psychic?” He pushed his hat back on his head and grinned.

“Not hardly, honey! I alerted Mullins last night that I suspected Sanchez was up to no good and might be back in Georgia. Does he have any good news for me?”

“Well,” she hesitated, “he has news but I don’t know if it’s good or not. Sanchez was killed last night in a gas leak explosion outside Baton Rouge.” She let that information sink in before continuing. “They think it was a homicide. At least that’s how they are approaching it until they prove otherwise.”

Spear was stunned speechless! So much for his theory of the identity of the likely perpetrators in this sick stunt! He grimaced, looked back to Spindola, then cleared his throat and spoke into the mic.

“Why do they think it was a homicide, Glenda? Did CJ say?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Someone stole Sanchez’ truck. They have an APB out on it but it was 10 hours or so before they came to that conclusion and determined that Sanchez even had a truck that was missing. So they figure someone did him in and stole his truck after the fact. Do you want me to do anything else, Sheriff?”

“No,” he answered. “Thanks, Glenda. You did great. I’m out.” He casually tossed the mic back into the seat. He looked back at Spindola who still stood looking confused on his front porch. “Maybe it was Ewing,” Spear thought to himself. “Or maybe an associate of the Korean was back in business covering his tracks. Whatever it was, Spear felt in every fiber of his being that the events of the grave desecration, the old soiled uniform at the Valhalla and

the murder of Sanchez were all linked and no coincidence. But what was it? What could the link be?

“Sorry about the delay, Reverend,” he finally said to Spindola as he walked toward the porch. “Let’s spend a few minutes and talk.” He hated himself for thinking it but he had to say it. “Tell me again about your theory of people coming back from the dead.”

Chapter 14

'Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death.

Thomas Paine

He traveled throughout the night nonstop, taking time to refuel the truck and nothing else. He had no need of rest or sleep. Fatigue was unknown to him. He had no need for food or water, nor did his faithful companion. As a result, he'd put in almost 400 miles on the road since Arlo Sanchez, being the idiot that he was, exploded himself in a fitting climax of fire.

If the dead could laugh then he would certainly laugh at the irony of that. He knew it was Sanchez who had doused his dying body in gasoline on that horrible night 15 years ago. It was Ewing who tossed the lighted cigarette onto him to destroy the *evidence*. He had still been alive when that happened ... and Ewing had known it. All the others thought he was already dead and had departed the house. He had been alone in the room with Ewing. Ewing saw that he was alive and struggling to breathe despite the brutal beating they had given him and the gunshot wound to his throat. He'd still believed that Ewing had some shred of humanity in him when he'd reached out to him for mercy, unable to speak. Ewing laughed and reached down alright ... to break Bronson's fingers one by one ...

before laughing and standing over him with that stupid smirk on his face.

“Not so tough now are you, Sarge?” He lit a cigarette and held the burning match just above Bronson’s gasoline drenched face. Laughing, he’d blown it out and strutted around the living room enjoying the moment. He felt like the proverbial fox in the henhouse. Bronson tried to move but had lost too much blood. He was able to muster enough strength to turn his head slightly and look into the open, lifeless eyes of his beloved Blue Boy. Ol’ Blue never suspected any danger from the men who had entered his home that night. He’d met them all before ... they’d all patted his head and called him a good boy. Bronson suspected that ol’ Blue had believed this would be a night of laughter, lots of hand shaking, and the telling old war stories with maybe a few meaty treats slipped to him under the table. He died wagging his tail, killed instantly by a single bullet fired at close range from a man he’d trusted ... a man he’d thought was his friend. Thinking back to that act of betrayal again, Bronson’s eyes began to glow. Sitting on the front seat of Sanchez’ truck, ol’ Blue noticed the sudden change in his master’s demeanor. He looked up and whined lowly, his tail wagging in a concerned and questioning manner. Bronson smiled and reached out to pat his furry friend’s head. The red glow began to slowly fade.

“It’s okay, boy,” he smiled. “It’s all going to be okay.” Now excited and happy, Blue adjusted his position and laid the long way across the seat, his head resting on his master’s lap. “Good boy, Blue,” he said. “You’re a good boy. Now get your rest. We are going hunting tonight.” Blue gave his trademark howl as if he understood. His tail thumped furiously. The stranger brought his eyes back to the road as his mind traveled again to that fateful night in 1995.

He saw himself lying in his living room next to the body of Blue,

blood gushing from his throat, drenched in gasoline, his mangled hand twisted in an unnatural pose as Ewing stalked around the perimeter of the throw rug like a circling hyena. It was as if he were watching a snuff film of his own murder in some morbid episode of “This Was Your Life” broadcast from Hell. Sensing that this was indeed the end he’d wanted to plead for them to spare Angel. But he knew any such plea would be a waste of time. Despite having no strength left, Jerry willed himself to a position next to ol’ Blue. He flopped his nearly lifeless arm across his trusting companion’s body. “I’m sorry,” he mouthed even though no sound emerged. “I’m so sorry, boy!” That was when Ewing laughed, took a final puff from his smoldering cigarette and tossed the burning butt on top of him!

Remembering it now as he did, he closed his eyes and gripped the steering wheel until he felt his knuckles would burst right through his skin! It pained him to think that Ewing and Wolverton, his former Army comrades, hated him so much that they would do this, especially after all he’d done for them. And Dr. Rollins? He’d been in on it, too. Rollins had developed a bad habit of taking his own prescriptions too willingly. Bad habits are not only hard to break, but they are expensive ... and illegal. He’d actually agreed to “doctor” (what a sweet pun!) the coroner’s report by omitting the gunshot wounds. It was all going to be an accident and they would all get a nice payoff from the Korean and live happily forever after. It was the deal with the Korean that started pulling things off the track for all of them! And when Angel got hurt it threw them all into a panic. They all got their hush money and left town ... all except the mastermind. He was still hiding in his scum filled façade in Timmons ville. But not for long!

All of them ... Ewing, Wolverton, Sanchez, Fast, Rollins ... they all had been sentenced to die by the solemn judge of all evil

doers. But he especially longed to deal with the *special* one! He was the one who had become his Judas, smiling to his face and feigning affection while all the time plotting to kill him and his beloved Angel. Some had escaped their punishment on earth. Wolverton ... killed in a bar fight; Rollins ... died of a pain killer overdose ... Sanchez ... a natural gas explosion. At least Sanchez saw what was coming for him before he killed himself.

He knew that Fast was in Washington suffering from mental delusions and a nervous breakdown. That would not save him! And Ewing? He would die tonight for sure. He noted by the road signs that he would definitely be in Kansas by nightfall. Then it would be Fast going down in Washington. Finally he'd return to Timmons ville for the closing curtain in this ongoing production of revenge. That's what he'd come back from the great beyond to accomplish. What other reason could there be? After Ewing and Fast were dead he'd return "home" to kill Dick Spear, traitor and murderer. Perhaps then he'd find the peace that had eluded him so far in life ... death ... and beyond!

Chapter 15

When small men begin to cast big shadows, it means that the sun is about to set.

Chinese writer Lin Yutang (1895-1976)

Purvis Hartley sat nervously in the dimly lit room filled with thick smoke from dozens of burning incense sticks. Around him, hanging from the walls and prominently displayed on book shelves, were strange items and objects that aroused his curiosity but made him uncomfortable at the same time. There were bizarre paintings of men with the heads of goats, topless women fawning over cloven hooved monsters, and unidentifiable objects floating in clear liquids capped by mason jar lids. In the center of the room where Purvis sat, holding his small cardboard box as he'd been told, was a circular card table with an impressive looking crystal ball that glowed and shifted colors at random. Purvis stared into it mesmerized, completely under the enchanting spells it wove. He heard the tinkling of the beads that hung from the doorway in the tiny room and turned to see her walk in with a sly smile and low cut blouse. His eyes locked directly onto her cleavage.

“Hello, Purvis,” she purred as she slinkily made her way to him. She stood over him as he sat very still, nervously sweating and trying in vain not to hide his fascination for the cleavage she'd suddenly thrust into his face. “Did you miss me, sweet little Purvis?”

He blushed slightly and smiled, still looking away. “Did you miss your sad and lonely Raduta?” Still unable to speak he nodded and snickered, feigning an effort to pull away from her but enjoying the moment nonetheless.

“Madame Tatiana: Fortunes Told, Spells Cast” had been a regular eyesore and controversial business in Mason, Georgia for over 50 years. Advertising that some spells start as low as \$5, it had passed through three generations of East European immigrants who each made a small fortune misleading and deceiving the weak willed and slow minded. They promised love, wealth, good health ... even communication with the dead for a “nominal fee.”

Raduta was the newest “Madam” to operate under the business name. Each new “seer of things unknown” kept the “Tatiana” business title so as not to confuse the somewhat gullible clientele. Born and raised in New Jersey (which is slightly west of Eastern Europe) she’d learned the fortune telling con from her aunt and moved to Georgia to ply her trade. She was about as Romanian as Purvis. After dropping out of high school at 16, Purvis found his life’s calling to be working as the night janitor at the paper mill outside town. His only friends were his pet hamster Lily, and Raduta.

Thirty-year old Purvis lived with his elderly alcoholic mother in the Shadow Grove trailer park just south of Mason. The mid-sized middle Georgia town, about 90 miles north of Timmonsville, was the hub of manufacturing for most of the state. There was once a small US Air Force base nearby but when the government closed it down in 2001, the town pretty much dried up. In came the manufacturing companies ... paper mill, gravel pit, dog food plant, sand pit, brick masonry ... the air pollution kept the air a steady gray haze, but at least the people who actually wanted jobs could get one. Life was pretty good for the people of Mason although depression ran rampant. That’s where Raduta came in.

For the last year Purvis had been in to see her 2-3 times per month. He'd plunk down his \$50 and she'd "see" his future. And what a rosy future Purvis had! Money, women, happiness, power ... it was all just ahead. But the specific path to those events still lay "clouded in the mists of limbo." She would need more time ... more money ... to clearly see the best way ahead for him.

The men at the mill shoved Purvis around and said he was a "gay retard." Raduta knew that Purvis may have some significant learning disabilities but he was definitely NOT gay. She saw the way he licked his lips when he looked at her. She didn't need any psychic abilities to read the thoughts of his mind during those times. She'd brush her body against him, causing him to blush and sweat, then tell him she'd need another \$50 to dig any deeper into the "vapors of the netherworld, where the veil is thin and the nine worlds come together." She'd add in a light and sound show and poor Purvis was ready to sign over his life savings ... or at least that week's paycheck. Then he'd be back again in a week or so to do it all over again.

But this time was different. Purvis was sad, distressed. His beloved Lily had died in her sleep in her cage the night before, leaving Purvis without a friend in the world. He had wondered, since Raduta had managed to link him up with his dead father a few years ago, if she could possibly bring Lily back from the great beyond. She'd channeled the spirit of Purvis' father flawlessly. Raduta helped Purvis understand that although his father had deserted him when he was 6-weeks old, he still and always would love him! *Now make sure you pay Raduta a little extra, son! It's what I want!* So if she could do that, was it possible to bring Lily back as well? He at least wanted to try.

"Let me look at your sweet Lily," Raduta cooed. Purvis handed over the little box with complete reverence, his sorrow spilling out through his eyes.

"She was fine last night," he wept. "But this morning she was curled up in a ball and wouldn't respond. I nudged her and she was all cold!"

"Now now, pretty Purvis," Raduta cautioned. "There is no power on this earth that Madam Raduta cannot overcome. Let me see your precious baby. If the life force is still on this plane of existence, I shall be able to call it back from whence it hast goeth!" She smirked at her own overindulgence. "*Whence it hast goeth?*" That was a good one, she thought! But the best was yet to come.

She held the lifeless hamster over the burning black candle beside her, all the time humming and chanting while Purvis looked on in helpless but hopeful agony. After a seeming eternity, Raduta smiled and returned her gaze to Purvis. "I have good news for you, sweet baby of mine," she smiled. "Mama Raduta can indeed bring Lily back to life." Purvis immediately broke into a giddy smile!

"Really, Miss Raduta?" He squealed more than spoke. "Can you really do that? How is it possible?" She never missed a beat in her answer.

"Lily didn't want to die. She still wants to be with you so her spirit lingers in the passageway between the living and the dead. The harvest gods are sympathetic to her desire but they will not hold the door to eternity open forever." Raduta strained to hold back her laughter. *Hold the door of eternity open forever?* She wondered where she came up with such crap! Behind her sat a fat black cat with huge, yellow eyes. He had been sleeping until Raduta held the dead hamster above the candle. Seeing the rodent only inches from his nose, the feline suddenly awoke and became interested.

"Did you see that?" Raduta figured using the cat would seal the deal. "Did you see how Lucifer suddenly arose to peer through the purple haze of eternity when I pulled Lily from her resting place? He sees the life force that still lingers in this place hoping

for the opportunity to return to its body!” Oh sure, the cat’s name is Lucifer! He is actually a “she” and her name is Frito. But then Raduta’s real name was Rhonda Pembroke. All that mattered was for Purvis to buy the act. And from all indications it appeared that he was buying it hook, line and sinker.

“So how will you do it, Miss Raduta? Will you be able to raise her back tonight?” Purvis was so excited that he was leaning on the table and bouncing. She needed to calm him down or the idiot would collapse it! The table had been a \$5 clearance item at the old overstock warehouse sale two years ago. It wasn’t designed to support much more weight than a deck of cards and a pitcher of beer ... which it had done on more than a few rowdy Saturday night poker games!

“Now calm down, sweetie,” she said, reaching out and rubbing his hand. Her touch settled him down immediately as he sat back in his chair.

“Sorry, Miss Raduta. I just want my Lily back as soon as I can get her.” Raduta smiled like a cat about to swallow a canary.

“Mommy knows, baby,” she hissed. “But this will be a very dangerous spell. It’ll take me a few days to meditate and prepare myself for the trip beyond the mountain. I’ll have to travel in the spirit world using all my charms and potions to protect me from the dark powers who are trying to steal Lily’s soul.”

“Dark powers?” Purvis’ eyes widened with dread.

“Absolutely,” she assured him. “Lily is a very special hamster, Purvis. The dark powers don’t want to let her go. But we must retrieve her or she’ll spend her life in the dark recesses of the mindless cannibals who stalk unsuspecting spirits trapped between the worlds. You do want to rescue Lily, don’t you, Purvis?”

She loved this part of her game. She’d examined the hamster to confirm there was nothing unique about its colors and that it held

no distinctive markings. Confirming this, she'd keep the dead rat, send Purvis away, then go to the mall pet shop and buy an identical one for \$10. Calling Purvis back in 2-3 days, she'd "raise" Lily from the dead by a miracle and turn a tidy profit. Easy money.

"Of course I want to rescue Lily, Miss Raduta. Just tell me what to do and I'll do it!"

"I know you will, sweetie," she smirked as she reached out to pat his cheek. "Here's what you need to do." *Oh, this was going to be so good! You are one savvy chick, Rhonda ... uh, I mean Raduta!* "I want you to leave Lily with me and go home. Come back in two days and if I have been successful, you'll be able to take Lily home that night. If I fail you owe me nothing. Is that fair?"

"I don't want you to risk your life for nothing, Miss Raduta. I love you! I'll pay you just for trying!"

"Oh, you are so sweet," she sighed. "But I would never take advantage of you, sweet Purvis. If I bring Lily back from the other side, you can pay me ... oh ... let's say ... \$200. And if I fail I probably won't come back anyway because the dark powers will imprison me inside the black mountains atop the crimson caverns. You'll never see me again!" She pressed a button beneath her chair and the sound of rumbling thunder broke forth from hidden speakers behind the drapes. She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her breasts into his face.

"Did you hear that?" She feigned fear. "They are already preparing to fight me. But I'll do this for you, Purvis! Come back in two days. And don't forget the \$200 ... cash!" Before Purvis could answer, a different sinister voice boomed from the doorway behind him, causing both he and Raduta to twist in the same direction to see the source.

"Don't be misled by this harlot, Mr. Hartley! I can restore not only the life of your hamster but I can do it this very moment.

In addition, I can provide you with your wildest fantasies, turning them into sweet reality. I can give you power over your enemies and put you in the presence of kings! And all for no money at all. Just give me the word and I'll provide all these things to you tonight!"

Standing in the doorway was a man small in stature but seemingly invincible. He looked very old but eternal, as though the age on his face was a veritable drop in the bucket when compared to the actual years he'd crisscrossed the planet. Raduta was furious!

"Who are you!" It sounded more like an accusation than a question. "How dare you interrupt us! I could call the police!" She started to stand but was halted, not entirely by her choice, but rather because he raised his left hand and showed her his palm. Engraved into his flesh, carved with a sharp edged blade and sealed with a matching brand, was the eternal sign of Satan ... the Pentagram!

"Be silent, whore of Babylon," he scolded. Fear began to well up inside Raduta ... uh, Rhonda ... as she realized she could not stand and could not speak. Turning his attentions to Purvis, the man reached out his right hand. Purvis noted there was no brand in that palm. "Allow me to hold your pet, Mr. Hartley." Still hesitant, Purvis held Lily's cold body under his chin.

"How do you know my name, mister?" His voice trembled and he made no effort to hide his immense trepidation. The man smiled and Purvis felt his dread subside somewhat.

"I followed you here all the way from Timmonsville, Mr. Hartley," he answered. "Oh, I know you've never been down there *physically*. I followed your emanations. I could feel them from across the oceans. I've spent the last several years in Europe, Mr. Hartley. It was your spirit that called me to return to this country after so many years. And as for your name? It's written on your face, on the walls of this hovel, across the back of the moon ... there is no

information hidden from us if we only know where to look. May I call you Purvis?”

“I ... I ... I guess so, M M M Mister ...?”

“Buchinsky. My name is Buchinsky. But please call me Vladimir.”

“Okay ... Vladimir.” Purvis actually smiled as he handed over Lily. His concern was rapidly disappearing. Instead, for the first time in his life, he was feeling confident ... powerful ... in control! He suddenly looked at Raduta and smiled. Still unable to move or speak, Raduta felt a shiver run up her spine. Purvis no longer had that look of a dim school boy with a crush on his teacher. He suddenly looked like a ravenous wolf looking at a solitary lamb lost along the moors!

Vladimir placed Lily on her back and positioned her little stubby legs in four different directions. Reading Purvis’ unspoken question, Vladimir answered, “For the four corners of the far worlds.”

“Oh,” Purvis grunted. Placing one finger from his branded left hand into Lily’s mouth, Vladimir placed the other on the crystal ball in the center of the table. He began reciting incantations in an ancient tongue that neither Raduta nor Purvis could understand. The walls shook, strange groans and growls emerged from the walls, and thick, angry black smoke swirled within the ball. Raduta began to sob. These events were not her parlor tricks. They were real. Evil saturated the air like a living thing. She was frightened for the first time since those gang members had cornered her in the girls’ bathroom in south Jersey when she was 14.

Suddenly the crystal ball exploded, showering Purvis, Raduta, and Lily with a slimy mucus that undoubtedly made up the liquid center of the ball. Vladimir smiled and when Raduta saw those rotted teeth, she gagged although she still could not move or speak. “Pick up your baby girl, Purvis,” Vladimir crowed. “She’s back with you again, anxious to begin life anew!”

To his disbelief, Purvis stared at the inexplicable! Lily was standing on all fours, emitting a faint “purr” as her little tail twitched intermittingly.

“How did you do that, Vladimir?” Purvis could not hide his excitement as he scooped Lily into his sweaty palms. But before Vladimir could answer, Purvis screamed and dropped Lily on the table.

“Ouch,” he lamented, staring in disbelief at the red trickle oozing down his finger. “Lily bit me! She bit me!” His face was stretched wide in horror, disbelief ... and hurt feelings. Vladimir smiled and shook his head as a grandfather would while explaining the facts of life to a curious grandson.

“Be patient, my boy,” he gently extolled. “Lily has been to the far reaches of eternity and back. To make the return trip, sacrifices had to be made. You must understand that those who return from the abyss will not be exactly as they were before they departed. Give yourself ... and Lily ... time to get used to one another again.” Purvis nodded his agreement. Vladimir then nodded in the direction of Raduta. “Do you *want* her, Purvis?”

“What do you mean, Vladimir?”

“You know *exactly* what I mean, Purvis. Do you want her *sexually*?” Raduta looked to Purvis and felt goose bumps rise across her entire body. The look on his face gave all the answer either of them needed. “Take her, Purvis. She is yours to do with as you please. You are now a god among men. You can have any woman you desire, punish any man who opposes you, rise to heights of glory and power that most men never even dream of!”

Emboldened, Purvis rose and took a step toward Raduta. She trembled in abject fear and horror. Somehow she knew she would not survive the ordeal she was about to endure. Death was waiting on her now and he was in a most unpleasant mood. As he reached

for her, Purvis hesitated, wiped the drool from his chin, and turned to Vladimir.

“What do I have to do in exchange for all of this, Vladimir?”

“Oh, nothing right now, my good friend. In a few days I’ll return to find you. We’ll ride down to Timmonsville together. There’s someone there I want you to meet ... someone who is anxious to join you and be your deputy as you take your rightful place as ruler of this coming dark age!” As Vladimir spoke, his eyes flickered like living things from another dimension. When he licked his lips, Purvis was certain that the tongue was forked ... like the tongue of a snake!

“Who is that, Vladimir? What’s his name?”

“No one you know now. But you will know him soon. You’ll get to know him very well. He’s so anxious to meet you, too! His name is Parker ... Roscoe Parker!”

He turned and took an apple from a bowl sitting on the old oak dresser behind him. He took a lusty bite as the juice ran down his chin. “I’ve always loved apples, Purvis. Some call it a forbidden fruit ... like passion! What fools some mortals can be!” He walked out the door without looking back. “Enjoy your piece of the apple, Purvis! I’ll be back in six days!”

Left behind, Raduta was completely helpless before the assault that followed. Purvis had always been a dim but benevolent recluse. He had now been transformed into a savage animal. Through pain filled eyes she gagged as she watched Lily tearing into the entrails of Frito, who died in the moment that Lily was revived. She remembered an old book she’d read when she was first learning the tricks of her con ... the laws of the dark arts cannot generate life force. To return life force to a deceased thing, an equal amount of life force must be taken from another. She tried to scream but no sound came forth. It was just as well. No one hears your screams in Hell!

Chapter 16

You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. Eleanor Roosevelt (1884 - 1962)

Spindola waved farewell to the sheriff as he backed out of the driveway. Spear did not return the wave. Spindola wished he could have shared something with Spear to ease his mind but he had failed miserably in that effort. Whether it was frustration or fear that the “Rev” saw on the sheriff’s face ... or could it possibly have been guilt? ... remorse? ... who knew? Whatever it was he knew that Spear was not yet ready to accept the possibility of the dead walking the earth again. But there were plenty of others around town who were more than ready!

Rev didn’t want to work people into a panic mode but he also felt it was his duty to at least let them know what they might be facing. He was no alarmist but if this were indeed the beginning of the Great Tribulation then people must prepare themselves for the coming of Armageddon. The final Apocalypse was certainly nothing to be taken lightly!

His biggest concern was the prevailing fear that some people believed the “return” of the deceased Sheriff Jerry Bronson might also signal the return of the most horrific creature to ever walk the streets of Timmons ville ... Roscoe Parker! He suspected that even

the thought of this beast being unleashed again upon the streets of this little town was more than poor Sheriff Spear could bear. Even though the events of that horrible night paved the way for Dick to fulfill his lifelong dream of following Big Ben as the sheriff, it also forever marked him in a very negative way. Many felt he should have done something ... anything ... but instead, he ran. It had cost Big Ben his life. Who knew how many more? If not for Jerry, Spindola guessed they'd have all died that night.

It was the opening day of the Dogwood Festival, 1979. The downtown square was packed with tourists from all over. The smell of hotdogs mixed with various spring flowers joined perfectly with the gentle breeze. At the end of the first day, a beautiful Friday night, the streets were still packed with families and fun seekers. Spindola was preparing to go home himself when *they* rode into town. They numbered four but it might as well have been four thousand! They came into town like lions bent to destroy the sheep and that's surely what they did.

Parker's biker gang called themselves "The Broken Bones." Their sleeveless leather jackets exposed arms and torsos covered with tattoos. The back of the jacket was simple ... two crossed bones over an upside down cross. They were not concerned with subtlety. They only wanted to *kill*.

Except for Roscoe Parker, Rev could not remember the actual names of the others. They had become faceless nightmares to him now. They each had a catchy nickname that they cleverly linked to the word "bone" or "bones." The first was called "CROSSBONES." He turned out to be a Native American from an Apache tribe in southern Arizona. He wore a solid white skull mask over his face with an opening at the top for his long, black hair to freely flow. His hair fell below his shoulders. The eye sockets of the skull mask were composed of a one-way black plastic. He could see out but

you could not see his eyes ... only the black hole of the bottomless pit. It made for a frightful sight as he sped into town on his bike, long hair trailing him in the breeze. He carried a small crossbow armed with dozens of razor sharp, metal tipped arrows. It seemed that the arrows were tipped in some type of poison that burned like acid when it penetrated skin. Others said it was a type of Ebola virus that actually ate the flesh of those pierced but Rev could not recall if that was factual or just part of the urban legends that had grown from the massacre of that night. Across his chest, these simple words were tattooed: "Today is a good day to die."

The second called himself "NECKBONE." Rev supposed he gave himself the name as an act of irony as this huge but squat monster appeared to have no neck! He had a huge, bald head with long, stringy hair that reached down to the small of his back. While not much taller than five feet, his girth was enormous! Rev estimated that he weighed at least 350. His face and shoulders were covered with thick, coarse hair that resembled the fur of a bear, adding to the impression that he had no neck. He carried a sledge hammer that he wielded with extreme skill. In retrospect, that was probably the reason he called himself Neckbone ... he was quite adept at swinging that hammer and breaking necks with one fatal blow.

"Men, women, children ... dear God," Spindola thought, "how could such monsters exist in the world?" He had heard Jewish scholars speak on the horrors of the Holocaust, listened to firsthand accounts from survivors who spoke of the horrific things the Nazis did to the poor Jews and "undesirables" of Europe before and during the war ... he'd even seen the documentaries of the Allied soldiers who were caught on camera discovering and liberating the death camps like Dachau and Auschwitz. He'd looked away in tearful disbelief at the sight of the "human skeletons"

in prison stripes and flannels, their faces devoid of hope, their eyes sullen and full of despair, praying to their God who seemed to have deserted them! So yes, Spindola knew of evil. Being of Italian heritage, he had been 15 when the war ended. He was too young to fight but old enough to understand that some Georgia residents had no compassion for an Italian boy named “Roman” in a time when the name of Mussolini was on the tip of every tongue. Despite that and his lifetime passion of rejecting the ways of the Devil, Reverend Spindola had never seen evil squarely in the face until that night. He prayed to God that he’d never have to see it again!

The next two members were worse still. The third went by the name of “FUNNYBONE.” No one ever heard him speak ... he just walked around with a crazy, high pitched shrill laugh that never stopped. He constantly laughed and laughed and laughed. He was completely bald and wore a Nazi style military helmet with the swastika prominently displayed on each side. His weapon of choice was an axe, a huge Viking or lumberjack style axe with double blades and a long handle. The axe was crude ... obviously handmade ... and the head was made of stone rather than iron or steel. It was already stained red when they rode into town. The stains became much deeper before the night was over. When it struck an object it tended to crush more than cut. The sickening sound it made when impacting a human skull was a sound poor Roman would never forget.

Possibly the most terrifying aspect of Funnybone was his face! He’d had plastic surgery, implants emplaced, lips carved back, all facial hair removed ... Spindola was not sure what things he’d done to make it happen ... but the bottom line was that he’d made his face permanently resemble the yellow “smiley face” that had at that time just become a cultural icon. The skin was not dyed with a removable shade and this was no face cream that could be washed

away. However he did it or for whatever reason, Funnybone was a walking replica of the yellow smiley face, laughing like an insane circus clown, his battle axe laid over his shoulder dripping wet from his latest murder.

As monstrous as these killers were, the worst by far was their now infamous leader, Roscoe Parker, aka “BACKBONE.” He was huge ... well over six feet and solid muscle. His arms appeared to be made of rock and his entire body oozed with power and the fury of the storm. Some news reports contradicted the Backbone nickname, saying instead that he called himself “Thor,” “God of Thunder” or Apollyon (after the destroyer of nations identified in the Biblical book of Revelation). Spindola did not know about any of that. He did see the name “BACKBONE” sewn across the broad shoulders of the man’s jacket. Even worse, Parker seemed to enjoy breaking backs, laughing as he felt the back break and shouting, “There’s another backbone to my name!” His weapon was a large chain, maybe six feet in length. He’d carry it around his shoulders and would swing it over his head when he’d strike. It was so heavy it would crush anything it struck. He liked to render his victim helpless, then lift them and break their backs.

No one ever figured out exactly why they hated the town so much. No one ever understood what drove them to such a bloodlust on innocent farmers, merchants and families on that horrific night. None of the bikers had a record of any significance. Parker had been arrested a few times for his brawls with other bikers. He’d been in a scuffle with the Hell’s Angels in California and with the Pharaohs in Chicago but nothing significant had ever come of it. The same held true for all of the members. Petty theft, vandalism, simple assault (always against other gangs), the types of records you’d expect from lifetime bikers. But murder? Especially savage murders in such an unspeakable way as carried out that night? No one could explain

that. The skull mask and the plastic surgery to alter appearances into ghastly monsters was also new. It just made no sense.

Parker had been quoted once, smiling when asked why he felt so driven to carry out so many brutal murders on people he did not even know. He'd responded, "Because I can. Wolves don't need a reason to kill sheep. They just do it because they are wolves and sheep need to be killed as often as possible."

That was all anyone ever got out of him before, during, or after the trial. The day before the attack, Big Ben Spear got a call from the curator at the old cemetery (although it was not the "old" cemetery back then) that several graves had been desecrated. Ben went out to investigate and was shocked to see four graves dug up, the caskets opened and the bodies inside dumped on the ground in rude poses. Some had been stripped and posed in various disgusting or perverted positions. A pentagram had been spray painted on the tombstones of all four graves.

It was that event that now led some of the people to fear that another biker gang was about to attack the town. But Spindola was certain that this time, it was something else. Plus there had been no repeat of the "warning" they'd received back in '79. On that night, carved in the tree that stood by the entranceway (which has long since been cut down) were the words,

"BROKEN BONE LAND. RUN WHILE YOU CAN."

Smearred all over that tree was ... it looked like ... was it? Yes, Ben told Spindola later, it was blood! Animal or human? Animal probably? A dog maybe? He was not sure. While the unforgivable nature of the crime, coupled with the obvious warning carved in the tree would have sent many sheriffs into panic mode, it only made Big Ben more determined. He'd deputized a dozen extra citizens to

help with the festival anyway. After alerting the state police of the desecration, he was ready for trouble that night. And trouble came looking for him, too ... in abundance.

Big Ben was standing beside his car in the town square talking to Neal Ferguson. Ferguson was a Korean War veteran who had just returned from a major ceremony honoring the US military in Seoul, South Korea. He was bragging to Ben that he'd returned with a dozen high end purses for his wife. He was proud that he'd bought all twelve for less than a single designer purse would have cost him in the USA.

"You do know that those purses are designer knock-offs, don't you, Neal?"

"Sure I know it, Ben," he laughed. "But Cheryl don't know it! All she cares about is that it's got this stupid freaking duck on it!" The two men laughed when Ben's car radio lit up like a Christmas tree. It was Ben's son, Deputy Spear, and he was not happy.

"Daddy," Dick's voice erupted from the speaker. "Daddy, can you hear me? Daddy, pick up the mic! Pick it up NOW!" Ben looked puzzled and cast a somewhat irritated glance at Neal.

"What the hell is that boy into now?" Ben asked the question aloud in an effort to downplay his frustration with Dick's lack of success wearing the uniform. He reached for the handset. Dick was still shouting into the speaker from his location, his voice clearly agitated and in great distress. Neal just stood there and said nothing. He was reliving a radio call from the night when he was a private in the 25th Infantry Division along what was now the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in 1950. That call was from a frenzied radio operator pleading for help as his position was being overrun. Neal swallowed hard at the thought ... all of those guys, all 147 of them from Bravo Company, died that night. Surely this call could not be close to anything *that* serious!

"Dick, this is the Sheriff," Ben barked into the mic. "What are you ..."

"Dad, you've GOT to get out here! My God, they've killed everyone out here already! I'd say there are a dozen dead ... bodies are thrown everywhere! I shot at them, Dad, but I missed! And they just looked at me and smiled! They acted like they didn't even care! They just looked at me and rode away! Dear God, they killed all of these people! They are all *dead*!" Ben took a deep breath and felt his heartbeat race. He gave a worried look to Neal.

"Do you still carry that .44 in your truck, Neal?"

"Of course, Sheriff. Always keep it under my seat."

"Go get it and meet me back here." Neal spun around and began walking toward his truck. He'd fought the Commies and returned home to tell the tale. Why did he suddenly feel like this time he was not going to be so lucky?

"Okay son, calm down," Ben said softly into the mic. "Who killed who and where are you right now?" If he hoped his voice would calm down his son, it failed. Dick was as upset as ever.

"I'm at Willie and Erma's bed and breakfast! I'd answered a call of some bikers showing up and getting rowdy because they didn't have a room!" Now Ben suddenly got very nervous. With the carved warning on the tree and the cemetery desecration, he'd feared this may be more trouble than his deputies could handle, especially with the festival crowds in town. Dick should have known better! He should have tried to call Ben before going out there alone. "They suddenly went crazy and just started killing people," Dick continued. They forced everybody outside and told them to run. Then they just started chasing them all down and ... and ..."

"Okay son," Ben interjected. "How many bikers are there?"

"Four, Dad! There's four of them and ... oh God, Dad! It's like

they rode out of Hell or something like that! They ain't human, Dad!"

"I need you to stay calm, Dick. Can you do that?" There was a long, silent pause.

"I'll try."

"That's my boy! Okay, there's four of them. We can handle that. We've handled lots worse than that. Remember when those Cubans came up from Miami and tried to set up a gang headquarters here three years ago? There were 20 of them! How'd that work out?"

"Dad, this is different," the younger Spear screamed back. "You are not listening to me! They killed everybody in Erma's place ... women, an elderly couple ... Dad, they killed little kids! Can you hear me? They killed little kids!" Ferguson walked up next to Ben with his .44 in hand. Several other onlookers began to gather around the car, sensing that something bad was wrong. Ben waved at Neal to wait, then spoke again into the mic.

"I hear you, son. What about Willie and Erma?" Ben's voice was calm and reassuring. His "take charge" demeanor was also having its usual affect on the gathering crowd. There was nothing Big Ben couldn't handle! That's what everybody *always* said!

"Willie and Erma are okay, at least physically. The leader ... he called himself Backbone or something like that ... he told him he'd let them live to spread his legend. He said that there was no need to kill them because he'd already split their seed."

"Split their seed? What did he mean by that?" Again there was a long pause.

"They killed little Willie, Dad. Killed him right there while Erma watched. Willie was trying to save them and ... and then they ..."
Dick never finished the sentence.

"How many guns do they have, son? And where are they headed?"

"They ain't using guns, Dad," Dick cried out. "They got a chain, axe, hammer, arrows ... no guns. But they didn't use any of that to kill these people out here." Now Ben was really confused.

"So how did they kill them, son?"

"They used their hands, Dad," Spear mumbled. *"They used their hands. They just grabbed people and ... and they just broke them. They tore them up. They just used their hands!"* The bodies are everywhere! In pieces ... *everywhere!*" A nervous murmur shot through the crowd. Spindola had now arrived and was listening intently. Ben looked pensive for a moment, then looked to Neal and Rev.

"Neal, Reverend, help me get folks to the church. That will be a good place to hold up. I can put deputies around it and keep everyone safe inside. It should be big enough to hold everyone still gathering in the square. I don't want folks running off in groups of two and three. Let's keep everyone together, okay?" Neal and Spindola nodded and went about doing like Ben said. He then shouted orders to several uniformed deputies who also joined in the effort. Finally he spoke softly back into the mic.

"Where did they go when they left there, Dick?" But before his son could answer, Ben heard the roar of the cycles. He looked toward the south entrance of town and saw them kicking up clouds of dust as they spilled out across the highway, riding four abreast like the demonic Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Just as had been written of those four, it was clear to see that this leader ... the one who rode slightly ahead of the others ... was the face of death. And the gates of Hell followed after him!

"Never mind, boy," Ben whispered into the mic. "I see them. Now you get on over here right now. Do you hear me? I need you here right now. You come and position yourself at the entrance of the old church on the square. You help get the folks inside. I'll take care of these goobers!" Before Dick could respond, Big Ben turned

off his radio. He tossed the mic into the front seat, then opened the trunk and removed the 12-gauge pump shotgun from the trunk. He opened a box of buckshot and stuffed an extra handful of shells into his pockets. Taking a stiff bite of plug chewing tobacco into his mouth, he tugged his trousers, spit into the street and walked out to face these biker misfits. They had just killed a dozen innocent people according to his son. Now he'd see how tough they were against something that hit back. He fully intended to kill them all on the streets of Timmons ville that night. It never occurred to him that it would be he, not the Broken Bones, who would die on that budding spring southern evening.

The four riders did not appear to be in any hurry. They rode calmly into town, causing a panic to erupt among the people trying to get into the church. Many rushed forward and jammed into the doorway, making it impossible for others to follow. Others gave up trying to get in and began running in different directions to escape. A few decided not to run at all. They chose to fight. They were the first ones to fall.

The bikers still sat astride their bikes with motors running when Parker said something to them. Spindola was straining to hear what he said but that was impossible due to the roar of the bikes and the crying children and frightened people. So while he was not certain, he believed the biker was speaking Latin! He certainly found that rather odd. Whatever Parker said, the bikers split up and went to the four corners of the square. Then they switched off their bikes and dismounted, each carrying their own distinctive weapon. Ben, expecting to be backed up by his deputies, did not seem worried that he had been effectively and immediately flanked and surrounded. He pumped a round into his shotgun, spit, and decided to make the first move.

“Now which of you boys is the leader here? I need to know

which one of you is going down first!” When no one answered, he pointed his shotgun at Parker, standing ten feet in front of him. “Don’t make me ask you again, boy! Drop that chain and tell your fag followers to drop their weapons as well. You’re all going down for what you did over at Erma’s biscuit kitchen but you don’t have to die tonight. That can come when the judge orders your candy asses to be fitted for the electric chair upstate. Now what’s your answer?”

The exodus into the church had halted as everyone’s eyes locked onto the sheriff and Parker. Then Parker, his eyes still glued on Ben, answered.

“You hear that, boys? The sheriff here wants us to just lie down and go with him all peaceful like. What should I tell him?” In response, Funnybone gave his shrill shriek of a laugh, causing Ben to look to his left quickly in the direction of the sound. When he did, faster than Spindola would have ever thought possible, Crossbones unsheathed his crossbow, fitted an arrow and let it fly. The small projectile, more of a dart than an arrow, struck Ben in his right wrist. Immediately the corrosive acid unleashed from the dart began eating away at Ben’s wrist and hand. He screamed and dropped the shotgun as Neal Ferguson raised his .44 and fired at Parker. Extremely nervous and over-anxious, he aimed too low. The bullet struck the hard pavement and bounced off to the left, striking a bystander 25 feet away. Horrified by what happened, Ferguson never saw Neckbone rushing up behind him, his axe poised to strike. Crushed by the blow he never saw coming, Ferguson dropped his gun as his lifeless body fell to the ground. The massacre had begun!

The killers were quite efficient. Dozens were killed in a matter of seconds. The deputies still alive were trying to follow Ben’s last order to get everyone into the church. Sensing that the only ones

with any potential to fight were already dead, Parker returned his attention to Ben. He was still writhing in agony as the acid filled dart ate through his muscle, bone, and sinew. Standing over Ben, Parker reached down and picked up the shotgun. For kicks he fired several shots into the crowd as the others killed anyone who tried to peel off and run. The blood, the cries of the dying and frightened, the smell of fear ... it was as clear a vision of hell as anything written by the Apostle or the famed Renaissance authors of legend. Parker looped his chain around his neck, freeing up one hand while holding the shotgun in the other. He reached down and pulled Ben to his feet, his face scant inches from that of the legendary lawman.

"So you're the one who has *him* all in an uproar? I expected more from you, sheriff. Much more! I'm surprised he even remembers who you are!" Ben, struggling to think beyond the agonizing pain shooting through his body, tried to make sense of what Parker was saying. Who was this psycho talking about? Who was this mysterious *him*?

"No matter," Parker continued. "This is what he wants so this is what he'll get. I have a special surprise for you, Sheriff. Do you like surprises?" He laughed with a lusty growl that did not quite sound human. Parker shouted an order in a language Ben didn't understand, causing Funnybone to approach them, all the time laughing his insane chortle. "What's your preference, Sheriff? Fire or steel?"

Ben showed no fear. Instead he tried to swing at Parker with his left arm. Parker blocked the blow with ease, then head-butted Ben in the face, shattering his nose. "I'll take that answer as you want both, Sheriff. And I aim to please!" Looking toward Funnybone, he said, "Let's do it!" He began dragging Spear toward the church with Funnybone walking beside him. It was at that point that Ben's son, Deputy Dick Spear, arrived.

"Look," Neckbone cried out, pointing. "It's *him* again!" Parker looked to see Spear the younger arrive with lights flashing and tires squealing. He jumped out of the car, pistol in hand, aiming at Parker. For a split second, hope emerged among the people. But Ben felt no such surge of confidence. The way the other freak had referred to his son as *him* convinced Ben that his son would not be a savior that night. Ben was doomed and he knew it. He only wondered if everyone else realized it as well.

"Welcome back to the party, Dick," Parker shouted. "I wondered if you'd come back or just keep running. I'm so glad you're here!" Funnybone was laughing more loudly and menacingly than ever. "You're just in time to see daddy get crucified!" Spending his last ounce of energy, Ben grabbed Parker's vest and looked him in the eyes.

"Don't you hurt my boy, you devil," Ben gasped. "Don't you dare hurt my boy!"

"Don't worry, sheriff! I won't hurt your boy. I'd love to put him out of my misery but he belongs to another. I only wish you could be here to see it when it happens but he doesn't want to give you any more time. Now it's time to say goodnight, Gracie!"

Parker tossed Ben's shotgun to Dick, who caught it as a reflexive reaction. His face was a twisted mixture of sheer terror and total confusion. "Watch and learn, boy! You're daddy's about to give you his final lesson!"

Ben's eyes locked into Dick's as Parker began dragging the powerless officer toward the church. His eyes pleaded with Dick's to do something ... *anything* ... to save the town, the people ... Ben himself. But Dick just stood frozen in fear. Finally overcome with the horror of the moment, Dick dropped his weapons, fell to his knees and began to cry.

Chapter 17

Nothing is more wretched than the mind of a man conscious of guilt.

Titus Maccius Plautus (254 BC - 184 BC)

Bobby Fast lay wide awake at 3:00 AM. He could not sleep but that was nothing new. He guessed he had not slept for 15 years, at least not any meaningful or restful sleep. He'd been to more than a dozen shrinks in that time and had a line of medication stacked on his bathroom sink that would make a drug dealer delight with envy. Despite being officially certified as a manic depressive and eligible to draw government disability (the only thing that kept him alive and off the streets), Fast still could not hold a job or make ends meet. He was a normal sized man but he weighed no more than 110 pounds. He simply had no appetite. If not for his buddy Joe, he figured he'd have starved years ago. As it was he would go 4-5 days without eating simply because it never crossed his mind. But Joe was a kind man who had also seen his share of bad luck. He looked out for Bobby and helped as best he could. Sadly, there were some problems that Joe could not fix. Bobby kept asking God to help on that front but so far, despite 15 years of pleading for forgiveness and peace, God had not answered.

Fighting depression of his own, Joe had first met Bobby at the free mission located in downtown Tacoma one Saturday night.

Striking up an immediate friendship, they agreed that if they pooled their meager resources they'd be able to rent a small two-bedroom apartment on the seamy side of the tracks. The men had now called this place home for the last three years and counting. It had no cable television and no air conditioning but it had plenty of roaches and low rent. It beat living in the alleyways where evil things lived that could hurt you in the night.

Joe was actually a celebrity. He still received fan mail from time to time asking for an autograph on an old magazine, comic book or TV Guide. His real name was Joe LaHoud. In the 1980's he was a big time wrestler who went by the name of "Viking Warrior." He became so popular that he ventured from wrestling to acting. He was cast as the superhero, Lunar-Man, and starred in a corny but tremendously successful television series and two big budget movies in the 90's. But his 15 year old daughter Tammy disappeared one night during a shopping trip in Los Angeles, 1999. She was never heard from again ... no ransom note, no clue, no witnesses ... nothing. Joe went into a deep depression, started drinking, and "BOOM," lost everything. His wife left him, he was blacklisted in Hollywood and he ended up on the streets. Whatever money he gets from residuals goes to his alimony payment. But Joe still contends that his daughter lives out there somewhere and from time to time, he still goes to the police station to ask if they've heard anything. Of course they never have. They gave up looking for little Tammy over a decade ago. But Joe still clung to his hopes. At least he still *has* hope to cling to.

Bobby was convinced that if Joe knew the real reason he had fled as far away from South Georgia as the continental USA would allow, he'd have nothing to do with him either. That's because Joe was a good man ... a very good man ... who was trying to recover from something very bad that happened to him and his family. But

Bobby Fast? He was quite different from Joe. Bobby knew he was not a good man at all!

As bad as Bobby's guilty conscience felt, it was the fear that something was looking for him "out there" that was worse. Something awful and righteous waited for Bobby, rising up in primeval judgment ready to carry out his inevitable punishment with astounding proficiency. The nightmares were becoming worse than ever. Bobby could see it now even when he was not trying to sleep. It was always the same ... those burning red eyes filled with hate. And the dog! There was always the dog with that growl, those white teeth, those red eyes!

Just the thought of that nightmare again made Bobby search Joe's cabinets for an open bottle. Failing again (Joe had begun hiding his liquor where Bobby could not find it), Bobby grabbed a handful of the latest generic brand anti-depression pills his new shrink had prescribed. Losing patience trying to figure out how many to take, he just dumped a handful from the plastic orange container and gulped them down, chewing and gagging as he did so. His hands were shaking again!

"Joe? Joe, are you here?" There was no answer so Bobby assumed Joe was working. Joe always told him his work schedule but Bobby could never remember. Joe had found a new job as an orderly cleaning out bed pans and wiping up blood at the emergency clinic a couple of blocks down the street. It was good honest work and Joe was making good money for them. But Bobby wished Joe would not be away at night. It was always worse at night.

It had been Ewing's fault! It was Ewing who took it too far. Dick tried to make it right but it had been Ewing who brought in the Korean. The Korean hurt Mrs. Bronson so badly that she would never recover. That's not what Spear had paid them to do. No one was supposed to get hurt but Ewing messed it all up. He

gave her to the Korean and that meant Dick had to kill more and more people to cover up what happened. And what Ewing did to the Sheriff! Bobby had never signed up for that! He was just the driver! He was just supposed to drive folks around and not get anybody hurt. He needed to call Ewing again! Dick would not take his calls but sometimes he could get through to Ewing. Where was that number again? He'd rather talk to Dick but Dick hated him, blamed him for how it turned out with Mrs. Bronson. But it was Ewing's fault! Ewing! EWING!

He reached for the phone. He'd ask the operator to help find him. Ewing was no friend but Bobby had to talk to somebody! Anybody! Joe was at work and Dick would not answer him so he'd have to talk to Ewing. Yes, he'd talk to Ewing!

He was about to dial the operator when he heard it loud and clear! It was so loud that Bobby felt sure it was inside the apartment. All the lights were turned on. Joe complained about that but he had to leave the lights on! He had no choice! Bad things moved in the dark, things that would hurt you. He needed to have the lights on to see! Why couldn't Joe understand that?

There! He heard it again and it was definitely inside. It was right behind him! The floor creaked again! Oh God, it's inside! It's going to kill him for sure! As sweat poured down his face, Bobby closed his eyes and clung tightly to the crucifix he'd gotten at the mission. It hung around his neck as it always did 24/7 despite the fact that it left a permanent green stain around his whole upper torso. Summoning all of his courage and praying for divine protection, Bobby swirled around to face ... nothing. There was nothing there! He sighed aloud and began to laugh. It was all in his mind! That's what the shrink kept telling him. He just needed to get his mind straightened out and ... then he heard the new sound. It was something he'd only been hearing the last few days and it was getting louder and

staying longer all the time. As expected, a few seconds later he heard a determined scratching on the door. Something big and ferocious was trying to dig through the door. Bobby started to cry and he slid down the wall, trembling in fear at the awful sound from the other side of the door. Above the scratching noise Bobby heard the bark. It was the dog. It was back. And it was angry!

Chapter 18

It is the madness of folly to expect mercy from those who have refused to do justice.

Thomas Paine, December 1776

Roman winced somewhat as he walked across his kitchen to sit in the soft chair that he reserved for his quiet moments of reflection. The pain in his abdomen seemed to get worse the more he thought of that terrible night when the devil made his way into town. His breathing was still good but the pain that grew by the day in his stomach was becoming too much to bear. He knew whatever caused the pain was going to be serious ... maybe too serious! He was not ready to face that possibility yet. He still had so much work to do! How could he ever find time to go to the doctor? If it were something serious he knew he'd never agree to spend his life savings on chasing a cure. He wanted that money to go to his favorite local charities ... and of course, to Rosa. Sweet Rosa never missed a day of going to the assisted living home to help as best she could, which usually meant just holding the hands of those too ill to speak or even pray. For those poor souls, Rosa would pray for them. She was such a gentle lady.

Roman leaned back into his chair and closed his eyes. But even if his eyes were sewn shut he'd still see the painful scene forever etched in his poor mind. And the awful sounds! And smells!

He was again in the city square, April 1979. The church on the square was now filled to capacity. Spindola guessed there were more than 500 people inside. But instead of a sanctuary from evil it had become a prison. The deputies guarding the front and rear entrances were already dead, their slaughtered bodies trampled in the street. These entrances were now guarded by Neckbone and Crossbones to keep those inside trapped there. They had nowhere to run at this point. Outside there were at least 100 dead and dying in the streets.

Spindola still stood outside in shock, witnessing the carnage and trying desperately to find a solution. Realizing there was none he was going from corpse to corpse asking for God's mercy on the dead and salvation for the living. So far he'd seen little evidence of either.

Parker and Funnybone dragged Ben over to the side of the church as Dick knelt sobbing twenty feet away. With one arm that rippled with muscles like an oak tree, Parker lifted Ben off the ground and slid him up the side of the wall. With his other arm he held Ben's hand against the side of the church and nodded to his demonic partner. Funnybone, laughing all the time, withdrew a railroad spike from his jacket and centered it in Ben's palm. Using his other massive arm he swung his hammer forward and with one mighty blow drove the spike through Ben's hand, effectively nailing him to the side of the church.

Ben screamed out in shock and agony. His screams were so loud, they drowned out the incessant giggling and howling of Funnybone. Spindola staggered toward them, his legs weak and trying to run the other way. But Roman willed them to keep moving. He passed Dick, still kneeling and refusing to look at the ongoing atrocity. He paused to say something but decided against it. Instead he picked up Ben's discarded shotgun. He flinched as a second

spike was driven through Ben's other hand. Poor Ben had stopped screaming now but his body jerked and convulsed as it hung three feet off the ground, nailed to the side of the church. Parker now stood back, hands on hips, to observe his handiwork. Funnybone was about to nail Ben's feet when Parker stopped him.

"Don't worry about the feet," he said. "Just let him dangle there for awhile. He ain't going nowhere." By now Spindola was less than ten feet away, the shotgun aimed and ready. Funnybone saw him and tapped Parker's massive shoulder. Now turned and fully facing Roman, the Rev was staring directly into the face of ultimate evil. The shotgun was shaking but at this range he knew he could not miss.

He'd never fired a gun of any kind before but he knew what a shotgun could do. His father had taken him hunting a few times when he was a child. While he could never bring himself to pull the trigger he'd seen the effect of his father's gun on squirrel, rabbit, raccoon and even a deer or two. "Forgive me, Lord," Roman whispered as he closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

He gasped as the gun was yanked from his hands with the force of a whirlwind! Opening his eyes, Roman saw the laughing Funnybone directly in front of him, holding the shotgun in one hand and his massive, blood soaked hammer in the other. Using the shotgun as a club, he jabbed it into Roman's gut with the force of a brakeless truck screaming down a steep decline. Roman lost his breath and doubled over as Parker came to him. He grasped Spindola by the shoulders and stood him upright, then lifted him off the ground as though he were weightless. The two were now eye to eye as Spindola's feet dangled a full eight inches off the ground.

"I'll say this for you, Padre," Parker scoffed, "you've got guts. That's more than I can say for Spear's boy over there!" He nodded

toward the still crying and kneeling Dick Spear. "But you ain't got the brains your god gave a flea! You got to chamber a round before you pull the trigger or the darn thing just won't shoot!" He tossed Spindola aside and he hit the ground with a thud, his head hitting the hard asphalt with a sickening thud. He tried to get up but he could not breathe and his entire body ached as though on fire. He felt as though his heart would give out.

By now Funnybone had returned to the crucified Ben who hung limply staring at his crumpled son with glassy eyes. Ben didn't react as the biker began dousing him and the entire wall of the church in gasoline. As the grim realization of their plan finally dawned on Roman he saw the other two pouring gasoline all around the church. Summoning his last gasp of air, he shouted to Dick as best he could.

"Dick! Dick, you have to do *something*! You still have your pistol! Dick, what's *wrong* with you? Why don't you *do* something?" Roman felt a small glimmer of hope as Dick slowly stood and reached down to retrieve his fallen pistol. But instead of attacking, he just turned and walked away. He took about ten steps before breaking into a full run. Roman watched in disbelief! In a matter of seconds he was out of sight. Turning back to the church, Roman's heart broke even further when he saw the look of total despair on Ben's face. He, too, had watched his own son run away. His body still lived but Roman knew that Big Ben was already dead on the inside.

"Don't fret, Padre," Parker called out. "He won't get far. He'll live today but rest assured he's a marked man. The one who marked him will find him one day! Then he'll feel the fire just like his old man!"

"Please," Roman begged. He got down on his hands and knees and crawled toward Parker in total subjection. "Please kill me, torture me, do whatever you want with me. But please don't

hurt any more of these people. I beg of you ... please!" Parker's response surprised him.

"You overestimate your powers, Padre. You god-fearing types always do. The only reason you're not dead already is because I was told specifically to let you live to see this ... *ALL of this!*" Parker whirled his arms around to emphasize his point. "When the time comes, he'll be coming for you, too! You're a marked man as well!"

At that instant Roman stopped crawling and collapsed face down on the ground. His mind raced like the wind. Who had "marked" him for death? What did all of this mean? He may have blacked out for a moment or two, but he was suddenly awakened by screams and smells he'd never even imagined. Straining to regain his composure he saw the church ablaze. Ben was still alive and screaming as his body jumped and danced about while pinned to the wall, totally engulfed in flame. The other bikers were on guard to kill anyone who tried to escape the exits or crash through the stained glass windows. In a matter of minutes the church would collapse on itself and everyone inside would be killed. Short of divine intervention this was certainly the end of the town and the people trapped inside.

Everyone heard the sirens at the same time. Spindola and the bikers turned as one in the direction of the sound. He could tell that Crossbones was totally taken aback at the unexpected sound, even with his features totally obscured. The county fire truck roared over the slight hill leading into town. It was traveling nearly 100 miles per hour. As it approached the city square it unexpectedly veered off the road and onto the grassy lawn. It was now heading directly for the church. It didn't even slow down as the slow and dim-witted Neckbone tried in vain to get out of the way. The truck crushed him as it continued right up the steps and through the front door.

The crash opened a large gaping hole across the entire front of the building. People trapped inside began instantly pouring out to escape.

It happened so fast that Parker had not even had time to digest this turn of events. As he ran forward and held his chain, ready to kill, he was about to shout for the others to kill the escaping victims. Crossbones ran from the back of the church to the front and the people trapped inside realized their opportunity. They broke free, spreading out into the wood line behind the church. The trap had clearly been broken. The massacre had been thwarted, at least for now.

“Bring me the man inside that fire truck,” Parker screamed, pointing and howling like an enraged bull. “Bring him to me alive!”

As the two bikers moved forward the door of the truck swung open. The driver, a tall man, slowly and confidently stepped from the stoop to the ground, his back to Parker and the rest of the gang. Slamming the door closed to symbolize he had no intention of running, he turned slowly to face the bikers. Spindola, despite his injuries, began to smile. It was Jerry! Pastor Jerry Bronson! With Jerry on the scene, then no matter how tremendous the odds, there was still hope!

Roman later learned that Jerry had seen the smoke from the fires and had rushed to the fire station to alert the firefighters. But Parker and his goons had already been there. Fire Chief Donnie Whittle and his entire crew had been slaughtered. Bronson stood there for a second, stunned at the sickening stench of drying blood still fresh on the concrete floor and walls. But he had only hesitated for a second. He would not do so again. “I’m sorry,” Jerry whispered to the corpses strewn across the station floor. “I can’t give you the respect you deserve now. I have to save the other people in town.

But I will be back for you.” And that was when he saw the fire truck!

Parker looked at the lone man who stood before him in his black jacket and stiff white collar. Still enraged, he began to chuckle, then stopped as his rage regained control. “Another preacher? Is this a joke? The man who wrecked my party and crashed my celebration without any cause is a preacher? You must be insane!”

“Oh yes, you psycho,” Jerry answered. “Yes, I’m insane. I’d have to be insane to actually be looking forward to what I’m about to do to you. To *all* of you!” He pointed to each of them in turn to emphasize his point. “I’m just sorry I killed that one using the truck!” He pointed back to Neckbone. His crushed body didn’t even look like a human being anymore. “I wanted to feel him die under my hands just like I will with you!” His voice was firm and fearless, tinged with sadness over the attack on the innocents but angered by being in the presence of filth like these bangers. It had a ring of finality to it. In that moment, Spindola understood the truth ... these killers didn’t have a chance!

Roman recalled a story Jerry told him roughly a year after he’d returned from Vietnam. It was one of the rare nights that Jerry agreed to actually talk about what he had endured there. Some Viet Cong guerillas had burned a village and slaughtered all the local residents. When American troops came to investigate they were ambushed and pinned down by five well-placed and dug-in snipers who controlled the overgrown jungle path. These snipers began picking off the Americans one by one.

Jerry’s commander wanted to call in artillery on the positions but he’d been told there would be none available until the next day. By then, they’d probably all be dead. With night about to fall, Jerry urged the young officer to turn Jerry loose on them. As soon as the twilight’s last gleaming faded, Jerry crawled into the darkness alone

and armed with only his knife. An hour later, he radioed that all was clear. He'd found all five Viet Cong snipers and killed them all in total silence with precise efficiency. "Not only was it easy to do," Jerry lamented, "it was *fun*!"

Parker locked into a stare down with Jerry. Roman was not surprised when it was Parker who looked away first. "You sure don't talk like a preacher," Parker said. "And now that I have a good look at you, I don't think you are. I know you, don't I? Aren't you supposed to be one of us?"

Before Jerry could answer, Crossbones fired one of his acid tipped darts. Jerry sensed it at the last millisecond and twisted back hard. He landed on his back as the dart flew harmlessly overhead, striking the grill of the fire truck. In one fluid motion Jerry flipped back to his feet and lunged forward toward Crossbones. The shocked killer was cursing and fumbling to load and fire a second arrow as Jerry was upon him. He yanked the weapon from the masked biker's hands and, grasping the unfired dart, tossed the crossbow to the ground. Holding the dart in his left hand, Jerry smashed the archer in the face with his right fist. The sickening "CRUNCH" was heard clearly across to the other side of the parking lot. Crossbones staggered back, his white skull mask now a bright crimson circle that grew larger and larger with astonishing speed. Jerry reached out and grabbed him by his open vest, preventing him from falling to the ground.

"You like playing with sharp sticks? Good! Let me show you what happens when you play with sharp sticks!" In a movement too fast for the human eye to follow, Jerry jammed the dart into the killer's right eye. It shattered the hard plastic eye socket and exited through the back of his skull.

Jerry turned back to the others just as Funnybone attacked, swinging his sledge hammer with amazing speed and skill. Again

and again he swung and missed as Jerry danced about with ease. By now fleeing people began to notice a change in the atmosphere. They stopped and actually gathered to watch the coming storm directed at the suddenly weak and unsteady bikers. As Funnybone swung again (strangely silent ... no incessant laughter now) Jerry caught the hammer in mid swing and neatly broke the handle with a powerful blow just below the hammer's head. In a continuous motion he swung the hammer head back full into the face of the grotesquely disfigured biker, smashing his cheekbones like an eggshell. Funnybone gasped and staggered back, holding his hands to his face while trying in vain to stop the blood that now gushed freely between his fingers.

"You need to do something about your face, you freak," Jerry growled. "Let me help you!" He punched the hulking brute full force in the throat. As his hands slid from his shattered face to his throat while gasping for air, Jerry rammed his face like a racing missile into the grill of the fire truck. His head completely caved in like an overripe watermelon left on the square.

"Now that's *funny*," Jerry remarked as he tossed Funnybone's lifeless body aside like a ragdoll. His face vibrant and alive in a frightening way, Jerry looked like a wild man as his eyes scanned the crowd. His eyes finally locked on the shocked Roscoe Parker. Jerry pointed and stated flatly, "You're next, biker man!"

By now a rather large crowd had gathered around and begun to cheer. As if to emphasize that all decorum was now lost the old church collapsed on itself in a "WHOOSH" of flame and smoke. Everyone inside had been safely evacuated. It was now just one against one ... and Parker seemed to know that he stood no chance. He took his battle stance and began swinging his chain over his head.

"I don't know why you are doing this, preacher man," Parker

shouted, “but no one will take me down today. Once I’ve shattered your hypocritical carcass, I’ll take up where I left off. You haven’t saved anyone ... you’ve just delayed the inevitable!” And with that his chain lashed out like a lightning bolt!

Bronson’s reflexes were catlike and his sense of combat uncanny. He’d anticipated Parker’s move and had actually leaped forward, allowing the chain to pass overhead. He slammed into Parker with a body slam and the two fell together, locked in a death’s embrace.

The battle that followed was brutal beyond compare. It was worse than anything the townspeople or Roman could have imagined. Neither man would give an inch. Both were powerful men of incredible skill and inhuman will. In a matter of seconds both men were bloody pulps. At several points, concerned bystanders moved forward to step in and help Jerry but he’d always wave them off.

“Stay back,” he’d shout while pointing for the locals to stop. Then he’d heave for a breath and nod his head toward Parker. “He’s all mine!”

The end came suddenly and had a twist all its own. Parker, battered and obviously operating on sheer willpower, had been knocked on his back as Jerry stood above him. But Parker had fallen atop his chain. Feeling it beneath him reinvigorated him. He arose with the frenzy of an attacking shark as his deadly chain lashed out at Jerry. It wrapped around his forearm and before he could pull free, Parker yanked back with extreme force. Jerry was pulled through the air and tossed 15 feet, crashing and rolling into a section of dogwood trees. He was back on his feet instantly but Parker was already attacking with the chain again. He flung it at Jerry’s head. Although Jerry was able to prevent the links from hitting his face, the chain wrapped itself around the trunk of the nearest dogwood tree. Jerry’s right arm was pinned between the

chain, which completely enwrapped the trunk of the tree, and the tree itself. With a mighty roar while sensing victory at last, Parker yanked back on the chain with all of his considerable might. The trunk of the tree snapped like a brittle twig. Even more importantly, Jerry's arm was broken and mangled. His bones clearly protruded along his forearm and elbow. The loud "POP" of the breaking tree and bones resounded across the still smoking and burning town square. The onlookers all gasped in shock.

Parker then moved in for the kill. He showed no hesitation and no desire to drag out the fight. Sensing this was his moment to end it all, he wanted to kill Bronson quickly and immediately, then make his escape to lick his wounds and recover. He moved in a direct line toward Jerry, bellowing his primal scream as he prepared to deliver the death blow. Roman took a step forward to try and block him but was too late ... Parker was already past him and upon Jerry.

Despite his horrific wounds, Jerry anticipated Parker's frontal assault and was ready. Sliding away at the last possible second, he caused Parker's blow to strike the ground. The chain missed its mark by the slightest of margins. Before Parker could withdraw and strike again, Jerry kicked out with amazing accuracy. The heel of his boot crushed Parker's kneecap with a sickening "CRUNCH!" Parker fell into a heap, gasping for air but still clearly not done fighting. He tried to get to his feet but Jerry beat him to it. He smashed Parker's cheek with a thunderous left hook that shattered Parker's face and completely knocked his right eye out of its socket.

Parker lay writhing and moaning on the ground. Blood streamed from every orifice in his head. Bronson walked over to him and looked down at the broken and mangled body of this once seemingly invincible killer. He acted as though the broken arm were little more than a paper cut. If Jerry Bronson was in pain he did not show it.

Jerry spit a shattered and bloody tooth from his clearly broken jaw, then reached up and straightened his obviously broken nose. A quiet hush fell over the onlookers. It was if they were watching a classic Jack Nicklaus' final shot on the green at the Masters in Augusta. Every eye watched as he dragged Parker, now helpless and unable to resist, to the broken stump of the dogwood tree. Where Parker's chain had shattered the trunk, a jagged and extremely sharp tip pointed skyward. Placing Parker's head above the stump, it became clear what Jerry intended to do. The crowd began cheering.

"Kill him, kill him, kill him," they shouted in unison. It was like a sadistic cheerleader chant at the execution of a condemned killer. The sheep had become the wolf. Blood demanded blood and Pastor Jerry Bronson was about to pay the band. Jerry placed the sole of his boot on Parker's head and was about to deliver the death blow.

"For crimes too heinous to comprehend," Jerry uttered, "I sentence you to DIE!"

"Nooooooooooooo, Jerry!" The cry came from beyond the crowd. "Jerry, please Don't do it!" The crowd parted to allow the speaker to enter the circle that had formed around the pending execution. Jerry's eyes were almost aglow with the raging fire burning within his mind and heart. He was about to become God's judgment on this bat from hell. Who would dare ask him to stay his hand? And then the glow left his eyes. His features softened and the rage melted from his soul. It was the only person on the planet who could affect him in such a profound and immediate way. As the fire of the burning church embers continued to pop and crackle she walked up to Jerry, her face aghast at the sight of his wounds and the carnage all around her. She gently touched his face.

"Please, Jerry," Angel pleaded. "Don't kill him. If you kill him you will no longer be the defender of this town. You'll have become

just like *him!*” She nodded in Parker’s direction to emphasize her point. “And you’re a better man than that!” Jerry swallowed hard and looked away. He stepped back from Parker, then swept his arm around to indicate the carnage that was once his hometown.

“Do you not see this, Angel? He did *this* ... he and his goons did *all of this*. Sheriff Spear, Chief Whittle, little Willie Goodman, dozens, maybe even *hundreds* more ... they killed them all! He deserves to die!”

“Maybe you are right, sweetheart,” she answered. Her soft tone and gentle demeanor seemed so out of place in an environment still rocking and swaying from the violence, fear and hatred of just a moment ago. “But that’s not for *you* to decide. Tonight let’s turn him over to the authorities. I’ve called the state police. They’ll be here any moment.” As if on cue the sound of police sirens began to moan in the distance, getting louder by the second.

“I can take him out with just a little pressure from my foot, Angel,” Jerry protested. “The people here deserve this after what he’s done to all of them!” Angel smiled as only she could do. Roman could see the sword figuratively slipping from Jerry’s hand.

“You once told me that you knew why the dogwoods blush, baby,” she softly smiled. “Would you, knowing that truth, now use this poor tree to kill a man who lies helpless before you? Even a man *like this man*? Would that not only add to the shame that this remorseful tree has endured for centuries?” She paused as her words began to take their full effect on the man she loved. Then she continued.

“After tonight this town will need men ... good men like the one I know you are ... to help rebuild and get it back on its feet. If you kill this man this way, it’ll be you who will be taken away when we need you more than ever. Think of the town, baby! Think of the ones who need help, compassion and understanding to recover

from all of this horror.” She paused again for effect, then drove her final point home. “Think of *me!*” Bronson lifted his foot back and stood firmly on the ground. He looked toward one of the onlookers standing closest by.

“Please go over to the sheriff’s car and bring me some handcuffs. He keeps them in a box under the passenger seat in the front.” The man nodded and ran toward the car, returning in a few seconds. Taking the cuffs, Bronson leaned over and clicked them in place around Parker’s wrists.

“As a citizen of this county and the state of Georgia,” he wheezed, “I’m placing you under citizen’s arrest.” The crowd cheered in unison as the police cars, four of them, screeched to a halt in the square. In a matter of minutes more would join them along with federal agents from all over the region. A helicopter clearly marked “FBI” landed just outside the city square. Her face now beaming with love and concern, Angel inserted herself under Jerry’s arm. It was likely the only thing that kept him from collapsing.

“Who’s in charge here?” It was the lead agent for the FBI asking as he stepped off his helicopter and strode into the midst of the crowd. Almost as one everyone pointed toward Jerry.

“That’s the man in charge,” little Johnny Kicklighter said as he pointed to Jerry. “That’s the man who saved us. He’s gonna be our sheriff now!”

Spindola sighed aloud as he allowed himself to return to the present. That had been more than 30 years ago! The Kicklighter kid had been right, too. Jerry refused to run for sheriff, saying that he wanted to continue his ministry. But it didn’t matter. Despite being the only name on the ballot for the special election, Dick Spear got less than 2% of the votes to replace his father. Jerry got 98% of the vote, all of them being write-ins. The people had clearly spoken. Jerry hung up his white collar and instead pulled on the uniform of

the new sheriff of Timmons County. To smooth over the doubts of the people he immediately reappointed his friend, Dick Spear, to the position of deputy sheriff. In time the people either forgot or forgave Dick for his cowardice of that night. And then, after poor Jerry was killed in 1995, Dick finally got to pin on his long sought after sheriff's badge.

Now it had been almost 15 years since Jerry died and something was happening again in this little town. Something bad, somehow once again connected to the annual festival. Spindola could feel a storm coming. It was going to be a very bad storm ... he could feel it deep within his psyche ... but this storm had nothing to do with the gathering black clouds and the distant rumble of thunder.

Chapter 19

*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; For he today that sheds his blood
with me shall be my brother!* **William Shakespeare, Henry V**

It was late dusk when Mike Ewing strolled into the VFW for happy hour. He could not shake the terrible headache that had plagued him for days. Perhaps it was lack of sleep. But who could sleep with that infernal dog who continued barking until all hours of the day or night? As if that were not enough, that idiot Bobby Fast kept calling him over and over babbling some incoherent nonsense about “our time has come” and “the devil has found us.”

What a load of crap! He’d started refusing to answer the phone just to get away from it all. He’d let a couple of days pass without answering the phone when the police knocked on the door. Seems the last several calls had been from Sheriff Dick Spear of Timmons County, Georgia. When Ewing had not answered, Spear had asked the local police to check on him to “make sure he was okay.” Oh sure, like Mike Ewing was born in the dark only last night! Spear just could not let it go even after all of these years. So he’d promised to call Spear and the cop left him alone. In reality he had no intention of ever calling Dick Spear. The more he could distance himself from Timmons County and 1995 the better off he’d be. In fact, maybe he’d been here in Kansas too long as well. Maybe tomorrow

he'd give some thought to pulling up and moving further west. He'd heard it was easy to get lost in Montana or North Dakota. And getting lost sounded like a very good idea these days since that coward Dick Spear and mental retard Bobby Fast suddenly wanted to play telephone footsie!

Maybe tonight was a night to let go and get drunk. He could get one of the guys to take him home if need be. These fools actually thought of him as a hero. They'd do anything for him, anything at all if he'd ask. Yes, he decided this was a good night to get drunk!

"Hi, Mike," an elderly gentleman in a wheelchair shouted from across the room. "Come on back here and visit awhile!" That was Blake Benson. Ewing guessed Benson to be about 95 years old but he still had the alert mind and energy of a man in his 50's. The wheelchair had nothing to do with the man's age. He'd been shot in the back by a Nazi sniper during the Battle of the Bulge near Bastogne, December 1944. Despite being shot and crippled, Benson had dragged himself through enemy fire to shield a wounded private who could not move and was exposed to artillery fire. The private died but Benson had been awarded the Purple Heart and Silver Star ... and a lifetime Army pension ... for his actions. As a former member of the 101st Airborne he assumed Ewing felt the same pride and camaraderie he felt for old soldiers. What a stupid old fool!

"Maybe later, Blake," Ewing answered, waving and smiling while cursing under his breath. "I plan to be here all night!"

"How's it going tonight, Mike?" Leon Teague was always happy to see Ewing. Ewing smiled and waved, taking his usual spot at the bar. He supposed that Teague felt some connection to him since they'd both served in Vietnam at the same time (although they had not known each other there). But Ewing couldn't care less. Leo Teague could rot in hell for all Ewing cared. "Want your usual tonight, buddy?"

“Not tonight, Leo,” Ewing responded, feigning kindness. “Give me some hard brown stuff and open a tab. And later tonight I may need a cab to take me home. Know what I’m saying?” Leo smiled and retrieved a high ball glass from beneath the counter.

“I got you covered, soldier! And the first one’s on me!”

“Thanks, Leo. I owe you,” Ewing offered back while thinking, “I hope you choke on a cherry stem you hillbilly prick!” That was shortly after 7:00 PM. By 8:00 PM Ewing was good and drunk and finding it harder and harder to keep his friendly façade under control. He’d pretty much driven the “regulars” away and had been given a wide berth for a time. Most everyone who came here on a regular basis had some demons of their own to exorcise. A general “live and let live” attitude prevailed. But when Ewing insulted the wife and kids of one of the faithful regulars, Leo decided it was time to intervene before things got too far out of hand. After a stern butt-chewing and a tense moment, Ewing settled down and began talking to the regulars in a more civil tone. Slowly but surely the circle regained its composure and began to form around the angry and inebriated Mike Ewing.

It was shortly after 9:00 PM when Leo broke away to answer the ringing phone. He had been just about to tell Mike that the bar was closed to him for the night. It wasn’t so bad that Ewing was roaring drunk and starting to get angry again, but the scary and disturbing stories of red eyes, bloody carpets and demon dogs were beginning to become upsetting. Ewing even had a name for the monster he said continually pursued him in his dreams. He called it ‘The Night Terror.’ Like Ewing, Leo had worked through his share of ‘night terrors’ after Vietnam. Who hadn’t? No sane person could endure the horrors of war face-to-face and not be changed. But Ewing’s description of this ‘Night Terror’ was the most vivid dream recollection Leo’d ever heard. Maybe Ewing needed some

professional help. All of this had been rushing through his mind when the bar phone rang. Excusing himself, Leo slid across the wet floor and answered on the third ring.

“Leavenworth VFW,” he spoke as he lifted the receiver to his ear. “This is Leo. What’s up?” There was a long silence on the other end although Leo could clearly hear stressed breathing in the headset. He rolled his eyes and looked back to Ewing. He already knew who the caller was and what he’d be asking for. It was the same caller who had been checking in daily over the last week in a desperate effort to talk to Ewing. Leo was getting pretty tired of the whole thing.

“Hey, Mike,” Leo shouted. “It’s for you!” Leo laid the handset on the bar and went about his business. He turned the bar television set and VCR to watch a terribly poor quality VHS of “Band of Brothers.” It was always a big hit with the old 101st veterans who gathered there ... all of them, of course, but Ewing.

Ewing cursed and considered just walking away and disappearing into the night. The last thing he wanted to do now was talk to Dick Spear. But what the hell, he might as well get it over with. If he kept refusing to answer, Spear would just send another goon out to roust him out of bed. And that really was the last thing Ewing wanted. With a huff and a groan he slid off his bar stool and moved around behind the bar.

“Hey, Mike,” Benson shouted again! “Come on back and visit awhile!”

“In a minute,” Ewing promised, turning his back to the customers and placing the phone to his ear. “This is Ewing,” he grouched into the speaker. “What is it, Spear?” Ewing immediately pulled the receiver away from his ear as the caller began shrieking into the phone. The sound felt like a needle being shoved into Ewing’s brain!

"Spear-do-you-mean-Dick-Spear-no-that's-not-me-this-is-fast-bobby-fast-from-Georgia-but-I'm-in-Tacoma-not-Georgia-do-you-remember now-Mark?"

"Fast?" Ewing was angry. "Fast, would you slow down, you moron? I can barely understand anything you are saying."

"Thank-God-I-found-you-Mike! He's-coming for us-I just-know he is. I-have seen-him-in my mind-for so long. But-he's almost-here now! I have seen-the signs!" Fast was crying and trying to space out his words more efficiently but it was still very hard to clearly understand him.

"Fast, you are an idiot. What signs? When are you ever going to get it through your thick skull that the guy is dead! He ain't coming back! He's *never* coming back!"

"I-used-to-think-so ... but it's getting-worse! He-may-even get one-of-us ... today!" Ewing huffed again and started to hang up the phone. But he suddenly realized, even through his alcohol induced stupor, that maybe his dreams and night terrors were somehow connected to what Fast was feeling. He began to feel somewhat uneasy.

"Why do you think something will happen today, Fast? Have you seen or heard something?" There was a long silence on the line before Fast blurted out his response.

"I-see-things all-the time! The red-eyes ... they-glow-in the dark!" Ewing felt tightness in his neck. He'd seen those things, too. It was his constant dream ... *the night terror*.

"Anything else? Have you seen anything else?" He felt the knot in his stomach intensify!

"Yes," Fast finally gasped. "It's-the dog. I-keep hearing-the dog!" Ewing almost threw up as his nerves exploded from head to toe! How could that be possible? How could Fast be seeing and hearing the same bad dreams Ewing felt.

“What did you say, Bobby?” This time Ewing’s voice sounded afraid and feeble. “Could you repeat what you keep hearing?” Fast answered immediately. In contrast to his frantic babbling before, his voice now was clear and concise.

“I said I hear the dog. But not just any dog ... *his* dog! I keep hearing *his* dog! He’s going to kill us, Mike. He’s going to kill us all. And God help us I think he’s coming tonight! Goodbye, Mike!” The line went dead.

Ewing considered calling information to try and place the call back to Bobby Fast. He had more questions he wanted answered and had no intention of letting the conversation end on that note. But as he placed the phone back on the cradle he realized that there was some commotion going on in the bar. There were about ten guys there, all veterans of various wars from WWII to Afghanistan. Most were either elderly or seriously disabled but they were still very much alive and ready to fight if need be. There were no passive cowards in this bunch. But they were all clearly afraid of something ... the stench of fear permeated the air like putrid smoke in a windowless room.

For a moment Ewing thought they were reacting to something on the television. He looked upward and saw that this particular *Band of Brothers* episode retold Operation MARKET GARDEN and the failed attempt to begin the invasion of Germany through the Netherlands. But despite the popularity of the show with the group, they had never shown this degree of reaction to the simulated war violence reenacted for public viewing. He stared back at them, trying to better understand what was happening through the drunken haze that wrapped itself around his mind like a constrictive python. That’s when he realized that someone was shouting at him.

“You cannot ignore me any longer, Ewing,” the cold and angry

voice shouted. "I made a promise that I'd come back for you and make things right! Tonight it all ends for you ... forever!" In disbelief Ewing turned to the sound of the voice and blinked in amazement. Fast had been right! Standing in the doorway was not just a dog ... it was THE dog ... it was HIS dog! There could be no mistaking the shape, size and color of this huge black lab mix with the telltale white patches over the eyes. He shook his head trying to loosen the cobwebs. His vision blurred as he focused again and saw the dog had inched closer to him, his hackles standing on end, baring the glistening white razor sharp fangs that provided a stark contrast to his shiny black coat. He almost laughed ... he never realized that dogs could talk! Then the voice boomed again and Ewing shifted his gaze higher. That's when he felt the warm trickle of urine flowing down his legs as fear forced his bladder to empty its contents. That's when he *knew* that Bobby Fast had been right ... he was going to die *tonight!*

Standing in the doorway was a man. It was hard to determine exactly how tall or large he was, but he clearly filled the entire doorframe. He was dressed like a well to do London gentleman ... black overcoat and tux with a black shirt and fancy black fedora. As if on cue the jukebox began belting out the old Johnny Cash tune, *Man In Black*. The song seemed oddly appropriate.

The mighty man's fedora sported a bright red band while a blazing red necktie adorned his chest. None of that was the cause of Ewing's distress, however. It was the face ... or rather, *lack* of a face that raised everyone's fear level. The man wore a white mask that covered his features. The only thing visible was the penetrating eyes ... eyes that glowed with a red rage much brighter than the tie draped neatly with perfect precision around his neck.

"W-Who are you?" The whiny tone in his voice surprised even Ewing. "And what do you want with me?" The stranger's answer was immediate and blunt.

"I am your night terror, Mike Ewing! I am the eyes you see in the dark! And I'm going to kill you for what you did to my wife, my dog ... and ME!" With that the stranger stepped forward with a calm resignation that nothing could prevent him from his appointed rounds. He was like a postman from hell, come to deliver a special package to Ewing as promised. God help anyone who received such a package postage due!

Ewing ran for the rear exit screaming for help as he fled. In doing so he knocked over several other patrons too elderly or ill to get out of his way. He vanished into the night through the exit, the barking dog right on his heels. Leo Teague rushed behind the bar as Ewing ran past him and withdrew the Army issue .45 that he purchased from an estate sale in Texas shortly after he returned from Korea in 1954. Chambering a round, he leveled it at the stranger who now stood directly in front of him. Onlookers could not say exactly how it happened, but in a split second the attacker took the gun from Leo and pointed it between his eyes. The barrel of the gun actually touched the bridge of Leo's nose.

"I have no fight with you, soldier. Stand down!" With that he tossed the gun backwards over his shoulder. It skidded across the floor and through the open door into the parking lot outside. He then moved past Leo like ... well ... like a ghost.

"The way he talked to me ... the words he used," Leo later recanted to the police and the local news reporters, "made me feel like he was a soldier. He just spoke and carried himself like one ... a combat soldier on a mission. That's what it felt like to me."

As the stranger made his way to the rear exit two of the old soldiers tried to physically tackle him. He tossed them aside with ease, never even slowing down. Another attending veteran later told the police, "He clearly did not want to hurt them. They were old

and feeble and he could have killed them at will. But he just wanted to get them out of his way. That was obvious.”

As he was only a few feet now from the rear exit, the masked man’s path was suddenly blocked by old Blake Benson. Blake rolled his chair between the attacker and the door and sat in his wheelchair defiantly, his fists raised and poised to strike. The stranger stopped and observed the man intently. Everyone else had already run outside and several were dialing 911 on their cell phones. But old Blake stayed firm, his frail fists upright but trembling. “Come on, you bastard!” Blake was trying hard to cover the obvious fear in his voice. “Come on and fight me like a man!”

The phantom intruder moved forward with blinding speed. He gripped Blake’s upright fists but did not exert any pressure. Instead he gently forced Blake’s arms downward until they rested at his side. Still holding them firmly in place, the stranger leaned in to look Blake in the eyes. Their faces were inches apart.

“Why do you fight with me, old man?” His voice was firm but not angry. “Why do you stand guard to prevent me from my destiny?” Blake swallowed hard before he answered. He’d spent a lifetime paying the price for the heroism of his youth. He was not about to lose his dignity now that he knew the end was near.

“I’d do anything to help a fellow soldier,” he said through quivering lips. “We are brothers, Mike and me. That’s something folks like you just wouldn’t understand!” Despite the hard ceramic mask, Blake could sense sadness in the man when he heard those words.

“Your loyalty is misplaced, Blake Benson. You are playing your hand to back one not worthy of your courage. If you only knew, you’d back me instead.” The stranger now relaxed his grip on Blake and stood erect. He towered over the frail man in the wheelchair. As if following an unheard command the stranger pulled away the

fright mask and allowed Benson to see his full, uncovered face. What Benson saw was no monster at all. He later told police he felt his fear vanish. And in its place? Respect!

“You called me Blake Benson? You know who I am?”

“Yes. I know you. I also know that you are a good man who gave his all outside a little Belgian town to fight oppression in a place you’d never heard of before you got there. And despite your horrific wounds and the physical and emotional pain you’ve suffered ever since, you’ve never complained or asked another to ease your burden.” Benson’s eyes began to well with tears and his body began to shake with emotion. The stranger reached out and placed a hand of comfort on his shoulder.

“I, too, bear the scars of war, albeit in a different way. Like you I also wore the patch of the screaming eagle. We are brothers, you and I. But Mike Ewing is not. I go now to purge us all of the evil he represents. Search your heart and you know it to be true.” And with that he replaced his mask and moved around Benson. He reached forward and grasped the door handle, opening the rear door exit. As he did so, he stopped. Although he did not turn around to face the now sobbing Benson he left him with these words.

“The German soldier who shot you? On December 22, 1944? His name was Hans Werthen. He was 19 years old, the son of a shoe cobbler from Berlin.” By now Benson was crying beyond control. Still he managed to mumble a response.

“How ... how do you know all of this? And why are you telling me this thing?” The man ignored the first question but gladly answered the second.

“He had never shot a man before he shot you on that snow encrusted winter night in the Ardennes,” he softly explained. “When he heard you scream, the sound ruined his life. For the next ten years he lived in a daze. He could not get the stain of

your blood off his hands. He went back home an emotional wreck. The Russians killed his parents and confined him to a labor camp further east. Unable to live with the pain and guilt and knowing he could never get used to it, Werthen took his life on Christmas Day, 1954. So you see, Blake Benson, that bullet still lodged in your spine didn't kill you ... it killed your attacker. When he fired and saw the bullet strike he sealed his own fate. That's what is happening here tonight with me and Ewing. Ewing fired the shot long ago ... but the bullet will kill him more surely than it did me. When he pulled that trigger he sealed his own fate. Does this now become clear to you? Do you finally understand?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Good-bye, Blake Benson. You are still a very good soldier! I am honored to have met you!" And with that he was gone into the night.

Outside, Ewing ran with amazing speed to his waiting and unlocked Chevy van. Hot on his heels was the angry, snarling black dog, his eyes ablaze with a hatred not associated with animals. It was as if this dog actually *knew* its prey and was determined to bring him down at any cost for *personal* reasons! Ewing made it to the van and got inside a split second before the dog went airborne and slammed into the driver's door! He bounced back, seemingly unfazed by the collision. The side door was almost completely caved in from the impact. The dog seemed to actually analyze the situation, according to several of the reports filed from witnesses to the police. He sniffed the air, looked left and right, then retreated behind the van to the passenger side.

Ewing had been fumbling with his keys and was about to insert them into the ignition when the dog crashed into the door. The tremendous force of the crash caused Ewing to drop his keys on the floorboard. He frantically groped for them in the dark and shouted with a cry of victory when he found them and raised them

to insert into the ignition. That's when he heard the low pitched growl of the dog again and actually felt its breath against his neck. To his horror he looked to his right and realized that he'd left the passenger window rolled down. His van had no air conditioning and with zero crime problems in the Kansas rural countryside he rarely rolled his windows or locked his doors. And now it was too late. The dog was on his hind legs looking into the open window. His enormous head was already inside the van. Ewing knew that with no effort at all the dog could leap into the front seat of the van. The dog's eyes were locked on Ewing in a death stare. From its deepest recesses, a low and guttural growl played out a mournful and continuous tune. To Ewing it sounded like a death march.

Deciding that any effort to close the window or ignite the engine to attempt an escape was futile, Ewing slowly reached down to open his own door. Perhaps he could escape through the driver's side and make it safely into a car of one of his VFW friends. He did not want to excite the beast, so he moved in slow motion. The dog never seemed to notice Ewing's slight movement ... those canine eyes were locked on Ewing's own. His hand firmly gripping the door handle, he tried to push it open but it would not budge. The impact earlier had warped the doorframe, making it impossible to open without exerting extreme physical force to it from the inside. Meanwhile the dog's eyes seemed wider and wilder than ever! Ewing began to tremble again. The urine returned with a vengeance, resoaking his already damp trousers.

It was then that the driver's door was unexpectedly yanked open from the outside! Ewing jumped with surprise as the grinding, protesting metal screamed but gave way, surrendering to a force more powerful than itself. Ewing jerked his head away from the dog to see who was opening his door to allow his potential escape. What he saw caused him to gasp in horror! It was the masked man who

had opened the door, the same man now glaring at him through the slits of the hard white ceramic mask with a hatred far eclipsing the animalistic rage of the dog. If death were a man, Ewing thought, he would be *this* man!

Before Ewing could even cry out to beg for mercy the stranger grabbed him by the collar and yanked him from behind the steering wheel. Ewing fell with a “THUD” to the dusty dirt, coughing and gasping for air as the impact with the ground forced all the air from his lungs. His keys spilled from his hand and made a “jingle” sound when they skidded away from him. Seeing the keychain at his feet, the masked man picked it up with his left hand and simultaneously pulled Ewing to his feet with his right. He slammed him against the body of the van roughly as the dog took his place behind his master. He was still growling and poised to strike when the man spoke. “Heal, Blueblood. Sit still, boy!” And just like that the killer beast hushed, took a step back and sat patiently awaiting his next command.

Roughly a dozen VFW patrons now gathered around to witness this unprecedented violence at the popular gathering place for war veterans. Realizing they were powerless to stop the killer’s assault, they still offered their support to their buddy. “Hang in there, Mike,” they shouted. “We called the police! They’ll be here any minute!” Neither Ewing nor the masked man paid any attention to their shouts.

“What did you call him?” Ewing wept, his voice now a total wreck. “What did you call the dog? Was it ... Blue? Was it ... Blueblood?” The attacker’s eyes narrowed, seeming to increase the intensity of his red gaze. He leaned in close to Ewing and spoke in a whisper from beyond the grave.

“You are not worthy to speak my dog’s name aloud, Ewing! Don’t do it again!” Ewing closed his eyes and began to weep incessantly.

“Dear God,” he sobbed, “this can’t be happening! This must be a bad dream!”

“This is so like you, Ewing! Hiding yourself among men of integrity and courage to mask who you truly are! But I’ll unmask you tonight. I’ll show them what you really are! In time, the whole world will know as well!” With that the “Night Terror” removed his hold on Ewing and took a step back. As he had done with Blake inside he reached up and pulled his mask away. Looking back to Ewing, they were now face to face with no mask between. Ewing screamed at that instant. Several of the witnesses later stated that the scream didn’t even sound human. Danny Dunham, a DESERT STORM vet, stated that it sounded like a cry from hell, “as if Ewing already felt the fires of the bottomless pit searing his soul!”

Ewing’s face was so contorted that he barely resembled himself when he saw the visage of his relentless pursuer. It was obvious to all that these two knew each other and had a history ... clearly not a good history at that! “Noooooooo,” he cried out. “This is not possible! You’re dead! I saw you die! How can this be possible?”

“I told you that I’d come back for you, Ewing. Of course you could not hear me since you’d destroyed my vocal chords. I’m guessing that you can hear me tonight though!” Like a man possessed Ewing whirled and tried to make a run for it. The highway was less than 30 yards away and he could see traffic in a steady flow heading toward Kansas City. With any luck maybe he could make it to the road and hitch a ride with a trucker or cop. He had to try! Anything would be better than having to look at that face again!

Ewing took a quick look over his shoulder as he darted toward the street. His drunken fog was lifted now, flushed out by the panic and fear coursing through his veins like a wildfire. He felt a surge of confidence however when he saw that the Night Terror made no effort to pursue him. He began to feel giddy with glee until he

saw something black, large and low to the ground closing in on him fast! It was the dog! That demon had unleashed that devil dog on him! Screaming all the way, Ewing picked up his pace faster than he thought possible. He was only a few feet from the road now and, as luck would have it, a massive 18-wheeler just topped the horizon. If he could flag him down he just might make it!

Ewing began waving his arms and screaming as he stepped onto the outer edge of the road. The trucker, a good ol' boy from Arkansas named Wayne, was hauling a load of cow feed from the Purina factory and saw him right away. Ewing squealed with delight when he heard those air brakes moan. He looked behind him again and to his horror the dog was airborne, locked onto Ewing like a heat seeking missile! Ewing screamed like a rat caught within the talons of a hawk and shielded his face, back-peddling into the path of the truck. Wayne hit his brakes full force and all 18 wheels locked, sending thick black smoke into the night air from the burning rubber. Two of the tires exploded from the sudden stress and heat as they skidded across the still hot pavement. Wayne cried out his warning and tried to veer away from Ewing but it was too late. Ewing backed directly into the path of the speeding, careening truck. At the last instant Ewing realized he had no place to escape to. From 30 yards to his rear, he still saw the man watching and at his feet sat the dog. How was this possible? Perhaps the dog bearing down on him had been an illusion. Or perhaps the dog could be in two places at once? He imagined he could see the man's face ... the face of Jerry Bronson ... in the last second before impact. Jerry was not smiling or laughing ... he was simply saying, "Justice is served! Burn in Hell for all eternity, traitor!" What was that line from Shakespeare, Ewing thought? Something like, "Though those that are betray'd do feel the treason sharply, yet the traitor stands in worse case of woe." He hoped God was in a merciful mood

tonight. And then the truck struck him going 60 miles an hour. When it skidded to a stop 25 yards further down the road, the body of Mike Ewing no longer even existed. The state patrol would later put all they could find into a single tiny plastic bag for burial.

From his vantage point, Bronson shook his head as he observed the end of another of his enemies. Again it was the guilt in their own souls that betrayed them in the end. He turned to look at the soldiers who stared back at him in awe. None made any effort to stop him. He still held his mask in his hand. One of the men held up his cell phone camera and took a photo. Bronson paid no mind to that. But he did lock his gaze onto Blake Benson who now sat among the onlookers with tear stained cheeks, clinging to the wheels of his chair. Blake raised his right arm and waved. Bronson nodded in reply, then looked down to Blue. "Let's take a ride, boy!" He opened the door to Ewing's van as Blue yelped and leaped past him to his familiar spot next to his master. "Next stop ... Tacoma, Washington!"

The van rolled forward into the night, disappearing north amid the traffic now piled up headed south toward Kansas City. Moments later the police arrived. They took multiple statements and the cell phone as evidence. That night, Shannon Sparks, a reporter from the Kansas City local news, aired her report "live" from the location of the shocking murder of a local "war hero." Standing in front of the VFW, she introduced Leo Teague as the "manager" of the club.

"Did you hear him say anything before he began his attack, Mr. Teague?"

"Yes," Leo answered, looking quite uncomfortable amid the glare of the television camera lights. "He clearly gave his name when he walked in the door."

"And what did he say his name was, Mr. Teague?" Leo swallowed hard as the camera zoomed in for a close-up.

“He said his name was ... The Night ‘Terror!’” That tagline was immediately picked up by the AP. It became the headline story for every late night news show across the country. The Night ‘Terror’ had been born! But unknown to any of them, the true terror was yet to come!

Chapter 20

Black it stood as night, fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell, and shook a dreadful dart; what seem'd his head the likeness of a kingly crown had on.

Satan was now at hand. **John Milton, Paradise Lost**

Vladimir Buchinsky shook his head “no” when the waitress asked if he’d like coffee. That was followed with a long debate over tea. Tea was what he generally drank to begin his day. The waitress was confused and was not even certain the establishment served hot tea! She’d have to check, she told him as she disappeared into the kitchen. Vladimir laughed in spite of his frustration ... it seemed that in Southern Georgia the only tea available was iced and laden with sugar. What had his ancestors ever seen in this place?

He was determined to be seen as little as possible in Timmons ville. While he kept his room at Erma’s bed & breakfast he maintained a very low profile while there. He didn’t want that stupid sheriff to cast unwanted attention his way but he needed to gather information, physical items, and ingest the aura of the town. He needed those things to make the final curse work as expected. Thus he’d driven west of the town to have breakfast in this truck stop diner just east of Alabama. But time was drawing near now! After all these years ... more than 50 years in the making ... Timmons ville would soon be no more. And this time there would be no one to stop him!

The waitress returned all aglow! They did indeed have hot tea and she would bring it out shortly! Vladimir smiled and placed his order, then watched her walk away. This country had so much to learn! Women should be taught to respect their masters. This country taught the false doctrine that all were created equal and should be treated with dignity and respect! Eventually he knew that would all go away. The weak were nothing more than sheep to be slaughtered by the wolf! To kill the sheep is merely the nature of the wolf! He'd learned early in his life that only the strong survive. And no one was stronger than Vladimir Buchinsky!

Vladimir was born in 1900 in a small village in extreme northeast Hungary just across the border from Ukraine. He smiled thinking of people's reaction when he told them he was 75. They'd "ooh and ahhh" and say he didn't look a day over 50! What would they think if they knew he was well over 100? That was an indication of his power, of his strong connection with the dark arts, of the rewards he'd obtained for all these years serving his master!

The small village he'd been raised in was soon pillaged and destroyed by fearful fools who said Vladimir's father dabbled in the black arts. The coming and ever increasing communist influence and persecution of the Hungarian gypsy people soon forced his family to move into Romania and, by 1915, to the United States. Before he left his father placed a curse on those who had driven him and his family from their home. They all died horribly in the following months. Once in America, his father changed the family name, Buchinsky, to a more English friendly version ... *Bronson*. He'd been Vladimir Bronson ever since. But now, back in the area where his Americanized name would draw too much attention, he was using his old name. He'd reveal it all when the time came to do so.

He'd first learned to dabble in the dark arts from his father

when he was still a child in Hungary. His father did have some degree of power ... he could place curses to kill chickens or cause an unfaithful lover to develop an embarrassing rash ... but he struggled with anything of substance. His parting curse on the villagers drained him of his life force tremendously and he never fully recovered from it. Valdimir once asked his father if there might be a way to levy a curse *without* draining your own life force in the process? “Yes,” his father told him, “there is a way. But this way is a dangerous one to all life, Vladimir. This is a power you must never seek to find!”

After moving to America and traveling with a gypsy caravan from town to town (mostly in the Midwest), Vladimir and his parents made a decent living telling fortunes, doing card tricks, playing music and selling “home remedies” ... love potions were what they billed them as. But once in a while, a man would arrive and have a darker request of his father. Vladimir was rarely allowed to listen openly but he’d usually hide outside the wagon, his ear pressed against the wall just below the poorly sealed window. He could hear the conversation clearly without detection (although he suspected that his father knew *exactly* where he was every time). The requests usually entailed righting of a wrong ... punishing an unfaithful lover, a thief, a tyrannical boss ... but sometimes it went even further. It was those times ... when the customer wanted revenge dished out in the most dreadful ways imaginable ... that Vladimir felt the most excited. He liked it! He knew that spreading the hatred and sickly scented aroma of revenge was what he longed to do with his life.

Normally his father would refuse to perform such a curse. It was not that he opposed it for moral purposes ... it was simply a matter of his own survival. To call up such dark things caused him to pay with a portion of his life force. It was this penance to the

dark gods of other worlds that eventually cost the elder Buchinsky/Bronson his life.

Vladimir's father died at the ripe old age of 47. When he died many thought his father to be a man in his 90's. Vladimir swore that he'd carry on his father's powers in his own way. He'd find a way to tap into the dark forces forgotten by civilization and retain his life force at the same time. The fact that he knew of no one to ever successfully accomplish this feat did not deter him, for Vladimir Bronson knew that he was better and more worthy than other men!

He started slowly and with mixed results, practicing on small animals and vegetable gardens of grumpy old men. It wasn't until he was nearly 30 years old that he met the "man" (and he uses the term loosely since this being was far more than a man) who would change his life.

The country was nearing the end of the booming 20's and the seeds of the Great Depression had begun to take root. Vladimir, now an orphan and traveling with his own caravan of drunken followers, concubines and bastard children, had settled for a time in the Pacific Northwest. He felt and looked like a man in his 60's. To his dismay he had not been able to unlock the secrets of channeling dark forces without paying a fearful price. He refused to curb his insatiable lust for power however. What is the purpose of life if not to rule those beneath you? He was contemplating his next move when the darkness arrived!

His name was Alexandru Vasilie. Like Vladimir, he was an immigrant from "the old country." He had followed Vladimir for days, locking in on the intermittent and broken signals that Vladimir put forth with his curses and efforts to tap into something larger than himself. Unknown to Vladimir, his spells had indeed aroused the attention of one of the dark princes who dwell in worlds beyond human imagination. That dark prince was Alexandru.

Alexandru had been a barbarian king and gypsy warlord in what we now call Romania over 1,000 years ago. Having unlocked the secret to power beyond human reckoning he looked to be still in his 20's. He was willing to show Vladimir the answers to his burning questions and open the doors forbidden to lesser men. These secrets would not only restore Vladimir's youth but allow him to use the dark powers for anything his heart desired while placing the burden of payment on others! He could call on the evil gods at will and place the pain and suffering for such calls on anyone he chose. As a result, Vladimir's lifespan had been drastically extended. He was not immortal ... he would eventually die ... but he anticipated living for at least 500 years at a minimum.

Of course he understood that he was still mortal, not "something more" like Vasilie. He could be killed as any mortal could. All he had to do was stay away from positions that could put him in physical danger. But if his plan worked as he'd envisioned ... as he'd planned for all these years ... then he may ascend up the black ladder to unholy power and immortality. Until then, he could have all of power for a very simple and reasonable price ... women and loyalty.

It seemed that Vasilie liked to collect women. He kept them as slaves and sold them in illegal markets around the world. It was a business he thrived upon. It had sustained him for hundreds of years. It was the way he spoke of women, his unnatural desires and the obvious contempt he held for them, that clearly defined Vasilie as no mere man who had found the secret of eternal life. He was "something else." Whatever that "else" was, Vladimir did not know. Perhaps that was a good thing for him. Vasilie was not fond of sharing secrets. As for loyalty? Vladimir was now permanently one of Vasilie's lieutenants. He was part of a secret empire of evil and powerful men around the globe, all linked in some way to Vasilie.

His empire still operated from his base headquarters deep within the Carpathian Mountains of Romania. Vasilie was now a legitimate businessman who marketed cosmetics throughout most of Eastern Europe. But his international slave trade was the real power broker of the Vasilie Empire. So long as Vladimir kept a supply of nubile, attractive women fed to his master, he retained his dark powers at no cost. It had been an easy choice for him to make.

The waitress finally brought Vladimir his tea and breakfast. He watched her walk away and liked what he saw. She was too old and not pretty enough for Vasilie, but she would be a fine afternoon diversion for Vladimir. One simple spell and she would be his to do with as he pleased. And he could use her for another purpose in the coming days as well. Perhaps he'd be back by later in the day.

Things were really starting to come together in Timmons ville. When Sheriff Ben Spear had kicked him and his roving band out of the county in 1950, Vladimir determined to make an example of the small southern town with its quaint homes and old fashioned values. And since time meant little to a man destined to live forever, he would take his time in exacting revenge such as this continent had never seen!

It had been Vladimir who left the infant behind for Spear to find. The bastard child was born to one of Vladimir's whores he kept in his entourage of the day. It had been born mere moments after Spear spit his tobacco into the dirt and drove away. It had taken a simple spell to plant a yearning within the deepest soul of a newborn child ... he would become a perfect and merciless killing machine! Nurtured and raised by the stupid townspeople who looked after him, an unseen clock ... a time bomb ... was ticking! The bomb was supposed to have exploded when the boy turned twelve, but for some reason there were no mass killings to follow his birthday celebration. The first one to go was to be the

sheriff's own son, Dick. But instead of killing the boy it seemed his chosen assassin had become like a brother to his intended prey. Upon later studying the situation from afar, Vladimir realized that it was Spindola and his constant meddling that had somehow thrown the curse out of order. Add to that the stupid girl that caused the boy to moan and twitter whenever she entered the room and his killer instinct had somehow been muted. Vladimir hoped that the stint in the Army would do the trick. The boy had indeed become a professional killer with his stellar combat record in Vietnam, but instead of returning home to slaughter the residents of his home town he returned a reluctant hero! To add insult to injury, he renounced violence and swore to never harm another human again! No way was Vladimir Buchinsky going to stand for that.

It was a few years after Jerry Bronson (Vladimir loved the irony that the killer in the midst of the sheep had been given the very name of the man who would soon orchestrate the destruction of the town) became a "Man of God" that Vladimir met Roscoe Parker. Parker was a man of limited intelligence but incredible physical strength and untapped potential for extreme violence. While Parker was consumed with petty theft and breaking skulls in bar fights, Vladimir saw in him the possibility of a level of violence rarely seen in modern civilization. Using women and money as the bait, Vladimir kept Parker close by as he developed a potent spell of death and destruction. He nurtured it, cared for it and strengthened it until it was ready to be unleashed on the town.

In that time span, he had collected the other three members of the gang soon to be billed as "The Broken Bones." Like Parker, the others were misfits destined for petty crimes and lengthy jail terms. Vladimir made them so much more! And so it was on that fateful night in April 1979, Vladimir unleashed his spell of revenge. He called upon his dark powers to transform these four violent but

ignorant bikers into lethal weapons of mass destruction. Not only was the spell to have brought down devastation not seen since the fall of Pompeii, it was also to have awakened the killer spirit still slumbering within Jerry Bronson. Bronson was to have joined in the fray, killing Dick Spear before the eyes of his crucified father, then killing the meddling Spindola and as many others in the town as he could find.

The killer spirit had been awakened as planned but Bronson went after the **WRONG** targets! What kind of mockery was this? Not only did Bronson save the town and destroy the gang but he took an oath to become the protector instead! And he compounded the problem by reinstating Dick Spear to a position of power and becoming closer than ever to that fool Spindola!

It was Vasilie who finally turned things around for Vladimir. He'd sent the Korean to spark the end of Jerry Bronson and his accursed wife, setting the stage for Dick Spear's stained soul to come to full fruition. Vladimir felt some remorse at the loss of Jerry Bronson on that spring night in 1995. Not that he cared about the man, but it pained him that his spell of revenge had not worked! Somehow, Spindola had discovered a way to circumvent the powers of the dark forces that empowered Vladimir's dreams. But 15 years later, Spindola, Spear, and everyone in the town of Timmons ville would die and die painfully.

It had worked out perfectly for Parker to survive his battle with Bronson on that fateful night 30 years ago. To take advantage of that night, Vladimir had been the one who paid \$100 to a brute named Malik to slip that knife between Parker's ribcage on a stormy night in the federal penitentiary. And he'd paid another cool grand to the prison surgeon to ensure that Parker died on the operating room table. Now with the stars aligned properly and the spell grown to a level of immeasurable power, Vladimir would call Roscoe Parker

back to Timmons ville on the first night of the Dogwood Festival just five days hence. That's where dear old Purvis Hartley would play such an important role. And this time there would be no Jerry Bronson to save the day! This time they would all die!

The waitress laid the check for the breakfast on the table and smiled as she walked by. Vladimir looked at the ticket and smiled. She'd written her name, Kimmy, with a smiley face using pink ink. He pocketed the pen to use later ... that's all he ever needed ... a personal item that he could use to cast his spell. Kimmy was not going to have an enjoyable evening, of that he was certain. He smiled and waved to her as he walked to the cashier to pay his bill. As he did so he patted the mysterious pouch he kept in his coat pocket. It gave him much comfort to feel it sitting in his vest as it had for all of those years. It was his guarantee that this time, Dick Spear and all the descendants of the people of Timmons ville would gasp their final breath when the festival began! One thing that did puzzle him, though, was the desecration of the grave of Jerry Bronson. Why had someone taken the time and effort to dig up the sheriff's body and hide it somewhere? That seemed odd! He silently wished he'd been the one to do that deed, but he'd had nothing to do with that at all.

Chapter 21

*An act by which we make one friend and one enemy is a losing game,
because revenge is more active than gratitude. Anon*

Just as he had done upon leaving Baton Rouge, Jerry was long gone from the VFW in Leavenworth before the police arrived. He had then been able to make good time on the back roads traveling at night. He was southwest of Omaha moving northwest toward Tacoma before the news made the airwaves. So they were calling him “Night Terror,” were they? He almost got a chuckle out of that. Ol’ Blue picked up on the slightly relaxed mood and moaned, wagging his tail as his sign of approval. But the mood didn’t last! The police reports on the radio indicated that they’d already found Arlo’s truck and traced it back to Baton Rouge. According to the radio report, the police were now looking for a serial killer wanted in the deaths of two men from Louisiana and Kansas. They relayed the description of Ewing’s van and tag number. For a moment Jerry thought about ditching the van and finding another way to Washington. But only for a moment! He was taking Ewing’s van and that was that. Use the enemy’s weapons and supplies against them! That’s what he’d been taught in the Army. That’s what he’d do now.

He felt he’d be in Tacoma by 2:00 AM or so the next morning.

Again, not needing to stop for rest or nourishment made the trip a simple undertaking. He knew exactly where to find Bobby Fast. He still was not certain exactly *how* he knew these things, but he did know them and that was good enough. He did understand enough to appreciate that there is so much you *never* understand about eternity. And coming back from the dead was a subject he still needed to contemplate. He was pretty much just making it up as he went along. But one thing he did know for certain ... he'd made a mistake by showing kindness to Ewing and Fast and their kind when he was living. They'd all mistaken kindness for weakness. He was determined he'd never make that mistake again! And neither would they!

Thinking about all those issues again caused his eyes to glow their angry red. Poor Blue whined and edged away from his master, sitting as far away on the front seat as possible. He laid down his head and pined, as he supposed most dogs did, for life to be simple and sweet like it used to be. But those days were long gone.

As Jerry passed one truck stop or all-night diner after another his mind raced back again to that fateful April night in 1995. He had just come home from a typical slow day in the county to find Dick Spear waiting for him in the living room. Things were going well between them. Dick finally seemed to have gotten over the horror of his dad's death and the stigma of shame he carried as a result. And he seemed to have long since moved on from his disappointment of not playing college football at Tech. From Jerry's perspective their relationship had never been better.

Angel was in the kitchen and Dick asked if he could talk to him outside. Jerry walked out with him just as two trucks pulled into the front yard. It was still nothing to raise alarm in Jerry's mind. Sanchez, Wolverton, Ewing and Fast had all been in his home before. Jerry had even hired Sanchez to do some yard work last

summer. Wolverton had helped him repair his roof after a hail storm caused some minor damage to the storm drains. It was Jerry who'd found work in town for both Ewing and Fast. Jerry was so relaxed that he'd laid his gun down on the kitchen table when he came inside and never even considered that he'd need it at his "out of the way" home east of town.

This had been the Spindola home "back in the day." It was well off the beaten path and had fallen into extreme disrepair when Roman's father died. Not wanting to live in the large and difficult to find home, Roman sold it for a song to Jerry as his wedding gift. Basically he gave it away ... all Jerry had to do was pay the back taxes. Roman only asked one favor in exchange ... to please share any ghost sightings or reports of any unusual circumstances. But in the almost 15 years that Jerry and Angel had lived there, Jerry never saw anything out of the ordinary. Roman always seemed disappointed about that as he he'd been certain Jerry would have seen *something!* After a time Roman stopped asking and Jerry never brought it up again. The lack of ghosts living on the property seemed to depress Roman for some reason. Jerry never really understood why.

As the four men got out of their trucks, Dick explained that they were here at his invitation. It seemed there had been some reports in nearby counties of some women simply disappearing from their homes. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the disappearances ... young, old, married, single, fat, thin ... perhaps as many as twenty women had disappeared in the surrounding counties over the last 48 hours and Dick feared whoever was behind these heinous acts might be about to enter Timmons County. "We need to be ready," Dick urged. These guys had seen some things and were ready to share with Jerry what they'd seen and heard.

Jerry's eyes were now blazing as hot as ever. If he'd still been able to feel temperature changes he was certain that the heat in the

van just increased by several degrees. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have been so trusting? When he asked how Dick knew of these disappearances when he, as the sheriff, knew nothing, Dick gave a pathetic story about Jerry being “out of the loop” the last few days. Dick had just been waiting to let him know, which was why he’d brought these four men to Jerry’s home late in the evening.

Jerry, of course, swallowed it all. He had no reason to believe that Dick Spear was anything other than what he said. Besides, Jerry *had* been away from the office and from typical police reports for more than 48 hours. He had been holding a prisoner on the run from McNairy County, Tennessee after he’d escaped from a road work detail near the Arkansas border. He’d agreed to meet the Tennessee sheriff halfway since they were friends and had worked so well together on numerous occasions over the years.

And he’d also been away on “personal” business with Angel. They’d gone into Atlanta to consult with a specialist, Dr. Britt Bradley, to help them determine if it might be possible for them to have children. Jerry and Angel certainly wanted to be parents, but after years of trying to conceive they still had none. It was important to both of them, so they’d headed north to look into the possibility of Invitro fertilization. Dr. Bradley said they were excellent candidates for the struggling, newly developed (at the time) technique. He ran some tests and they would know within a few days if the doctor could help them. He’d told no one, but he was excited about the possibility! He dreamed that within a year he and Angel would be introducing their new baby.

Jerry suddenly screamed with rage and struck the steering wheel in his anger! His outburst startled Blue, who trembled and wedged himself against the passenger door as best he could. “I’m sorry, ol’ Blue,” Jerry said as he reached out to console his canine partner.

“It’s not your fault!” Blue wagged his tail in response and ambled over to again lay his head in his master’s lap. Jerry patted his head as his eyes slowly returned to normal. He marveled at the notion that nothing loves more completely and unconditionally than a dog ... or a child.

Again sinking into 1995, Jerry believed the lies Dick told him as the four monsters disguised as men approached him in the gathering gloom of twilight. “Hi, guys,” Jerry welcomed as he shook the hand of each man. “Sorry I am not better prepared for this night. I should invite you in for dinner, but we were not expecting you and we’ve been out of town for awhile. Can I get you a drink?”

“Sure,” Ewing answered with a slight twinge of menace. “I could use a beer. We all could!”

“No beer,” Spear insisted. “We are here on business, not to celebrate happy hour!” Ewing gave Spear a look that would have stopped a clock but Spear didn’t back down. “It’s getting late! We need to get down to business so we can get on with our night. Understood?” Jerry was perplexed at the odd behavior Dick was exhibiting and tried to ease his obvious tension.

“It’s okay, Dick,” Jerry soothed. “I had no idea about any of this. My fault to downplay the importance of the night.” He then looked to all the men who now stood slightly spread out before him on his front porch. “I apologize to you for not being aware of these disappearances. I guess I’ve been so wrapped up in personal business and helping out a friend that I’ve allowed my duties to slip. Now I understand that you guys have some information about all of this?”

“We sure do, Sheriff,” Wolverton answered. He had a sly grin on his face that made Jerry uneasy. He’d seen Wolverton like this before and it usually meant he was up to no good. Ewing, Wolverton and Sanchez were all smiling that same “dangerous”

smile. Fast appeared nervous and was sweating profusely. Dick seemed extremely agitated.

"Maybe you'd better tell me what's going on, Dick," Jerry directed. "And start from the beginning." Bobby Fast now seemed about to faint and the others suddenly seemed nervous as well. They had all seen Jerry Bronson move into "take charge mode" many times over the years. He was not a man to be toyed with for any reason.

It was then that ol' Blue came ambling around the corner of the house. He got excited when he saw Dick. He made his goofy barking sound that signaled his happiness and moved to Dick's side, nudging his hand with his nose. He wanted Dick to pet him and play with him as he often did on visits. The years were catching up with ol' Blue. He had some arthritis in his hips which caused him to run at a slightly slower pace and in a somewhat angular stance. But being petted was always the perfect medicine for ol' Blue. He nudged Dick's hand again.

"To hell with this!" It was Wolverton who suddenly lunged forward with his knife, slashing at Jerry's face. But Jerry's reflexes had been too quick for them! The split second of doubt he'd felt gave him his warrior's "sixth sense" to prepare for trouble. He dodged Wolverton's lunge with ease, then grabbed his knife arm, pulling and twisting at the same time. Fast screamed and fell to his knees as Wolverton cried out! Jerry had cleanly broken Wolverton's arm at the elbow. To put the final stamp of his disgust on the poorly timed attack, Jerry smashed Wolverton squarely in the face. His nose shattered as he fell backward, bleating like a sheared sheep. Blood and cartilage hit Bobby's face like a fine mist.

Dick knew that this fight was already lost. The only chance they'd had at all was to catch Jerry by surprise. Now that he was forewarned he'd run through them as if they were children. Damn

Wolverton and his bestial nature! So Dick acted quickly. As Blue slowly looked to his master, confused by the sudden change in the group's atmosphere, Dick pulled his revolver from its holster. Without hesitation he aimed and fired. Poor Blue was killed instantly, his skull shattered by the .38 hollow-point round that exploded through his head and lodged in the hard wood porch.

Jerry screamed! He'd expected the attack to come to him, not his precious Blue! In disbelief he rushed to his beloved pet as Dick aimed his revolver at Jerry. In a split second Jerry realized that Blue was dead. His adored pet and friend had been expecting a gentle rub on his head. Instead he got ... AARRRGGGH! ... the rage began to build! Jerry had not felt such white hot anger since he had faced down the Broken Bones more than 15 years ago. With his dog's blood on his hands, Jerry locked his death gaze onto Dick! It was the only thing that saved the deputy's life.

With Jerry so fixated on his traitorous friend he'd lost track of the others. Wolverton was still moaning in the driveway and Fast was crying and having an emotional meltdown right next to him. Sanchez was in a panic and stood frozen in place, unable to figure out what to do next. But Ewing had come with an agenda of his own. As Jerry lunged toward Dick, Ewing fired the .22 pistol he'd kept concealed under his jacket. The bullet slammed into Jerry's throat. He'd been so target oriented on Dick that he never even saw the flash of Ewing's pistol until the metal jacketed messenger of death ripped through his vocal chords and lodged just beneath his left ear below the jawbone. Jerry fell with a "THUD" and began gasping for air. He heard Dick shouting and Fast crying, then tried to focus as Ewing and Sanchez ran past him into the house. He heard Angel screaming ... and Dick was shouting something to ... someone? He could not maintain his focus. Everything was going black. He could feel his life pouring out onto his porch with every

gush of bright red blood. He had to find the strength to get up! He had to save Angel! Try as he might he could not rise. Lying on his back he could feel his throat filling with his blood. He coughed and it splattered upward and back across his face. He must not allow it to end this way! That's when he realized someone was standing over him, looking down. It was Dr. Rollins! If anyone could save him it would be Dr. Rollins. But Rollins just shook his head and moved over him into the house. Angel was still screaming. That's when everything went black.

He regained consciousness later, but how much later he had no idea. He was lying in his living room floor next to his beloved Blue. No one was with him now except Ewing. Where was Angel? Was she still alive? And why had they done this? How could any of them have done this? And Dick? Dear God, how could this be happening?

He tried to speak and could not. He tried to move and could not. He thought of Angel and the child they would never have. Please God! Please don't let them hurt sweet Angel! He reached out to Ewing to plead for Angel's life. That's when Ewing took his hand and ...!

Jerry died not knowing what happened to Angel. But now, back in the land of the living, he knew she was dead. He could not find any indication of her life force like he'd been able to do with so many others. And when he awakened in the cemetery three nights ago he clearly saw her tombstone neatly etched next to his own. Those bastards had killed her that night! But they would not escape unscathed! All that was left now was Fast and Spear! He'd take care of Fast tomorrow night. And Dick Spear? He'd save him for last! He'd make him suffer and plead for mercy, fully knowing that all the others were already dead! And once he'd been broken mentally and emotionally, Jerry would break him physically ... *permanently!*

Jerry's mind snapped back to the present day. It was sometime in the early morning just before sunrise on a desolate Nebraska highway. Behind him, sirens blaring and lights ablaze, was a Nebraska state trooper car. As best Jerry could tell from the rear view mirror, the driver was alone.

To outrun him was futile. He was in barren countryside with no place to hide and the van could barely make 70 mph even downhill. Ewing obviously had not done his regular preventive maintenance on this rust bucket. Even if he could outrun the patrol car the trooper would no doubt soon be calling ahead for a roadblock. He might have already done so. So when retreat no longer poses a viable option, attack! That's what Jerry had learned in Vietnam. He had a mission to complete and nothing this side of St. Peter's pearly gates was going to keep him from making it to Tacoma in the next 24 hours.

The thought suddenly occurred to Jerry that he might be put into a position where he would have to injure ... or kill ... someone innocent in order to accomplish his mission. He wondered if he'd be able to do that. He hoped he would not have to make that decision.

With the patrol car directly on his tail Jerry slammed on the brakes. Both the van and the pursuing car burned rubber and the acrid smell of the screeching tires filled the air. The trooper, a 10-year veteran and former Marine named Charlie Young, struggled to keep his car under control as it fishtailed left and right across the asphalt surface.

The van could not maintain its balance as the cruiser did and it teetered on two side wheels for a second or two before it flipped over. It rolled six times before coming to a stop some forty yards down the road. It teetered briefly on two wheels, then collapsed on its side, the passenger side down. All four wheels were still spinning.

The motor was still running. Officer Young, still trying to maintain control of his car, swerved hard left to avoid hitting the van that now lay motionless in the middle of the road. He missed the van but bounced across the hard gravel to the soft dirt shoulder along the far side of the road. Unable to brake in time, he smashed into a road sign before grinding to a halt, his back wheels hopelessly mired in the soft but sun dried sand.

As steam gushed from beneath his hood, Officer Young understood that his car was finished. But if it was indeed the Night Terror in that van as he suspected he needed to secure the suspect before making any radio calls. He emerged from his car with his .38 pistol drawn and ready.

Young approached the van with extreme caution. In his ten years on the force he'd never had to pull his weapon but that did not mean he was not extremely proficient in its use. He made an educated assumption that whoever was in the driver's seat of that van was in critical condition, even if he'd been wearing a seatbelt. Once he'd verified the location of the driver, he'd confirm the identity and call for back-up. That was Young's plan. But plans never seem to work out as expected.

With a jolt of energy, his heart pounding out of control as adrenaline flooded his body, Officer Young looked through the shattered windshield and pointed his pistol at the driver's seat. To his surprise, the van was empty! In disbelief he looked and blinked, then looked again. Nothing! How was that possible? Perhaps the driver had been thrown from the van as it flipped? If so he was surely dead. Young took a step back when he heard the low growl of a wild beast. Slowly looking above him he saw the most terrifying dog he'd ever seen. The dog was standing on top of the van looking down at him, drool oozing from his bared fangs. He appeared ready to pounce at any second.

“Easy boy,” Young whispered softly as he slowly raised his gun to take aim. “Take it easy boy!” The dog did not seem to show any increased agitation but he was very much in attack mode. Only a couple more seconds and Young would have a clear shot. Just a little more and ...

Young suddenly cried out in shock as the Night Terror seemed to literally appear from nowhere. He lunged forward from Young’s right side and grabbed his gun arm in a vise grip of iron. He pushed his arm upward as Young pulled the trigger. The shot went harmlessly into the air and echoed down the dark, deserted highway. In a flash, Young had his gun ripped from his hand as he was rudely thrown to the ground.

For the first time he clearly saw his attacker. He was dressed entirely in black, complete with fedora and overcoat. But it was that ghastly mask ... pale white with no mouth and no nose ... and those glowing red eyes that made Young begin reciting the rosary in his mind. He’d made a fatal mistake by not calling for back-up first. Now he was going to pay with his life!

Night Terror grabbed Charlie by the collar and jerked him to his feet in a single motion. Silently but never ceasing to glare with those burning eyes, he removed Young’s handcuffs from his belt and dragged him to the police car. Young was fighting with everything he had to resist but it was a total exercise in futility! This man ... if indeed he was a man beneath that mask ... had the strength of a battalion. It was like trying to stop the wind during a hurricane!

Arriving at the car, the Night Terror shoved Young inside and in a smooth fluid motion, cuffed him to the steering wheel. Reaching across the officer, he pulled the keys from the ignition and tossed them 30 yards away into the black Nebraska night. He turned back to Young and leaned in, his face inches from the patrolman’s.

Young tensed and anticipated the worst. This was the moment of his death.

“Look at me,” the Night Terror commanded. When Young did not comply the tone became much more terse! “*I ... said ... LOOK AT ME!*” Young relented and looked into the eyes of his executioner. To his surprise the man had removed his mask. He no longer appeared to be a crazed demented killer. In fact, rather than fear, Young suddenly felt a new emotion. It felt like ... respect.

“I have no quarrel with you, Officer Young,” the man spoke. “But I cannot allow you to keep me from my appointed mission.” With that he reached across to the radio and, grasping it in a gloved hand, ripped it from the console with a single jerk. It was the most amazing feat of strength Young had ever seen!

“I am leaving you here now, Officer Charles Young. Others will find you eventually. When they do, trust your instincts. Tell them I was headed south. Tell them I am heading to Colorado or Arizona. Search your heart and you will know that I am not your enemy. We are brothers, you and I. That is why I spare you today. Search your heart and do your duty. *Do what you know must be done.*”

And with that final appeal he was gone. He walked to the van that lay on its side. As if it were weightless and showing no signs of extreme effort, Night Terror pushed the van erect. It rocked left and right before settling on all four wheels. Casually, Night Terror got back into his van, whistling for his now happy and friendly dog to join him. Charlie watched in shock and disbelief as they drove away heading northwest. In a matter of seconds they were completely out of sight. There was no sound to be heard along the long stretch of highway except the gentle drone of the wind and the occasional cry of a wayward coyote.

Taking a deep breath, Charlie realized he'd just come face to face with death in human form and survived to tell the tale. His

stomach suddenly convulsed and his nerves exploded in stressful jubilation. He threw up all over his pants and car seat.

Now on the road again, Jerry gripped the steering wheel and began planning his next move. Tomorrow night ... Tacoma, Washington ... Bobby Fast! He began to feel excitement! It was all about to end at long last!

Chapter 22

Do not always expect good to happen, but do not let evil take you by surprise.

Czech Proverb

Sheriff Dick Spear was still sitting at his kitchen table watching the early morning news when he heard the initial reports. Federal agents were now involved in a case involving a potential serial killer on the run between Louisiana, Kansas and Nebraska. He called himself “The Night Terror” according to eyewitness accounts who confronted him in Leavenworth, Kansas.

Spear stared wide-eyed at the tube as a bouncy blonde reporter appeared overcome with glee while telling of the gruesome events of the previous three nights. Authorities linked the killing of a “highly decorated and well respected Vietnam veteran” in Kansas to that of a “gentle, grandfather type groundskeeper of a secluded Louisiana Civil War cemetery” through a trace of stolen license plates. It seems that when Arlo Sanchez was killed, the suspect apparently stole his truck and drove it to Leavenworth. The same man apparently killed Mike Ewing, abandoned the truck and headed northwest in Ewing’s stolen van. “According to local federal authorities,” she beamed, “an exhaustive search is underway to determine the connection, if any, between the victims in these two inexplicable murders.”

Spear would have laughed if he'd had the energy. It would not take much digging to find the connection between these two "well respected and beloved" community pillars of "selfless service." The reporter then cut to a clip of a federal prosecutor from Kansas City.

"We will pursue this killer no matter how long it takes," he proclaimed to the cameras. "An attack on our dignified and honored military heroes must not ... cannot ... *will not go* unpunished!" The prosecutor then displayed a poor quality cell phone image of the man, hat pulled low in the dark, looking away from the camera. "Not much to go on there," Dick muttered.

The blonde reporter came back with an "urgent piece of breaking information!" She reported that the killer had been confronted by a state trooper in Nebraska in the early morning hours following the attack on the VFW.

"We are sending you now to a live feed from our local news affiliate in Omaha!" What followed was a poor satellite feed from a lonely highway somewhere in rural Nebraska. Dick saw a tow truck preparing to pull a wrecked state car from a ditch. A police spokeswoman was giving a statement to the news crew. Spear turned up the volume to better hear this tale that just kept getting worse and worse.

"... was Trooper Charles Young, one of our most respected and experienced officers on the force," the spokeswoman droned. "Only his vast experience and skill as a highly decorated and courageous police officer saved his life. It was truly a matter of a professional peace officer outwitting what we now believe to be a ruthless and highly intelligent homicidal fugitive on the run from authorities."

"Is it true that Officer Young was handcuffed to his steering wheel with his own handcuffs?"

"I am not prepared to comment on that aspect of this ongoing investigation," she deadpanned. Spear felt his anxiety level rising. Could this possibly be what he'd long feared ... could his past finally be about to find him and demand payment on a bill he knew he could not afford?

"Did Officer Young give a description of the suspect?"

"Yes," the spokeswoman confirmed. "The suspect is a white male, over six feet tall and weighing roughly 225 pounds. He has dark hair and blue eyes with a professional athlete's build."

"Is he armed?"

"No one has seen any indication of a gun or explosive, but he does have an unusual traveling companion. The suspect is traveling with a large black dog ... believed to be a Lab mix but much larger, possibly 125 pounds. He is completely black except for two white spots above each eye. Some eyewitness accounts believe the suspect referred to the dog as 'Blue.'"

Spear's blood pressure and heartbeat suddenly went through the roof! How was this possible? It had to be some sort of massive coincidence! It *must* be! Spear's troubled mind could not comprehend any other possibility. But what if it really was Ol' Blue? If so then he *had* returned from the dead. And if that really was Blue, then the man in question must be ...?

No! He refused to believe this to be even a remote possibility. Dick had killed Blue himself over 15 years ago. The dog was old even then and suffering from the maladies that afflict all living things when they reach the far edge of their expected life span. And Jerry? He'd not actually seen him die but he'd seen the charred remains in the aftermath of the fire that consumed the home and provided the perfect alibi. He'd personally gone over the coroner's reports and evidence with Dr. Rollins. Rollins confirmed with 100% confidence that it had indeed been Jerry Bronson's body in

the ashes of that fire. So how could this be possible? Unless ... no, he didn't want to hear that voo-doo 'back from the dead' theory of Spindola's again! This was no late night chiller theater entry or monster movie marathon! *This was real life, damn it!* There had to be a logical, reasonable explanation! He turned his attention back to the news which was wrapping up with the original blonde reporter.

"... are conducting routine car searches and have pretty much locked down all roads leading to the southwest from Nebraska. Officer Young clearly saw the van turn to the southwest following his miraculous escape. He also heard the suspect make mention of having business in Colorado or Arizona, which has authorities in those states on a high level of alert. Reporting to you live from Nebraska, this is Polly Butterfield for your 'On the Go' news!"

Spear turned off the television with a frustrated snap of his remote. That last part very much sounded like Jerry. It would be so typical for Jerry to gain allies as he proceeded west ... allies like that Nebraska patrolman. Heading southwest toward Colorado? In a pig's eye he was! Jerry had convinced that cop to lie for him! If that was indeed Jerry, he was heading to Tacoma and a rendezvous with Bobby Fast. And after that? It didn't take a genius to figure that out. If all went well he'd be in Timmonsville right on time for the opening festivities of the Dogwood Festival. Now wouldn't that make for one hell-raising homecoming for everybody?

The ringing phone startled Spear from his self-imposed dream state. He considered letting it ring until the machine picked it up, but in light of all that was going on he decided against it. As soon as he answered he immediately regretted it.

"Sheriff Dick Spear. Who's speaking please?" There was a long pause before Bobby Fast blurted his response.

"Dick-it's-Bobby-did-you-hear-the news?"

"Of course I heard the news, Bobby. It's all they are talking

about this morning. I thought we agreed to never speak on the phone again. Wasn't that the agreement?" Fast was in no mood for a rebuke ... not this time.

"Cut-it-out-Dick! I-have-been telling-you ... all-this time ... that-he's coming-back for-us! He's coming-for me-next! Then-it'll-be you-Dick! Don't you understand-that?"

"Just calm down and take your meds, Bobby. I heard you had some ex-body builder movie tough guy living with you now. He'll be able to take care of you, don't you think?" Bobby suddenly became very lucid and calm.

"Joe can't save me now, Dick! No one can save me now! Just like no one can save you. We did a terrible thing, Dick. Now he's coming back to settle the score. It's Jerry Bronson come back from the dead, Dick. I know because I've seen him in my dreams. He's come back to kill us for what we did to him and his family." Now Dick was angry. He began shouting into the phone.

"Don't you say things like that on the phone, Bobby! Are you crazy? Now take your meds and don't call me anymore! I'm warning you, Bobby! Don't you call me anymore, do you hear me?" Again there was a long pause before Bobby responded.

"I hear you, Dick. Don't worry about me. I won't be calling you anymore. But I'll see you soon. I'll see you in Hell, Dick!" Now it was Fast who suddenly began shouting into the phone. "Do you hear me, Dick? He's coming for us! You and me, we're the only ones left! All of the others are dead already and we're next! *Do you hear me, Dick? DO YOU HEAR ...*" Spear slammed the phone down on the receiver, cutting the connection.

"Crazy bastard," Spear cursed. "I never did like that crazy son of a ..." He leaped and cried out as the doorbell rang! He clutched his chest and tried to slow his breathing. He was about to have an anxiety attack and he could hardly breathe. Taking a moment to

regain his composure, he held his revolver behind his back and made his way to the door. Peering out from the curtains, he sighed and placed his pistol on the coffee table. His terrible day just seemed to be getting worse with every passing moment ... and he'd not even had his breakfast yet.

"Good morning, Reverend Spindola," he welcomed in a dead tone as he opened the door. "What brings you out here so early in the morning?" Spindola did not wait to be invited inside. He barged past Spear, then turned to face him from the living room floor.

"Have you heard the news, Sheriff? The news about Ewing?" Spindola was very upset, more so than Dick recalled ever seeing him in the nearly 60 years of his life.

"Does everybody think I live in a cave or something? Of course I heard the news! So what?"

"You can't be *serious*," Spindola exclaimed. "First Jerry's body goes missing, then I hear Blue barking, then Sanchez, now Ewing? Dear God in Heaven, can't you see what's happening here?"

"What I see is a man I expect to help me keep order and respect in this town who instead wants to incite panic! And I'm getting fed up with it, Rev! I'm warning you! Don't keep pushing me on this!" Spindola softened his tone but not his intensity.

"Spare me your hurt feelings, Sheriff. You say you want to preserve order and peace in this town? I told you right after Jerry was killed that I was positive that Ewing, Sanchez and Wolverton had something to hide. You scoffed at the notion and never followed up on it! The town closed the books on that terrible crime after you tracked down that Korean killer and his European cronies. Forgive me if I seem hostile this morning but I always believed that was just too tidy and simple of a wrap-up! And shortly after that, those "three amigos" left town together. Now they are all dead! What do you plan to tell the authorities when they come asking about it? You

do know they will be here any day, don't you?" Dick snapped back at Spindola, his voice quivering with rage.

"Don't you dare come into my home and accuse me of a 'tidy wrap-up' in tracking down Jerry's killers! Don't you *dare*!" He paced back and forth, hands on hips, never taking his gaze off Roman. "Jerry was my *best* friend! Why is that so hard for you to accept? I *loved* him like a *brother*!"

"I've long ago come to the reality that Jerry is gone from me forever, Dick. And the fact that we two, you and I, have serious problems between us is secondary to what's happening here today. I don't know what to believe anymore." Spindola's countenance softened tremendously and the color suddenly left his face. Spear's anger suddenly turned to concern.

"Are you okay, Rev? Would you like a glass of water?" Roman shook his head "no" and slowly sat on the couch. He grimaced and held his stomach in obvious pain.

"I'm okay, Dick," he smiled. "Just old age. It seems to flare up when I get too excited. It'll pass in a moment."

"You are a terrible liar, Rev," Spear countered. "But that's a good thing, considering your profession." The two men laughed for a moment and the tension eased significantly. Finally, Spindola spoke again.

"Like I was saying, Dick, I don't understand what's happening here. Maybe it's a sign from God or maybe it's something else! Maybe it has nothing at all to do with the supernatural as you suggest. But one thing I do know! The desecration of Jerry's grave, the deaths of Sanchez and Ewing and the coming dogwood festival are all connected somehow. So if you follow the dots, *she* might be in danger."

"By *she*, I assume you mean Angel?" Spindola nodded affirmative. "Yes, I already had thought of that. I drove out to Dove of Peace

the last two nights and stayed outside on patrol pretty much all night. There was nothing out of the ordinary. I talked to Rosa who also said she'd seen nothing unusual. I didn't want to scare her, though. She's been through so much since Jerry died and, well, with Angel being brain dead with no chance of recovery." Spindola's eyes filled with tears.

"Did you know they were trying to have a baby?" Roman's tears were no longer held in check. "She and Jerry? They were so excited! Dear God, how could this terrible thing have happened to them?" He looked so helpless and feeble. Spear had no clue how to respond.

"That's more your lane in the road to answer than mine, Rev," he finally added. "But at least she's been kept alive all these years thanks to Jerry's insurance and your generous contributions and fundraisers. The doctors all say she will never recover. She's been effectively dead since the Korean's attack the same night Jerry died."

"You are correct, Dick. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to burden you with the insane ramblings of an old man. I know she still lives only because the machines force her to breathe and the tubes keep her nourished to the minimal degree possible. But Rosa, God bless her for her faith, still believes that one glorious day her Angel will awaken from her coma and live again. How can I take that dream from her? She's suffered enough already."

"I agree, Rev. No one wants to face the decision of letting Angel die. She has already defied the odds a thousand times over. I agree with you that we have enough strange events already going on to conclude that someone may be intending to hurt Angel before all of this plays out. So I'll make certain we have 24/7 security from the department out there starting today. And we'll keep it on the sly so as not to alarm Rosa or the staff at the center. How's that

sound?” Spindola nodded. He was still clearly ill and struggling to hide his discomfort. “Maybe I should take you to see a doctor, Rev?”

“No thank you, Dick. Completely unnecessary, I assure you!” Dick was not assured. “But one other thing about Angel and this situation brewing bothers me.”

“What’s that, Rev?”

“What if someone connected to the murder of Jerry and the attack on Angel back in 1995 really is headed here to finish the job? But instead of coming to hurt Angel, what if this person does not know she’s still alive? What if he thinks she is dead also? How would he react if he discovers that she still lives? He might feel deceived or betrayed if that were the case. His target might then become me ... or even *you*!”

Dick closed his eyes and rubbed his temple. He had the mother of all headaches. This was turning out to be a terrible day ... the worst he’d had in years. And he still had not even had his breakfast!

Chapter 23

A man whose life has been dishonourable is not entitled to escape disgrace in death.

Lucius Accius (170 BC - 86 BC)

It was just past midnight when Jerry and Blue eased into the parking lot of the seedy apartment complex where Bobby Fast lived out his life in shame and fear. It was a clear, star-filled night with no moon. There was a crispness of life in the early morning air of the Pacific Northwest. But there was no life glaring through the windshield of the battered and broken down Chevy van. There was only death.

Things were especially quiet for a week night tonight. Many of the residents of this complex had either moved already or had boarded up for the night. Not many respectable people would dare mill about this neighborhood after dark. Jerry included himself in his unsavory assessment. There was nothing respectable about him anymore and certainly not in the deed he was about to accomplish.

He exited the van with Blue on his heels. With a simple nod from Jerry, Blue bounded off silently into the night to scout out the best approach to their prey. He also served as Jerry's over watch, insuring that nothing or no one took them by surprise. Jerry doubted that would even be possible at this point.

The complex was run down and crumbling. It was a two story building with all apartment entrances on the outside. It appeared to have been a discount hotel many years ago. The swimming pool was filled with rodents and dead leaves, a testament to the residents who now inhabited its walls.

Fast lived on the lower level, room number 44. This was made very clear to Jerry as he concentrated on the location of his prey. He still did not understand *how* he knew these things ... he just knew them and that was all. Just *knowing* without *understanding* would have to suffice for now.

Jerry was standing about ten feet in front of the doorway to Fast's apartment. He knew that Fast had a roommate, a big man named LaHoud. Jerry actually remembered LaHoud from long ago. How could he not remember meeting one of his childhood heroes? It was the summer of 1964. Jerry was 14 and an immense fan of the local wrestling circuit that originated from Tallahassee, Florida. There were few things he enjoyed more than watching the Saturday afternoon matches on the scratchy, black and white television in the orphanage recreation room. Well, to be honest he did enjoy several things more ... like fishing with the "good and right" Reverend Spindola; or tossing the football around with his best buddy, Dick; or taking a ride in the squad car with "Big Ben" Spear; or most of all, just hanging out with Angel. Best of all was listening to her sing with that sweet, melodious voice that caused even the angels in heaven to pause and look down in stunned silence. There was nothing that even came close to the feeling he had when he was with her.

After resetting his priorities, at least watching wrestling was one of the ten or so favorite things in life. He would sit glued to the station in awe, totally absorbed into the storylines of these colorful and energetic men in larger than life roles. And his absolute favorite

of them was Joe LaHoud, the Viking Warrior! The wrestler's stage story was compelling ... he was one of the ancient Norse gods exiled from Asgard by the traitorous Prince of Evil, Loki! While all the gods were trapped by Loki's wicked spell, only Viking Warrior knew the truth of his companions' plight. So he fought on against all odds, standing alone against the fury of Loki and his devil-spawned armies, gathering strength to one day launch an assault on Asgard itself to free his imprisoned warrior companions. One day he would join Odin in the halls of Valhalla, where he knew the brave would live forever! Oh the countless hours Jerry spent cheering for his hero to save the day and take his place among the greatest warriors of the nine worlds!

It was about then that he experienced the dream of a lifetime. Several wrestlers had agreed to come to the Timmons ville gym and perform a wrestling event to raise money for a local branch of a national charity. One of those wrestlers was to be Joe LaHoud, the fabled Viking Warrior! Big Ben was providing some police security and taking Dick, who invited Jerry to come along as well! He didn't have to ask twice!

It was between some of the earlier matches that Jerry saw him standing sheepishly behind the bleachers, smoking a cigar. He was alone, peering through the seats at the people and getting a feel for the crowd. He was only 25 yards away from Jerry! There could be no mistake ... it was *him*! It was the Viking Warrior!

Without hesitation Jerry dashed from his bleacher seat directly for his idol. Dick called after him to come back but Jerry had no intention of doing that. In an instant he stood before this Viking legend, standing about waist high and in total awe, spilling over with excitement. LaHoud, cigar in mouth, looked down at the fidgety kid who sported the Cheshire cat grin. The young boy happily held out his hand.

“Hello, Viking Warrior! My name is Jerry Bronson and I just want to tell you that you are the greatest of all time!” His face was beaming with excitement. LaHoud maintained his game face and slowly took the cigar from his mouth with his left hand. He locked his piercing gaze onto the eyes of the boy, who never wavered or lost his exuberance. Then, with only the slightest hint of a smile, he reached out with his right hand. His massive fist completely engulfed Jerry’s hand.

“You’re okay with me, kid,” he growled. “But you’re not supposed to be back here. So do me a favor and go back up into the bleachers.” Jerry laughed out loud as his excitement overflowed from his body. Joe LaHoud had touched him! He shook his hand! This was Jerry’s greatest day ever!

“Yes, sir, Viking Warrior!” Jerry gave a salute and turned to run back to Dick. In his excitement he tripped and fell but rolled and kept running. When he got back to Dick, he looked back and LaHoud was gone. He’d returned to his locker room to get ready for his match. When he came out an hour or so later, winning his match handily, Jerry was still on cloud nine. It was a special day he’d never forget.

A decade later, LaHoud would market his wrestling success into professional acting. He landed the plum role of *The Legendary Lunar-Man* in the hit television series of the same name. “Lunar-Man” became a pop icon of the 70’s and appeared not only in television but on lunchboxes, pajamas, tee shirts and comic books. Standing now before the apartment LaHoud shared with Bobby Fast, Jerry lamented that a man once so popular and proud could have sunk so low. But how was Jerry any different? He figured you can’t sink much lower than death. The only thing lower would be to walk the earth without the one person who means more than life itself to you. As fate would have it, Jerry had endured both of those

things. With that realization, he no longer had any sympathy for Joe LaHoud. His own pain surpassed that *ever* experienced by mortal man. Besides, he had a mission to complete!

Reaching inside his coat, he pulled out his white death mask. He would reveal himself to Fast when the time came. But for now, he was not Jerry Bronson. He had become a force of nature, no less than a crushing tidal wave or devastating earthquake. He had become ... The Night Terror!

He was about to step forward when he heard the telltale “click” behind him. It was the sound of a switchblade knife opening and locking into place. “Gimme your money, man! Gimme your money or I’ll cut you up good!” Jerry shook his head in disbelief. No matter where he traveled or what era he resided, criminals were always the same ... stupid and ... well ... just stupid! He never even turned around to look at his mugger.

“I suggest you withdraw your weapon and vacate this location immediately, Kevin Pearson! You are in a great deal of danger. My friend and I are willing to overlook your lapse in judgment if you simply turn around and go.” The mugger’s eyes grew wide in bewilderment. He was craving another meth hit and this well dressed target seemed like the perfect sucker to provide it. Now he was not so sure!

“How did you know my name, mister? And what ‘friend’ are you talking about? Ain’t nobody here but me and you!” Right on cue Blue emerged from the darkness and uttered his low, menacing growl. His eyes burned bright red, so very bright that it seemed to illuminate the areas once lit by long abandoned security lamps. Pearson squealed and dropped his knife. His mind cried out for him to run but his rubbery legs refused to move. Night Terror slowly turned and looked Pearson fully in the face. A strange, guttural moan slipped from the terrified druggie’s lips!

“You test me, Pearson. I ... SAID ... GO!” Night Terror returned his attention to the apartment door as Pearson found his leg strength and took off like an Olympic sprinter. He’d run three miles before he even dared to look behind him.

With that temporary distraction resolved, Jerry reached for the doorknob. He twisted and it opened without resistance. The door had been unlocked. Was this a trap? He could sense a single living presence inside. If it was a trap, the trapster would soon regret his strategy!

Inside the small apartment, Jerry could see directly into the kitchen. It was lit by an overhead fluorescent bulb that was going bad. It blinked on and off in an erratic pattern, giving a 70’s psychedelic feel to the room. Sitting at the table, his head lying in the fold of his crossed arms on the table top, was Bobby Fast. He appeared to be sound asleep. Leaving the door open behind him, Jerry authoritatively strode across the living room into the kitchen. Standing behind the slumped and motionless Fast, Jerry saw numerous empty pill bottles and liquor containers strewn all over the floor. He removed his mask and returned it to his coat. There was clearly no need for it now.

Pulling off his leather gloves, he touched the throat of his intended victim. The skin was cold. There was no pulse. To his left, written in bright red crayons on a newspaper flyer advertising ‘Vasilie Cosmetics’ were these words: I AM SORRY. PLEASE FORGIVE ME! BOBBY FAST.

Fast had found a way to cheat fate by taking his own life. The Night Terror had been denied one sweet taste of revenge! He still sensed a living person within the apartment. “You can come out of the shadows now, LaHoud,” Jerry said. “It’s all over now ... at least so far as Bobby Fast is concerned.”

“He’d been expecting you,” LaHoud answered, emerging from

his tiny bedroom where he'd been watching. "He saw you in his dreams ... described you down to the finest detail. I never paid much attention to it though. I figured it was his drugs and mental issues talking. But I sure do believe him now." The two men, both built for action and chiseled like rock, sized each other up for a moment. The silence was broken by Blue's menacing growl. He was in the open doorway, teeth bared, hackles raised, waiting for his master's command. If LaHoud was afraid, he did not show it.

"It's okay, Blue boy," Jerry said. "This is a friend. Sit down and behave." Instantly the menacing black dog with the white patches over his eyes wagged his tail and transformed into a goofy family pet. He sat and began his patient wait, his tail wagging back and forth to a two-step cadence.

"I need to call the police," LaHoud intoned. "You need to stay until they arrive. I think we all need some questions answered."

"You are more than capable of answering their questions, Joe LaHoud," Jerry answered. "I didn't kill Bobby Fast. I am as innocent here as you."

"You may not have killed him, mister, but that's only because he beat you to it. He has lived in constant fear of you for years! He always knew that one day you'd show up looking for blood!" Joe shivered and regained composure of his voice. He'd never come upon the body of a dead friend before. He didn't like the feeling.

"He called me at work tonight," Joe continued. "Not much more than an hour ago. He pleaded with me to come home as he was so very afraid. He was certain that you were about to burst through the door and rip his lungs out or something. Against my better judgment I came back to check on him." He looked again at his dead friend and his eyes welled with tears. "And *that's* how I found him. I had just walked into my bedroom to call 911 when you came waltzing into my place pretty as you please. So you're

going to wait with me for the police to arrive, pal! If you won't stay of your own will, then I'll keep you here to enforce my own will! Are we *clear*?" While Joe's anger became apparent, Jerry never showed any emotion at all.

"Your anger is misplaced, Joe LaHoud. It should be directed at the killer who deceived you all these years instead of me." As Jerry moved toward the door Joe moved forward and grabbed him by the arms. Joe was in his 60's but still extremely fit and powerful. He had no intention of allowing this man to leave without some answers. But the instant that his massive hands clamped around the arms of the mysterious stranger in black, Joe realized he was in far above his head. This was no mere man he held! It was something far, far more! Staggering back in stunned silence, Joe's eyes were wide with confusion and concern.

"Who are you, mister? Who are you and what's going on here?" Jerry looked Joe full in the face and moved forward. Joe recoiled and prepared for violence but Jerry's voice was soft and consoling.

"My name is Jeremiah Bronson. I am a former sheriff from southern Georgia. My ... circumstances ... made the national news almost 15 years ago. Think back ... and remember!" Joe furrowed his brow and concentrated. A slight flicker of recollection finally burst through his memory bank.

"Bronson? That name does sound familiar. I do seem to remember something about that," Joe admitted. "In fact, yes, I do recall it! Something about an attack that killed the sheriff? And lots of women going missing shortly after that? Is that right?"

"You are correct, Joe Lahoud. The women disappeared after the sheriff was killed. Brutal killers murdered the sheriff and his wife."

"I didn't remember the wife being killed. I'd heard that she was badly hurt and in critical condition but I lost track of that after awhile. I guess she died later and I never heard that report."

"That would be a logical assumption."

"So are you saying Bobby had something to do with those murders? Was his suicide note meant for me ... or *you*?"

"No doubt the note was meant for me," Jerry surmised. "Bobby Fast was orphaned at a very young age. Being a product of the same orphanage that raised me, I took him under my wing. He was always somewhat slow but I found him a job and made certain he was cared for. He repaid my kindness by siding with the most vile residents of the county. He used my generosity to get close enough to strike. If he'd only warned me ... if he'd only shown me any kind of clue ... then she'd still be alive today!" Jerry looked at Joe and his eyes were a restrained red. The anger was growing, but Jerry was trying to keep it under control.

"He may have carried the guilt all of these years but Bobby Fast was responsible for the murder of innocents, LaHoud. And despite my hatred for him it was not my hand that took his life. Bobby Fast died the night he betrayed his conscience and made his deal with the Devil. It merely took 15 years for him to carry out his own sentence."

"This is all so very hard to accept, Sheriff. I knew Bobby was tormented by his past but I never believed it would be something so evil! I assume the sheriff he killed was a relative or friend of yours? And the woman as well? Was she a friend?"

"Yes, you could say that she was my friend." In the distance, a soft rumble of thunder gently rattled the walls. "She was my wife! And the man he killed ... the man who trusted and befriended him who paid for his kindness with his life ... that man was *me*!" LaHoud staggered back and fell against the wall of the kitchen. He felt his knees buckle. Only the firm walls prevented him from falling to the floor.

"That's not possible," Joe kept mumbling. "How can that be possible?"

“Search your heart, LaHoud! Search your heart and you will find the truth. But I must go. I still have another one ... the FINAL one ... to seek out and bring to justice. Surely a man such as you can appreciate how I feel! Surely you can relate to pain seared into your soul caused by the loss of one you loved ... one you should have been able to protect, but in her greatest time of need found that you could not save her!” The burning anger suddenly returned to Joe’s face.

“What are you talking about, mister ... whoever you are? I *demand* to know what you are talking about!”

“No demands are necessary. I know your teenage daughter disappeared over a decade ago from a shopping mall in Los Angeles. I know how it shattered your life, ruined your marriage and ended your professional career. I know the unresolved nature of this terrible thing has carved a ditch in your soul. But I also know something that you *don’t*!”

“Don’t play around with me, man” Joe warned. “If you know something, then tell me!” Jerry’s answer was direct and to the point.

“Your daughter still lives.”

Joe shouted like an enraged lion pouncing on a startled antelope along the Serengeti. He grabbed Bronson by his shoulders and attempted to push him against the wall but he never budged an inch. Joe felt as if he’d slammed into a tank. Frustrated and frightened, he began shouting.

“How can you know these things? Did you have something to do with her disappearance? Have you hurt my baby? Because if you have ...”

“You are being ridiculous. Of course I had nothing to do with the disappearance of your child. How do I know these things? I do not know. I wish I did. Things ... some things, not all ... seem so

much clearer than they did when I was ... before I died.” Joe was trembling, his face contorted in agony, pleading with his eyes.

“Sheriff Bronson,” he begged. “Can you ... will you ... help me find her? Please?” Bronson’s response sounded cold but his heart was actually overflowing with compassion.

“Your daughter still lives, Joe LaHoud! She waits for her *father* to find her and *rescue* her. But this is not why I have been called here. This is *your* destiny! Yours and *yours alone*!” At those words Joe sank to his knees, then leaned back against the wall. He thought he had no more tears to cry. But he cried now. Oh how he cried! Watching from the doorway, ol’ Blue whimpered and moaned. He walked forward and sat next to the weeping LaHoud. He gently licked the man’s hand and lay down beside him, his tail slowly wagging. Joe regained his composure and reached out to pet the head of his furry comforter.

“You have a good dog, Jeremiah.”

“Yes I do,” he replied. “I have a *very good dog*!” With more urgency, he added, “I cannot stay any longer. I must return to Georgia. My destiny lies there.” Now feeling more like himself than he had in years, Joe stood and tossed Jerry his car keys. Jerry caught them with ease.

“I’ve been following you on the news,” he said. “Bobby had me watching it constantly. After what happened in Kansas he knew he was next. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry about your wife ... sorry about you.” Jerry said nothing.

“Anyway,” Joe continued, “take my car. It’s the beat up blue Ford Focus outside. It’s old but it still has life in it, just like me. She’ll get you to Georgia in good shape. They’ll be looking for that Chevy van. The Focus will allow you to slip by under the radar. I’ll wait a day or two before reporting the white van to the police. I’ll report my car stolen then. The insurance will pay me something for it at

least. So take it with my blessings.” Jerry still said nothing. Instead he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the wad of bills he’d taken from the hobo attackers on the train just outside Baton Rouge. He’d spent some on gas money and would need some to get back to Timmonsville, but he still handed over close to \$500. He placed it on the kitchen table, right next to Bobby’s suicide note.

“Take this. The ones who gave it to me no longer have any need for it.” He whistled and Blue stood at alert. “Let’s go, boy! Time to go home ... at last.” He turned to Joe. “Good-bye, Viking Warrior. I just want to tell you that you are the greatest of all time!” Recollection exploded like an overripe melon all over Joe’s face.

“Hey,” he asked, “have we met before?”

“Perhaps,” Jerry answered. “But that was in another lifetime.” And with that he was gone, swiftly and silently. It was as if he’d never been there at all. Joe ran to the door and looked out into the darkness. A light rain was falling and despite the late spring date, Joe could see his breath as he exhaled. His car was gone already. Jeremiah Bronson was nowhere to be seen.

“One last thing,” Joe said aloud to no one in particular. “My daughter? Will I ever find her?” Although there was no spoken reply, Joe felt the answer drift back to him clearly on the soft spring rain.

“Find your daughter? That is up to you. Only you can fulfill or fall short of your own destiny.”

Joe walked back inside and closed the door. He strolled to the body of his longtime roommate and shook his head sadly. He again read the suicide note without touching it. Strangely, the ad for Vasilie Cosmetics seemed to pulsate for a brief second. No doubt it was an optical illusion. It had, after all, been a very difficult day even by Joe’s standards. His heart heavy with sadness, he picked up the phone and dialed 911.

“911 operator,” the voice spoke after three rings. “What is the nature of your emergency?”

“This is Joe LaHoud of Vista Village Apartments,” he answered calmly. “I’d like to report the suicide of my roommate.”

Sirens soon blasted into the night, shattering any semblance of peace. Jerry was already 100 miles east of Tacoma by then. He’d be back in Timmons ville in 48 hours. And then there would be hell to pay!

Chapter 24

Men of energy and character must have enemies!

Thomas Jefferson (letter to John Adams, 21 December 1817)

Vladimir pulled his old car into the unpaved lot of the crumbling cemetery along the Georgia-Florida border. It was midnight. He chuckled at the notion of going to a graveyard at ‘the witching hour!’ Such foolishness was for geeks who thought the current slasher film was a documentary on evil. He came at midnight because it suited him. To complete what he planned this night, darkness provided a comfortable, familiar backdrop.

Pulling in beside him on a brand new Harley Dark Custom Iron 883 was Purvis Hartley. He revved the motor a few times before shutting it down. Slinging his Nazi style helmet under his arm, he opened the passenger door and slid in next to Vladimir.

Sitting between them on the front seat was a small cage that contained Purvis’ pet hamster, Lily. Purvis smiled and excitedly began touching her with his bandaged index finger. His hands and fingers were raw and sore from the multiple bites and scratches Lily imposed on him since her ‘resurrection.’ She was so aggressive now that he had to keep her in her cage all the time. He’d tried to snuggle her to his neck as he used to do and she’d gone crazy, attacking him with the fervor of a rabid wolverine.

"I don't understand, Mr. Vladimir," Purvis complained. "Why does Lily always want to bite me? She used to love to cuddle with me and watch TV but now all she does is fight and scratch. Why is that?" Vladimir put the car in 'park' and switched off the ignition. He looked over at Purvis and smiled.

"As I've explained, boy, Lily has been through a great deal this past week. It's quite stressful to die and then be snatched back from the realm of the dead. She's been changed, but believe me, the change is for the better. Just give her some more time to adjust. Patience is a virtue, young man!" He smiled and playfully gave Purvis a whack on his shoulder. "Now are you ready to help me out with this favor?"

"Of course, Mr. Vladimir. I'll do anything for you!" Vladimir smiled.

"I'm very happy to hear that, Purvis. By the way, how is your girlfriend, Miss Raduta?" Purvis frowned and looked away from Vladimir into the darkness beyond.

"She's not doing so good, Mr. Vladimir. I think she's dead ... but I'm not really for sure on that. But she just lies there and stares at the ceiling all the time. Even when I loosened her chains she just kept on staring. Do you think I was too rough with her, Mr. Vladimir?"

"Who can say with women, son," Vladimir responded. "They are so fragile and easy to break. But hey, at least you had some fun with her, right? We'll get you a new one after tonight. One that you can ride around on that new Harley over there! Would you like that?"

"I'd like that a lot, Mr. Vladimir!" They got out of the car and began walking toward the shadowy silhouettes of the unmarked graves before them. Slung over Purvis' shoulder was a shovel and small bag containing some strange herbs and liquids. Left behind in

the front seat, Lily raged and foamed, roaring and bashing her body again and again into the bars of her cage.

The cemetery was very small and unmarked. It was well off the beaten path and tucked in as an afterthought on a red clay Georgia path (road was much too kind a term to use). It was overgrown and in complete disrepair, located about 60 miles east of Timmons ville near a large, reptile infested swamp. In the last 18 months Vladimir was certain that not a single visitor had come to pay tribute to the men buried in these unmarked graves. The only person to even set foot on the property in that time had been Vladimir. He'd come many, many times to prepare himself and the site. And now on this most unholy of nights, all of his work was about to bear some very strange fruit.

For over a century this little 5-acre plot of cursed earth had been used to bury the "undesirables" of the surrounding region. Buried here were the rejects of society dating back to the 18th century ... rapists, child molesters, murderers, masochists ... the kind of people Vladimir had employed many times in his elongated life. These were the kind of people who knew what they wanted and took it! The hell with the consequences! These were the people Vladimir needed now ... and there was one in particular that he intended to deal with this very night!

"Why do we need Roscoe Parker anyway, Mr. Vladimir? Why can't I be your enforcer?" Purvis was dejected and feeling somewhat jealous.

"Oh, you will definitely be my enforcer, Purvis. I'd never replace you, my boy! We are going to add Roscoe Parker to our clan to be your servant."

"Really, Mr. Vladimir? That will be cool! I could use a servant, you know, to go get food and beer and stuff like that!"

"Yes," Vladimir scoffed, "that sounds like a great plan, Purvis! Now let's get to work."

Purvis followed as Vladimir walked his now familiar pathway to the specific simple concrete slab located almost perfectly in the center of the plot. The anticipation made Vladimir giddy with excitement. He'd spent weeks preparing this site for this very moment. He'd dumped gallons of human blood to saturate the ground, spoken the ancient incantations, mixed in various personal items and Parker's DNA acquired over the years. He topped it off with the urine and feces of Dick Spear. He admitted to some degree of trepidation. This was the first time he'd ever attempted a spell so drastic with such a high price to be exacted and to be paid in full *immediately* upon completion. He'd learned it directly from the instruction of Alexandru Vasilie himself and he'd followed the instructions to the letter. Of course, he'd been successful with small animals and rodents ... Lily was a perfect example ... but this was the first time he'd attempted to bring a human back from the great beyond. To do such a thing incurred a debt to a power beyond even that of Vasilie. Even the slightest miscalculation would result in an eternity of torture and torment. Even for a man as evil as Vladimir, this was nothing to be taken lightly.

He motioned for Purvis to begin digging and the slow witted former janitor did just that. From time to time he'd complain of the bad smell but Vladimir would only laugh and instruct him to keep digging. All the while Vladimir would add ancient powders, vile liquids and various human 'extracts' to the soil as Purvis dug. He chanted in a variety of ancient dialects ... Latin, Greek, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Mayan, and myriad others that have long since slipped beyond modern human civilization's ability to comprehend. This continued for a full two hours before Purvis, complaining of back and neck pain along with blistered hands, struck something hard.

"I knew they wouldn't bury him the full six feet," Vladimir

cheered. They had barely gone three feet ... certainly less than four ... when Purvis struck the hard casket. Leaping into the hole now was Vladimir with his own shovel. In a matter of moments he had cleared the edges around the casket. Turning to Purvis he gave his order. "Let's get out of the hole and ask Parker to join us now!"

The two men scampered out and stood at the edge of the opened gravesite. Purvis kept complaining that it was too dark to see anything. Vladimir ignored him and closed his eyes, lifting his hands over his head. It was only two hours until daybreak and he felt it was important to be done before the morning rays of the sun shined light on the forbidden and lethal practice now underway.

Speaking in the ancient tongue of his Hungarian forefathers, Vladimir began calling upon the darkness to grant him the boon of life ... not life to serve mankind or enhance the destiny of man ... but life bent on pain and destruction, opposing any semblance of mercy or compassion ... life designed to bring about the return of the dark gods as they once were before the creation of man. For nearly ten minutes absolutely nothing happened. Again and again Vladimir called upon the dark beasts who lived in the dimensions between heaven and hell to attend to his request for power. His eyes rolled back in his head and sweat, mingled with blood, began to trickle from his eyes, ears and nose. Purvis quipped that he had to go to the bathroom and was hungry. Vladimir was completely oblivious to Purvis' whining and continued his efforts to cast the most forbidden spell of all. Time stretched to thirty minutes. Vladimir began to weaken. And then ... something moved!

It was the slightest tremble in the ground at first. Purvis stumbled and looked around in total confusion but Vladimir, smiling at last, intensified his demands. Now the ground began to shift and shake! Furrows began forming across the cemetery plot, swallowing some grave markers as the ground twisted and churned.

The wind followed soon thereafter. It began slowly before frenzied gusts began kicking up dust and dirt in a whirlwind pattern. Purvis covered his eyes to protect them from the biting sand that pounded his face and choked his mouth and nostrils. Vladimir continued his chant.

Birds, rodents, reptiles and insects, all of whom nested within the various holes and crevices of the graveyard and the surrounding tree line began evacuating in a wild panic. It was like watching the procession to Noah's ark, only in reverse. Within a matter of moments the only living things remaining on the burial plot were Purvis and Vladimir. A loud "CRACK" boomed from the skies and the earth shook with such violence that both men fell backward. And then there was total silence! As Purvis stood and dusted himself off, he cursed and doubled over in pain. Crying out, his bowels and bladder released their contents as he vomited all over the ground before him.

"I don't feel so good, Mr. Vladimir. I think I'm really sick all of a sudden!" As his eyes adjusted to the dark, Vladimir saw a thick cloud rising from the freshly dug hole in the ground. Dim red lights swirled amid the fog/smoke and he picked up the unmistakably pungent smell of sulfur. At least that's what they called it in modern times ... Vladimir preferred to call it by its original name ... brimstone!

"Sorry you don't feel well, Purvis," Vladimir remarked. "But me? I feel *great*!"

"What happened to me, Mr. Vladimir? How come I'm sick and you're not?" He gagged and vomited again.

"Ah, now that's the trick, isn't it, Purvis? I learned that a long, long time ago. But don't worry. I suspect you won't feel any pain at all very, very soon!" From the depths of the swirling smoke a figure began to take shape. Vladimir could barely contain his excitement. It

had worked! For the first time in ages the dead had been recalled to do the bidding of the living! And so it was that as an owl screamed its protest from the relative safety of the nearby oak trees, Roscoe Parker emerged from the abyss to terrorize mankind once again!

“Who has called me?” He spoke in Latin. “Who has dared to return me to this place of weaklings and spineless vermin?” Vladimir was pleased. Parker was filled with more rage than even he had anticipated. But then he’d spent the last 30 years in Hell ... there was no telling what new tricks he’d learned.

“It is I, Vladimir Buchinsky, who has called you from your forbidden places!” He pointed to the trembling Purvis, still on all fours, heaving and gagging and trying to stand. “Here is the debtor. Take your payment in full!” In one large stride Parker grasped Purvis and yanked him to his feet. At 6’6”, Parker towered over the short and pudgy Hartley. Purvis shouted in anger, still naively believing himself to be the master here.

“Hey, slave! Get your hands off me. I am your master! How dare you ...” Purvis never finished his threat. With one smooth movement Parker twisted Purvis’ neck with such force and ferocity that his head almost completely came off in his hands. Purvis’ head was at a perfect 180 degree turn, his face still in shock and bewilderment. With a battle cry Parker heaved the lifeless body into the pit that once housed his own decayed body. Still looking to pacify his rage, he turned his gaze to Vladimir.

“I have needs! I would have them met now!” Buchinsky nodded and held up his hand in agreement.

“I understand your needs, Parker. In fact, I understand them even more than you. In order to grant you the life force to live again, an equal amount of life force had to be sacrificed. Purvis did quite well, don’t you think?” Parker did not respond ... he stood enraged, fists clenched, a strange glow pulsing from the socket

where he once had an eye. "You never were a man for words, were you, Parker? No matter. Today is the dawning of a new era for mankind. I succeeded in passing the agony of the spell to Hartley and using him as life force payment for your return to the living. You are invincible now ... nothing on this planet can harm you! Anything at all that you desire *must* bend to your will!"

"Then why do I need you, puny man? Why don't I crush you now and take my revenge in my own way?" His language was all over the place ... Latin, Greek, Spanish, Aramaic, old English ... all anger. He took a menacing step toward Vladimir who now appeared to be truly amused.

"Because, you idiot, your lifespan is forever linked to mine. Your body cannot be destroyed, but if something should happen to me ...?" Parker stopped and glared at his new/old master with the look of a caged tiger. "Ah, so you finally understand. That's good! Now follow me and I'll give you your instructions." The two monsters walked side by side to Vladimir's car. Parker caressed the Harley while Vladimir opened the trunk. Inside was a young woman, bound and gagged. It was Kimmy, the bubbly waitress from the diner the day before. She was terrified. Seeing her, Parker began laughing. It was not a laugh of joy ... it was a laugh of evil.

"She's yours," Buchinsky said. "Do whatever you'd like until tomorrow night, but when you are done, kill her and leave her here." Parker nodded in agreement.

"I'm hungry, too," he said.

"There's a live hamster in a cage on the front seat. And after that there's Hartley's body. That should be enough meat to carry you over until tomorrow night."

"And then?"

"Make sure you meet me at the Bed and Breakfast, the Kozy Kottage, in Timmonsville tomorrow night ... the one still run by

Erma and her stupid husband. Do you remember?" His eyes locked on the whimpering Kimmy, Parker nodded affirmative.

"Good! I need you to be there exactly at 9:00 PM. We'll start there, then make our way to the fire station and the town. And you'll need this!" Reaching across Kimmy, he pulled Parker's chain from the trunk and tossed it to the hulking brute. As soon as Parker grabbed it, it burst into a blue flame. Parker smiled as he held his old weapon in his hands again. He swung it over his head again and again, the blue flame leaving a glowing path of fire in its wake.

"So I see you've brought some new tricks with you? Good! Because this time, I want the town to burn ... *all of it* ... every man, woman and child ... I want them *all* destroyed! Then I want that hell fire to scorch the dirt so that nothing will ever be able to live there again!"

"And Bronson? Will Bronson be there?"

"No, you imbecile! Bronson is *dead*! He died 15 years ago!"

"Strange," Parker growled. "You say he is dead but I can sense him in this world! I can feel his rage. There can be no doubt ... *he* has returned as well. He will be there tomorrow night!"

"Stop wasting time with your fantasies, Parker! There are no dark powers involved here but we two. So forget about Bronson. I want you to focus on the others who must not escape this time! You *must* kill Spear and *especially* that fool Spindola! So don't you disappoint me! If you do, there are dark places I can send you that would make you beg for a return to Hell! Do you understand me, Parker?" In response he pulled Kimmy from the trunk with one massive arm and laughed at her obvious terror.

"Call me Backbone," he said.

In the distant eastern sky the first faint rays of sunlight began to awaken the slumbering earth, chasing away the shadows of the night. It was Dogwood Festival Day in Timmonsville. Today was going to be a very special day!

Chapter 25

*Every man has his own courage and is betrayed because
he seeks in himself the courage of others.* **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Morning broke the day before the Dogwood Festival with an appearance of peace but a foreboding of evil. The entire town seemed to be nervous about the annual event this year although no one could specifically explain the root cause of their fears. That's what Dick Spear thought as he pulled into the parking lot of the assisted living home. It was well before visiting hours but it was not uncommon for him to arrive early or stay late. The staff had come to expect it from time to time.

He walked through the front door and nodded to the security attendant who waved and buzzed him through. His mind raced as he stopped before room 41. He sighed and knocked gently before pushing it open. He always knocked because it was not uncommon for Rosa to spend the night inside. Like Roman, Rosa still hoped for a miracle ... that one day her dear sweet Angel would open her eyes again and breathe on her own. She hoped that one day Angel would sing again and the world would be a better place for it. But Dick had long ago given up such fantasies ... Angel was brain dead and had been for almost fifteen years. It was not likely ... not even possible ... that she'd ever awaken. Her muscles had

long ago atrophied and she weighed less than 75 pounds. And it was his fault. That was a hard pill for any man to swallow, but it was even more difficult to realize that he had caused this affliction to the woman he loved. It didn't even matter to him anymore that she'd never loved him back. All that mattered now was that he had made a terrible mistake and there was nothing he or anyone could do to make it right.

He was relieved to see that Rosa was not there. He liked it better when he could just sit with Angel and hold her hand. He had confessed everything to her many times over the years. He wondered if she could hear him and, if so, had she forgiven him? In his heart he was conflicted about whether she could hear him or not in her comatose condition. But he absolutely knew the answer to her forgiveness ... no one would ever forgive him for what he'd done. Why would Angel be an exception?

He sat beside her and took her hand as he'd done a million times before. And just as he'd done every time before, his mind raced back to that fateful night of April 1995. It seemed to make so much sense then. He knew he'd never be sheriff so long as Jerry was alive. He also knew he'd never have Angel so long as Jerry was alive. So it seemed that his life would be so much better off if Jerry were no longer alive.

He'd had an "under the table agreement" with Dr. Rollins for some time already. He'd look the other way while Rollins abused his prescription medication. Spear had taken no money for the agreement ... just the request for a favor at some point to be determined. The point turned out to be April 1995.

The plan was for Rollins to come over to see Jerry at his home about an "urgent matter." By coincidence Dick would already be there on a social visit. It was to have been on a weeknight when Angel would be either performing or doing one of her many charitable

functions in the community. Rollins would slip Jerry a sedative in his drink to render him unconscious. They'd then pump his body full of illegal drugs until he was dead by overdose. The men he'd hired ... Wolverton, Ewing, Sanchez and Fast ... were to be waiting in the wood-line until summoned. They would take his body to a hiding place where a group of East European former Russian mob thugs were to plant additional evidence on the body. Spear would "crack the case" that Jerry was a drug dealer and had overdosed on his own product. The leader of the Russian mobsters, a man named Vasilie, had identified one of his own to be "sacrificed." Spear would be a hero and Bronson tarnished forever. Rollins, as the county coroner, would testify that Bronson died of a self-imposed drug overdose. Spear had paid his accomplices with the insurance money he'd received when his parents died. They would move away and keep their mouths shut. In time Dick would be the county hero and Angel would be his for the taking. It had seemed like such a perfect plan! How could it have gone so wrong?

In the dim light he saw Angel breathing silently and steadily. Her lungs operated only because of the breathing apparatus that hummed with timeless proficiency. Rosa received a tidy insurance settlement when Jerry died. But that money dried up quickly thanks to the excessive medical bills for Angel. If not for Roman's intervention with his own money plus the constant fundraisers in the town, Angel would have died years ago. But she was still here, still so beautiful and elegant even in this terrible place. Damn Ewing and his obsession with Jerry! If anyone had hated Jerry more than Dick it had been Ewing.

It was Ewing who, without telling Dick until he was already sitting in Jerry's home, had hired another member of the gang. He would only refer to him as the "Korean," but before Dick could respond Angel drove up unexpectedly. When he asked why she

was not at her usual routine of charity meetings and sessions, she explained that after being out of town for a few days she needed to catch up on some things at home first. He had been about to call Rollins to postpone the evening agenda when Jerry drove into the driveway. Things really went downhill after that.

Jerry had become suspicious immediately. He definitely had upped his guard when Ewing and that fool Wolverton showed up. Of course, seeing Bobby Fast sweating and twitching only made matters worse! They might as well have sent Jerry a telegram outlining their plans!

Once Wolverton lunged at Jerry with the knife, Dick knew he had to come up with a better plan quickly. He didn't know why he killed ol' Blue. He just knew he needed to distract Jerry quickly or he'd kill them all. Even with five of them ... actually, only four since Fast was completely worthless ... they stood zero chance against an enraged Jerry Bronson. He closed his eyes as he could still hear Angel screaming as she ran out on the porch to see what was happening.

After the shooting, and with Angel as a witness, there could only be one other solution ... she had to die! This defeated everything Dick had planned. He pleaded with Rollins to offer some other solution. Ewing, Wolverton and Sanchez all wanted to rape her and kill her but Dick had pulled his gun on them to prevent that from happening. He supposed it was the only good thing he ever did in his life.

That was where "the Korean" came into play. After a heated telephone call with Ewing, he claimed to have an experimental drug that would erase Angel's mind completely. After that she would be open to any suggestion a person might want to write upon her blank mind. And his price? He wanted to collect local women to carry back to Korea. These were women he would use to satisfy his

ongoing genetic experiments for a North African “contractor” and pay an “operating fee” to Vasilie. He’d make sure Spear came out looking like a hero and Angel would still be his but even better ... she’d have no memory of her life with Jerry Bronson or the terrible events of the night. What choice did Dick have now? He made the deal with the Devil and regretted it every night since.

Ewing finished off Jerry and burned the house to hide the evidence. The story they’d later recite involved an attack on Jerry and Angel from the Russian mob. Jerry fought to save Angel, but she had been injured, kidnapped and suffered from complete amnesia. The house had burned down in the aftermath of the gun battle with Jerry trapped inside, too wounded to escape. Dr. Rollins would confirm all of this in his autopsy on Jerry. The next day Dick would rescue the kidnapped Angel from the mobsters and kill the “boss,” already designated for sacrifice by Vasilie. Ewing and crew would have their money, the “Korean” would be allowed to steal his women, Rollins would have his drugs and Dick would have Angel. It seemed the best solution once everything fell apart. But when Dick arrived at the “pick-up point” to “rescue” Angel, he was informed of a new wrinkle in the plan. Angel had not reacted as expected to the amnesia drug. While her mind was definitely erased she had slipped into a coma. The Korean and Rollins had both tried unsuccessfully to revive her. It was their opinion ... both of them ... that Angel would never recover and regain consciousness. She would be dead within the week.

Enraged, Dick allowed Rollins to leave but not the Korean. He had killed them all ... the two Russian mobsters, the designated sacrifice and the Korean. He’d have killed Ewing and his crew as well had they not already skipped town.

And so the story spread that Dick Spear was a hero. He’d tracked down the men who killed the beloved Sheriff Bronson and,

in a heroic shootout, killed them despite being outnumbered 4-1. And while he'd not been able to prevent them from injecting some horrible drug into sweet Angel's veins, he had at least saved her life. It was all in the hands of God now.

The outpouring of affection on Jerry and Angel was tremendous. The story attracted news media from all over the world. The Attorney General of the United States flew down for the funeral. For the second time in fifteen years, the sheriff of this tiny South Georgia town had been killed in a stunning display of courage and defense of the town. "Let the word ring from this land to those who would do us harm and break our laws," the Attorney General spoke from the pulpit during Jerry's memorial service, "that we will never relax our vigilance! Let them understand and tremble at the knowledge that should you be a killer biker gang on a murderous spree or a Russian mobster attempting to spread your poison through our land, *we will not yield!* For we are better than you! And should one of our own fall while standing against you, we will stand in the breach to take his place. This was true yesterday, it is true today, and it shall be true tomorrow!"

To no one's surprise, Dick was elected sheriff in a special election held the following month. And he'd been reelected by overwhelming numbers ever since. So he'd gotten his wish. He was now the town hero and he had been referred to as such for over a decade. But at what price? He knew his true nature and that's what he saw when he looked in the mirror. He saw the shattered lives of his father ... Jerry ... Angel ... even the beloved Blue Boy! Every great tragedy in this town's history over the last 50 years had his fingerprints all over it. Of all the villains to tread this land in his lifetime, he was the chief ... the king ... the big #1. And he was not proud.

Now there was *someone* on his trail. He had no idea who it could

be. Everyone who knew anything about his past was already dead. But in the last three days someone had killed Sanchez, Ewing and Fast. (The sheriff from Washington had called him an hour earlier with the news of Fast's demise). He laughed at the stupidity of the reports that tried to paint those deaths as two accidents and a suicide. He paid much more heed to reports of a masked killer who called himself "The Night Terror." He had been linked to the deaths of Sanchez and Ewing and would certainly emerge as the cause of the death of Fast. He even had a dog! How could Spear ignore what was happening now? Jerry *was* the Night Terror. Dick could not explain how, but he knew it to be true. And the dog *was* ol' Blue. He read once that dogs will forgive you no matter what you do to them. Would Blue forgive Dick for what he'd done that awful night? No, he didn't think that he would.

So after all this time it appeared that Bobby Fast was the smartest one of them all. Fast had been the one to be afraid from the start and Fast had made his escape *before* being called to judgment. Dick had a choice to make and he felt he needed to make it before the start of tomorrow's festival. Should he wait for Jerry to come to him to exact his fearful vengeance ... or should he follow the example of Fast and take his own life first?

"What should I do, Angel?" He looked at the small, frail body that lay motionless before him. "Please tell me what to do!" He waited a few moments and, getting no answer, arose and quietly left the room. As he closed the door he saw Rosa walking down the hall. She had just come from Reverend Spindola's home after making his coffee and "tidying up a bit."

"Good morning, Rosa. She's still the same ... no sign of any movement. I keep hoping, you know?" Rosa smiled and hugged him tightly.

"You are such a *good* man, Sheriff," she beamed. "While I know

many people still care, no one but you ... and of course Father Spindola ... still come to visit my baby Angel. But she will awaken one day, Sheriff. I know this to be true. Just like in the Bible, Jesus said the 'girl is but sleeping.' She will wake up one day and smile and be so happy. You'll see, Sheriff. You'll see!

Rosa brushed past him and disappeared into room 41. He had wondered what he'd do, and now Rosa had made the decision for him. Tomorrow night was the night he was convinced Jerry would come for him. So he'd be sure to camp out here in the assisted living center. If Jerry planned to kill him he'd have to do it in front of Angel. He only hoped that would be enough to save his life. Yes, that's what he'd do. It seemed like a very good plan!

Chapter 26

It is appointed unto man once to die, but after this comes the judgment!

Hebrews 9:27

Roman always loved the spring. It was by far his favorite time of year. While many complained of the pollen and hay fever or the coming humidity and heat or the ever present thunder showers, he saw it as a time to celebrate life. Things always came alive in the Spring, promising that after the death of the Fall and the cold of the Winter, life would always find a way.

He stood on his porch for a moment to take in the evening breeze. He could hear the rustling of the leaves among the perfumed branches of his flowering trees. Of course he would always love the dogwoods the most. He supposed that was a memory he'd die with. Despite the estrangement he'd felt from his father over the years he missed the simple conversations he used to have with him from his childhood. Almost no one he'd known from his youth still lived here anymore. Most had died. The others had moved away. And now he supposed his own mortality was a matter of concern.

He'd been trying to conceal his worry, but it was now clear that something was terribly wrong. The pain in his abdomen worsened by the day and he felt weak and nauseous constantly. In his heart he knew that this would be his final spring ... his final dogwood

festival. Many of the tourists were already in town. Tomorrow would signal the start of a new season for the town and the county. He just hoped it would be one to remember ... a festival for the ages!

Feeling somewhat rejuvenated by the spring air, Roman decided to take a short walk. It was times like this that he felt closest to God. While he enjoyed his time in the mission or any of the many places he went to help, it was here under the great open skies that he felt as though God walked by his side. He used to wonder what he would say if God ever came down to walk with him one night. Would he be overjoyed at the opportunity ... or would he tremble in fear?

He first saw the animal from about ten feet away. It was dark outside, as was the animal. With no moon to illuminate the grounds, everything seemed somewhat more sinister than Roman remembered being the norm. Was he just getting old or was something else afoot in the town of his childhood? Straining to see in the dark, he heard movement behind him. Something had flanked him and had now circled behind him, blocking his retreat to the house. Dick Spear had warned him about straying out alone in the dark so far from civilization. There had been reports of coyotes roaming into the farmland from the panhandle area. Several farmers complained that the "varmints" had killed cattle, chickens and pigs across several of the neighboring counties. "It'll only be a matter of time before one attacks a human," Dick warned. "It's a matter of 'when,' not 'if.'" With those cheerful thoughts running through his mind, Roman took a cautious step back toward the house. That's when he saw it!

The beast emerged from a thicket of bushes that created a hedgerow walkway from Roman's porch to his mailbox. In the dim light Roman could not clearly identify it but it was definitely no coyote. It was much too large and muscular for that. It was

definitely canine, though ... and it seemed to know exactly what it was doing.

Roman knelt and tried to coax the dog to come to him. Perhaps he had a collar with some identification? If so, Roman would be happy to hold him here until the owner could be notified. The dog took a step or two closer, then another, then another. Roman gasped and clutched his heart when he finally saw the huge black head with the white patches over the eyes! This was impossible, but yet, he was seeing it with his own eyes! It was ol' Blue boy! He was back! And if Blue was back, could Jerry be far behind?

"Blue? Is that really you, old boy?" Roman rose quickly and took a step toward the dog with eagerness and excitement. He stopped abruptly when the dog suddenly took a battle stance and lowered his head to the ground. The growl that emerged was low and menacing, the teeth glistened ivory white in the darkness, and the eyes ... the eyes shone with a red hue powered from the pits of Hell. Roman felt more disappointment than fear. He'd hoped this was ol' Blue, but Jerry's beloved Blue Boy would never behave like this.

"Don't be angry with him, Rev." The voice came from behind him in the darkness. "He's not nearly so trusting of people as he used to be." Roman turned to the sound and saw him standing there, barely six feet away. He could not believe his eyes! He gasped a time or two as his mind tried in vain to accept what his eyes told him he saw.

"Oh dear God!" His voice cracked and quivered with emotion. "Oh dear God, I can't believe it's really you!"

"It's hardly God that you see before you, Rev. It's just me ... your old pupil and friend, Jerry Bronson." Roman thought he was going to collapse from emotion, but he composed himself and raced forward, arms spread wide.

“Jerry! Oh Jerry, I’ve missed you so! Last week I just knew you’d come back! I couldn’t explain it but I knew it in my heart! And now you are here! Right here in my yard! Come here and let me hold you, my dear sweet Jerry!” But Roman stopped when Jerry held up his hand in an almost threatening manner.

“Stop, Roman,” he commanded. “Don’t come any closer!” As Roman stopped, Blue became extremely agitated and began barking. But it was far from the friendly, goofy bark Roman recalled from the past. This was the bark of a predator about to make a kill.

“I don’t understand, Jerry. I don’t understand any of this. What are you ...” And then, his eyes widened with anguish, he seemed to understand. “Have you come to kill me, Jerry? Is that why you are here? I know it was you who killed Sanchez ... and Ewing ... and Fast. I can only assume that Dick Spear is also on your hit list. So am I to be the next victim on your killing spree? Is that why you’ve come to me ... Mr. Night Terror?”

“No, Roman! Please don’t say those things! I’d never hurt you ... ever!” His voice was pleading, the way he’d sounded when he was just a child. Roman’s heart melted in an instant as the tears began to well up within his eyes. “And I didn’t kill any of those men. They all ended up being the cause of their own death. But yes, Dick Spear is on my list. He’s the last one, Roman. Don’t you *dare* try to stop me because he is going to *pay*! He’s going to *pay* for what he did to Blue ... to me ... and to Angel.”

“I don’t presume to know what role Dick Spear played in all of those tragedies, my son,” Roman softly answered. “But I know *you*. Or at least I know who you *used* to be. The Jerry Bronson I knew would never go on a murderous rampage across country, taking his revenge on his enemies, deciding on a whim who will live and who will die. The Jerry I knew would come inside and sit with me. He’d talk to me over coffee and we’d laugh and sing and play with ol’ Blue

over there. He'd give me a hug and allow an old man the pleasure of a son's embrace. What happened to *that* Jerry Bronson?" Jerry's response was as cold as an icy wind blowing across a frigid Arctic expanse.

"*That* Jerry Bronson died, Rev. He died a long, long time ago." The silence that followed was deafening.

"So why did you come here tonight, Jerry?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that, Rev. I don't know why I'm here. I have no idea why or how I came back to the land of the living. I can't remember anything that happened to me since I ... since *that* night! Some things are clear to me and some seem blocked. Nothing makes sense! Can you help me ... old friend?"

"I don't have those answers, my son," Roman answered. "What is happening right now is clearly uncharted territory. But I do know this ... I know that you were the most amazing person I ever met. You had so many talents and an unlimited capacity to do good. In all of your endeavors ... student, athlete, soldier, pastor, husband, sheriff ... you were the best of the best in *all* of them! A talent like yours only comes along once in a century!"

"You forgot one other skill of mine, Rev. I am also a killer! And when you closely examine the accomplishments of my life, that's the skill I did ... and still do ... better than *all* of the rest!" Roman ignored Jerry's jab and continued.

"While I don't pretend to know everything, I do know this ... God is still in control, my son. And if He brought you back to this earth, then you should be patient and wait for Him to reveal His purpose for you."

"And what if God had nothing to do with any of this, Roman? What if something *else* brought me back?"

"Evil only wins when we allow it to win, my boy! I'm no warrior like you, but even a senile old man like me knows that you are no

pawn of evil! If you do this terrible thing you're planning ... if you kill Dick Spear for whatever he did all of those years ago ... then evil wins! But you don't need me to tell you that, Jerry. You know that already."

"You're wasting your time now, Roman. I am going to kill Dick Spear tomorrow night. I am *convinced* that *he* is the reason I am here again. Once he's dead, my mission will be completed. After that perhaps my true purpose will finally be revealed!"

"Or perhaps if you do that terrible thing you'll *never* know what your true purpose ever really was at all." Jerry turned away and made a low whistle sound. Blue responded immediately, scampering past Roman and bounding ahead of his master into the night.

"I made a mistake by coming here," Jerry said as he walked away. "Good-bye, Roman. Take my advice and stay away from Dick Spear tomorrow night. Wherever he might be, you stay away from him." He paused for effect, then added, "You've been warned."

"Jerry! Jerry ... wait!" Roman's voice pleaded! He sounded desperate. Jerry took a few steps then stopped. He did not answer or look back toward his mentor and father figure. "I want to tell you something, son! It's something I've never shared with anyone ever in life ... until now."

"I'm listening." He still did not turn around.

"I was 16 years old. It was 1946. The war was over and peace was breaking out across my world. I was happier than I'd ever been since my mother had passed some nine years earlier. I'd taken a shortcut on my way home from picking wild berries. I was anxious to get home. I loved that old place. It was the same place that you once called home, along with Blue and Angel. Remember?" Jerry nodded that he did.

"I was thinking that summer about how beautiful the dogwoods were that year. The pink ones especially seemed to shine more

brightly than ever. I stopped to smell a few and pick some wild daisies. Dad never admitted it, but I knew he liked having wild flowers in the house. Like me, it reminded him of Mom.” Roman’s mind wandered a bit as it seemed to do more often these days. But Jerry said nothing. He stood there in silence, waiting patiently for Roman to get back on track. Eventually he did.

“I heard it before I saw it. It was a low whine. It had a sad wail tone to it and I stopped and got very quiet as I tried to pinpoint where the sound was coming from. As I got closer to the source, I imagined I’d find a bee or some type of insect caught in a spider’s web. It had that far away drone to it. Do you understand me, Jerry?” The sad and pleading tone in Roman’s voice finally touched some aspect of Jerry’s sympathetic side. He turned to face the “good and right” reverend, his face full of compassion.

“I understand, old friend. Go on.” Roman smiled his appreciation and continued.

“That’s when I saw it, Jerry. It was a dogwood blossom! One of the beautiful pink ones! It was shaking and quivering ... writhing as if it was in agony. And it was *crying*!” Roman closed his eyes as a single tear rolled down his face. The tear lingered for a brief instant on his chin, then fell into oblivion, lost forever in the damp Georgia clay. “As I looked closer I saw that it was bleeding! Blood poured ... *poured* ... from its dainty petals. And in the center, Jerry ... this flower had a *face*! It cried out, its voice anguished and in pain, quivering and shaking in fear and despair. And then, it *spoke*! And do you know what it said to me?” Jerry shook his head ‘no.’

“It said, ‘Roman, help me! You must help me stop the bleeding! There is so much blood, Roman! Only you can stop the blood! I can’t do it alone, Roman! Help me, Roman! PLEASE HELP ME! HELP ME STOP THE BLEEDING!’” As tears streamed down Roman’s face he sank to his knees and wept. Jerry watched from a

distance, motionless, saying nothing. By now Blue returned and saw Roman in his hour of need. He whimpered and started to move to the side of his old friend but Jerry stopped him.

“Stay here, boy,” he commanded. “Sit!” As he always did, Blue obeyed.

“I’ve been haunted by that vision for almost 65 years,” Roman sighed, still on his knees. “I’ve never understood what it meant. But I do know that the dogwoods still blush in shame over their part in the violence of man’s darkest hour. The dogwood was trying to tell me that bloodshed was coming again. It was coming and it was going to be very bad, Jerry. For a time I thought it was trying to warn me of the night that Parker and his gang came to town. I tried to stop them, Jerry, but I failed.”

“I remember,” Jerry said softly. “You were very brave.”

“But I *failed*, Jerry,” Roman snapped! “The bloodshed kept on coming until you saved us all. And then later I believed it was the night you were killed! I believed that I was supposed to do something to prevent that terrible night from taking place! And again, I *failed*!”

“That night had nothing to do with you, old man. It was all Ewing and his clan ... and Dick Spear!” Jerry’s eyes began to glow. The Night Terror was starting to emerge.

“Perhaps you are correct, Jerry,” Roman agreed. “Perhaps none of those things were the unspeakable event the flower warned me about. Maybe it was trying to warn me about tomorrow night. Maybe it was trying to warn me about the real threat to the peace and tranquility of this town.” Roman swallowed hard, then stood to his feet and looked directly into Jerry’s blazing red eyes. “*Maybe it was trying to warn me about you!*”

Roman’s words stung Jerry to his soul. It surprised him that he felt such sorrow at the words of his beloved Pastor Spindola.

He thought he had moved well beyond his need for such petty concerns. But despite his inner pain he showed nothing on his hard outer shell.

“As I said before, I made a mistake in coming here,” Jerry said as he turned to go for good. “Nothing has changed. Stay home tomorrow night, Roman. There’s a smell of death in the air ... and it’s going to get worse before it gets better!”

Roman stared blankly into the darkness for what seemed an eternity but was most likely only a moment or two. He neither saw nor heard anything out of the ordinary. He had never felt so alone in all of his life. He felt as though the solitude would crush him.

“Good-bye, my dear sweet boy,” he finally mouthed to the night sky. “I love you!” If either God or Jerry Bronson heard Roman’s impassioned declaration, they did not answer.

Chapter 27

*Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—
but right through every human heart.* **Alexander Solzhenitsyn**

Welcome to the opening day of the 2010 Dogwood festival! It had been nearly 100 years since the town first began celebrating this “economic boom” tradition. Spear had been nervous all day, wondering if something bad was going to happen. But the day wound down quietly and the crowds gathered in the square for singing, dancing, local music and barbeque. So far, so good!

As daylight began to fade, Spear headed to his car. As he started to get in he looked across the crowd of 300 or more tourists and made eye contact with Reverend Spindola. The Rev seemed worried and sad but said nothing. Spear shook his head in frustration and drove away. He had no time or energy for the Rev tonight.

As he headed for home, Spear got a sudden change of heart and decided to drop by the Dove of Peace instead. He had a deputy posted there for the night so he had the perfect excuse to swing by for a visit. He pulled into the parking lot next to Deputy Sherrard. Tracey rolled down his window as Spear’s car pulled beside him.

“Anything going on here, Tracey?”

“Nothing at all, Sheriff. Not a sound since I came in this afternoon. The town okay?”

“Same as always, Tracey,” Spear answered. “We had a few folks show up with too much beer and a mild case of heat stroke, but otherwise it has been quiet.” The two men sat for a moment as they struggled to speak. Spear knew that his deputies felt he was overreacting to a possible threat to the town. They were just too polite to tell him so. “Would you do me a favor, Trace?”

“Sure thing, boss. What’s up?”

“How about taking a drive out to Erma’s Kozy Kottage and see if anything’s going on out there? I know they have a full house and if there’s any trouble she could use the help.”

“What about here, Sheriff? I’m supposed to be here until midnight.”

“I’ll take your watch, Trace. Just take your time out at Erma’s. I’ll get out and walk around the grounds here ... just to be on the safe side.” Sherrard nodded and drove out into the night. Spear watched the taillights disappear before he got out to stretch. Taking a deep breath, he pulled on his hat and headed for the door. He had only taken a few steps when he heard a movement behind him. It sounded like an animal running through the dry leaves that accumulated beneath the dogwoods and oaks that surrounded the facility. He paid it no mind as he figured it to most likely be a rabbit or squirrel. Sometimes in the night, especially among those dry and brittle leaves, even a small animal sounded much larger than most people would believe. But the sound continued and seemed to be getting closer and closer. Dick stopped and peered into the darkness among the trees.

“Is anybody there?” No answer. He removed his flashlight and cast a high beam into the shadows. He swept it left and right along every square inch of the lot but saw nothing. Berating himself for

being so skiddish, he turned back toward the building when he heard it again. It sounded closer this time and quite large. He shined his light again toward the direction of the sound but saw nothing. His nerves began to fray somewhat as his mind began playing tricks. For the first time in his life he began to seriously think about dying. The prospect terrified him. As panic began to well up inside him he considered running.

Deciding that was the best plan of the day, he turned to race inside the assisted living center. He stopped before even starting. Blocking his path to the doorway was a dog. It was a black lab, hunched low to the ground in a threatening stance. It was well over 100 pounds and growling in a deep, low pitch. Its hackles raised, it was clearly in position to attack at any moment. White teeth gleamed in the porch light. Red eyes gazed outward in an obvious display of hatred. That's what unnerved Dick so much ... the dog was looking at *him* ... and he felt as if the dog knew him *personally*! As Dick fought against total panic, he swallowed hard as his own recognition set in. He *knew* this dog and knew it *well*. The body style, head shape and white patches over the eyes were no coincidence. This was no rabid stray or mongrel on the loose. This was ol' Blue. In his mind's eye, Dick could still see the bullet wound in ol' Blue's head. Or maybe it wasn't his imagination at all. Dick had no intention of finding out. Taking a slow step back, he whirled to race to his car. Once inside he'd call for back-up. Tonight was no time to be a hero!

Dick cried out in shock as he fell to the ground. He coughed and gagged and rolled around, trying to force air into his lungs. As he'd turned to flee he had run headlong into something hard and solid. He felt as if he'd hit a tree or large rock. Whatever it was had been huge and powerful enough to knock him flat on his back without budging. It took Dick a moment to compose himself. As

the crescent moon slipped behind dark clouds, the porch light of the assisted living center suddenly died. Behind him he could hear the growl of the dog getting louder and louder. Afraid to look in that direction, he reached out for his flashlight that lay directly to his side. Gripping the metal cylinder, he decided he could use it as a weapon against the dog until he could unholster his pistol.

Scrambling to his feet with these thoughts racing through his head, Dick regained his balance and turned to identify what he had hit. The answer stunned him worse than the earlier impact had done. He fumbled for his pistol but, upon pulling it from his holster, lost his grip. It fell harmlessly to the ground. His eyes saw the sight but his brain could not accept it. His heart, however, knew it to be true. The strong jaw, high cheekbones, furrowed brow, powerful nose ... he'd never forget that face. He looked just as he'd looked the last time Jerry saw him almost fifteen years ago except for one difference ... Dick had never seen such angry red eyes!

"Jerry?" Dick was not sure if he'd asked a question or exclaimed a point. Either way, Jerry didn't respond as Dick would have hoped.

"Hello, Dick," Jerry uttered. "Hello and good-bye!" Jerry slammed a massive fist into Dick's chest. Dick was knocked backward and rolled over several times from the force of the blow. He cried out in pain and fear as blood began oozing from his nose and the corner of his mouth. His chest was on fire and his ragged breathing was a clear indication that he had a broken rib ... or maybe several ribs! He felt as if he'd been hit with a cannon. Another blow like that and he might not survive.

Before he could even regain his sense of balance, Jerry was upon him! Dick felt himself jerked rudely from his cowering position and lifted in the air. Still trying to take in what was happening, he felt himself flying through the air. He crashed into the windshield of his car. The impact instantly sent shards of pain streaking down

his spine and neck as multiple spider web cracks appeared across the driver's side of the glass shield. He bounced off the hood and rolled like a crumpled rag doll to the ground.

Completely disoriented as his world spun out of control, Dick tried to stand but had no strength. He was lifted in the air again. He cried out "Please stop" and found himself suspended in the air, his feet dangling inches off the ground. Jerry had him firmly by the collar, his blazing red eyes mere inches from his own.

"Are you happy to see me, Dick? I'd guess that you are not!" His voice sounded like an animal from the wild that somehow learned to enunciate human sounds. It sounded primitive ... inhuman ... merciless! "Time to put you down like a rabid dog, Dick!" With that, Jerry tossed Dick aside. He fell like a bag of straw, his body like a paper sack of jello. He crunched when he hit the ground and just lay still, panting and crying. Jerry turned to Blue, who stood watching just a few feet away.

With a low whistle from Jerry, Blue came forward, still hunched low to the ground, his face little more than red eyes and massive teeth. He stood over Dick and pressed his muzzle to the man's throat. Dick moaned but could not speak.

"I'm going to give him a command now, Dick," Jerry said. "It's a command Blue never knew until you taught it to him on my front porch on that fateful night. Do you know what that command is?" Dick struggled to speak but was afraid to do so with Blue's teeth pressed against the soft flesh of his throat. "*Come on, Dick! You know what I'm talking about, don't you?*"

Obviously agitated by Dick's silence, Jerry took a step closer and leaned down. He now stood directly over his former best friend. "Let me refresh your memory, you bastard! You killed my dog ... you killed my wife ... and you killed me! Tonight will go a long way to evening that score. Since I can't kill you three times I will take my

pleasure in watching ol' Blue return the favor as only he can." Jerry looked to Blue. "Are you ready, boy?" Blue's growl intensified and Dick closed his eyes tightly. "Good bye, Dick! May you rot in Hell forever! Blue?" He paused as Dick's terror engulfed his trembling body. "KILL HIM!"

"NOOOOOOO! STOP! FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, PLEASE STOP!" The shout came from the road behind Dick's car. Blue hesitated as Jerry turned his attention back toward the road. In his excitement and focus he'd completely forgotten about the parking lot. All the commotion had brought several nurses and orderlies from inside to see what was happening. And standing in the lot, just a few feet away from Jerry, Blue and Dick, was Reverend Spindola. It had been he who had called out for Jerry to stop. Seeing that he had at least created a pause in the violence, he called out to Jerry again.

"Jerry, please don't do this! I am begging you, son! Please back off and let the authorities handle this!"

"Authorities?" "*What* authorities?" Jerry pointed to the still whimpering Spear who was now rolled into a ball on the ground. Blue sat beside him looking more bewildered than deadly. "*He* was the authority here! Do you see how *that* turned out? I told you to stay home tonight, Rev. I *warned* you!"

Jerry turned to observe the Dove of Peace staff members that now stood on the edge of the porch. There were about a dozen of them. They were all wide eyed and frightened. "We've called the police," one man from the group shouted. "They are on their way." As Jerry hesitated, Roman saw his opening and took it.

"Is this what you've become, Jerry? Have you come back to us to terrorize and kill an innocent man? I know you warned me to stay away, but how could I stay at home while you evolved into the murderer you once swore to me you'd *never* become?"

"Innocent? You think *this* man is *innocent*?" Jerry was incensed to a level that made Roman nervous. But he hoped if he could force Jerry to focus his anger on him, then maybe Sheriff Spear might be spared. "This man is a *murderer*! He deceived all of us, especially me, and repaid your trust with the most heinous evil any man's heart could imagine. He wanted Angel for himself! He killed me ... killed ol' Blue ... thinking it would open the door for him to take my Angel. And when that went wrong, he killed her, too!" By now Jerry's voice escalated to screams of rage. He clinched his fists and roared into the black night above him. Finally spent, he looked back to the cowering group on the porch, then to the shivering clump of flesh at his feet, then back to Roman. "He is not worthy of your protection, Rev. For all the dark sins that stain his soul, *Dick Spear deserves to die*! If you can't see it for me, then can't you at least see it for Angel? How could you defend a man who killed such a beautiful soul?"

"Angel is not dead, Jerry. My sweet baby still lives ... just beyond these walls!" Everyone on the porch parted as Rosa walked though them toward Jerry. Blue immediately ambled over to her, his tail wagging. She reached down and patted his head as he rolled over on his back, showing his belly as he always did to the ones he loved. "This may be a terrible man, Jerry, and he may have done the terrible things you say he did. But he did not kill Angel. She's still alive after all these years ... fighting to breathe ... fighting to live ... locked inside a coma that keeps her from my reach."

Jerry staggered back as if he'd been shot. "That's not possible, Rosa! If she were alive I would *feel* her! I would be able to *sense* her! Try as I may ... even now ... I can't *feel* her presence."

"She is clinically dead, Jerry," Rosa answered softly. "Her brain patterns are flat-lined. But we've kept her alive all these years, Father Spindola and myself. We kept her alive with the machines

and every dime we could spare because I just could not let my baby go. So don't you come here tonight proclaiming vengeance for her death! Don't you DARE come here tonight justifying murder and terror and violence by invoking her name because those of us who truly love her have seen to it that she will live as long as humanly possible!" Rosa held her head high and looked Jerry directly eye to eye. "My baby is *alive*!"

Jerry was retreating now. He stumbled back and leaned against Spear's car. He looked around in shock. There was some static and rather excited transmissions coming from the car radio but no one, especially Jerry, paid them any attention. He looked to Rosa, then down to Spear, then to Roman.

"Is it ... is what she's saying ... Roman ... is it?" Roman smiled and nodded.

"Yes, my boy. It's true. Angel still lives, albeit in a coma. She has been that way now for fifteen years." Jerry gasped as now he found it difficult to breathe. Blue, sensing his master's distress, came quickly and stood by his side. He sat and looked up into Jerry's face, trying desperately to comprehend the swirling emotions in his canine brain.

"But I was *there*," Jerry protested to no one in particular. "The night they killed me I heard her screaming! Last week, when I awoke in the old cemetery, I saw her tombstone! I can still see it in my mind as plain as day!"

Angel Debbie Bronson

Beloved Wife, Acclaimed Entertainer

Born April 16, 1952

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for by doing so some have entertained angels unaware.*

“What you saw was a marker, son.” Roman took a step forward. “We had her stone placed there when we buried your ... um ... what was left of you. We put you in the ground with your uniform and gave you a hero’s farewell as you deserved. We even got permission from the doctor to bring poor Angel to the graveside ceremony. Later it just didn’t seem right to have you out there without her by your side. So we erected a stone to mark her eventual resting place and set it beside your grave.”

“But it’s empty, Jerry.” It was Rosa again. “Her tomb is empty. My Angel will join you one day. But today she’s still living. My baby ... your wife ... is still alive!” He looked to her with agonizing anguish on his face.

“What have I done? How could I have been so blind?” He looked back to Roman. “Why didn’t you tell me, Rev? Last night when we spoke ... why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were in no mood to be told anything last night, my boy.” Now Roman moved in and placed his arms around Jerry’s shoulders. “But now that you do know we can make everything right again. Let’s move away from Dick and get the police involved. They’ll investigate what you’ve said and we’ll do it the right way. Will you do that, my boy?” Jerry realized Roman’s strategy and pulled away. His anger had returned.

“Maybe Angel still lives, but her injuries and her coma are still *his* fault!” He pointed to Dick who now sat upright but still cowered in fear. “*He* was the mastermind of that horrible night. So even though Angel still lives, the blame for her pain and sorrow ... as well as my death ... still rests with *him*! And for that, *Dick Spear must die!*”

“Do you remember this night in 1979?” It was Rosa again. She moved forward and confronted Jerry again. This time her voice was soft, her tone soothing. She sounded just like Angel. “You had saved the town from those awful bikers and you had Roscoe Parker

completely at your mercy. You were about to impale his head on a splintered dogwood tree. Do you remember?”

“Of course I remember,” Jerry answered. “I would have killed him, too, if not for ...” His voice tailed off. Rosa reached out and took Jerry by the hand. He snapped his head to gaze at her but his eyes were soft and moist. It was not anger on his face now. It was sorrow.

“I know,” she smiled. “It was Angel who saved you that night from killing a helpless enemy. And it is Angel who speaks to you tonight through me. No one doubted 30 years ago that Roscoe Parker was an evil and guilty man. But that did not give you the right to kill him once he’d been exposed and broken. Tonight I speak for all of us when I say that no one doubts what you have told us about Dick Spear. But he, like Parker, is now exposed and broken. Let the authorities take him away. I’m asking you, Jerry ... I’m *begging* you ... if you loved Angel enough once to spare the life of Roscoe Parker, will you love her enough now to spare the life of Dick Spear?” Jerry’s face resembled that of a little boy who wanted his mother’s forgiveness for some terrible deed.

“It’s so hard, Rosa.” His voice tailed off to a distant mumble. “It’s just so hard!”

“Anyone can dole out punishment,” Roman offered as he patted Jerry’s back. “But only the strong can afford to be merciful.”

“I love Angel more than anything,” Jerry finally said. “For her sake and for her sake alone ... he can live!” As Roman and Rosa smiled their sigh of relief, Blue began prancing and barking his goofy trademark. The crowd, sensing they had seen something truly amazing, began to cheer and applaud. Dick, lost in the confusion, finally stood to his feet and silently waited, slumped and invisible.

“Welcome back, dear Jerry,” Rosa smiled. She embraced him fully. Roman beamed with ‘fatherly pride.’

“Can I see Angel now?” Jerry’s face was pleading and hopeful.

“Of course,” Rosa answered. “Let’s go inside.” It was then that Deputy Sherrard’s voice broke through loud and clear on Spear’s car radio. He was screaming and pleading for attention.

“SHERIFF! SHERIFF, PICK UP! YOU NEED TO PICK UP *RIGHT NOW!*” Everyone stopped and looked toward Spear who stood frozen and motionless. He seemed incapable of movement, the same as he’d done in 1979. Sherrard was still screaming into his handset. “SHERIFF! DEAR GOD, SHERIFF! *PLEASE PICK UP RIGHT NOW!*” Seeing that Spear was in no condition to answer, Jerry reached through the open window and pulled the mic to his lips. Giving a disgusting look to his former friend and deputy, he pressed the transmit button.

“This is *the* Sheriff. Calm down and talk to me. What is the nature of the emergency?” If Deputy Sherrard was confused about the identity of his caller his voice did not show it.

“It’s awful, Sheriff,” he began. “It’s just like the night I read about when I first went through our files after I got hired. It’s happening all over again!”

“What are you talking about, Tracey? Like what all over again?”

“I’m at Erma’s place. It’s burning down as I speak. And poor Erma! One of them made her watch while the other one nailed old Willie to the side of the house. And then they set it on fire! Oh God, sheriff, he killed them all! There are bodies everywhere!” Jerry’s eyes narrowed as he took in the news. He looked around at the faces of those who now gathered around him with the mic in his hand. They were all looking to him to take charge again ... to stop this evil that had again found their town and threatened to destroy it. It was just like old times. Even Dick was now staring at him with pleading eyes. Those eyes seemed to say, “Please save us! Please deliver us from

evil one more time!” Jerry already knew the answer but he asked the question anyway to confirm it for everyone else.

“You keep saying *him* and *they*, Tracey. Can you identify the attackers? And how many are there?”

“There are only two of them, but they are invincible ... supernatural ... monsters!” Tracey seemed slightly calmed now by the power in Jerry’s voice, but he was still on the verge of panic. “The leader is an older guy but evil beyond belief. He was a guest at the Kottage. He’s the one who set the building on fire. He said his name was Vladimir Booshinkee or something like that. But during the massacre I heard him say his name was Bronson ... Vladimir Bronson.”

Jerry nodded. He recalled the name from the files he’d once read as a sheriff as well. It was the old gypsy chief who had been run out of town in 1952 by Dick’s father, Sheriff “Big Ben” Spear. The same man who left a little baby behind ... the baby found the next day by Ben and raised by the whole town. The baby who grew up to be Jerry!

“You said there was a second man, Tracey. What can you tell me about him?”

“He’s a beast, sheriff! He’s got one eye and is huge ... made of rocks or something. I shot him six times in the head and chest and he was not even fazed! He looked at me and laughed at me like I was not important enough to kill. Then he rode off on his motorcycle toward town. Why didn’t he kill me, sheriff?”

“He left you there to make this call, Tracey. He wants you to warn people. Then he’s going to kill them anyway. He wants them to know that even forewarned, they are going to die and no one can stop him.” Jerry looked back to the frightened faces of the crowd, then pressed the button again. “But they didn’t count on *me*!”

“What do you want me to do, sheriff?”

“Call the state police, Deputy. Alert all the local county fire and

police departments. Tell them to forget about jurisdiction and get over to town as quickly as possible.”

“Should I call our fire department as well?” Jerry frowned as he thought back to that fateful night in 1979.

“No need, Tracey,” he sighed. “They are already dead. Now start making those calls. I’m on my way.” He looked to Rosa and the onlookers. “Go inside and prepare to evacuate the patients if needed. We’ll know within the hour if that will be necessary. And Rosa?” She looked to him with newfound admiration but growing fear. “Take care of my baby, will you? I can’t go see her just yet.” Rosa nodded, then turned and ran inside with the others.

“Let’s go, Rev!” Spindola nodded and raced to the passenger side of the sheriff’s car. As Jerry opened the door, Dick finally found the courage to speak.

“Jerry? Jerry, what’s going on here?” His voice trembled and cracked. Jerry looked at him with disgust but found the power to answer him.

“The town’s under attack again. It’s the old gypsy your father kicked out almost 60 years ago ... the same one who left me behind as a baby. He’s returned and he’s brought a friend.” Dick struggled to take in Jerry’s words as the big bomb dropped. “It’s Parker, Dick. Roscoe Parker has returned from the grave to finish what he started thirty years ago.” A sudden resolve flashed across Dick’s face.

“Roscoe Parker is the man who killed my father,” he said. He turned and picked up his revolver, opened the chamber to verify it still carried six rounds, then placed it into his holster with a jolt. Without further hesitation he opened the back door and slid into the back seat. “Let’s go, Sheriff! We are wasting time!” Blue bounded right behind him and took his place in the backseat as well.

Jerry started to argue, then changed his mind. He switched on his flashing lights and let loose the blaring siren. The tires spun as they gathered traction on the red clay road. In the distance they could already see the glow of the fire from the city square. Soon they would be able to hear the screams. The Devil had returned to Timmons ville for the Dogwood Festival. This time there would be Hell to pay!

Chapter 28

Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.

Thomas Paine, December 1776.

Jerry drove the sheriff's patrol car into the city square with lights and siren in full force. He careened into the sheriff's reserved parking space directly in front of the courthouse. There were several buildings already burning and numerous bodies on the street. Parker was running rampant through the square on foot, chasing down victims while Buchinsky stood atop the steps to the courthouse like a ringmaster in a three ring circus from Hell. Jerry put the transmission into the "park" position and switched off the ignition. He passed the keys to Roman. "Keep these handy, Rev. If things go poorly, I want you to be able to make an escape."

"I'm not going anywhere without you, Jerry!"

"This is no time to argue with me, Rev. I'm not doing this to protect you. If I don't make it, I need you to get back to the assisted living center and help them evacuate the patients. No debate!" He then turned to Dick, who was trembling and still bleeding from his nose and mouth. "You don't have to do this, Dick. You will still have to face up to what you did all those years ago no matter what happens tonight. In other words, this does *not* square things

between us ... not by a long shot!" Spear looked Jerry directly back in his eyes.

"I'm not doing this for you, Sheriff. I'm doing it for me ... and for my dad. After tonight I'll willingly turn myself in to any authority you direct me to. But for now, I have a score to settle with Parker."

"Parker is mine, Dick. You heard Deputy Sherrard say he's invulnerable. Your bullets won't have any effect on him. I need you to take out Buchinsky." He pointed to the man who was laughing and cheering from the top of the steps. "He's the mastermind in all of this. Somehow, I believe that taking him down is the key to any chance of victory for us tonight. I'll hold off Parker for as long as I can ... draw his attention to me and away from the town ... but *you must take down Buchinsky!*" With that, Dick nodded and exited the car. He removed the shotgun from the backseat and checked his ammo. After confirming his ammunition load he slammed the door and began walking toward the courthouse. Roman placed his hand on Jerry's shoulder.

"What's your plan, son?" His face was full of fear and concern. Jerry laughed.

"Plan? What plan?" Then to Blue, "Come on, boy! Let's go!" He confidently emerged from the driver's side of the car as Blue followed him in full battle mode. Roman slid over behind the driver's wheel. It would all play out directly in front of him now. He silently mouthed a hasty prayer.

"Dear God, grant Your mercy and protection on us all! Send Your mighty power to crush these beasts like the *vermin* they are! I'm talking about unleashing Your wrath like the days of old ... fire from heaven kind of stuff! *Obliterate* them, Lord! Forgive me for my weaknesses and indiscretions! Amen!"

It was Buchinsky who recognized Spear first. He'd not seen

Bronson yet. He called to Parker to get his attention. That act alone allowed a teenager and her mother to escape Parker's killer advance. Parker stopped to listen to his master's commands, his shattered face and empty eye socket only adding to his fearsome demeanor.

"I can't believe this," Buchinsky shouted. "The cowardly son returns yet again! But you won't be so lucky this time, Sheriff Spear. The one who was pegged to kill you before failed. Tonight I will do it myself!"

"Who are you?" Spear waved his hands at the pandemonium behind him. "Why are you so determined to kill everyone here? What reason do you have to do this terrible thing? What has this town ever done to you?" Buchinsky bellowed his demonic laugh as a response.

"Reason? Does a wolf need a reason to slaughter the sheep? He does it simply because he is the wolf!" Spindola shivered from the car at those words. It was almost exactly what Parker had said after the attack on the town in 1979. Sensing that he may be needed to help evacuees, he slowly got out of the car so he could move in any direction he needed. "Sorry, Jerry," he whispered. "I can't sit back and watch while you are in such danger." Buchinsky continued his tirade.

"But this time there actually is a reason, Spear! Your father humiliated me in front of my people and my clan in 1950! He cursed me and drove me in the dirt just to make a name for himself. But he made two fatal mistakes that night! He cursed my master, the eternal Prince of Darkness, who was NOT amused! From his own mouth your father spoke the words that sealed his fate and the fate of this town!"

"Sounds like you and your boss have pretty fragile egos, prune face," Dick taunted. "But you mentioned two mistakes? How about filling me in on his *second* mistake?"

Buchinsky smiled, revealing his decayed and rotting teeth. The tongue was *definitely* reptilian. He cackled as he pulled a mysterious brown pouch from his coat and unwrapped it as Dick and Roman looked on.

“Your false bravado does not impress me, you insignificant cur! But yes, I’ll show you your stupid father’s second and most critical mistake. He left *this!*” Buchinsky held high the contents of the pouch as thunder rolled. A huge lightning storm streaked across the purple sky. It really did seem like the end of the world. “When he ridiculed me in front of my people that night, your father spat his wad of tobacco on the ground. When he drove away I gathered that wad because it contained *his* essence ... *his* DNA ... *his* life force that I could use against *him!* I have kept it all these years to keep track of what has been happening in this town. So once again it was *your father* who sealed his own doom that night ... his own as well as that of this accursed village!” Roman stepped forward from the concealing dogwood trees and called out to the madman.

“So you would condemn a town and its people simply to avenge a perceived wrong from almost 60 years ago? This is insane!” Buchinsky looked toward Spindola and acknowledged sweet recognition.

“Ah, Spindola! I knew you’d make your way here eventually. As usual you have completely missed the point! Tonight is not just about revenge for a past misdeed. Tonight is the culmination of a *lifetime* of mastering the dark arts of the master of Lies and Prince of Evil. Tonight I will ascend to the next level of evolution only attained by one other being since the dawning of man! The fires that burn here tonight are generated from the pits of the Abyss that no man can stand against! Your pathetic emergency crews are *helpless* to stop me. Between the fires and the murder lust of my

slave, this will signal the beginning of my reign over all men for all time! *Tonight, I will transform into a god among men!*"

As Buchinsky railed on, more and more fire and police trucks began arriving from neighboring counties. The distraction was allowing them to evacuate screaming tourists and residents while Spear and Spindola kept the monsters occupied. The rescue efforts did not go unnoticed by Buchinsky.

"I know that you think you are being so sly by evacuating these people while you keep me occupied. But know this! I have placed a spell of containment that encompasses a twenty mile radius from the town center. People can come in but they can't get out! You have called these people to their deaths! Before the night is over, EVERYONE within this radius will die either by my fire or Parker's powerful fists. There are none who can stop me! Do you hear me? You have no one! NO ONE!"

"Wrong on all counts," Jerry said as he and Blue emerged front and center. "They have *me*!" Parker roared with delight as he finally saw Jerry for the first time.

"I knew you would be here, Preacher Man! Buchinsky said you were gone forever but I knew you'd be here. I KNEW IT! I have much to repay to you for that night so very long ago! You will wish you had stayed dead ... your second death will not be a good one I promise you!"

"Jeremiah Bronson," Buchinsky screeched. He was clearly stunned. "My greatest plan and worst failure! By what magic have you returned to the land of the living and how have you evaded my sight until tonight?"

"Maybe your powers are not so great as you think," Jerry responded. Blue took his battle stance and growled defiantly. "And looking at the poor quality of your handiwork," he added, pointing to Parker, "looks like I got the better deal. I returned fully intact,

my wounds completely healed. Your boy here looks like he got hit by a locomotive.” He paused for effect, then added, “Oh wait ... I forgot. Those scars are from the last ass-whipping I gave him 30-years ago!” Buchinsky’s face swelled with fury!

“I left you behind in 1950 for that fool sheriff to find. He did find you and, as planned, brought you into the town to be raised by the very sheep you would one day slaughter. I placed a ticking bomb inside of you that night. It was to direct you toward deception and lies to lower the guard of these fools. On your 12th birthday you were to go on a murderous spree to take the lives of the ones closest to you ... beginning with this one!” He pointed to Spear. “But you never did! This is most perplexing to me! You are the most lethal and perfect killing machine to *ever* emerge on this planet. You have exhibited this skill on more than one occasion. Yet you always side with the sheep instead of the wolves! Could you at least tell me why?”

“Maybe because you forgot there’s a third type of animal beyond sheep and wolves, you sick bastard,” Bronson answered. “You forgot about the sheepdog.” Buchinsky stared in disbelief for a moment, then laughed.

“Ah yes, you are truly the deep thinker, aren’t you, Bronson? You throw out your witty outdated clichés and we all are supposed to grovel at your cloven feet? Who taught you to protect the weak? *Someone* taught you to nurture instead of kill.” His voice deepened with absolute menace. “This is all the more reason why this town must die tonight!”

“Give it your best shot, Buchinsky. Sounds to me like all you’ve done is fail at everything since you came into this world. I see no reason why tonight should be any different.”

“So once again you choose to defy me rather than join me? I can still make you a god among these pathetic fools! You’ve even managed to come back from the dead ... something I thought only I had the power to accomplish! Can’t you see what you are throwing away?”

"He doesn't want any part of you, monster!" It was Spindola who now shook his fist toward the menacing gypsy who hoped to be king. "He was sent here by a power far greater than you! And he's going to prove it tonight or die trying!"

"Your words are most appropriate, Spindola," Vladimir answered. "Let's see if it's possible for a man to die twice. Let the blood bath continue!"

In response, Dick fired his shotgun pointblank into Vladimir's chest. He fired all five shots, then cast it aside and pulled his revolver. He fired all six shots into his target's head and shoulders. As the smoke cleared, Buchinsky was not even scratched.

"Nice try, you stupid shell of a man," he scolded. "You thought you might kill me and be rid of Parker? Kill two birds with one stone? No, I forgot to mention to you that I have also cloaked myself with a spell of invincibility. Nothing forged or formed on this planet can harm me! You picked the wrong night to be a hero, Spear!" With alarming speed Buchinsky raced up to the unprepared Spear. His gait resembled that of a hyena ... at times he even went to all fours. He slapped Spear hard across the face, knocking him backwards. He tumbled head over heels down the steps of the courthouse. Pointing to a nearby dogwood, Vladimir shouted an ancient spell in some forgotten Gaelic tome. The tree burst into white hot blue flame ... the fires of Hell. Then he waved to Parker.

"*Kill them all!*" Parker nodded and locked eyes onto Jerry, who took his battle stance. Blue lowered his head and emitted a low, threatening growl.

"I'm going to grind you and your dog into buttermilk, Bronson! And this time, there won't be anyone to save you!"

"I don't need any help to take you down again, Cyclops. So let Hell claim the one of us who falls first!"

The demonic biker smiled. "Call me Backbone!"

Chapter 29

A timid person is frightened before a danger, a coward during the time, and a courageous person afterward. **Jean Paul Richter (1763 - 1825)**

Parker closed on Jerry quickly and literally tried to rip his head off. Jerry continually broke Parker's grip and landed powerful blows to his throat, head and neck. Nothing seemed to have any effect. Parker was truly invincible. His return blows were immense but slow ... Jerry was having great success at forcing Parker to swing and miss ... but it was clear that this monstrosity was incapable of tiring. The longer the fight went on, the more Parker seemed to enjoy it.

Of course Jerry knew he was far beyond the strength and capability of a normal man as well. The problem was that he really had no clue as to exactly *what* he was capable of. He still was not even sure *why* he had returned, but no matter what the reason might be, he knew he had to find a way to defeat Parker and Buchinsky or everyone in this town was going to die. And if what Buchinsky said was true ... about tonight becoming his ascension to god-like powers ... then maybe this was the beginning of the end for mankind. Maybe the outcome of tonight would determine the future for the planet ... even the universe! Despite such heavy pressure, and with so much riding on his success, he could not

help but think of one thing ... Angell! She was still alive! She was helpless ... vulnerable ... *he would not let her down again!*

Parker wore his old chain around his neck like a six-foot necklace. He also realized that much was at stake here ... *too much* for him to lose again. With a taunting laugh he stepped back and removed the chain from around his neck and shoulders. The chain immediately burst into the same blue flame that Buchinsky had channeled onto the surrounding trees and buildings. It was Hell-fire ... all consuming and completely lethal. Parker began swinging the chain around and around in a circular motion over his head. Jerry had seen him use the chain in this manner before. Anticipating Parker's lunge to the split-second, Jerry fell back as Parker flicked the chain at his head. He rolled to the ground to his left and then to his feet again as Parker smashed the ground where Jerry had just laid. The whole area burst into flame! Any touch of the flame and Jerry was certain even he would be consumed to the bone. Parker roared with amusement!

"Very good, preacher man," he boasted. "You dodged that one! Can you do it again?" Parker attacked with a scream that would chill the winter snow.

Satisfied that his assassin would triumph, Buchinsky turned and began ascending the court house steps again. As he did, he snapped his fingers, causing tiny sparks of hellfire to dance and skip along the marble steps. Each one took root and started small fires along the steps. It would make for a good backdrop to his final coup-de-grace ... burning down the courthouse that was the center of his decades long war.

As he meandered his way to the top of the steps, Spindola caught up with him. He passed the mad killer and blocked his way to the large oak double doors. Above the doors, carved into the marble arch of the building, were these words:

LET ONLY PURITY OF HEART THROUGH THESE DOORS PASS.

“Stop!” Spindola held out his palm. “In the name of Christ the Redeemer I command you to stop ... you and all the demons of Hell that inhabit you.” Buchinsky laughed.

“This is very sad, Spindola! I expected more from you! Do you truly think your old and outdated faith will stop me?”

“I may be old and outdated,” Roman angrily answered, “but my faith is all I need to stop cockroaches like you!” Roman pulled his crucifix from his collar and held it out like a weapon! It was the crucifix that his mother wore since she had been a child in Italy, attending mass on an almost daily basis. She had given it to Roman when he was seven. She died the next week. If any symbol had the power to stop the powers of Satan, this would be it!

“In the name of Christ, I command thee to get behind me, Satan! Let all the angels in heaven stand with me to proclaim that thou shalt not pass into this place!” Buchinsky suddenly stopped with a wide-eyed look of shock! He began gasping for air and grabbing at his throat, staggering about like a bat lost in a windstorm. As he heaved and gagged he looked to Spindola in a state of panic.

“H-H-H-HELP me, Spindola,” he cried. “Your powers are too great for me! Have mercy!” Surprised at his own success, Roman put the crucifix down and reached out to the now whimpering Buchinsky. He was weeping, his face buried in his cupped hands.

“It’s going to be okay now,” Roman was saying. “Call off your demon and we will confess your sins together. God will yet make all things right!” As Roman reached out and touched Vladimir’s shoulder the wily sorcerer lurched forward in a surprise attack. He gripped Roman around the throat with one vise-grip hand and snatched the crucifix away in his other. As Roman looked directly

into the eyes of his deceiver he could see directly into the darkness of the lake of fire. The eyes truly are the window to the soul.

"You are an even bigger fool than I thought," Buchinsky laughed. "What were you going to do next ... douse me with holy water?" The crucifix immediately was engulfed with flame and vaporized on the spot. Buchinsky watched little pockets of flame dance over his hand as the chain melted. He then licked his fingers as if savoring the remnants of an especially tasty ice cream cone. "Good-bye, Spindola! Time for you to die at long last!"

Buchinsky drew his hand back and formed his fingers into an obscene claw-like shape. Roman did not look away ... he stared directly into the eyes of his assailant. He would show no fear.

Buchinsky looked puzzled briefly, then began sniffing the air like a bird dog on a rabbit hunt. A look of amusement suddenly came upon him. He looked back into Roman's face and smiled. "No, I'm not going to kill you, Spindola. Your god has already done that!" He released Roman, who sank to his knees in total exhaustion, then leaned in to whisper into his ear.

"There's a cancer growing inside you, Reverend. It's been there for some time and you've been too afraid to face it. Now it is in complete control. So I want you to live tonight so you can see the awful consequences of turning my greatest weapon against me! You'll see him die under Parker's boot! Then you'll see us burn this town to the ground and slaughter everyone in it. And finally you'll see me take out my revenge on the women and children! And through it all you'll know it was because of you! I dedicate tonight to you and you alone!" As he walked away toward the courthouse doors, he added, "You'll be dead before Christmas! Thank *your* god for *that*!"

Below, a crowd gathered again to watch Jerry battle it out with Parker. It was a battle that Jerry was losing. He had been knocked

to the ground again and was having a hard time getting up. His face was battered and bruised. He had suffered some devastating blows to his legs, neck and upper body. His torso was badly burned. He was certain that his arm was broken again. Whatever powers he had brought with him from "the other side," it clearly was not enough to win this fight. Conversely, Parker was strong and getting stronger by the minute! Even he could now sense that the end was near.

"Don't die on me yet, preacher man," he taunted. "But then again, yes ... go ahead and DIE!" As Parker prepared to smash Jerry with his blazing hellfire chain, ol' Blue came to the rescue. Determined to save his master at any cost, Blue went for Parker's groin like a mad animal on the rampage. Again and again he bit down on Parker's groin and upper thigh. Sadly it had no effect on his rocklike exterior.

"I HATE DOGS," Parker roared as he lashed out with his sledgehammer fist. The blow caught Blue along the side of his head. Everyone gasped at the sickening 'CRUNCH.' Blue was expelled fully ten feet in the air only to land like a badly mangled sack of rotting fruit. The poor dog's face was clearly broken. He whimpered and cried as he writhed in pain, completely disoriented. Jerry struggled to get to his feet, reaching out to his beloved pet and friend.

"Blue," he cried. "Look out, Blue! Get away from me! Run, boy! RUN!" Parker confidently strolled over to the injured animal, then looked back to Jerry.

"You like this dog? Good! Watch this!" With all of his might, Parker smashed his chain onto Blue's exposed back. Blue screamed the most horrible wail that anyone had ever heard. His back was completely broken and now he was on fire. Unable to get away, he flopped and screamed in agony, helpless to escape or find any

relief. "Come get your dog, preacher man!" Parker was roaring with confidence. "Don't you know we got leash laws in this town?"

Crawling as quickly as he could in spite of his wounds, Jerry collapsed next to Blue. He quickly removed his overcoat and began blotting Blue's burning body with it as he tried to extinguish the fire. To his grateful surprise he was able to smother the flame although Blue's injuries were ... well ... they were bad. The poor dog was in intense agony, but seeing his master beside him again, he lifted his head and wagged his tail. "Rest now, boy," Jerry whispered. "It's going to be okay."

As Jerry rose to his feet, new strength coursed through his veins. Being able to put out the fire on Blue meant that Buchinsky's powers were weakening. Jerry didn't know if there was a time limit to those powers; or if he might be distracted by Spindola; or the gathering crowd; or if Parker was taking too long to finish him off. Whatever the cause, *something* was causing the spell to weaken. Buchinsky was clearly the key. If he could be killed, Parker would go down with him. It was up to someone else now. All Jerry could do was hold Parker off as long as possible, but *someone* was going to have to stop Buchinsky. If not? Forget that! Failure was not an option! He rose to his feet and turned to face Parker again. Behind him, lightning seared a jagged slash across the sky. The thunder rolled.

"You hurt my dog, you low rent maggot infested son-of-a-bitch!" His eyes were now blazing red. "I swear by all that's holy that you won't hurt him again ... not so long as I live!"

"That's the problem," Parker laughed. "You're NOT living anymore! But let's see just how far I can push you before you die ... AGAIN!" And he began whirling his chain.

Dick Spear took a deep breath and caught up with Buchinsky just as he pushed open the oak doors of the courthouse. Buchinsky

turned and laughed. "Still with us, Spear? I'm surprised! I thought you'd have run by now. But even if you do, it won't save you. Tonight you will die and die terribly. It'll be just like your daddy back in the day! What do you have to say about that?"

"My father gave me this gift when I was appointed his deputy," Dick angrily replied. He pulled a large hunting knife from his belt and plunged its 12-inch blade to the hilt into Buchinsky's chest. "Tonight I'm giving it to you!" Buchinsky looked down at the hilt of the knife protruding from his chest in disbelief. He then looked back to Spear and began laughing. Grasping Spear by the collar, Vladimir pulled the knife from his own chest and buried it into Dick's. He then gave the dying sheriff a push. Roman, still gasping for his breath and in intense pain from his abdomen, watched Dick's body roll head over heels down the steps and come to a rest at the base of the courthouse amid a slowly widening pool of blood. Buchinsky dusted his hands casually and finally entered the courthouse. "Good-bye at last to the much too long line of the Spear family," he said as he entered.

Once inside, Buchinsky made his way directly to the sheriff's office. Pushing open the heavy door, he stood directly in front of the large painting of Sheriff "Big Ben" Spear. "Good evening, Sheriff," he mocked. "Time to erase all traces of your miserable, pathetic life." In a matter of moments, he had stacked a large pile into the middle of the room ... books, chairs, papers, the American flag ... anything he could find in the office. Then with a look of sadistic glee, he snapped his fingers and uttered an unspeakable sound. The stacked materials instantly burst into hellfire flame. It would burn until everything within the building was completely consumed. As a final gesture he yanked the painting of Big Ben from the wall and held it in his hands. With one final curse he spat in Ben's face and tossed the painting onto the ever mounting

flame. "Go to hell, Ben Spear! Go to hell with the rest of your pathetic town and miserable family!" Chuckling, Vladimir turned and literally bumped into Dick Spear! He was so startled that he stumbled back a couple of steps.

"Surprised to see me, aren't you scumbag!" Dick was clearly dying. The knife was still firmly lodged in his chest. Blood fell in a steady stream from his nose and mouth. His voice, however, was strong and clear. And his face? No fear!

"All my life I've cowered from people like you," Dick continued. "But *no more*. You sent Jerry Bronson into our lives to betray us ... to build our trust and then crush us from within. But he never did! He *never* did!" Spear coughed and blood exploded from his mouth. He staggered, struggling to stand erect, but he did not fall.

Buchinsky realized that the hellfire was growing larger and larger. It was now running up the side of the walls, igniting the curtains and shades. As if he understood Vladimir's concerns, Dick slammed the door shut and turned the deadbolt.

"Jerry made all the right choices with his life and I hated him for it. It was *me* who betrayed everyone in this town." He smacked his bleeding chest with his fist to emphasize his point. As his anger rose, his strength increased. He no longer seemed frail and weak. Like blind and enslaved Samson, his hair had begun to grow at last! "They all trusted me and I am the one who lied, cheated, and murdered to cover up my shame. I betrayed my best friend, deceived my childhood hometown and left my own father to die for my sins. You should have picked me instead of Jerry, Buchinsky!"

By now the flames were scampering across the ceiling. The heat was intense. Buchinsky made a defiant step forward to push Dick aside.

"Out of my way, you fool!" He pushed Dick aside with ease. The loss of blood and punctured heart betrayed Dick's newfound

courage ... the mind was certainly stronger than the body. The weakened sheriff fell feebly to one side as Buchinsky reached for the door. He twisted the knob and pulled but nothing happened. He pulled again and again, yanking with all of his strength! The door would not budge. He felt a tap on his shoulder and looked back over his shoulder, wide eyed in panic.

Dick was completely engulfed in flames but was on his feet. As he tapped Buchinsky's shoulder the hellfire immediately ignited his clothing. Buchinsky screamed as the flames instantly circled his body. He recalled his own spell ... whatever the flames touch must be consumed! His spell of protection was not enough to prevent him from incineration from the fire down below. Still alive, Dick's flaming body fell against Buchinsky.

"The heat sealed the door, monster! You couldn't open the door because of the heat! Let's go to hell ... together!" Just before their bodies exploded, Dick looked toward the painting of his father. Despite the agony, he smiled. Perhaps it was an optical illusion. Maybe it was wishful fantasy. Or possibly it was just the paint running together amid the roaring flame. But it appeared that Big Ben was nodding an enthusiastic approval from the painting ... he was providing a father's pride over the heroic actions of his son! Years from now people would still be talking about this night and the heroic actions of the man who saved the town ... Dick Spear ... Sheriff ... Timmons County, Georgia!

Simultaneously outside, a nearly defeated Jerry Bronson struggled to stand erect as Parker moved in for the kill. "Let's see if you can still stand with no head!" But as Parker whirled his burning chain above his head, he suddenly staggered. The chain fluttered over his head as his grip lessened. He looked to Bronson with fear and confusion etched across his face. "What the hell is happening to me?"

Sensing a shift in Parker's invincibility, Jerry attacked like the natural warrior he still was. He'd made the mistake of letting his guard down when he lived as a man before ... he would not make that mistake tonight. Grabbing Parker's arm that still held the chain, he accomplished a perfect judo flip. Parker somersaulted a perfect circle and landed with a "THUD" on the hard asphalt pavement of the road. His flaming chain landed directly on top of him. His body was immediately engulfed in all consuming hellfire!

As Jerry stepped back from the heat, Parker arose and cried out for help. He began running to and fro like the proverbial chicken without a head. His chain now dark and cold, Jerry reached down and held it in his hands.

"Parker," Jerry shouted! As the demon biker turned in panic, Jerry smashed out at him with his own chain. In the brief second before impact, Parker seemed to realize his fate. He stopped and stood motionless for an eternity filled second. Then ... impact! His body exploded in a massive fireball that knocked several onlookers on their backs. "I warned you! You hurt my dog," Jerry muttered. "For that, you can go to hell!"

It took a moment for the people to realize that the danger had passed. But once they did they began to shout and cheer just as they had done thirty years ago. Jerry staggered to his beloved dog. Blue still lay motionless on the charred ground. Jerry knelt beside him and gently lifted him into his arms. Blue whimpered lowly. He tried to wag his tail but did not have the strength.

Roman, also in pain and barely able to walk, limped as he took his place next to his companions. Jerry looked into the eyes of his oldest friend.

"What about Dick?" Roman shook his head.

"I'm sorry, son. Dick didn't make it."

Jerry sighed and bowed his head slightly, taking in all that had

happened over the past week. With the passing of Dick Spear, it was all over. It was finally over. As more and more people began to gather around in shock and amazement upon seeing Jerry, he turned again to Roman.

“Can you drive, Rev?”

“Of course,” he answered without hesitation.

“Then what are we waiting for?”

Chapter 30

For certain is death for the born and certain is birth for the dead; Therefore over the inevitable thou shouldst not grieve. Bhagavad Gita (250 BC)

It would only be a matter of minutes before a literal army of state and neighboring county police officers and firefighters would be on the Timmons ville City square. Reports were already circulating that the Governor would dispatch the National Guard. But Jerry had no intention of waiting around for that. There would be plenty of people more than anxious to tell their story and plenty more willing to listen. There was only one ‘Angel.’ He could wait no longer to see her.

He rode silently in the back seat of Dick’s car while Roman drove. Roman called the Dove of Peace assisted living center through the police radio while enroute. Rosa would be waiting for them out front.

How could he have been so wrong? How was it possible that he had missed seeing Angel’s life force when he saw that of others so clearly? Roman speculated that it was due to Angel’s dead brain wave patterns. It was as good an explanation as any other, he supposed.

Across his lap was poor Blue. His back and snout were clearly broken. He had massive burns across his hips and spine. How much more pain must this poor animal suffer because of Jerry’s

failures? He'd been given this second chance and what had he done with it? He'd brought more pain and death on the ones he loved. He was not sure why he'd been allowed to return but he knew that whatever the reason was he had failed.

Roman parked the car in front of the assisted living home and turned to Jerry. Rosa ran to meet them and leaned in the open driver's window. She was horrified at the wounds both Blue and Jerry sported. Roman swallowed hard and spoke.

"She's in room 41, son. I'll go in with you to make sure the guard lets you through."

"No," Rosa insisted. "Let me do it. My Angel loved you so much, Jerry. I'll make sure she gets to be with you again. Just give me five minutes." Not waiting for any rebuttal from either man she began running toward the assisted living center.

"You were right, Roman. You were always right."

"About what, son?"

"I was so focused on revenge and death that I missed seeing the true purpose of my return. I could have been with her all this time. But I wasn't. I was on a cross country trek of violence to make myself feel better. And how do I feel now? I failed everyone, Roman. I failed everyone that I ever loved or who ever loved me!" He softly patted Blue's head as his devoted pet moaned lowly, trying in vain to hide his pain from his master. Roman's response used a tone more direct and emphatic than Jerry had ever heard from his mentor in any previous dialogue.

"Is this a *joke*, son? You've *got* to be kidding! Because of you a decade long murder has finally been solved and the murderers revealed. You saved this town yet *again* from powers no man is equipped to stop. Everyone in this town ... perhaps the entire *planet* ... owe their lives to you! You defied evil from the day you were born!" When Jerry had no response, Roman continued.

“You were sent here to destroy us, but you rejected that destiny and made your own. In the end, it was you who *saved* us rather than *destroyed* us. You gave an evil man like Dick Spear the opportunity to redeem himself for a lifetime of deceit and wrong doing. Failure? Hardly!”

“I remember the night I first fought Parker ... back in 1979. Remember?” It was clearly a rhetorical question so Roman didn’t bother to answer. “I was going to kill him that night and she stopped me. She looked at me and said, ‘*Think of me!*’ And now, all of these years later, I still immediately turned to violence. I turned to violence instead of thinking of her!” Roman’s face and voice softened.

“We don’t have all the answers to life’s mysteries, son. All we can do is our best, fail, and try again. But no one doubts your love for Angel, no matter if we are talking of your past life, current life, or future life. But think of this possibility ... what if your purpose of returning to us was to save us from Buchinsky and his evil plans for world domination? And what if, in accomplishing your mission, your *reward* is to see Angel one last time?”

Rosa appeared at the doorway and motioned for them to come inside. Her actions broke the deafening silence that engulfed both men. “Come on, Jerry,” Roman softly offered. “Let’s go see Angel.”

With Roman leading the way, Jerry carried the softly moaning Blue in his arms through the door of the assisted living home past a wide-eyed receptionist. She gasped openly at the sight. Like a man in a trance Jerry followed Rosa and Roman down the corridor and waited for them to open the door to room 41. As Rosa pushed the door open and stepped inside, Jerry entered without looking at the figure in the bed. He instead looked away, trying to build his resolve. Blue moaned but began to wag his tail as Jerry laid his

faithful pet on the foot of the bed. He then looked at the barren walls and the various medical monitors that crowded the bed ... machines to measure and display the patient's heart beat, blood pressure, brain waves, various tubes passing liquid nutrients, an artificial lung pumping air in and out of otherwise dead lungs ... it was almost more than he could bear. After a moment he took a deep breath and looked at her face. Despite the tears that streamed down his face like a broken dam, he smiled.

"Angel," he sighed breathlessly. "My precious Angel! What have they done to you? What have I done to you?" He reached out and took her frail and motionless hand. As soon as he did so her heartbeat and blood pressure spiked and the machine displaying her brain waves beeped and jumped. Both Rosa and Roman gasped. Rosa took a step forward with unbridled excitement, but Roman grabbed her arm and held her back.

"It's okay, Rosa," he whispered to her. "It's clear to me now. *This* is the reason he was called back. He did not return for revenge or punishment or redemption ... he was sent back for love ... he came back for *her*." With the sudden dawning of understanding at long last, Rosa nodded, wiped away a tear, and stepped back in silence.

Jerry softly stroked Angel's forehead and ran his fingers through her once beautiful hair. As he did so, Blue dragged himself closer until he was cradled between his master and his mistress. On the walls, Angel's monitors continued to climb. In a matter of seconds all of them recorded normal levels. Her heartbeat, blood pressure, brain waves ... all were in perfect working order. Then she opened her eyes!

As if she'd just awakened from a short nap, Angel smiled and petted Blue who now thrashed and howled with excitement. His tail wagged furiously! He had completely recovered from his horrific wounds.

Rosa's knees buckled as Roman slipped an arm around her to hold her erect. He knew he was seeing a miracle beyond his wildest dreams. He sadly also knew what lay just ahead. Not sad for Jerry or Angel ... sad for Rosa ... sad for himself.

Angel now looked to Jerry and smiled. He smiled back and leaned forward, gently kissing her lips.

"I must look terrible," she said, her voice hoarse and barely audible. "I wish I could have fixed myself up for you."

"You have never looked more beautiful, darling," Jerry answered, holding one hand while caressing her cheek with his other. "I am so happy to see you again."

"I knew you'd both come for me when it was time. All of these years, I laid here unable to move or to speak. But I was always aware ... always so happy to see mother and Roman visit with me. I hated it when Dick would come! I *hated* being in this room with him!"

"It's okay now, sweetheart," Jerry assured her. "Dick won't be coming back here anymore. Not ever again." She smiled and squeezed his hand tightly.

"When I realized I was going to die here, I became very afraid. I feared I would not know where to go and I'd get lost. There are so many bad things that can happen, Jerry. I always needed you to protect me ... to show me the way. That's when I knew it was going to be okay. That's when I stopped being afraid. I knew that when the time came for me to go that you and ol' Blue would find me and show me the way. And here you are ... right on time!"

As Roman and Rosa watched, a small light began to dance and flicker against the far wall. It was about the size of a tiny candle flame at first but it grew larger and larger with alarming speed. In a matter of seconds it was wide enough for two persons to easily walk through. Despite the light being so very bright, both Roman and Rosa looked directly into its illumination with no discomfort. It

was clearly a doorway. Roman could see that beyond it lay a much better world.

Blue jumped from the bed and raced through the opening like one would expect from a bounding, happy Labrador. He was now barking excitedly in his own goofy way from the other side.

“Are you ready, darling?”

“I’m ready,” she answered. Holding tightly to his hand, Angel rose from her bed and walked with Jerry into the light. She was no longer the frail emaciated skeleton living only through various fluids and artificial breathing machines. She was the Angel of yester year, young and vibrant, as radiant as the day she wed. And Jerry? His wounds were gone. He was young, happy and giddy with the joy that only comes from complete fulfillment. Rosa tried again to reach out to them but Roman held her back.

“Let them go, dear Rosa. You must let them go.”

“But Father,” she pleaded, “that’s my baby! I must go to my baby one last time! Please Father ... PLEASE!” For once, Roman didn’t correct Rosa when she referenced him as “Father.”

“I understand. I feel the same way. But it’s not our time. For now we must stay here and ...,” he struggled to finish his sentence, “and just let them go.” Again with sad realization and acknowledgement, Rosa stopped. In that moment, Angel looked to her and their eyes met.

“It’s okay, Mama,” Angel sighed, her voice relaxed and calm. “I will see you again soon ... on the other side.” She waved goodbye and smiled as Rosa, on the verge of emotional collapse, fell into Roman’s comforting breast.

As Jerry ushered Angel into the light, he looked back at Roman. He smiled and waved. Roman returned the gesture. Turning back toward the light, Jerry entered. He was actually laughing! In that exact instant, they were gone ... the light, Blue, Angel, Jerry ...

it was if they'd never been there at all. The room was now dark and bitterly cold. A nurse ran into the room and checked Angel's pulse. In a matter of seconds a second nurse joined her. On the walls, all monitors registered "flat line." The head nurse slumped her shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Reverend. I'm sorry Rosa," she announced. "She's in a better place now."

"I know," Roman smiled in return. He held Rosa as her weeping escalated. It was a sad day within a sad day for Timmons County, Georgia. Angel Bronson, beloved wife of the late Sheriff Jeremiah Bronson, had passed away. The world suddenly seemed a great deal colder than it had the day before.

As Roman led Rosa from the room, an attendant called out to them. "Pastor, what's this?" Roman walked back into the room as the puzzled nurse handed Roman the contents of her hand. "Angel had this in her hand, Pastor," the lady explained. "I have no idea how it got there."

Roman opened his hand and smiled in spite of the events of the day. Angel had been holding a tiny bouquet of flowers ... blossoms actually ... dogwood blossoms. And they were pink. He felt a sudden surge of heat in his cheeks. He was blushing.

Chapter 31

I believe that the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I don't mean by humility, doubt of his power. But really great men have a curious feeling that the greatness is not of them, but through them. They see something divine in every other man and are endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful.

John Ruskin (1819 - 1900)

Eight months later.

Christmas Eve.

It was nearly midnight before Roman finally took to bed. He had not felt well for so very long. Tonight, he was so tired he could barely function. The pain in his abdomen was an intense white hot agony that would have normally forced him to take his pain medication by the handful. He would take none tonight. He lingered before closing his eyes to sleep. Perhaps it was because he knew that this was THE night. There would be no tomorrow for the “good and right” Reverend Roman Spindola.

Shortly after Angel's funeral last April he finally relented to Rosa's insistence and drove out of Timmons County to a cancer specialist located in the Florida panhandle. Dr. Rodney Lawson was a very good doctor. He was a veteran of the first Gulf War in 1991 and a huge fan of music. Such a nice man! They had become

instant friends from their very first session together. Sadly, Dr. Lawson confirmed the bad news that Roman and Rosa feared ... pancreatic cancer ... terminal. The Rev had two months to live ... three at the most.

Despite that dire diagnosis, Roman was still alive eight months later ... although he knew beyond any doubt that his hour glass was rapidly running out of sand. He glanced at his bedside clock. It was 11:45, only fifteen minutes to Christmas Day. He silently wondered if he'd live to see the glorious day arrive. When Buchinsky declared that Roman would not live to see Christmas, Roman had made a solemn vow to fight harder than ever to prove the evil man wrong. Watching the seconds fly by now, Roman had serious doubts that he was going to make it.

He looked over the letter one last time and placed it in plain view on the nightstand. Rosa would find it first thing in the morning. He hoped she would not be too distressed at finding him this way. He also hoped that he'd said all he needed to say in the letter. If not, it was too late now. His strength was completely gone ... what had already been done would have to be enough.

The light hurt his eyes ... they had become quite sensitive in the last few weeks ... so he lit a candle, blew out the match and turned off the light. He liked the result! It was so very dark in his little cottage but the soft glow of the flickering candle gave the tiny bedroom a comforting ambience. My how he was going to miss his humble home!

As he laid his head on his pillow, he stared at the old ceiling above him. He saw the flaws in the finish, the flaws he'd always intended to repair. Now it just didn't seem to matter. Funny how things tend to lose their significance when compared to life and death.

It had begun to snow outside. This was extremely rare in southern

Georgia. In his more than 80 years on the planet, Roman could count on one hand the times he'd seen snow. The local children would be so happy to awaken tomorrow morning to discover that not only had Santa left a few mementoes behind, but he'd also left a sprinkling of snow. He closed his eyes at last and pictured snow angels laughing with overflowing glee as they danced and sang their favorite Christmas carols amid the soft flutter of the gentle snow.

He opened his eyes in wonder at the tiny light that weaved back and forth in a diagonal pattern at the foot of his bed. The light seemed to be a thing alive, searching for the perfect spot to rest. After a few seconds the light found just the right spot. It paused in midair and began to grow. It had begun as a small dot ... a pin prick ... but was now the size of a baseball, basketball, medicine ball ... in a matter of seconds it was large enough for a man to easily walk through.

Roman tried to sit up but was too weak. He lay very still and stared at the light with amazement. For some reason he was not alarmed in the slightest. And despite the light being so bright ... perhaps it radiated to the degree of the sun? ... he found that he could look directly into it with no discomfort. His sensitive eyes actually seemed to feel better as he gazed into the relentless beauty of this strange illumination.

In time (it could have been seconds or it could have been hours ... time suddenly had no meaning to Roman) a humanoid shape began to appear. At first it had no viable features and could have been anything, but it gradually took form. It was human ... it was female ... and ... dear God, was it possible? Yes, it was definitely her! It was ... Mom!

"Roman? Roman, are you there?" His eyes suddenly exploded in a cascade of tears that streamed down his face and spilled over to his pillow. He found the strength at last to sit upright and reach

out to her. Strangely all of his pain was gone. He felt young again, better than he'd felt in over 50 years.

"I'm here, Mama," he answered. "I'm right here! Do you see me? I waited for you, Mama, just like you told me to do!" Mrs. Spindola smiled as she stepped forward and reached out to her son's straining hand. When she took his hand into hers he began laughing, no longer able to contain his joy.

"I do see you, dear Roman," she gently sighed. "I have missed you so! And what a wonderful man you became! You have lived your life in a way that would make any mother proud. Who could count how many lives you have saved?" Roman, still smiling, took his mother's hand into both of his, gazing with unbounded love into her soft eyes.

"I tried to do what you wanted, Mama," he continued. "You wanted me to wait and I did. But so many terrible things happened here since you left me! So many people died in terrible ways! Evil targeted this town and we lost wonderful people like Angel and Jerry. If only I could have done more! If only I could have saved them all!" The joy suddenly evaporated from his face. In its place now resided pain, sorrow and guilt. But Mrs. Spindola only smiled more sweetly.

"No, my dear son. You cannot yet understand why things happened as they did. I told you to wait for me all those years ago because I knew that a great evil was coming to our little town. Had you not stayed ... had you not become a man of humble dignity and consistent mercy ... evil would have won the day. Countless thousands would have died had it not been for you." Sensing her son's remaining confusion, she continued.

"It was you who took the bus ride to Atlanta that fateful day and came back home with poor shattered Rosa. You not only saved her life but the life of precious Angel as well. It was you who took

a shine immediately to the little orphaned child who grew into the man of Jeremiah Bronson. No one knew that this child bore the mark of evil and had been placed in our midst like the Trojan horse of Greek lore ... the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing ... designed specifically to earn the trust of the people only to one day slaughter them all. It was you who thwarted all of that, dear Roman. It was *your* love that conquered his evil and showed him that there are other ways ... *better ways* ... to fulfill your destiny."

"But the killing! All the terrible things that came upon us since you left! How I regret not being able to keep that from happening!"

"We do not control evil, my son. When we stand for good, evil seeks us out to divert us. When diversion fails, it discourages us. When discouragement fails, it discredits us. And when the attempt to discredit us fails ..."

"It destroys us?" Roman's hand trembled as he spoke. But his mother only smiled.

"It *tries* to destroy us, dear. It's up to us ... each of us ... to decide if evil succeeds or fails. Thanks to *you* it did not succeed. When Jerry refused to play football, his violent nature called him to war. But he fought for noble reasons *instead* of evil. Upon returning home from unspeakable violence, he chose *peace* instead. When the bikers began their rampage, he stood *against* the darkness rather than embracing it. When he wavered from your teachings he was reinforced by Angel. And Angel would not have been present to do her part had it not been for your compassion to her pregnant mother in 1952. Looking back now, it is easy to see that it was *you* who planted the seed of love into Jerry's soul. It was that seed that *you* reaped later into a tree of shelter and strength so strong that it brought him back from death when his country ... his town ... his wife ... his dearest friend ... needed him the most. In the end it was *you* who taught Jerry Bronson that it does not matter how you enter

the world. Rather it's the choices you make once here that dictate the person you eventually become." She reached out and caressed his face.

"Vladimir Buchinsky spent a century peddling hatred, misery and death. He planned for more than 50 years to destroy this town and all the people living here. But *you* defeated him, dear son. It was *you* who stared down the face of evil in the end. It was *you* who allowed a pitiful creature like Dick Spear to atone for his lifetime of mistakes with one final act of honor. Was it not *you* who saved him from death when Jerry wanted to kill him in an act of revenge? Had Jerry done so he would have sealed his own fate ... and the fate of the town ... but it was *you* and Rosa who convinced him to do otherwise."

"You have done so much by merely being the man you are. You have proven that in the end, love indeed conquers all!"

With that, Mrs. Spindola moved to Roman and took him in her arms. He embraced her tightly, his smile bursting across his small face and threatening to extend beyond his physical features.

"Is it time to go, Mama? If it's time, I'm ready"

"Yes, my son, it is time. I promised I'd come back for you and now that I have, I'll show you where we need to go. I'm so proud of you, son! It was your father who breathed life into this town a century ago but it was *you* who brought it to its potential. That will be *your* legacy for others to digest and carry on. But it's up to them now. Each individual ... each generation ... must choose for themselves. May they all follow your fine example and choose as well as *you*!"

She stood then, maintaining her grip on Roman's hand. As she did so she pulled him to his feet and they ventured toward the still open and pulsating circle of light. As he looked into and beyond the circle, he broke into joyous laughter.

“It’s beautiful, Mama!”

“Welcome home, dear sweet Roman!” They stepped inside the circle. It flickered briefly, then suddenly went black. The little candle by Roman’s bed side wavered and danced wildly about, jumping to and fro as if it had a life of its own. The flame then became calm and slowly, gradually shrank until, with a final “POP,” it extinguished itself.

Roman Spindola was dead. The time was 12:01 AM. Buchinsky had been wrong! Roman had survived to see Christmas Day after all!

Chapter 32

I know why the dogwoods blush!

“The Good and Right” Reverend Roman Spindola, 1930-2010

Dearest Rosa,

I write this letter tonight as I am certain that come the morning I'll no longer have the opportunity to sample your wonderful coffee. It's hard to believe that I have spent more than 80 years on this planet and still have so much left that I want to do. After the tragic events of the last 50 years or so in our beautiful little town, I must admit that there were times when I wanted to just run away and live in seclusion. Dealing with people and the evils of this world were, at times, just too overwhelming. But anytime I felt that the pressure was too great, I would be reminded of the great miracles that God bestowed on me in my unworthy life and I would stay. One of those great miracles, my dear Rosa, was you.

As you know I only dared venture outside Timmons County once in my entire life. I know that seems hard to believe and impossible to understand in this “modern age.” Many consider me rather eccentric for that very reason. I hope you will be kind in your assessment of me after I am gone. All I ask of you is to accept that I had my reasons for never wanting to

travel and now, as my life plays its final act, I know that it was the right choice. But the one time I did travel outside our hometown was the time I met you on that fateful bus ride to Atlanta in 1952. You have been one of the constant lights in my life, dear Rosa, and I thank you for the many kindnesses and happy memories you have shared with me. Of course, your beautiful Angel played a major role in the happiness of our lives. And when she married that dear boy, Jerry ... well, you know that I loved him like a son from the first day I saw him. So when you consider that our “children” wed, it makes us family as well as friends.

I am sorry to leave you behind, sweet Rosa. As I assume that you will be the first one to find me in this sad state of affairs, I ask that you call Tim Luria’s legal office when you get the opportunity. I took the liberty to draw up my last will and testament with him some time ago. I wanted to leave something to the mission, the orphanage, and of course, the assisted living home, which I have done. But this little cottage I leave to you along with a monthly endowment that will provide you with a comfortable living for the remainder of your life. It’s the best I could do for you, Rosa, since I will no longer be here for our ongoing talks and discussions. Oh My! How I will miss that!

After you call Mr. Luria and settle into your new home, please feel secure in the promise that one day I will come back for you. I understand that now ... it’s something I never fully understood until Jerry showed me the way. It seems he made a career of doing that! Just as he came back for his darling Angel, I now know that the promise my mother made to me will be fulfilled tonight. We spend our lives trying to be so smug and insightful that we forget the basic principle for

happiness prescribed to us from the dawn of time ... we are to love completely even when we do not completely understand. I will come back for you, my dear. But live your life to the fullest until then. Is this not what Christ Himself instructed us to do?

This will indeed be a long trip for me, dear Rosa. I will be leaving my home, my town, my life. It will be a strange experience. I am anxious to see Jerry again and to hear Angel sing at last as God always intended, surrounded by angels along gleaming streets of gold! I am certain that across the fabled "Rainbow Bridge," I'll hear the familiar bark of ol' Blue and know that I've found my way home at last.

So finally, after it's too late for me to fully appreciate it, I know why the dogwoods blush. It has nothing to do with shame, crime or admonishment for sins of the past. They blush to light the path, to remind those who have lost their way in the darkness to look upon them and their eternal example of love to light the way to eternity. I now comprehend that those who love beyond death cannot be separated by it. Even as ships pass in the night they live on in one another still, so long as we remember ... so long as we continue ... to love each other.

So when you feel lonely or sad, look to the dogwoods. When you see them blush their soft pink glow, know that they do so as a reminder that love still exists in this dark and dreary world. If love is indeed what you seek, they will know where to find it. And they will show you the way!

*Until I see you again,
Roman Spindola
December 24, 2010*

Rosa held the letter close to her breast, dried her eyes and sighed. She reached for the phone to dial 911. Somewhere deep in the distance, far across the frosty meadow and beyond the old cemetery, she heard an old familiar sound. It was a dog. It sounded like a big, goofy family pet. As her tears flowed again she could not help but smile. Her smile progressed to laughter. The dog was barking! What a beautiful melody he made!

Afterword

As you get older it is harder to have heroes, but it is sort of necessary.

Ernest Hemingway

The Evolution of *The Night Terror* Through the Years

Jerry Bronson has been my friend and hero since 1973, the year I turned 15. Raised on the heroic icons of Marvel Comics (I always said I learned to read thanks to Stan Lee) and “tough guy” TV shows like *Gunsmoke*, *The Green Hornet*, *Daniel Boone* and *The Rifleman*, I was all too ready to embrace that type of character in the movies I frequented as well.

My teenage years gave me much to embrace ... *Death Wish*, *Waking Tall* (1973 version), *White Lightning* and *Billy Jack* all brought the concept of revenge, corruption and betrayal right to my willing mind. I began writing my story of redemption beyond the grave during woodshop class in the 9th grade. My buddies all loved it and urged me to write as much as I could at night. I'd read the pages I'd written the night before aloud to them the next day before class began.

The name “Jeremy Bronson” is an obvious tribute to my teen idol, the great Charles Bronson. No one dished out revenge like ol' Charlie. The first name, Jeremiah, came about just like the

nun's version in the story ... it was the name of a favorite Biblical prophet. Called by God at a young age, God told Jeremiah "I knew you before you were in your mother's womb." That was always very comforting to me.

Vladimir was inspired by the late, great Bela Lugosi. The original *Dracula*, Lugosi still speaks to me when I watch one of his many films. He was an amazing man and actor and, in my mind, the best screen villain ever!

Roscoe Parker was patterned after the great character actor William Smith, who played more than his share of biker, sci-fi and western villains from the 60's to the 80's. No one ever topped his on-screen image of menace in my mind.

The name "Roman Spindola" emerged when I was about 10. My parents took the family on a vacation to Houston, Texas. We went to the Astrodome to see the Astros play the Atlanta Braves. It was a magical night for a kid from Thomasville, Georgia. When Astros third baseman Doug Rader hit a home run to win the game, I just knew that one day I would grow up to play baseball for the Houston Astros! When we got home I made up names for my fictional roster ... my fellow teammates who would play with me on that Astros team of the 80's (this was 1969). My sister was a big fan of Los Angeles Rams' quarterback Roman Gabriel, so I patterned my "best friend" after him. Roman Spindola has been my imaginary advisor and confidant ever since. Sadly, I never played a single game for the Houston Astros!

Alert readers noticed that the number "41" was used twice ... the room number for Angel's old dressing room at the Valhalla Theatre and her room number in the Dove of Peace assisted living home. Number 41 is a tribute to one of my Hollywood idols, the great Charlton Heston. As it did on the young Jerry Bronson in this story, the movie *Ben-Hur* made a tremendous impact on me when

I saw it on television as a kid in the mid-sixties. When Ben-Hur is sent to the galleys as a slave, he is assigned number 41. Years later, while serving in Iraq during the first Gulf War in 1991, I sent a letter to Mr. Heston, who kindly replied. He wrote “#41” next to his signature. This became our “inside joke” over the next 15 years as we regularly corresponded until he, sadly, could no longer do so. Rest well, kind sir!

The critical plot point surrounding the “vision” of Roman’s deceased mother leaving through the gate while he played was based on a story my own mother shared with me when I was a teenager. She was playing at the home of a friend when she was about 10. Her friend cried out that she saw her own mother leaving. My mom never saw anything. Moments later they were told that the little girl’s mother just passed away. I was blessed to have had a wonderful mother and also to be holding her hand in her hospital room when she passed away in 1987. I looked all around for her as her life light faded but saw nothing. Today I feel her in my life always. Roman’s death scene in this story is my fantasy of how I hope to pass from this world one day (hopefully) long in the future.

Joe LaHoud was inspired by the great wrestler of the 70’s, Joe LeDuc. The whole instance of Jerry telling Joe about meeting him as a kid is a true event that occurred when I met Joe LeDuc before a wrestling match in Tallahassee, Florida in the mid-70’s.

The entire *Lunar-Man* character was something I developed to pitch as a comic series with my late friend and mentor, George Roussos. I intend to tell much, much more about Lunar-Man in (hopefully) future novels.

While there are many other examples of inspirations from my life that made their way into this book, the one I must not overlook is ol’ Blueblood, Bronson’s faithful dog. In the winter of 1997 we paid \$5 to a man living near Augusta, Georgia for a little black lab

mix who only weighed five pounds. He would eventually grow into the massive 130 pound behemoth we named Orry (after the Patrick Swayze character, Orry Main, in the television mini-series, *North and South*). No family ever loved a dog like we loved Orry (I know that all families say that but this time it's *true*). For five years he brought us tremendous joy and constant entertainment, the stereotypical gentle giant and goofy family pet. When he contracted an incurable canine disease which caused him tremendous physical pain and curtailed his health overnight, I made the sad decision to do what no pet lover ever wants to imagine. He died in my arms the day before Thanksgiving, 2002. We mourn him still. He immediately joined my imaginary universe as Blueblood, the long-lived pet and companion of Jerry Bronson. I maintain that he's waiting for me at the Rainbow Bridge until I can rejoin him one day. And the goofy bark? That was Orry's contribution to the story. I hope he doesn't mind!

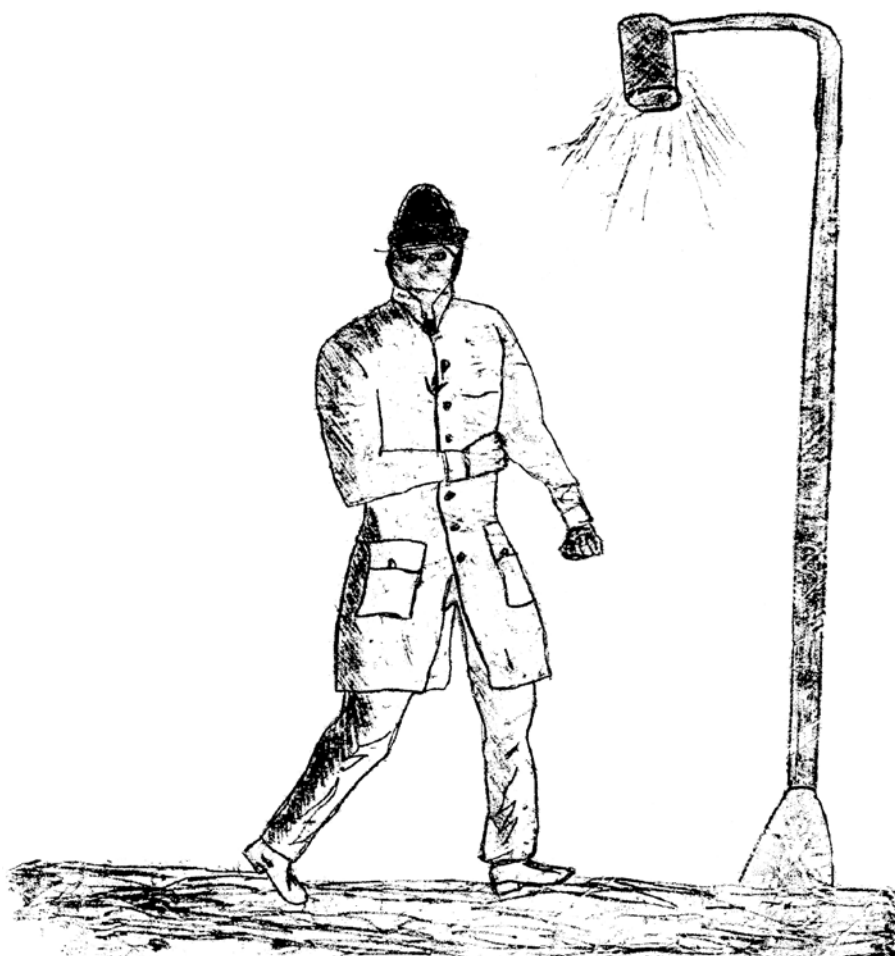
If you enjoyed this book, please tell your friends and urge them to purchase a copy. If all goes well I hope it will be the first of four stand-alone yet connected tales set in the same universe and timeline. There are several threads in this book that will play out in the next book ... Joe LaHoud, Alexandru Vasilie, and the identity of the mysterious "Korean" ... just to name a few. For a tease, check out the next chapter.

If you'd like to share any comments or thoughts on this book, please feel free to contact me at:

Bronson@billcainonline.com

You can also visit my website at www.billcainonline.com. I'd love to hear from you.

Thanks for coming along with the gang on this ride. I hope you enjoyed it half as much as Jerry, Blue, Roman and I did.



Night Terror drawn by Billy Cain, age 14 (1973)
(c) Bill Cain 2009

Logo for a proposed Night Terror comic book series from 2007:



Logo design by Bill Cain and Sting Cain (c) 2007.

www.DarkClockWorkStudios.com

This art was commissioned from Christopher Ivy to give an indication of what our heroes might look like in a comic series.



Original art by Christopher Ivy, ivyzyink@gmail.com.

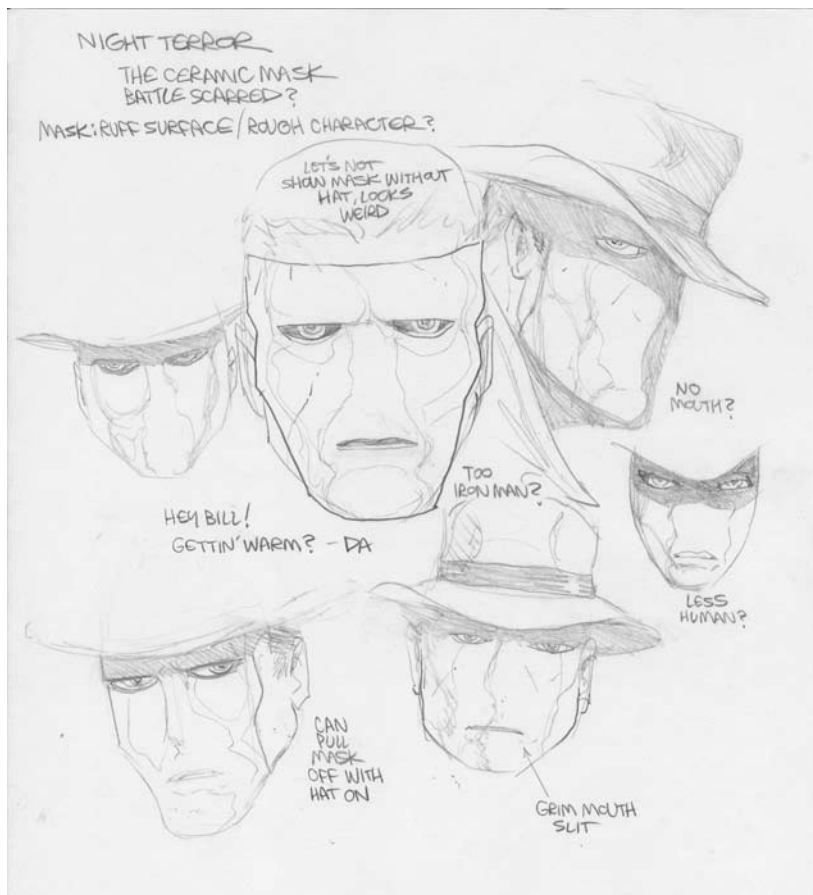
Reprinted by permission. (c) Bill Cain 2009

Here is an example of a single page from the above mentioned proposed comic book series. The sequence depicted is from Night Terror's attack on Arlo Sanchez.



Art by Scott Reed. Reprinted by permission. (c) Bill Cain 2009.
<http://www.websbestcomics.net> scott@websbestcomics.com

I began working with artist Darren Auck on a definitive “look” for Night Terror in 2005. Here are some of the ideas we tossed around before settling on the “Herbert Lom” mask from *Phantom of the Opera*.



Art by Darren Auck (2006). Reprinted by permission.
auckdarren@hotmail.com (c) Bill Cain, 2009

This was the first art I ever commissioned of Jerry and ol' Blue. It has served as the template for many others that followed, including the cover to this book.

Original art by Evan Driscoll, Studio-Hades Illustration.

www.studio-hades.com

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And now, read on for a preview of the next tale to be told!

Teaser

Be ye therefore wise like serpents but harmless like doves. Matthew 10:16

Joe LaHoud made his way home at 6:00 AM after a very tough night in the ER. It felt as if the earth must be slightly off kilter tonight. The crazies were out in force. It still seemed strange that Bobby Fast was dead. And to discover all those terrible things about his past? He guessed it just proved you never really know a person.

He wished he could have spent more time with the mysterious Jerry Bronson. But the news reports clearly covered his death last April. There were the strange urban legends that arose discussing Bronson's "supernatural" origins. Despite what he'd seen firsthand, Joe dismissed those tales. He had no time for such silliness. The things people could dream up these days!

He walked over to Tammy's picture and caressed her smiling face. She would be 26 now if she were still alive. But maybe it was time to give up that hope and move along. Whatever happened to her on that terrible day over a decade ago, he accepted now that he would never know. He crossed the living room to the kitchen to make his usual pot of morning coffee when he saw the flashing light indicating a voicemail on his telephone. He paused for a moment to ponder who might have called him during the night while he was working. To his knowledge he was finally caught up

on any outstanding bills or debts. He didn't even owe any money to his ex-wife at this point. This made the blinking light intriguing. With a shrug he took a giant stride to the phone and pressed the "playback" button.

There was some obvious static on the line and some unsteady breathing that was clearly audible immediately. Joe wrinkled his brow, confused over the premonition that crept up his legs and lodged into his abdomen. And then he heard the voice! It so stunned him that he staggered back and felt his beating heart rocket skyward only to lodge in his throat. His hands trembled as he cautiously reached forward to play the message a second time. And this time there could be no mistaking what he'd heard!

"Daddy? Daddy, are you there? Please pick up, Daddy! I'm so scared! He's going to hurt me again, Daddy! Please help me! *Please* help me before..." Click. The line went dead. Joe immediately recalled the words of the mysterious Jerry Bronson:

"Your daughter still lives. She waits for her father to find her and rescue her. But this is not why I have been called here. This is *your* destiny ... *yours* and yours alone!"

Joe staggered to the front door and looked out into the early dawn with fear and confusion. Then his fists clinched! "I'm coming for you, baby! Daddy's coming to find you now!"

Across the country, watching the morning sun bake the streets from his elegant penthouse suite in New York, Andrew Vasilie smiled. "He's coming at last," he whispered to no one in particular. "He's coming for me ... *again!* So I'll have to kill him ... *again!*"

COMING SOON!

The Dove of War!

A dove alone in a world of hawks ... God save the hawks!