

Bewildered



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Bewildered

C.H. FOERTMEYER

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iUniverse, Inc.

For information address:

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2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100
Lincoln, NE 68512

www.iUniverse.com

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Cover Photo Credit - Natalie Foertmeyer

Cover Design Credit - Tom Foertmeyer

Cover Graphics - C.H. Foertmeyer

ISBN: Trade Paperback 0-595-0-595-34382-1
ISBN: Hardcover 0-595-0-595-67112-8
PDF EISBN: Adobe Ebook 0-595-0-595-79149-2

Printed in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to my brother, Tom, who encouraged this work and provided me with the seed from which this book took root and grew.

Acknowledgements

Again, I would like to thank my brother, Tom, for his efforts in creating the cover for *Bewildered*, and for his help with the immense chore of editing. Thanks also to my daughter, Jennifer, for her considerable help with the thankless chore of editing. Finally, thank you Tom for lending your eye to the cover of *Bewildered* and to my niece, Natalie, for photographing it.

Foreword

Those of you who have become familiar with my writing will notice a change from the ordinary in *Bewildered*. Or, better stated perhaps, this book is a change to the ordinary; yet certainly *not* ordinary. "What does that mean?" you ask—This book is my first endeavor at writing a *straight* fiction novel, without any inclusion of time travel, the supernatural, angelic beings, or Indian magic. This is a first for me, encouraged by my brother, Tom. Nevertheless, the adventure remains, and like in so many of my other books, the setting for the story is an isolated forest. *Unlike* the majority of my other books, *Bewildered* is a departure from the theme of two young friends seeking and finding adventure in the wilderness. This work is about a husband and wife who go hiking the Appalachian Trail and find *so much more* than just adventure. They find themselves embroiled in a battle with greed and deceit, perpetrated by one man, who has swayed an entire community to his deranged way of thinking.

C.H. Foertmeyer

CHAPTER ONE

A Simple Hike

"Why couldn't we just stick to the trail, like everyone else?" Annie complained. "Now we're lost, aren't we?"

"How can we be lost, Annie? We've got a GPS, and a map. Where's your sense of adventure? Besides, like you said, *everyone else* follows the trail. This route I've plotted out will take us from the trail *back to* the trail, while allowing us to see the raw beauty of the Appalachian wilderness. See here, look at the map," Charlie said, handing the map to Annie.

Annie watched closely, as Charlie traced their route with his finger.

"See? We never really get far from the trail. We're just cutting off this big bend in it. We can get back to it any time we want, just by turning right, and going east."

Annie handed the map back to Charlie, and replied, "Okay, *Daniel Boone*. I sure hope you know what you're doing."

Charlie and Annie McVee had decided to hike two hundred miles of the Appalachian Trail, as their gift to themselves, upon the occasion of their fifteenth wedding anniversary. Hiking was their passion, and having never been blessed with children, they had usually had plenty of time to get out into the woods and follow that passion to wherever it had led them. *This* trip, however, was their grand hike. Never before had they ever planned such a long and arduous trip.

Charlie had set aside six weeks for this trip, and ever since publishing his third novel, Annie had retired from her job as a receptionist for a veterinarian clinic. They had all the time in the world for this adventure, and no one to answer to. And—that was just the way Charlie liked it. He had no deadlines to meet, no publishers demanding manuscripts from him, and no office to report to. Right now, the only thing they were responsible for, was having a good time, and enjoying each other's company.

It had been about halfway through their hike, while studying the topo map, that Charlie had noticed a large bend in the trail. It had been then that he had come up with the brilliant idea of cutting off the bend, by following a course, northwest, through the wilderness. As he had put it at the time, "to see this land as it was intended to be seen". He had studied the topography of his planned route, on the map, and had determined it to be

gentle enough for Annie and him to negotiate. Now, a good fifteen miles into their wilderness route, the terrain was growing far more rugged than the map had indicated. Charlie was secretly beginning to have his doubts about his decision, but he wasn't about to admit it to Annie.

As Charlie tried to justify their location to the map, and choose the best way to go, Annie sat down on the ground with her back resting against a large tree trunk.

"It's like I tried to warn you," Annie admonished, as he studied the map. "The trail doesn't take that big bend *around* this area for no reason at all."

"Yeah, so I see?"

"You do? You mean Davie Crockett is admitting he screwed up?"

"Only in as much as I didn't notice this symbol on the map before."

"What symbol?"

"This silly little 'U' that apparently means that this area is *uncharted*."

"Uncharted? In this day and age? How could anyplace in the United States still be uncharted? That's gotta be a mistake."

"No, I don't think so, Annie. I thought this route would be pretty flat, judging from the lack of elevation lines on the map, but—just look around you. This *ain't* flat."

"So what now, Charlie?"

"Well, I'd hate to have to backtrack fifteen miles, and there is no way we can go east to the trail. Just look at those cliffs off to the east. We'd never get up and over those. I'd say we should continue to the northwest, and work our way back to the trail that way. That should only be about ten miles or so if we go *that way*."

"I don't know, Charlie. It looks pretty rugged that way too."

"Yeah, but look. See that break in the mountain?" Charlie asked, pointing to what appeared to be a seam in the towering rocks to the northwest. "That looks like it may be a pass of some sort. I say we give it a try. We can always turn back if I'm wrong."

"Okay, McVee. Lead the way," Annie kidded, as she stood up, and dusted off the seat of her pants. "You better be right about this."

Charlie smiled at Annie, and started toward the seam in the rock wall that lay ahead of them. He looked back over his shoulder, and said to Annie, "If I'm wrong, and

that doesn't lead back to the trail, I'll buy you a new SUV when we get home. How's that for confidence?"

"You call it confidence if you want. I call it stupidity-but it's a deal. What do you get in return though?"

"No *I told you so's*," Charlie laughed. "*If I'm wrong.*"

Their course now decided upon, Charlie and Annie hiked straight for the seam that would hopefully turn into a passage through the mountain before them. A half a mile later they entered a vertical cut in the rock wall, a mere twenty feet wide and at least one hundred feet high. The cut appeared to go straight into the mountain for about fifty yards, before turning off one way or another-or, coming to a dead end. It was impossible to tell from the head of this impressive canyon, where it might lead them, if anywhere.

As Charlie and Annie entered the narrow valley, they were at first impressed by the sheer vertical cliffs on either side of them, slick, gray granite walls, towering upward over one hundred feet above their heads. At first, it was impressive, but as they neared the end of what they could see of the valley, it became oppressively claustrophobic.

Charlie looked back to where they had entered, and grimaced.

"It sure looks a long way back out of here, if this goes nowhere," he commented.

Annie looked back, and replied, "Yeah, it sure does. Let's hope we can keep going this way."

Annie sighed an audible sigh of relief when they discovered that the valley veered off to the left, and kept going, rather than ending in what might have been a rock wall dead end. They followed the valley to the left, as it curved west, before opening up, some one hundred yards later, into a heavily forested, flat plateau.

Charlie smiled at Annie, as they left the confines of the narrow canyon, and walked out into the dense forest.

"Ha," Charlie blurted out. "There goes your new SUV."

"Ha, back at you. We're not back to the trail yet."

Charlie glared at Annie, and pulled his compass out of his pants pocket.

"Got kinda turned around in that canyon. I better figure out which way is northwest again, so we can head for the trail."

"You hope," Annie quipped.

Charlie took a bearing on a mountaintop, to the northwest, and he and Annie resumed their hike back to the

trail. They were now in a dense, oak forest, on flat terrain, and the hiking was easy, but keeping Charlie's mountaintop in view was a bit of a problem, with the compactness of the trees around them. Charlie did his best to stay on course, and after they had hiked about two more miles, the mountaintop came back into view, right where Charlie had expected it to be.

"True as an arrow," Charlie said. "True as an arrow."

"That's good, Charlie, but I still haven't seen the trail yet. How much farther do you figure we've got to go to get to the trail?"

Charlie didn't answer.

"Charlie?" Annie said, trying to get a response from her husband.

Charlie's gaze was fixed ahead of them, locked on something he had spotted, but didn't quite believe.

"Charlie-What are you looking at?" Annie asked, craning her neck to see what had Charlie so transfixed.

"A building," Charlie replied. "In fact, two, I think."

Annie stepped in front of Charlie, and looked in the direction that he was still staring.

"What do you see?" Charlie asked. "Your eyes are better than mine."

"I see several buildings, like houses, really. What do you suppose they're doing here?"

Charlie stared at his map.

"I don't know. There isn't even a road marked on the map, *anywhere near* where we are."

"Well, you did say this area was uncharted, right? And I, for one, have had about enough *exploring* for one day. Maybe there *is* a road up there, *and* someone who can tell us how to get back to the trail."

"Yeah-Maybe."

Charlie began walking toward the buildings they had spotted, without saying another word. Annie fell in behind him, and followed. Soon, Charlie was able to make out what the buildings were, and what they were, was the southeast edge of what appeared to be a small town.

As he approached, he was able to see that the houses were lined up on either side of a treeless band of ground, running away from him to the northwest. The buildings on the east side appeared to be residences, but across from them, there appeared to be the storefronts of businesses, about twenty buildings in all. What was missing was a road in, or out, although it appeared as though there may have been one, at one time, running between the two rows of

buildings. The other obvious omission-was *people*. The town seemed to be totally vacant.

Charlie turned to look back at Annie, but she was now standing alongside him, staring down *Main Street* with him.

"What do you make of *that*?" he asked.

"Looks like a ghost town to me, except..."

"Yeah, the buildings are all fine. I mean, they're not run down at all."

"Yeah, it looks deserted, but well maintained at the same time. That's *sure* odd-Hey, I know. Maybe it's part of an historical park, or something. It *looks* like something from out of a history book."

"What historical park, Annie? We're in the middle of the biggest wilderness east of the Mississippi. There *are* no parks up here."

"Okay then, what's your take on it?"

"I don't know. Come on. Let's take a stroll through, and see what gives."

Charlie and Annie began walking down what appeared to have once been the main street through town. Maybe they were on an old, long since abandoned highway, that had once nourished this small mountain town. If so, it had long since gone to soil and weeds. And if this was an old abandoned town, *who* was maintaining it today?

As they walked between the two rows of buildings, they kept a sharp eye out for any sign of life, and marveled at the old architecture, so pristinely preserved here. Windows were intact, and clean. Paint was fresh, and not peeling. And, potted flowers thrived on windowsills throughout the village. What was missing-was people.

Halfway through the town, Charlie and Annie had not seen one living soul. They had not seen so much as a dog chasing a cat, or a cat chasing a mouse. The town seemed devoid of *all* life. It was Annie who pointed out that there was also a lack of transportation, there not being one car, or truck, to be seen anywhere. That didn't particularly surprise Charlie, as he pointed out that when everyone left, they would have left in their vehicles, even if those vehicles had been horse-drawn wagons.

Appropriately enough, just as Charlie made that comment, they came upon the largest building in town, marked with a hand-painted sign, above the doors, which read, "Livery".

"Livery?" Charlie questioned. "This place *must* be old."

Prior to now, they had not wanted to approach too closely, the homes and businesses in this place, but now,

Charlie's curiosity got the best of him. "Wait here," he told Annie, and he walked to the large double doors of the livery. Finding them unlocked, he pulled one door open, and peered into the dim light of the interior. A moment later he heard something move, and then he heard the soft nicker of a horse. Leaving the door ajar, he ventured further in, leaving Annie nervously waiting outside, in the middle of town. A few moments later, Charlie emerged from the stable, with the most peculiar look on his face.

"Well?" Annie asked. "What did you see?"

"Horses, mules, and donkeys," Charlie informed her. "There's one or the other in every stall."

"No people?"

"Nope—Only horses, donkeys, mules, and an old tabby barn cat."

"Maybe everyone's out at the harvest, or something like that," Annie speculated.

"Harvest? Harvesting what, acorns? This isn't farm country. There's nothing around here but forest."

"Come on, Charlie. Let's get the heck out of here. I'm starting to get creeped out."

Annie turned to head up the main drag out of town, and then stopped dead in her tracks. She knew what she had seen out of the corner of her eye, and already unnerved by this very weird town, the sight of a curtain falling back into place, stopped her cold. Trying not to look directly at the window in question, she whispered to Charlie, "Did you see that?"

"See what?" Charlie asked, turning to face Annie, and noting the frightened look on her face.

"Someone was just watching us from that window over there," she replied, cocking her head in the direction of the window where she had seen the curtain move.

"You saw someone?"

"Well, no, but I saw the curtain move."

"Maybe it was just the wind, Annie."

"*What* wind, Charlie? There *is* no wind. And it didn't just flutter. It *fell* back into place."

"But, you didn't actually see anyone, right? Well, maybe I should go over there and knock on the door..."

"No. Don't you dare, Charlie," Annie insisted. "Let's just get out of here. The sooner we get back on the trail, the better I'll feel. This place gives me the creeps."

"You're not curious about who was watching us then?"

"Not in the least. I just want to leave-now."

"Okay, Annie, we'll leave," Charlie agreed, but reluctantly, as this mysterious little town now had him intrigued. *Who did live here?* he wondered. *And why?*

Charlie started walking northwest again, between the two fronts of buildings, Annie at his side. As they walked, Charlie studied the buildings on either side of them, wondering what sort of people chose to build a town in the middle of nowhere, with no easy access to the outside world. As they left the northernmost end of town, Charlie noticed, ahead of them, a massive oak that appeared to be at least a century old, and dwarfed the surrounding trees in both height and girth. Their route out of town took them directly beneath the outstretched limbs of this gargantuan tree, and as they passed beneath it, Charlie looked straight up into the heart of it.

"Annie. Look up there," he said, pointing up into the overhanging limbs.

Annie stopped, and looked up to where Charlie was pointing. What she saw was what appeared to be a wooden platform, about twelve feet square, nestled in the crook of three large branches, as they departed the main trunk of the tree.

"A tree house?" Annie suggested, questioning her own eyes.

"Looks like it. I guess whoever lives here must have kids, or did at one time anyway."

Annie thought about what Charlie had said, and then replied, "Yeah, maybe, or it's a lookout of some sort, you know, to keep an eye on the town maybe. Or-to keep an eye out for intruders, like us. Come on, Charlie. Let's keep moving, okay?"

Charlie smiled at her, and nodded. He knew Annie was spooked, and now her imagination was getting involved. *A lookout?* he thought, snickering inside at that notion. He knew a tree house when he saw one, and he was dying to climb up and check it out, but he also knew Annie would never stand for it. A town empty of people, a falling curtain, and now a sinister *lookout* in a massive old oak tree, had her about ready to come unglued.

Charlie threw his arm around Annie's shoulders, and began walking to the northwest. He couldn't walk fast enough to suit Annie, and five minutes later they were free of the strange and mysterious little town, and back into the thick of the oak forest. They proceeded northwest for another two miles before being confronted with the unexpected. There, before them, was yet another massive group of cliffs, blocking their passage to the trail.

Charlie studied the situation, and then declared, "Well, I don't see any way over, or around this mess."

"There has to be a way, Charlie. I'm not going back through that town, or anywhere near it. We'll *find* a way across to the trail."

With that said, Annie took the lead, and started up into the barrier cliffs before them. Charlie shook his head, clueless as to what it was about that town that had her so upset, but willing to follow her lead just the same. *His* reason for not wanting to go back was simple. He knew that the trail was a lot closer to the northwest than it was the way they had come, *if* they could negotiate this last impediment.

As Annie ascended the large escarpment, she was proving to be quite adept at finding a way to keep moving upward, on what was turning out to be a very difficult climb. Charlie was impressed, and followed closely behind, using the same hand and footholds she had found to gain ground. As they neared the top of what Charlie hoped was the final obstacle in their way, he was growing confident that she might actually pull this off. Then-in the blink of an eye-the unthinkable happened. A rock that had supported Annie's weight failed to prove substantial enough to support his. The rock fell from beneath his foot, and Charlie began careening down the steep slope. The first pain that he was aware of was his right leg breaking, and the second, his left leg. He came to rest nearly seventy feet below Annie, with two broken legs, and-he believed, a broken hip.

As Charlie lay helplessly broken, and writhing in pain, Annie hurried down the wicked slope to him. She knelt down beside her husband, tears flowing down her face, and tried to comfort him as best she could.

"Oh my God, Charlie! Can you move? How bad does it seem?"

Charlie grimaced with pain, and through gritted teeth, answered, "I think both my legs are broken, Annie, and maybe my hip too. There's no way I'm getting out of here. Not under my own power."

Annie tried to think through her despair and fear for Charlie's life.

"Is the GPS okay? Get it out of your pocket, Charlie, and check it out."

At first, Charlie looked at her like she was crazy, and then he realized what she was doing. He gingerly reached into his pocket, and retrieved the GPS. He tried to

turn it on, but it had suffered the same fate as he had. It, too, was broken.

"No good, Annie. Good thinking, but it's ruined. It won't help you lead anyone back to me. The best we can do is mark our position, as closely as we can on the topo map, and you can take it with you. Are you going to try to go over the top again?"

"It's the shortest way, right?"

"Yep. The trail should be no more than eight miles over the top there. But I think you'd better hurry. I don't know how long I've got, before there'll be no helping me at all."

"Don't talk like that, Charlie. You'll hang on here until I get back-no matter how long it takes. Do you hear me?"

Charlie just smiled, and gently shoved Annie in the direction of the summit.

"Get going, and be careful. Over the top, and then northwest. Go."

Annie kissed him on the cheek, and then headed up the mountain. Charlie watched her go, knowing it was probably the last time he would ever see his lovely Annie. A tear came to his eye, and then the reality of his injuries set back in, as the pain came back to his full awareness. As the pain intensified, he mercifully passed into unconsciousness.

Gravel and pebbles, falling on him from above, awakened him. He had no idea how long he had been out, but he suspected several hours, judging from the impending dusk. He looked up the steep slope to see the source of the rock debris falling on him, and he saw Annie, coming back down the mountain-alone. He watched as she made her way to him, and sat down at his side.

Trying to catch her breath, she said, "No good, Charlie. The other side is a sheer drop-off. I'd need mountain climbing gear to get down the other side."

Charlie smiled at Annie, and replied, "Well, you gave it your best. Just stay with me then. I don't think I have the time for you to go all the way back the way we came. Shock's gonna set in soon, and then I'll be a goner. Just keep me company until..."

"Damn you, Charlie! Don't talk that way. We are both going to get out of this wilderness, and we are both going to get out alive. You got that? Good. Now, I'll tell you what I *am* going to do. I'm going to go back to that town, or whatever it is, and I'm going to go to that house where I saw the curtain move. I'm going to get whoever's in there

to help me get you out of here, and if they refuse...Well, they won't refuse. You can count on that."

She paused, and Charlie let out a brief laugh, but very brief, as laughing hurt severely his apparently damaged ribcage. He gritted his teeth against this latest pain, and then replied, "You'd go back there?"

"I don't see that I have any other choice, Charlie. Do you?"

He didn't answer. There was no way he was going to ask Annie to go back to that place that had bothered her so much before. Not even to save his own sorry self. Finally, he said, "You don't have to, Annie. Just go around the town, and keep going. I'll hold on until you come back. Just go around it, and keep going the way we came."

"Southeast?"

"Yes, southeast."

A frown came over Annie's face. "How will I know?"

"Know what?"

"Which way is southeast."

"The trees. Watch the trees. Moss only grows on the north side of the trees. You can figure southeast from the moss on the trees."

"Do you think I should build you a fire before I leave? Will it get too chilly tonight?"

"No, no fire. You don't have the time. It'll be dark soon, and I want you well past that town before it gets full dark. Okay? Just get going, and get past that place before nightfall."

Annie took one last, longing look at Charlie, and headed back to the southeast. He watched her go, and said a prayer for her safe return to civilization. He said no prayer for himself, because he knew he was beyond any help that could reach him in time. He lay back, closed his eyes, and drifted off into unconsciousness.

Annie hurried toward the little town. There was no way she was going to waste time going around it, knowing every minute that passed was precious time lost. She stopped at the very outskirts of the strange little place, looking down on it from the hillside above. It was totally dark now, but she could see a couple of dimly lit windows in several of the buildings that she could use to guide her down into town. She pulled from her pocket her 32 caliber Colt pistol. It was only loaded with snake shot, but whomever she came across wouldn't know that. She would ask nicely, once, but there was no way whoever was in that place was going to refuse to help Charlie. No way.

She checked the pistol's chambers to be sure it was fully loaded, and then put it back in her pocket. A warning shot fired into the air, she believed, could be a great motivator if she met with resistance down there. She took a deep breath, and stepped forward. Her third step found nothing but air and she felt the distinct feeling of tipping forward into nothingness. She knew she was falling, but it was so dark that she couldn't see to where. A moment later, impact, and all went black, as she felt a scathing pain in her head. Then, she slipped into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER TWO

Rescue

Charlie opened his eyes, and looked into the black night sky. He took comfort in the fact that he had awakened again; something he now considered less than a given. He scanned the blackness of the heavens, and picked out Gemini, directly overhead, with Pollux and Castor staring down on him like guardian eyes in the sky. His attention was drawn away from those two bright heavenly lights by two other lights, bobbing and weaving along the ground.

Charlie tried to focus on the two lights, which appeared to be approaching him, but he could not see clearly, what they might be. Then, as they came to within fifty feet of him, he muttered, "Lanterns. They're lanterns. Annie must have gone to that town after all."

He had no idea what time it was, but he knew it was too soon for her to be bringing back help from anywhere else *but* that little town they had passed through. He smiled at the thought of her braving the mysterious little place and bringing back help so soon. He watched the swinging motion of the lanterns, almost mesmerized by them, as they approached to his side.

As the lanterns cast their yellow light around him, the first thing he noticed was that Annie was not with the two men who had kneeled down beside him. He stared into the bearded face of the man closest to him. The man put him in mind of the Amish, the way his beard was trimmed, and with the flat, straw hat he was wearing. He looked again to see if Annie was with them, but could see her nowhere.

"What we got here, Michael?" one of the men asked the other.

"Looks like a fish outa water to me," the other man answered.

"Where're you hurtin', mister?" the first man asked Charlie.

"My legs, both of them, and my hip. I think they're all broken. Where's Annie?" Charlie asked, growing concerned over her absence.

"Both legs, and your hip, huh? Looks like you messed yourself up pretty good then. Here-drink this," the man called Michael said. "It'll make the trip back to Jessup bearable."

Michael offered Charlie a small glass bottle filled with a greenish liquid.

"What's this?" Charlie asked. "And *where* is my wife?"

"It's a sedative," Michael answered. "Now, drink it, and drink it all. We're not goin' to have you screamin' your fool head off the whole way back to town. If you don't drink it we'll leave you here for the buzzards-Do I make m'self clear?"

Charlie looked into Michael's eyes, and knew he meant every word he had said. He nodded, and reached for the small bottle, taking it cautiously, and unscrewing the metal cap. He put the mouth of the bottle beneath his nose, and sniffed, noting neither bad odor, nor pleasant aroma; only a mild mustiness. He looked again into Michael's eyes, and without further hesitation, he downed the contents of the small bottle.

The green liquid had a mint taste, not at all unpleasant, but then his head began to spin. As he stared into Michael's eyes again, he had trouble bringing him into focus. Soon, all went black, and the only sensation he felt was that of being lifted by his arms and legs, and then, fortunately, even that sensation left him.

Charlie opened his eyes to the dim light of a bedside table lamp, in a room, he was sure, he had never seen before now. Despite being totally confused as to his whereabouts, or his condition, his first thought was of Annie. He remembered the accident, and he remembered Michael and the other man, who had come to his rescue. He also remembered that Annie had not been with them when they had found him, and *that-right now-was* his biggest concern.

He looked around the unfamiliar room, and realized soon enough, that he was in a hospital room. *But where?* The last thing he remembered was drinking the greenish liquid Michael had given him and feeling the sensation of being picked up and carried. *But-carried to where?* Of that, he had absolutely no clue.

He looked around his bed, and located what appeared to be the nurse call button at the end of a white electrical cable. He pressed the button twice, and waited. In less than thirty seconds a young nurse walked into his room, and said, "Oh, good, Mr. McVee. You're awake. What can I do for you?"

Charlie stared at the nurse, and replied, "Three things. For starters, you can tell me where Annie is."

"Who's Annie?"

"My wife," he snapped back at her.

The nurse let the rebuke slide, and replied, "I have no idea, Mr. McVee. I haven't seen anyone here to see you. Maybe she'll be along shortly."

"Okay, sorry," Charlie apologized, sensing offense in the nurse's voice. "I'm just very confused right now-and worried. Can you tell me where I am?"

"Harlon County Hospital. You were unconscious when they brought you in."

"When *who* brought me in?"

"A couple of campers, from the looks of them; the two young men who found you on the trail. You don't remember them?"

"No. I remember two older, bearded men finding me, but I sure wasn't on any trail. They..." Charlie paused. "You say there's no one here waiting on me that could possibly be Annie?"

"Not that I've seen, sir."

"What's your name, nurse?"

"Laura."

"Well, Laura, will you *please* do me a favor, and go ask around? I'm really worried about her. She went for help when I had my accident, and I haven't seen her since."

"Sure, and I'll tell Doctor Roberts that you're awake. He'll want to check in on you, and explain your injuries to you."

"That'd be good. Thanks, Laura."

Laura whisked out of the room, leaving him alone to try to piece together what could have become of Annie. Had she befallen an accident of her own? Had she become lost in the forest? Had those weird men, Michael and his buddy, with their weird green liquid, abducted her? That last thought gave him pause. *Had they?* he wondered. He thought back to their arrival in that funny little town in the middle of nowhere. *Where had everybody been? Hiding? Away? But where?* He thought back to the curtain Annie had seen drop, as if someone had been watching them from the house across from the livery. Had Michael and his companion come from *that* town?

Charlie's thoughts were abruptly interrupted by the arrival of Doctor Roberts.

"So, Mr. McVee-How are we feeling today?"

"I'd feel a whole lot better, Doctor, if you can tell me where Annie is."

"Yes, Nurse Lewellen mentioned your concern to me, but I'm afraid I can't help you there. There's been no one here to see you, or waiting for word of your condition. The two hikers, who found you along the trail, dropped you off

here, and those are the only two that seem to even know you're here."

"Did they leave?"

"Yes, they did."

"Did you get their names and addresses?"

"I believe we did. It's standard hospital procedure. Just in case we need to involve the police, you understand. We get a few *accidents*, from time to time, that aren't quite accidents, if you know what I mean."

Charlie propped himself up on his elbows, and stared hard at Doctor Roberts.

"Yes, yes I do, but *my* accident was an accident, and we may still need to involve the police, if you know what I mean."

"Your wife?"

"Yes, Annie. She must still be out there somewhere, either hurt or lost. How soon can I get out of here, Doc?"

"Take a look, Charlie. You're in traction. Your right femur was snapped clean in half. You're not going anywhere for at least six weeks, and then we may have to consider a body cast. You're going to have to leave the looking to the authorities, I'm afraid."

"What else is wrong with me?"

"Broken left tibia, and a bunch of bruises."

"That's it? No broken hip?"

"Dislocated left femur, but nothing broken up there. I think that's probably where you got the idea your hip might be broken. There's a lot of pain associated with an injury like that. So, should I call the sheriff in on this for you?"

Charlie sank back off his elbows, and rested his head back on his pillow.

"Yes, please give him a call, and ask him to bring a topo map of the Cherokee Quadrant. I want to show him *exactly* where I last saw Annie-*and that town.*"

"Town?" Doctor Roberts asked, a puzzled look on his face. "What town?"

"Before my fall, Annie and I came across a funny little town, up in the mountains. There was no road leading into it, and there were no people to be found anywhere...except for what Annie thought was someone watching us from behind a curtain. But, the livery stable was full of horses and mules, and the town itself was well maintained. We thought it might be some sort of historic reproduction that the park service built, or something like that. Ever hear of such a place, Doc?"

Roberts rubbed his chin, and replied, "No. I can't say that I have. Where exactly was this place?"

"If I had my map I could show you, but it was in an uncharted region where the Appalachian Trail makes a big bend to the northwest. We decided to cut off the bend, and see the wilderness as it was intended to be seen, and rejoin the trail later-on the other side of the bend. Have you ever hiked the trail in these parts, Doc? Does that sound familiar to you?"

"Yes, I have hiked that part of the trail, and even that bend you mentioned. I know it. But if you tried to cut off *that* bend you sure sent yourself into some rugged country."

"Yeah, so we discovered. That's where I fell. I was trying to climb over a ridge after we passed through that town."

"That ridge you fell on is probably Jackson's Knob, but I've been up there. There's no town up in that area. Are you sure about where you were?"

Charlie stared at Doctor Roberts in disbelief and bewilderment.

"Yeah, Doc. I'm sure. But I may not be describing the same location you're thinking of. There was nothing on the map to put a name to the ridge I was climbing. It was all marked *uncharted*. No names at all. Wouldn't Jackson's Knob be printed on the map, being as how it *has* a name?"

"Yes, it's printed on every map I've ever seen. Well, I'll get the sheriff in here to talk with you, and I'll have her bring that map you want. Cherokee Quadrant, right?"

"Yeah right. Tell him...Wait-Did you say *her*?"

"Yes, the sheriff is a woman. Kate Pickens is her name. Don't worry, Charlie, she's good at her job."

"Well tell *her* to hurry, okay? I can't imagine where Annie is, and *that* worries me-a lot."

Helpless, aptly fit the way he felt now, and from the extent of his injuries it appeared as though he would remain that way for quite some time to come. He could only hope that the sheriff the doc was sending, to hear his story, was competent, and hopefully, knew the area well where Annie had disappeared. He had the very unsettling feeling that he and Annie were at the mercy of the local Andy and Barney team of law enforcement. Or worse yet, the local *Andrea* and Barney team. He could only hope he was wrong.

It was about a half-hour later that a woman of about thirty-five, or forty years of age, dressed in khaki

uniform, entered his room. He was taken aback, momentarily, by the woman's beauty, and perfect physique, so much so that he failed initially to notice her badge. He had envisioned an older, plumper woman, as the sheriff of Harlon County.

"I...I thought the sheriff would drop by to see me," he blurted out, disappointed that a mere police officer, or deputy, may have come to hear his story.

"She did," the woman commented, dryly, pulling up a chair to his bedside. "Now, what's this about your wife being missing?"

"Did you bring the map?"

"My deputy is picking it up in Greenlee at the Geological Survey. I didn't happen to have one lying about. The area you're talking about is out of my jurisdiction, but you're here in it, so let's have the story."

Charlie looked at the sheriff's badge, just to be sure she was the sheriff, and began. He told Sheriff Pickens the whole story, leaving out no detail. Sheriff Pickens listened intently, and did not interrupt him, saying nothing, but taking notes religiously as he spoke. When he finished, Sheriff Pickens closed her notebook, and smiled at him.

"Well, Mr. McVee. That's one interesting story. I'm not familiar with that town you mentioned, but as I mentioned, that area's out of my jurisdiction, and unfamiliar to me. But you're here, and you're making your complaint in my jurisdiction, so I'll be involved. If that town is there, as you say, we'll find it, and we'll have a word with the residents there. Rest assured, we'll find *them* too. My deputy should be back with the map in about an hour. I'll stop back with it when I get my hands on it. In the mean time, I'll put in a call to Sheriff Jeffers, and see if that town sounds familiar to him. If I'm right, the area you're talking about is in his jurisdiction. Can I call you Charlie?"

Charlie nodded.

"Okay, Charlie. Don't you worry. We'll find Annie, and I'm sure we'll probably find her just fine. Could be those folks in that town took her in, and are caring for her right now. One never knows."

"But, what about the fact that the two hikers who brought me in to the hospital say that they found me on the trail? I wasn't on the trail when I got hurt, and it wasn't two hikers that I remember finding me. It was two older, bearded men, who looked like they lived up in those mountains."

"Yeah, I caught that. That *is* puzzling, but I'm sure there's a logical explanation for it. Maybe they put you on the trail where they knew you'd be found. Maybe they didn't want to get any more involved than that. It isn't right, but some folks are just like that, you know. Especially some of those mountain folks who have very little contact with the outside world. It frightens them to come out of the sanctuary of their mountains."

"So why not put Annie on the trail with me then?"

"I don't know. It might be two different groups of people we're talking about here. We'll get some answers when we get up there. You rest for now, and I'll be back later this afternoon."

"Okay-and thanks, Sheriff."

Kate Pickens left his room and disappeared into the hospital hallway, leaving him alone, and again to wonder about the whereabouts of Annie. True to her word, Sheriff Pickens returned to his room two hours later with the map that he needed to pinpoint the location for the search. He had no problem finding the area again, and on this map the area was marked *uncharted* as well, just like on the one he had been using three days ago.

What alarmed Charlie was the *new* knowledge that three days had passed since his accident. What had those two men given him that had knocked him out so soundly for three days? Before the sheriff had informed him of the date, he had assumed that his accident had occurred just the previous day. *Now*, Annie had been missing for *three* days, and that knowledge scared him more than he wanted to think about. But think about it he did, constantly throughout the rest of the day, and into the night, before finally falling asleep.

When he awoke on the fourth morning since he had last seen Annie, the first thing that caught Charlie's attention was the television set resting on a small table across from his bed. He had noticed it the day before, but watching television had been the last thing he had been interested in at the time. *Now*, however, his attention was drawn to it like flies to honey. The sheriff had not been back to update him on the search for Annie yet, and he began to wonder if perhaps the news stations had picked up the story. He located the remote, on the side table next to his bed, and clicked on the television set.

I hope it's not closed circuit, he thought, as the screen illuminated to snow. He began surfing through the channels, coming up with nothing but static snow on every

channel he came to. "Damn," he mumbled. "Is this damn thing broken?"

As he continued moving through the channels, Nurse Lewellen entered his room, and asked, "Can't find it?"

"Find what?" Charlie asked, looking in her direction.

"Our TV channel. It's channel 12."

"Don't tell me you get only one channel here."

"Sorry, but yes, just the one. We don't have cable, and the hospital can't afford satellite TV. So, all we can get here is one local station out of Greenlee."

"Geesh. I can't believe this. They *do* have news on that channel, don't they?" Charlie asked, disgust showing in his voice.

"Sure, but you missed the seven a.m. news already. They'll do it again at noon, and then again at six this evening. But, don't be too disappointed, Mister McVee. *That's all* WWGL broadcasts. News and farm news, three times a day for one hour each time, at seven, noon, and six. Greenlee's a small place, and the TV station is just an amateur effort at best. It's not fancy, and it's not well done, but it *is* the news."

Charlie grimaced.

"How far away is Greenlee? Do you think they'll pick up Annie's search on that channel?"

"Greenlee is about five miles from here, and I'm sure they'll pick up the search story. Around here, the news people need every story they can find to fill their half-hour time slot. The other half-hour is all farm news. The search for Annie will be *big* news for them. They won't pass on that. But, like I said, don't expect much. WWGL is no more than a student reporter with a video camera. I'm sure it's not what you're used to."

Charlie punched in channel 12 on the remote, and came up with the Greenlee local channel, WWGL, which was currently airing farm news. He looked at the clock on the table, and realized it was going to be a long morning until the noon news would come on. It was seven forty-five now, and he really didn't care what the price of soybeans was this morning.

He clicked off the TV and looked at Laura, who was busy adjusting his intravenous drip.

"Nurse Lewellen, can you call the sheriff's office for me and leave a message for Sheriff Pickens?"

The nurse smiled, and replied, "You're going to be here a while, Mr. McVee. So, why don't you call me Laura, okay?"

"Sure, Laura, and please call me Charlie. Well, can you do that for me?"

"Sure, Charlie. What's the message?"

"Tell the sheriff that I left my car parked in the parking lot in Evergreen State Park. It's a 2002, Jeep Grand Cherokee, dark green. The license number is Ohio HDW-369. Tell Sheriff Pickens she should check to be sure the car is still there. Who knows, Annie may have returned to it, and now doesn't know where to look for me. I don't know, but it's worth a look."

"Sure, Charlie, and if you've got the keys I'll be glad to drop them off to the sheriff, and I'm sure she'll have your car brought here for you, where we can keep an eye on it."

"Yeah, that'd be great. Thanks, Laura. My keys should be in the pants I was wearing when I was brought here."

Laura went to the small closet, reached into Charlie's pants pocket, and located a set of keys. She dangled them for him to see.

"That's them," he said, giving Laura a big smile.

"Okay then, Charlie. I'll take care of all that for you. You just try to relax and get some rest. Dr. Roberts will be in to check on you, around ten, when he comes in to do his rounds. Remember, the news comes on at noon. Maybe the sheriff will be in, even before that, with good news for you. Keep your chin up. The sheriff will find Annie. She's probably just lost up there near the trail somewhere."

Laura left the room with his keys, and his message for the sheriff. Charlie rested back onto his pillow and drifted off to sleep. He dreamed about Annie being found safely, and driving him home to Cincinnati. As pleasant as his first dream was, his next dream left him wondering about what he hadn't noticed while awake. He awoke, looked around the room, and then out through the open door. Before he had time to think about what the dream had pointed out to him, his eyes fell on the wall clock in the hall. *Almost time for the noon news*, he thought, and clicked on the television.

Just as Laura had said, the WWGL local news came on channel 12, promptly, at noon. The lead story began with Sheriff Kate Pickens talking about the ensuing search for Annie McVee, hiker gone missing, four days ago, along the Appalachian Trail, somewhere between Evergreen State Park and Greenlee. Sheriff Pickens talked about his accident, and the fact that Annie McVee had not returned to her

automobile, which had been found right where Mr. McVee had said he had parked it.

Charlie thought about that for a moment and smiled. *At least they're getting on everything right away*, he thought, thinking about how quickly the sheriff had acted upon the suggestion he had made through Laura. It looked to him as though the sheriff wasn't going to leave any rock unturned.

Sheriff Pickens went on to discuss her planned joint search effort with Sheriff Jeffers of Glaskin County, who it turned out, *did* have jurisdiction over the area where Annie had disappeared. In all, a good fifteen minutes of the half-hour news was committed to the story of the missing Cincinnati woman. The coverage of the search for Annie concluded with a personal message from Sheriff Pickens to Charlie. Kate Pickens looked straight into the camera and told him that she, and Sheriff Jeffers, would be doing everything necessary to locate Annie. Charlie sighed and thought, *That was nice*. Somehow, he felt his problem was in good hands.

When the story switched to other local news, he switched off the television set and looked back out to the hall. He watched and waited, staring into the hallway, taking up the vigil his dream had suggested. After twenty minutes of watching, he was left with the same question that his subconscious had been asking. *Where is all the traffic one would expect to see in the hallway of a busy hospital? Where was the staff, and where were the visitors?* In twenty minutes of constant watching, not one person had passed his doorway. Charlie pondered the question for a minute more, and then, relaxing back onto his pillow, he came to a conclusion; *I guess Harlon County Hospital is simply not a busy hospital. But still...*

CHAPTER THREE

Tragedy

The next three weeks were pure hell for Charlie. Every day that passed was a repeat of the day that had preceded it. Each day would start with the seven a.m. news, and then continue with the noon news, and then in the evening, Kate would drop by to inform him that they had made no progress in locating Annie. After three weeks, it was getting old, and he knew he still had *at least* three more weeks to go before he could join the search, and begin to feel useful. It was the "at least" that *really* bothered him. He had no real way of knowing how long it would actually be before he would be able to participate in the most important event of his life.

The second three weeks were no better than the first three, with no new evidence of Annie's whereabouts, or what had happened to her. It was as if she had simply vanished from the face of the Earth. As concerned as Charlie was for Annie's safety, he had plenty of time to think about other things as well. He continued to wonder about the lack of traffic in the hospital halls, and he began to try to picture his location within the hospital. When he had asked about the lack of traffic passing his room, Laura had told him that the hospital was actually an old converted mansion, and that his room was alone on a small northern wing. Her explanation made sense to him, but still...

He studied the trees outside his room window. They were primarily oak trees, and judging from the portion of the trees that he could see nearest his window, he had figured out that he was probably on the second floor of the hospital. There was no room number on his door to confirm that belief, but straight out his window, the trees began to branch from their trunks, suggesting that he was probably fifteen feet or so up from the ground.

He had begun to picture Harlon County Hospital as being in a rural setting, with very little business, or activity. The fact that during his entire stay here he had seen but one doctor and one nurse fostered his belief.

Despite the quaintness of the hospital, it seemed to be providing him with good care, and he had noticed the equipment in his room seemed to be up to snuff by current standards. Doctor Roberts was certainly no slouch. He seemed to be up on his stuff, and was very attentive to his needs. He couldn't remember a day, since awakening here, that he had been in any pain, or discomfort, and particular

care had been given to insuring that he did not develop a thrombosis from his inactivity.

So, why am I so uneasy about this place? He decided that it was a combination of two things. The first of which was the uncertainty about Annie. He believed that the second reason was that Harlon County Hospital was simply not what he was used to; not what he envisioned as a modern day, twenty-first century hospital. *So, what was wrong with that?* he wondered.

Doctor Roberts *had* told him that on Friday, just three days away, he would be taking him out of traction and putting him in a walking cast. *That had been good news; no body cast needed.* Sure, he'd be on crutches for a while, but at least he'd be free from the hospital where he might do Annie some good. "See, Charlie. Things are looking up," he told himself. But he knew better than anyone that six weeks missing almost certainly meant serious trouble for Annie.

With that last thought still in mind, Sheriff Pickens entered his room, several hours earlier in the day than usual. He held his breath, as Kate pulled a chair up beside his bed, and sat down. The look on her face was not encouraging.

"Hi, Charlie. We..Well, we found a woman's body," Kate said, getting straight to the point of her visit. "She appears to have been a hiker, judging from her clothing and all, but the body is badly decomposed."

"Blue jeans and a blue plaid shirt?" Charlie asked, trying to hold back his tears.

"Yes, and these," Kate replied, handing him a gold wedding band and engagement ring. "Are they hers do you think?"

Tears welled in his eyes, and a lump formed in his throat, making it impossible for him to reply. He simply nodded, and the tears began to flow down his cheeks.

"How...How did she...?" he was finally able to ask.

"It looks like she took a bad fall, Charlie. The medical examiner says she had massive head injuries, which means she probably went quickly. He says he doubts that she suffered at all. He puts the time of death at just about the time of your fall. It probably happened that first night, after she left you to find help."

Charlie tried to think through his grief and confusion.

"Then I guess it doesn't matter that you never found that town I told you about," he said, after a moment.

"We *did* find it, Charlie. Didn't I mention that to you? We kept it out of the news, out of respect for the inhabitants' wishes. They call their town Jessup. It's sort of a holdover from the sixties; a commune, originally founded by a utopian society called Puralists. They're a completely self-contained society of peaceful mule breeders that shy away completely from the outside world. We even found Michael and Octavius McClellan, the two residents of Jessup that found you and put you by the trail where you'd be found quickly."

"Oh, gee, that was nice of them," Charlie replied, sarcastically. "I'm sure glad they didn't go out of their way on my account."

"I know it seems like they could have done more, but it was them that helped us search for, and eventually find, Annie."

"Well, I thank them for *that* anyway."

"They're just afraid of the outside world, Charlie. They're good people it seems. They just want to be left alone to live their lives in peace and solitude. That's all - Charlie...I hate to have to ask this, but what should I do about the arrangements for Annie? Where should I have her sent, or do you need more time to think about that?"

"No...I have a friend in the mortuary business in Cincinnati. If you would please, have her sent to Fostoria Funeral Home, in Springdale, Ohio. That's a suburb of Cincinnati. I'll give Rick a call..."

Charlie paused, realizing for the first time since arriving here, that he needed a telephone, and there wasn't one in his room.

"I'll make the call, Charlie. Is there anyone else I should notify?"

"No, there's no one else."

"What about Annie's folks, and yours?"

"All I *had* in this world was Annie, and all she had was me," he replied, lowering his head. He then looked up again and continued.

"Our parents were best friends. Five years ago they all decided to take a vacation together. They got as far as Louisville before being mowed down from behind by a semi truck driver who had fallen asleep at the wheel. There's no one to call, Kate, but thanks for offering."

"Okay, Charlie. I'll take care of the arrangements with Fostoria, and your friend, Rick. When does Doctor Roberts think you'll be able to travel? Rick will need to know when to arrange the funeral."

"He's planning to take me out of traction on Friday. I guess, if all goes well, I could travel Saturday, but I doubt if I'll be able to drive with the cast he's got planned for me."

"You let me worry about that. I'll get you home just as soon as Doctor Roberts releases you. I'll double-check with him, but for now, we'll plan on Saturday. I'll go make the arrangements for Annie's trip to Cincinnati right now."

Kate left Charlie's room and he clicked on the television to try to catch the evening news. He was just in time to see the search party carrying a body bag down the trail, and presumably, back to civilization. He began to weep. Just as Kate had said, there was no mention of Jessup, or of Michael or Octavius McClellan having helped in the search. There was nothing more than four men carrying the body of Mrs. Annie McVee down from Mount Laura, where she had been found dead, "the victim of a tragic fall". The coverage, which had originally taken up half of each broadcast, had now diminished to a mere footnote. He guessed that the people of Greenlee were sick and tired of hearing about some northerner, named Annie McVee, who had been dumb enough to wander off the Appalachian Trail, and into the wilderness. *If they only knew who the dumb one actually was*, he thought, clicking off the TV.

Doctor Roberts awakened Charlie, early Saturday morning, when he entered his room and opened the window blind. Charlie squinted at the early morning sunlight, and greeted the doctor.

"Morning, Doc. Is today going to be the big day?" he asked, in anticipation of finally being allowed to go home.

"Should be, Charlie. Everything looks good to me. I'm just waiting on word from Sheriff Pickens, as to the arrangements for getting you home. She's supposed to call me any time now. As far as your legs are concerned, there's no reason to keep you here any longer."

"You can tell that without x-rays?" Charlie asked, surprised.

"We did that yesterday afternoon, while you were sedated; before we put the cast on," Doctor Roberts replied. "You have no recollection of that?"

"Nope. Must have been some good stuff you gave me."

"Yes, must have been," Roberts replied. "Anyway, everything has been finalized with your insurance company,

your car is parked outside, and the only thing we're waiting on now is a driver. You're good to go, Charlie."

"Thanks, Doc. I mean for everything. Is Kate coming by to see me off?"

"I don't know. I'll ask her when she calls though. In the mean time, I'm going to give you a shot of something that will help you travel. It's a long drive back to Cincinnati, and with that cast on your leg, it's liable to be a bit uncomfortable for you. This will help," Roberts said, wiping a spot on Charlie's arm with a wet cotton ball.

Doctor Roberts injected him and wiped the spot again.

"Thanks, Doc. I'm sure I'll appreciate that, *down the road.*"

Doctor Roberts smiled and left Charlie's room, looking back and waving, one last time. Charlie laid his head back down on his pillow and sighed heavily with relief. *Going home*, he thought, and closed his eyes.

When Charlie opened his eyes, he found himself staring up Interstate 75. He looked slowly to his left, shaking the groggy sleep from his head, and stared at the bearded man driving his Grand Cherokee.

"Who...Who are you?" Charlie asked his driver, not quite clear how he got from the hospital into his car, and onto the road. "When did we leave the hospital?"

"About an hour ago, Charlie, and don't you remember me? Michael McClellan," the driver replied. "I'm the one what got you down from the mountain, so to speak."

"Yeah-I remember you. Why'd you leave me on the trail? Too much trouble to take me to the hospital?" he asked, not mincing words.

"That's why I'm here now, Charlie. I got to feelin' bad about that, and asked that sheriff lady if there was sompin' I could do to help you. So, here I am."

"Well, for someone who was afraid to leave his mountain to take me into town, you sure have gotten brave all of a sudden. Not that I'm complaining, but that's quite a leap for you, isn't it?"

"Like I said. I got to feelin' bad about how I handled it before. I'm just tryin' to help now."

"So how are you going to get back home?"

"That sheriff lady, Kate. She gave me taxi money, and bus money, to get me back. All I'll need from you is a

little direction. You know, how to get a taxi and all, when we get there."

"Kate gave you money?"

"Yep. She said the county was springin' for it. You're not to give it a second thought, she said."

Charlie thought about that, and thought to himself that it was nice that there were still people in this world that had compassion for others, and weren't afraid to show it. There were actually people in this day and age that would still put their money where their mouth was. It was a comforting thought for him, after all that he'd been through these past six weeks.

He shook off his personal thoughts, and turned again to Michael.

"So, Michael. Tell me about that little town of yours, up on the mountain. How did it come to be there, and where in the heck did the road go? I mean, it looked to me like it had been built on a street that no longer exists. That's the impression I got, anyway."

Michael smiled.

"The town is called Jessup, and it was founded by Cole Callaghan, back in 1809. There never was no 'Main Street' though. Oh, Cole laid it out that way, but it never happened. He died in 1810, and the town, *and* his dream, were abandoned. It was in 1816 that Eli Jessup, a preacher of sorts, heard stories of the town, and took his followers up there to live. They fixed the place back up and settled in. Eli's idea was to create a community up there, free of the outside world; its vices, and immorality."

"Puralists," Charlie offered. "But Kate said your group was a carryover from the sixties."

"And the fifties, and the forties, and all the way back to 1816. The fact that we appear to be a carryover from a Hippie commune of the sixties, as I've been told they were called, is a common misconception, held by those few who stumble across us. We let them believe what they will."

"And you have no contact with the outside world? How do you sustain yourselves?"

"Same as anyone else. What we can't make, or grow for ourselves, we buy. It's true there's no *road* into Jessup, and it's also true that very few people know we exist, but we *do* have some contact with the outside. We raise some of the best red mules and hinnies in that part of the country. Once a year, my brother, Octavius, takes a string down to Greenlee for sale. He takes the wagon and trails a string of five or six mules, overland, to Greenlee. We know a

shortcut, as you might say. He sells the mules, and brings back whatever supplies we need for the upcomin' year."

"So those were the animals I saw in the livery then; your breeding stock. But-Where were all the people when we walked through town? Annie and I didn't see anyone, although Annie swore someone was watching us from a window across from the livery."

Charlie's last question caught Michael unprepared, and he groped for a viable answer that would explain what Charlie had experienced. His mind shot to a vision of the whole village out at the digs. But he certainly couldn't mention that, John would skin him alive if he mentioned that. Then his mind wandered back to a day in the past that would truthfully answer Charlie, without actually telling the truth.

"Ha! That would have been Caroline Greer. She's old, and bedridden. She sits propped up in her bed by that window, and just watches. Judgin' from when we found you, I'd say that when you passed through, we were all down at Carson Creek for the baptism. Johnny Walker was bein' dunked that day, and the joke was, that with a name like his we should probably dunk him twice! Anyway, that's probably where we were when you passed through. There's only thirty-seven of us anymore, and all save Caroline went down to the creek that day."

Charlie listened, fascinated by Michael's stories, as he continued to ramble on about Jessup and its inhabitants. Finally, after about fifteen minutes, he interrupted Michael.

"So, what was that green liquid you gave me, when you first found me, up on the mountain?"

"Oh-That. That's just sompin' old Caroline Greer came up with some years ago. It's made from herbs and the like, and we use it on the mules when they're needin' fixin'. Works good on folks, too, that needs it."

"The mules?"

"Yeah, but like I said..."

"Yeah, I heard you...It works good on people too."

Now that Michael had started into his stories of Jessup, and Charlie had shown an interest, Michael kept right on talking-all the way to Cincinnati. Charlie directed Michael to his home, and then invited him in while he called for a taxi to come pick Michael up, and take him to the Greyhound station. He had offered Michael a bed for the night, as he was sure Michael was tired of traveling, but Michael was in a hurry to start back for home. The cab arrived about an hour later, and as soon as he saw Michael

on his way, he picked up the telephone and dialed his friend, Rick. It was a call that he had wanted to make as soon as he had entered the house, but it was also a call that he wanted to make in private. He waited, impatiently, as the telephone rang at the other end of the line.

"Fostoria Funeral Home."

"Hey, Rick. It's Charlie. Did Annie arrive okay?"

"Yeah, Charlie, gosh I'm so sorry, man. What the hell happened to her? Are you okay? The sheriff that called said you were hurt pretty bad too."

"I'm okay, Rick. Just trying to mend now. I have a cast on my right leg from my ankle to my groin, but I'm doing okay. Where's Annie now?"

"She's at the mortuary. Listen, Charlie. I'm coming over right now, and I'm bringing dinner. I'm sure you've nothing there to eat after all this time. Is Dragon City Chinese okay? I was just heading out there now anyway."

"Yeah, sure, Rick. Sesame chicken for me, and a pork egg roll. But then, after we eat, I want to go see Annie."

"Look, Charlie. We'll talk about *that* when I get there. I'll see you in about half an hour."

"Okay, Rick. Thanks. The front door's open. Just come on in when you get here."

Charlie put the receiver back in its cradle, and wondered what there was to talk about. He wanted to see Annie, and the sooner the better. He positioned his crutches in his armpits and navigated to the living room, plopping himself down on the sofa, to await Rick's arrival. He thought about Rick's last comment, and wondered why he'd balked at his desire to see Annie.