

Taylor Manse



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To Pop, who has always loved a good ghost story.

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Foreword

This book, although fiction and some might say fantasy, is of the stuff that drives children to hide beneath their bedcovers. It is about the monster in the closet, the bump in the night, and the demon lurking under the bed. It is about they who create a child's nightmares, and therefore the nightmares of his or her parents. The reader will meet within the pages of this book, one whose existence is every reason for leaving the light on when you lay your head to pillow. For in the battle between good and evil-evil sometimes wins.

C.H. Foertmeyer

Beneath the planks of the
hardwood floor
Dwells a ghastly demon of legend
and lore,
Biding his time, he patiently
waits
For the opening of the flaming
gates.

Silently he rests, two decades
and a half,
Until the time comes to
slaughter the calf.
Then Hell's Maw opens and in a
flash,
A soul is claimed for the
devil's cache.

Again below he'll take his
stance,
Biding his time beneath Taylor
Manse.
Twenty-five more years will
flee,
Before his next victim you will
see.

Then silence will fall on a vast
expanse,
From the town of Thiers to
Taylor Manse.
And as swiftly as waves rush to
the shore,
A deathly pall will creep over
the floor...
As the House of Taylor claims
one more.

Chapter 1

Wade lifted his sleeve to his forehead and wiped the sweat from his brow. It was one hell of a hot day and he'd been at it now for six straight hours, stripping paint from the massive woodwork of his new living room. He looked around the room, realizing that his six-hour's effort had finished about ten percent of the woodwork in the room. *Damn, I knew this was gonna be a bitch, but this is ridiculous*, he thought, as he put down his scraper and headed for the kitchen. *Maybe I'll hire someone to do the woodwork while I move on to the floors.*

When he had purchased this 1880, Victorian fixer-upper, he had known he was in for a lot of work, and a lot of work it had been. The kitchen had been the first room he had tackled, completing its renovation in about three week's time. He had then moved to the library, and another three weeks in there had produced the exact results he had hoped for. The sitting room had come next, another three weeks. He had thought next to move to the living room, but that was when Annie had put her foot down. "Nine weeks we've been here and you haven't done one thing to our bedroom yet," she had admonished. "It comes next." And-it had.

Now, three months into the renovation, Wade was running out of steam. It wasn't so much the work, or the time involved, as it was his waning enthusiasm for the project. Sure, Annie was still hyped about it, picking out the furniture, draperies, carpeting, and wallpaper, but he was doing all the work. The only things he got to pick out were splinters.

When he entered the kitchen, he found Annie sitting at the table going through a paint color deck, matching paint colors to swatches of cloth.

"What are those for?" he asked.

"The living room."

"Drapes?"

"Yes and the woodwork color."

"What? If you're gonna have me paint the woodwork, then why am I in there stripping it? I thought you wanted it back to natural wood."

"I did, but I think I've changed my mind about that."

Wade looked down to his blistered, stripper burned hands, and sighed loudly.

"What's wrong with you?" Annie asked.

"Oh-Nothing; nothing that a six-pack won't fix."

"Oh, sorry," Annie said, "but we're out of beer. I haven't been to the grocery yet today."

"Well that's just fine, because I'm headed for Hooligan's anyway. I've had about enough of this place for today anyway. Wanna come along?"

"Well, that's a nice way to talk about our new home. No, you go; I've got decorating to do."

"It's not our new home; it's our live-in fixer-upper that will eventually produce the profit we'll need to buy our modern, up-to-date new home. Don't forget the mission, Anne. We're not staying here any longer than we have to."

"We'll see."

It was at times like this that Wade felt like he had been duped. The agreement had been to buy this old mansion to renovate it into something worthwhile for some well to do someone who liked old Victorian mansions. It had been so dilapidated that doubling their money on the deal was not out of the question, and actually quite likely. Structurally, the place was sound. It just needed updating, decorating, and one hell of a lot of work. Somewhere along the way though, it seemed as though Annie had fallen in love with the place. At times like this Wade had the feeling that it might have been her plan to keep this place from the very beginning. Although Anne wouldn't come right out and say so, the way everything had to be just so perfect, it sure seemed the case.

Hooligan's was the refuge Wade had discovered in March, a short while after moving to Buffalo Brook. It was no more than a local dive, just like any other small watering hole in small town Vermont, but it had made an impression on him. What had sold him on the place was the large, stone fireplace with a healthy fire blazing away, warming the bar nicely while the weather had remained cold. Nothing chilled him more to a place than having to drink cold beer where the owner was too cheap to keep it respectably warm. In that regard, during what had remained of the winter, Hooligan's had never let him down.

As he turned out of the manse drive and onto the road to town, rain began pouring down and the wind began blowing furiously, driving the raindrops into his windshield with such force that his wipers could barely keep up. His visibility dropping by the second, he reached out and flicked on the defroster in an attempt to clear his view. As he did so, he completely forgot about the hairpin turn he knew to be up ahead, and as he slid into it, he looked up and saw a logging truck bearing straight down on him. Screaming out an expletive, he jerked the wheel, spinning his pickup around, as the truck clipped his rear bumper. The impact sent him flying from the road, spinning wildly out of control, and into a large tree. Luckily, the pickup merely grazed the tree, sending him skidding

into the open woods where he came to rest between two large oaks.

Dazed, but seemingly without serious injury, Wade looked back over his shoulder and saw the large truck on its side in the road, its load of huge timbers scattered everywhere. As he stared in disbelief at the gallimaufry of spilled lumber on the highway, he saw smoke starting to billow from the truck's cab. Suddenly, flames burst forth from the engine compartment, and he gasped in horror, as he saw a man's arm waving frantically from the cab window. Wade flicked open his seatbelt, and finding his door jammed, he crawled through the window of his truck and ran toward the wreckage of the logging rig. It took what seemed like forever to negotiate the scattered timber and reach the cab, which was now burning furiously. He climbed the bottom of the cab, burning his hand on the exhaust pipe, and reaching the open window he looked inside. The driver was frantic, trying in vain to open his seatbelt buckle. Wade pulled out his pocketknife, opened it, and as the flames grew nearer and the heat intensified to an almost unbearable degree, he began cutting away at the fabric of the belt. Finally, and not a moment too soon, he cut through and helped the driver out through the window and down to the ground. As Wade began climbing down himself, and as the driver scrambled away through the maze of logs, the truck exploded, catapulting Wade over the debris-strewn road and onto the soft humus of the forest floor. He rolled over, shook off his daze, and took a quick inventory of his working body parts. Miraculously, he seemed totally unscathed. Standing, he ran to the truck driver, who was now sitting nearby watching his truck burn.

"You okay?" Wade asked the man, worried that a man of his age, after what he had just been through, might succumb at any moment to a heart attack.

"Yeah," the man smiled, "okay, and thanks. That was a close one."

Wade patted him on the shoulder and then fumbled in his pocket for his cell phone. He placed a 911 call, and then the two of them sat in silence, awaiting the arrival of the authorities, the fire trucks, the tow trucks, and the ambulances. The old truck driver didn't seem interested in a conversation, probably still in shock over what had just taken place, and Wade didn't push the issue. Right now, sitting in silence, and silently thanking the Man above, seemed like the appropriate thing to do.

After the fire was extinguished, the statements taken, and all the rest of the official business dispensed with, Wade walked back to his truck, climbed in, and tried to start the engine. Much to his delight, it kicked right over. Now, before

he allowed the tow truck to leave, the question was whether it would move, or not. Again, he was pleasantly surprised that it would, and everything seemed to be in working order. He slipped the tow truck driver a twenty for his trouble and then pulled his pickup out onto the road. What he needed now, more than ever, was that beer he had started out for. So, rather than head back home he continued his trip to Hooligan's. The truck seemed to want to wander a bit to the left, but other than that, it drove fine. *I'm one lucky son-of-a-bitch*, he thought, as he left the disaster behind, *one lucky son-of-a-bitch indeed*.

Wade walked into Hooligan's and took his usual seat at the bar; third stool from the far end, right on the bend in the bar where it turned to meet the wall. As he seated himself, the bartender looked up from his work and said, "Hey Wade, house got you down again?"

"Ah Hoolie, you know me too well. Give me a Miller High Life; I've just been through hell and I could really use one right now."

"So, what 'hell' have you just been through, or shouldn't I ask?"

"I damn near got killed on my way in here, that's what. A damn logging truck clipped me and sent me flying off the road, and then I had to pull the driver out of his rig, right before it blew."

"Damn and you came here anyway?"

"Like I said, I needed a beer, and with Annie on one of her kicks, I didn't feel like going home until I got it, and maybe a few more to boot."

"Well, you've come to the right place, if that's what's on your mind. This is the place where troubles are washed away, nerves are calmed, and bullshit flows deeper than the ocean."

Wade laughed, and then suddenly missing the crackle of the fire, he glanced over to the fireplace. But, it was June now and he would have to wait a few more months before he could again enjoy the smell of logs burning on the hearth.

"So, what's new with you, Hoolie?"

"Around here? Ha, now that's a good one. So, how's Mrs. Robinson?"

"The same; got her nose stuck in the paint color deck again, looking for something more for me to do."

"Ah come on now, you know you enjoy it."

"I enjoy the profits from these rehabs; not the work. And this time, there sure seems to be a lot more work than usual."

"It's a big house."

"It's not that; I've done houses this big before. This time it's Annie. Everything I do has to be so perfect, and she's dreaming up a whole lot more for me to do this time around too."

"Sounds to me like this is the end of the road for her," Hoolie said. "Sounds like she's plannin' to stay on at this house."

"Yeah," Wade replied, "that's exactly what I've been thinking."

Suddenly, Hoolie looked up to the front door and frowned. "Oh no, here comes Kravitz," he said, his expression now gone completely sour.

Wade turned on his stool to see a withered old man, hunched at the back, entering the bar.

"This old fart creeps me out," Hoolie said.

"Who is he?"

"Kravitz, the mortician. He stops by once in a blue moon. I wish it were never though. Like I said, he creeps me out."

"Morticians have a way of doing that," Wade replied.

"It ain't that-you'll see. He'll be sittin' right down next to you-he always does."

"Does what?"

"There'll be only one person sittin' at the bar and nine open stools, and he'll sit right down next to the one person at the bar. Today, it looks like that's gonna be you. Your lucky day I guess."

By now, Kravitz had finally limped his way to the bar, and true to Hoolie's prediction; he slid onto the barstool next to Wade. He adjusted himself just right, placed his hat down on the bar top, and looked up at Hoolie.

"Schnapps," he demanded, barking out his order.

"Good afternoon, Dolph," Hoolie replied, sarcastically. "Peppermint?"

"Of course, what else?"

Hoolie slid the shot glass to Dolph and then turned his attention back to Wade.

"So, like I was sayin', it sounds to me like your wife is tired of fixin' up places just to sell them and move on. Nope, I think she plans to keep this house. Looks to me like I'll be keepin' you as a customer after all."

"Well, she's got another think coming," Wade replied. "Fixing them up and selling them is how I make my living. She doesn't have much say in the matter. I live where I work, while I work, and that's the way of it."

"Yeah, well we'll see about that. It's been my experience that when a woman decides to call a place home, that's it. I think you're gonna become a permanent resident of Buffalo Brook my friend."

Although it didn't fit in with his current plans for his future, the idea of becoming a resident of Buffalo Brook did intrigue Wade. It was a nice town of only a hundred or so souls,

with only four public buildings; a town hall, a privately funded library run by an old lady named Marian Mansard, a one-man post office, where everyone in town congregated mid-mornings after coming for their mail, and a church. Yes, Wade could see himself living in a place like Buffalo Brook-someday.

Dolph, who had been hanging on every word of their conversation, but quite uncharacteristically quiet, looked up from sipping his schnapps, and asked, "What house are you fixing up mister?"

"The gentleman's name is Wade Robinson, Dolph, and he's a contractor who rehabs old houses for a livin'."

"So what house?" Dolph asked again.

"Taylor Manse," Hoolie replied.

"Huh," Dolph said, turning, and looking at Wade, "I'd fix it up quick and get out quicker if I were you."

Wade, taken aback by the old undertaker's comment, looked at Hoolie with a questioning gaze.

"It's nothin'," Hoolie said, "he's just drummin' up old wives' tales."

"Wives' tales hell. Folks have died in that house," Dolph stated, emphatically.

"Folks have died in lots of houses, Dolph. Don't mean nothin'," Hoolie replied.

"Murdered?"

"Yes, murdered; it happens all the time and it don't mean nothin'."

"Vanished too? That means something I'd say."

"No it don't, Dolph."

"What say you, Mr. Robinson? Seen anything queer up there at that house?" Dolph asked, turning his stone cold gaze Wade's way.

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Well, stay there long enough and you will."

Wade looked back to Hoolie, and asked, "What's he talking about?"

"Don't ask him, ask me what I'm talking about," Dolph said, reaching out and placing his hand on Wade's arm. "He's too young to know the truth about that place."

"I know the rumors, and that's all they are," Hoolie replied. "See Wade, this is exactly what I was talkin' about. This guy'll creep you out every time he shows up."

"So what are the rumors?" Wade asked.

Dolph leaned in close to Wade, and said, "They're *not* rumors. It was 1905. Major Pike's wife and two grandchildren were found murdered in that house; their throats cut from ear to ear. But-they never found the major, alive or dead. He had simply vanished."

"Well, if that's true, and I'm not sayin' it is mind ya, the major probably offed his family and lit out for the hills is all," Hoolie blurted out. "It's just rumors, Wade. Don't listen to the old fool."

"It's no rumor," Dolph said, "go check it out at the cemetery. You'll see, and while you're there, check the cemetery records. You'll see it was my father who buried them all, 'cept the major. Like I said, he vanished."

"And like I said," Hoolie replied, "into the hills."

Dolph smiled a queer smile Hoolie's way, and said, "Yeah-What about 1930 then?"

"What about it?"

"My father buried those folks too."

"What folks?"

"Simmons was their name; Lottie and Evelyn Simmons. Mother and grown daughter, and Zeb Simmons, Lottie's husband, vanished too, just like the major. What say you to that, Hooligan?"

When Hoolie only stared, failing to answer, Dolph looked at Wade and asked, "Got a wife and kids at that house, Robinson?"

"Just my wife, Annie."

"Uh huh."

Wade thought for a moment, and then asked, "Were there ever any other, ah-events at that house?"

"1955," Dolph replied. "Same scenario, the Morgan family that time and then there was the really bad one in 1980."

"1980, what happened then?"

"Same story-only worse. By then Taylor Manse had been converted into the Adams County Orphanage, the transition having occurred in 1958. Seems no one wanted to live there anymore, not after all that had happened there in the past. Anyway, the orphanage housed from fifteen to twenty boys at a time, with a Roger Willows running the show as the headmaster. One December morning, when the maid came in to clean, she found nine boys dead, throats cut, but nowhere was Mr. Willows to be found. Vanished-like all the rest."

"Only nine boys?" Hoolie asked. "You said the place housed fifteen to twenty."

"Usually, but they were fixing to shut the place down and several of the boys housed there had recently turned eighteen and had moved away to go out on their own. They weren't replaced, but there were still ten there at the time. The tenth boy was found alive, hiding in a corner of the cellar, scared shitless and shaking like a leaf on a windy day."

"Could he tell the police what happened?" Wade asked.

"Nope-The tenth boy was Joe Bishop. He claimed he had been outside, skating on the creek at the back of the property when it happened. When he came home, he said he found all his friends

stacked like cordwood in the living room, their throats cut-blood everywhere. He cannot to this day remember anything after that. You can talk to him if you've a mind to. He's still living where he's been ever since, at Blackstone Home for the Criminally Insane."

"Criminally insane?" Wade asked. "Was he a suspect, or was he convicted of the murders?"

"I've never heard any of *this* before," Hoolie said. "You're just makin' this shit up, Kravitz."

"You've only been here five years," Dolph said to Hoolie, and then turning back to Wade, "No, he was not a suspect, nor was he charged with any of it. He was put in Blackstone because of what happened later."

"Later? Later when, and what happened?" Hoolie asked. "Not that I believe any of this."

"He got the idea that it must have been the maid that killed all his friends, since she's who found them and she was the only other person there that day. He went after her with a butcher knife—exactly one year later, in December. It never occurred to him that Willows being missing suggested that he might be the real murderer. He just blamed it on the maid."

"Did he kill her?" Wade asked.

"Death by exsanguination, cut from ear to ear, just like his friends were. Yep, he killed her all right, but the mystery was how he got her into the orphanage to do it and on the same spot in the living room where he had found his friends' bodies. The orphanage had been shut down and sealed up after the initial murders. But, that's where her body was found, right on the living room floor there."

"Damn," Wade said, "that's some story."

"Yeah," Hoolie said, "if it's true."

"Easy enough to check it out," Dolph replied. "It's all in the public record down at the county courthouse in Chesterville."

Wade thought for a moment, and then asked, "You say this Joe Bishop is still alive at this Blackstone place?"

"Yep, still there," Dolph said.

"Maybe I *will* drop by there for a visit and a chat with Mr. Bishop. This is interesting."

Dolph's face grew grim and he leaned forward, staring into Wade's face.

"What you had better do," Dolph said, "is do the math."

"The math?"

"Yes, the math. Taylor Manse was finished and first inhabited in 1880. In 1905, Major Pike's family was murdered there. In 1930 the Simmons family was murdered there, in 1955—the Morgans. Then came 1980 and the boys at the orphanage met

their ends there, and Mrs. Sellers too, a year later, but still a part of the original event of 1980. That's twenty-five years-exactly-between each event. This is 2005-twenty-five years later-exactly-since the orphanage murders. If all remains as it always has, this is the year someone is scheduled to die there again, and-someone else will vanish, just like always."

Wade shuddered.

"You don't really think...?"

"Think what," Dolph said, cutting Wade short, "that you're going to cut your wife's throat and then vanish into the mists? You tell me."

Wade was speechless, thinking over what Dolph had just said, but Hoolie had plenty to say.

"You never fail to creep me out, Dolph. I'm gonna check down at the courthouse and if all this is a bunch of bull, you'll never be welcome in here again, comin' in here, creepin' out my customers like you do. If this is all bull-crap, you're finished here."

Dolph smiled a wry smile, and said, "Check all you want; it's all true."

"Yeah," Hoolie said, thinking about something that had him wondering, "then why is the place known as Taylor Manse if it was that Major Pike that first lived there? You never mentioned anyone named Taylor."

"I never said Major Pike was the first person to live there. I said his family was the first family to die there. He didn't build the house; the Reverend Michael Mariah Taylor built the house."

"Where'd he go?" Wade asked.

"He started construction of the manse first, planning to build his church following the completion of the manse, but in 1880 after completing the home, he moved in and immediately put the place up for lease. Major Pike leased the place in December of that year. The granite pillars at the end of the drive, each bearing the inscription 'Taylor Manse' were left unchanged, by agreement between Taylor and Pike. Pike had mentioned to Taylor that he wanted them removed and replaced with red granite pillars bearing his own name. But, Taylor flatly refused the request. Ergo, it has always been known and referred to as Taylor Manse. The story goes that Taylor offered Pike a very big discount on the first year's lease in exchange for leaving the Taylor Manse pillars in place. It was subsequently written into the lease that the pillars were to remain unchanged, as a condition of each exchange of the house for a period no less than one hundred years. And so it has been ever since, throughout each lessee's residency there."

"Lessees? Do you mean to tell me that I'm the first owner of the house since the Reverend Taylor, or his heirs? Everyone else who ever lived there was only leasing the place?" Wade asked.

"Yes, that's right. And, it has been empty for the past twenty-five years and went up for sale for the first time ever, back in January this year."

"So, that explains the amount of work I need to do there; why it was so run down. But-Taylor can't still be alive after one hundred and twenty-five years. So, who's been collecting the lease payments all these past years, and who owned it prior to me? My paperwork on the house merely states that I bought it from the TRI Group. All the details were handled by the bank, so I never met the seller."

"Dolph smiled, and replied, "Taylor Realty Investment Group."

Wade frowned.

"O-kaaay, so *who* comprises the group?"

"Hiram Taylor, the Reverend Michael Mariah Taylor's grandson. He's ninety-five years old, lives alone in Milford in a modest home there, and from what I've heard he's broke, or was until you bought his house in February."

"Maybe I'll go talk to this Hiram Taylor too," Wade said with a smirk of a smile. "It could be interesting. Maybe he has some insight into the infamous reputation of my house."

"What you had better do," Dolph warned, "is finish that place up and get out before December. What happens there-every twenty-five years-always happens in December. I'd sure as hell be quit of the place by then."

"Yeah, well that gives me five more months."

"Then again," Dolph said, "maybe it doesn't matter anymore. After all, the manse is out of the Taylor family's hands now. Tell ya what, Robinson. When you get the place finished, you come see me. If your price is right, I'll take it off your hands for you."

"Okay, I'll give you a shot at it. You make me an offer and I'll consider it."

"Good, but don't forget, I get first crack at the place."

"So you think the Taylors had something to do with *all* the murders-over a hundred year period?" Hoolie asked. "That's a bit of a stretch, isn't it?"

"I never said that," Dolph answered.

"You implied it."

"Did I?"

Chapter 2

Wade finished his Miller High Life, warm by the end of his conversation with Dolph Kravitz, and departed Hooligan's with a sense of dread. He wasn't a man easily spooked by ghost stories, haunted houses, and the like, but when such gobbledygook pertained to his own house—he took notice.

He hadn't bothered to go to the courthouse to verify Dolph's information about the four groups of murders supposed to have taken place in his living room. He believed Dolph's story. After all, a one hundred and twenty-five-year-old house could have such a history, and it surely wasn't the only such house that had seen four murders over its lifetime. But, what was really hard to believe was that all four groups of murders were carbon copies of each other, each involved the disappearance of one of the residents, and they were evenly spaced out every twenty-five years. *Too weird*, Wade thought, as he headed for Milford. *Maybe Hiram Taylor can fill in some of the blanks for me.*

As he drove down State Route 27, Wade picked his cell phone up off the seat beside him and phoned directory assistance for Hiram Taylor's phone number. Luckily, it was listed and he had the operator connect him directly. The phone rang twice before a deep voice came on the line. "I don't want whatever it is you're selling, so take this number off your list."

"Mr. Taylor? I'm not selling anything, sir."

"No, then who are you?"

"My name is Wade Robinson, sir, and..."

"You bought my house, and now you've heard the stories about it and you want to back out. Does that about sum it up?"

"Well, yes I am the Wade Robinson who bought your home, but I'm not calling to back out of the deal. I just want to meet with you and talk about the history of the manse. I have a few questions about it that I think I should have the answers to, if I'm expected to live there."

"No one expects you to live there. That's up to you. It's your choice."

"Well, yes I know that, but still..."

"Very well, come on then. The address is 47 Lincoln Road. It's a yellow Cape Cod with white and green trim. Lincoln is off 27 to the right, as soon as you enter Milford."

Wade continued the ten-mile drive to Milford and had no trouble spotting Lincoln Road or Hiram Taylor's Cape Cod. He parked at the curb in front of the house and then sat and stared at the house for a minute or two, wondering if he really wanted to go through with this or not. Finally, he took a deep breath

and headed up the walk to the front door. As he arrived, the door swung open slowly and a tall, thin man, slightly hunched with age, stood before him.

"You must be Robinson," was all Hiram said, but as he said it, he stepped aside and motioned for Wade to come in.

Once inside, Wade replied, "Yes, I'm Wade..."

"Well come on, Robinson. We'll sit in the living room and you can ask your questions, but don't expect much, because I don't know much about that place. I never lived there you know; I owned it for only a while after my father died."

"What was your father's name and when did he die?"

"His name was Horatio and he died in 1975."

"And he never lived in the manse either?"

"No he did not. My grandfather built the place and then leased it out almost immediately. He moved here to Milford after the Pikes moved into the manse."

"When did your grandfather die?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" Hiram asked, abruptly barking out the question.

"I don't know; I'm just trying to fill in all the blanks."

"Well, we assume he died in 1918 when he disappeared, but we have no proof of that. My father was thirty years old at the time; I was just eight years old. I really don't remember much about my grandfather."

"He disappeared—under what circumstances?"

"There were no circumstances. He just hired a jitney to Buffalo Brook one day and was gone. The last person who ever saw him was the jitney driver, who said he dropped my grandfather off at the pillars in front of the manse. Poof, just like that, he was gone. No one ever saw him again."

"Huh—Have you ever visited the manse?"

"Nope, never. My father took care of whatever the place needed up until the time he died. I hired a manager through the bank to handle everything there, including maintenance, leasing, and whatever else needed attention. I've never had anything to do with the place other than to live off of the proceeds of the leases."

"And after the orphanage affair it never leased again?"

"After the orphanage murders I never tried to lease it again. I just had the bank pay the taxes and shut off the services to the place. I had them hire an exterminating company to keep it pest free over the years, and of course, a cleaning crew to clean up after the first mess and then the mess Joe Bishop made killing Mrs. Sellers there. I never figured to outlive my savings, but I did, so I finally put the place on the market."

"Lucky me."

"Yes, lucky you."

"Have you any idea why what has happened in that house has taken place?"

"I assume you mean the regularity of the murders and the fact that they are all pretty much the same scenario each time they happen, right? All family members slain and the head of household gone missing—each occurrence twenty-five years after the previous event. That's what you want to explain, right?"

"Yes, I guess it is."

"Well, good luck. I've never been able to figure it out. It means nothing to me, nor did it mean anything to my father."

"What about to your grandfather? He built the place, and then abandoned it. Do you know why?"

"I know the family version of why. It may be true, maybe not, but it's what I was told. It seems that Michael got carried away with the construction of the manse, overspending his funding and leaving nothing left for the church he had intended to build. It always seemed strange to me though that he didn't build the church first. But then, having elected not to do so, it seemed even stranger that he would build a manse that he must have known would break the bank."

"Yes, I had the very same thought about why he didn't build the church first too," Wade replied.

"Then you knew about the church? How? Who have you been talking to?"

"An old mortician by the name of..."

"Oh, I know," Hiram said, cutting Wade off, "Uncle Adolph."

"Uncle Adolph?"

"Yes, my mother's brother, Adolph Kravitz. Where did you run into him?"

"At a bar named Hooligan's. He told me all the stories about the manse and swore they were all true. I wondered how he knew so much about it all."

"He made it his business to know all about it. In fact, he tried to get his hands on the manse after my father died. My mother had predeceased my father, so she was out of the picture, and when my father passed away and it was discovered that he had left no will, Dolph tried to get the deed transferred into his name. I guess he thought that I'd let it slide since it was well known that I wanted nothing to do with the place. What he hadn't counted on was the fact that I needed the manse's lease income for my survival. He didn't know I had lost my business to the large box stores."

"Really, what business were you in?"

"I had a small hardware store, here in Milford. I couldn't compete with the big boys though, and I'd been running in the red the two years prior to my father's death. The income from

the manse was truly a lifesaver for me, but it sure pissed off Dolph when I invoked my right to its inheritance."

"Huh-I wonder why he didn't buy it when you put it on the market this past January."

"Because I made sure he didn't know about it. He burned that bridge back when he tried to steal it away from me. I instructed the bank to sell the property, but to advertise it as a fixer-upper in carpentry, building, and real estate periodicals only. I knew I'd find a buyer through those magazines and that Dolph would never see the ads. And guess what? It worked; along came you."

"Yeah, then along came me, the proverbial sucker."

"Only if you plan to stay in the manse. Fix it up before December, hold onto it until January, and then sell it. You do know about December, don't you?"

"Yes, Dolph told me about December, and now I know why. He's trying to scare me into selling the place to him, isn't he? Did I tell you he offered to buy it from me? He's still after it. I wonder why?"

"I don't know; it's no longer an orphanage. That's the only reason I thought he might have wanted it back then, but do me a favor; don't sell it to him. Don't even let him know when you're ready to sell. Just put it up for sale silently; no signs on the property and no local advertising."

"Okay, I'll do it that way for a while, but if it doesn't sell I'll have to see what he has to offer. So, what has the orphanage got to do with why Dolph would want the place?"

"Because he was an orphan himself before my grandfather Taylor arranged for his adoption by my mother's parents. I had thought that maybe he was interested in owning the orphanage for that reason, but I have no idea why he'd want it now."

"If your grandfather Taylor disappeared in 1918 then he must have arranged for Dolph's adoption sometime before that. How the hell old is Dolph anyway?"

"I don't know for sure, but he's younger than I am, and I'm ninety-five. Michael arranged for the adoption the year he disappeared and Dolph was just a small child at the time, no older than three or four years. So, I guess he's about ninety years old, or thereabouts."

"Any idea where he came from; I mean do you know how he was orphaned, or who his parents were?"

"Nope, I've no idea at all."

"He told me his father was a mortician, that his father buried the Pike family. Could that be true?"

"Yes that could be true. My grandfather Kravitz, my mother's father, was a mortician. Dolph learned the trade from him. However, like I said, that was his adoptive father, not his

real father. That sheds no light on who his real parents were, or how he became orphaned. All of that though is just history that means nothing today. The important thing for you to remember is that December is coming and this is year twenty-five since the last murders at the manse. Don't take any chances, Mr. Robinson; plan on being gone from there by December."

Wade pulled into the driveway and stopped between the granite pillars bearing the Taylor Manse inscriptions. He had learned a lot today about the gory history of this place he now called home. He also had a magazine full of ammunition to use against Annie's arguments for staying here permanently, or even past November. The downside of today's enlightenment was that he still had many unanswered questions. *Does it really matter?* he asked himself, as he stared at the weathered pillars. *We'll be gone before December anyway.*

He started to drive on, and then the thought occurred to him, *What about the people I sell the place to? Do I warn them that they need to leave for the month of December every twenty-five years? That'd kill the sale, if they believed me in the first place. But, if I don't tell them, and twenty-five years later, they're murdered, I'd be responsible.* With that thought, Wade decided that he *did* have a need to find out all he could about this house and its history. Most importantly perhaps, he needed to know why Dolph appeared to be interested in owning it.

When he entered the house through the kitchen door, one very upset wife greeted him. He had been gone for hours without so much as a phone call home to explain himself, and apparently, it was now time to pay the piper.

"Where in Sam Hill have you been?" Annie asked, shooting a stern glare his way. She sat, her glare unfaltering, tapping her fingers on the kitchen tabletop, as she awaited an explanation.

Wade pulled up a chair and sat down, trying to force a smile, but falling short.

"I started out to have a beer, just one beer at Hooligan's, but along the way, I had a little accident." Wade started into the whole story of the logging truck mishap. When he finished, Anne said, "Wow, so that's what all those sirens in the distance were. God, Wade, you were lucky to come out of that alive."

"Yeah, I know, damn lucky. Anyway, I still needed that beer, and by then even worse than before, so I went on to Hooligan's. I know I should've come straight home, but I didn't. Then, once I got to Hooligan's, I met a man there who knew a whole lot about the history of this house. We got to talking..."

"And you couldn't call to tell me you'd be late?"

"I didn't know I was going to be late until he got into his stories. Then, I just lost track of time and when he'd finished telling me all about this place I took a drive to Milford..."

"Milford?"

"Let me finish, Annie-You're gonna want to hear this, and then you'll understand."

"Okay, go on then, but it better be good. I needed you back here to pick up paint before the hardware closed. Now, it's too late."

"Okay, I'll just lay it on you. This house has been the scene of several murders dating all the way back to 1905. Not only that, but it's been the scene of several disappearances too, including the original owner in 1918."

For the longest moment, Annie simply stared at Wade, her mouth agape. When she was finally able to speak again, all that issued forth was "Murders-here-in our house?"

"We'll see if you still want to call it *our house* after I tell you everything I've learned about it today."

Wade went into the whole story of Taylor Manse, as told to him by Dolph Kravitz and Hiram Taylor. Anne hung on every word, and when Wade finished, she said, "So we have until December to finish up with the place and get out. Is that what I'm to understand from all this?"

"That's pretty much it in a nutshell," Wade replied, "unless you want to risk..."

"Have you verified all of this poppycock anywhere, like at the courthouse, or with anyone who might not have a stake in this place, like maybe a local historian of some sort?"

"What, you don't believe it?"

"I love this place, Wade. I'm not going to cut and run from here on the word of a couple of old geezers telling old wives' tales. Who knows what their motivations are?"

"I knew it. I knew you were paying too much attention to the décor here to be thinking of this place as just another flip. I'm right, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are right. I need a place to call home for once in our lives. I want to start a family before it's too late. We've spent the last ten years going from one fixer-upper to the next, never planting any roots anywhere, and quite frankly, Wade, I'm tired of it."

"But that's how I earn my living. You know that."

"And you can go on earning your living like that, but with the next place, not this one. We need a home base, a place to start a family and be a member of a community. The life we've been living was fine when we were in our twenties, but now it has to change. I want a home of my own-and this is going to be it. No unsubstantiated ghost stories are going to drive me out."

"You want proof. Okay, I'll do the research and if it bears out what I've been told, we're flipping this place before December."

"And if it doesn't?"

"If it doesn't I'll consider staying; if we can afford it."

Having agreed to Annie's terms, yet quite uneasy about it, Wade set out early the following morning to prove his case. By the end of the morning, he had all the proof he would need to convince Anne that flipping the manse was in their best interest, and that being out before December was probably crucial to their ultimate survival. According to all the newspaper accounts he had unearthed at the library, all the stories he had been told were true-in every bloody detail.

Beyond confirming what he had already been told, what Wade found really interesting was what he learned about the Reverend Michael Mariah Taylor. From an article dated December 7, 1877, he discovered that Taylor had arrived in Buffalo Brook six days prior, from nearby Milford, and had gone straight from the train to a realty office where he inquired about buying land for a church. He paid cash for the land the manse now stands on and then immediately hired a contractor to build not a church, but the manse. Not only did he pay the contractor in cash as well, but in advance and in full of the amount agreed upon for the completed job. Then, the business of the manse settled, he departed Buffalo Brook, as quickly as he had come.

From later articles, Wade learned that Taylor did not return to Buffalo Brook until the completion of the manse in 1880, never once coming to town in the interim to check on the contractor's progress. When he did finally return, as Wade had been told, he moved in briefly before putting the place up for lease. Major Ulysses Melrose Pike was the immediate taker, moving into the manse in December of 1880 with his wife Marie, and their twelve-year-old daughter, Ruth.

From that point on until 1900, Taylor Manse was apparently not worthy of comment, as Wade could find no mention of it in any newspaper article of the times. Apparently, the mystique had worn off, as the Pikes enjoyed a very normal existence there. Then, in 1900, it made headlines again. Ruth had married in 1891 to Lewis Morris, and by 1900, they had two lovely daughters and they were all living happily together in the Taylor Manse with Ruth's parents. It was March, the circus was in town, and the whole family had planned an outing to the Big Top. Lewis had come down with the flu though, and was bedridden on the day of the outing. Rather than disappoint the girls, Ulysses and Marie took their granddaughters to the circus as planned, leaving Ruth at home to care for Lewis. When they returned from the circus that evening, both Ruth and Lewis were missing from the manse.

There was no evidence of foul play; they were just gone. An article Wade found from two months after the fact stated that Ruth and Lewis were still unaccounted for and there were no leads to their whereabouts.

This last bit of information, which neither Dolph nor Hiram had revealed to him, had gotten him to wondering if there were other incidents that had gone unmentioned. As he ventured forth through newspaper after newspaper, he had come to the Pike murders in 1905, and then finally to the account of Reverend Taylor's disappearance in 1918 and the jitney driver's account of having dropped him at the front gate, apparently the last person ever to see him. What Wade had not known was that the manse had stood empty since the Pike family murders in 1905. What he also hadn't known that this article had pointed out was that during that thirteen-year period, four teenagers had gone missing there. Twice, upon two separate occasions five years apart, two adventurous young men had decided to explore the vacant mansion. All four boys had vanished within its walls, and in both instances, there had been no evidence of foul play or a struggle of any kind. They had just vanished, permanently and completely.

Wade knew what he would find if he kept reading. He would eventually come to the Simmons murders, then the Morgan murders, and then finally the orphanage massacre. What tragedies he would find in between each of these horrible events he had no idea, nor did he want to know. He had read enough; the history of the manse was even worse than he had been led to believe.

More than satisfied that the legends of the manse were true, what he wanted to explore now would take him back to Milford, back to Hiram Taylor's house. It was something he had read in the last article. In describing Taylor's disappearance, the writer had referred to the Reverend Michael Taylor, as "a bachelor clergyman with no known heirs to the manse." The article, written in 1918, postdated Hiram's birth by eight years. Something didn't fit. He may have been a bachelor in 1918, but he had a thirty-year-old son and an eight-year-old grandson to inherit the manse. Maybe the author of the article had been misinformed, but then again-maybe not.

The door to the tiny Cape Cod swung open after Wade's third round of knocking.

"You again," Hiram said. "What brings you back here again, Robinson?"

"An article I read. Can I come in?"

"Suit yourself, but I haven't got all day, so make it quick."

Once seated in the living room, Hiram asked, "So what's this about an article?"

"An old article from the Buffalo Brook Gazette dated 1918, in which the author refers to your grandfather as a bachelor clergyman with no heirs to the Taylor Manse. Can you explain that?"

"The bachelor part, yes I believe I can explain that. The rest is just a mistake on the part of the author. As I told you, my father inherited the manse in 1918 when my grandfather vanished. He had no interest in living there and the lease money before the Pike murders had been good, so he started leasing it out once again. But you know that, so what else was it you wanted to know?"

"From what the article said I would assume that your grandmother died prior to 1918, but still, calling Michael a bachelor rather than a widower is rather strange, wouldn't you say?"

"No, it's not strange at all. He was a bachelor. He never married, and before you ask, no my father wasn't a bastard. My grandfather adopted my father from an orphanage."

"Adopted him? Why would an unwed man, a clergyman no less, adopt a kid from an orphanage? That makes no sense at all."

"No it doesn't, does it? But, that's what happened. I never got the chance to ask him why. After all, I was only..."

"Yeah, I know. You were only eight years old when he disappeared. Funny though..."

Wade stopped to think a minute about something that had just occurred to him.

"Funny though what?" Hiram asked, after the silence grew uncomfortably long.

"Funny though that he seemed to be in the habit of doing that. First, he adopts your father, and then in 1918, right before he disappears, he arranges for the adoption of Dolph by your mother's parents. That's at least twice that we know of."

"And your point is?"

"I don't know what my point is; I'm just fishing for answers. What about you though?"

"What about me?" Hiram asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Any chance your grandfather arranged for your adoption by your parents?"

"How did you know I was adopted?"

"I didn't. I was just thinking out loud-well, did he?"

"From what I was told, yes he did arrange it. My parents wanted a child and my grandfather found me for them at Saint

Avalon Orphanage. My biological parents, I was told, were killed in a house fire."

"Did you ever get curious and try to find out who they were; what your real name is?"

"I thought about checking the records at Saint Avalon."

"And?"

"And-I found that there is no Saint Avalon; not now, not then, nor has there ever been."

Chapter 3

As interesting as the history of the Taylor Manse was, and as interested in both the manse's history and the Taylor family history as he was, Wade's main concerns left him little more time to dwell on the events of the past. He had his future to think about, and that meant finishing the rehab before December and then flipping the house quickly. The last thing Annie and he needed was for the history of this place to catch up with them, putting their investment in jeopardy, or more importantly, their lives.

Although disappointed over the prospect of having to flip yet another potential home, Annie agreed that they should do as they had originally planned and move on to another place. After Wade had spelled out all he had learned about the manse and the Taylor family, and after taking time to think it over, she had agreed that she could probably never feel at ease here anyway.

Her plans for a permanent home now put on hold; Anne abandoned her decorating schemes and dove into the mundane chore of prepping walls and woodwork for priming and painting. Wade continued the heavy work where needed, and eventually came to the task of removing the old living room carpet. With the main entry hall and dining room both displaying beautiful random width pegged floors, he couldn't fathom why the living room had been carpeted in the first place. Beneath its outdated gray Berber, he was sure he would find equally beautiful floors in there as well. In today's marketplace, the hardwood floors were a feature he did not want to leave to the shoppers' imaginations.

Wade began by carefully removing the toe strips along each wall and freeing the carpet from its tack strips. Then, as he began rolling up the carpet, he smiled at what lay beneath the padding. It was just as he had expected, and he began working feverishly to expose the whole floor. Halfway across the room he stopped, as ugly dark brown stains revealed themselves. Much to his dismay, the whole center of the room was stained with the ugly brown blotches. His mind raced back to the accounts of the murders that had taken place in this room, and he knew immediately what he was looking at. If he had been harboring any doubts about the stories he had read about this place, those doubts now quickly evaporated. "Blood stains," he mumbled, and then a brass seam in the flooring caught his attention. *What the hell's that?* he wondered, as he began working to uncover the remainder of the seam, which abruptly turned at a right angle to itself and continued away under the carpet. He pushed, shoved, and rolled the carpet until he had uncovered what the carpet had

been concealing for at least the past twenty-five years. In the middle of the living room floor was a wooden trapdoor, framed in brass trim, with a large brass ring inset at one end.

Momentarily taken aback by his discovery, Wade lowered himself to the floor and sat down staring at the trapdoor. *Crazy place for a root cellar*, he thought, reaching out and lifting the brass ring from its recess, and then letting it fall back into place. Getting to his feet he bent down and lifted the ring again, placing his finger through it, and giving the ring a gentle tug. It did not budge. *Heavy, or stuck?* he wondered, tugging a little harder. Still the trapdoor would not lift from the floor. Wade bent his knees to the task and gave the ring all the might he could muster, and still it refused to open. He straightened up, backed away a few steps, and studied the situation.

Again the thought came to mind that the middle of the living room floor was a strange place for a root cellar, which is all he could imagine this door could possibly lead to. After all, he knew well where the stairwell to the basement was, and that thought started him wondering if perhaps there were two entrances to the basement; the one off the kitchen that he knew about already, and perhaps this trapdoor led there as well. He had never noticed another set of stairs while he was in the basement, but perhaps over in a dark corner along one of the stone walls it may have been lurking in the shadows.

A quick trip to the basement revealed only the one staircase and no sign overhead of the trapdoor in the living room floor. But, it was a big basement, and broken up into several rooms, so he wasn't sure exactly where above him the living room actually was. Back upstairs, he began pacing off his route from the trapdoor to the basement stairs; twelve steps to the hall and then left fifteen steps to the top of the stairs. He went back down and got under the stairwell directly below the head of the stairs and paced off his route in the basement; fifteen steps down the hall and then right ten steps—his route was stopped dead by a solid stone wall, two steps short of his goal.

"That trapdoor leads down to the other side of this wall," he said to himself, reaching out and feeling the solid rock barrier in front of him. "I wonder if there's a way around it, or is this one of the foundation walls?" A quick exploration of the wall, from end to end, proved it one of the foundation walls. Theoretically, there should be nothing but earth and rock on the other side.

Wade rushed over to his makeshift tool bench, grabbed a pry bar from one of the drawers, and headed back upstairs. As he cut

through the kitchen, he ran smack into Annie, who had just come down from the second floor to clean her roller and brush.

"Hey mister, watch where you're going. You just about got a face full of paint."

"Sorry, Annie. Come on, look what I found in the living room."

Wade stepped around her and hurried to the living room, Annie fast on his heels, her curiosity piqued by Wade's urgency. When they entered the room, Annie stopped and threw her hands to her face.

"Oh my God," she said, "bad idea. What *is* that all over the floor?"

"That's not what I brought you in here to see," Wade replied.

"Yeah, but what *is* that?" she asked again, her eyes fixed on the brown stains. Then, it hit her. "Oh no, don't tell me...That's blood, isn't it?"

"Yeah, blood stains. Apparently the stories are true, but look," he said, pointing to the trapdoor. "Look at that."

Anne looked to where Wade was pointing, and asked, "A trapdoor?"

"Yeah."

"Where does it go; the basement?"

"No, I already checked that from down in the basement. I couldn't get it open to see where it leads, but it seems to lead down to behind the west foundation wall."

"Is it locked, or just stuck?"

"If it's locked, it's locked from the other side; there's no locking mechanism on this side."

"Then it must be stuck. How could it be locked from the other side?"

"Well, it could be locked from the other side if it leads to somewhere there's another entrance to, otherwise I'd say you're right; it's just stuck."

Wade got down on his knees and placed the blade of the pry bar into the opening beneath the brass ring. He looked up to Annie, and said, "Here goes. Now we'll see where this goes." He put all his strength into forcing down on the pry bar until the pain in his hands was almost too much to bear, but the door would not budge. "Damn, that's tough," he mumbled to Anne. Then, leaning directly over the bar, he put all his weight behind it, but instead of the door popping open, as he expected, the pry bar bent to the floor. "Damn!" he barked. "That's some kinda stuck."

"Or locked from the other side," Anne suggested again. "What now?"

"I don't know. If it is locked from the other side, then there must be another way in. I guess I'll go outside and search around the grounds for another entrance. What do you think?"

"Go for it, and while you do that I'll fix us some sandwiches. If you do find another way in though, come and get me before you go in-if you can get in. This is kinda cool; like exploring an old castle's dungeon or something."

"Yeah, it is kinda neat-Hey, do you know where my Coleman lantern is?"

"As far as I know it's down in the basement with the rest of our camping gear we haven't used in years. We keep toting it from house to house and never use it anymore, not like..."

"I know, I know, but do you think you can find it for me and make sure it's full of fuel. If I do find a way into whatever this is, we may need it. I doubt if there's gonna be any light down there."

"Sure, anything else?"

"Yeah, you might try lighting it; just to be sure it still works. But we had two, didn't we?"

Anne nodded.

"Well, then we better try them both out, if you can find them both."

"Oh, I'll find them all right. You just find a way in there. There could be treasure down there-or something valuable."

"Right-dream on. Maybe it's the Reverend Taylor's church building funds," Wade said, snickering.

"Whatever, just get started."

Wade had walked the grounds before and had never seen anything like what he imagined he was looking for now. But, he knew the one place he hadn't explored was the old carriage house, with its crumbling walls and ominous concave roof. It hadn't looked safe to even enter the structure, let alone explore its interior. His long-range plan for its rehabilitation had been to level it and build a new garage, but with December looming ahead, those plans would now be put on a back burner.

He stopped just outside the double cross-buck doors and wondered if he really wanted to risk going inside this dilapidated building, especially on a lark such as this. After all, he was in the construction business and he knew an unsafe building when he saw one. This carriage house was the epitome of unsafe. Wade took a deep breath, and thought, *Well here goes*, and then he walked past the opening created by the half-hinged right door and entered. He stood just inside the opening for a moment, allowing his eyes to adjust to the dimmer light of the interior. It didn't take long for his eyes to adjust, as there

was ample light entering through the sagging roof and the missing slats of the outside walls.

The main garage area proved to be empty, but what caught his attention, almost immediately, was a railing at the backside of the room. He walked across the earthen floor and peered down a wooden staircase on the other side of the rail. A *basement*? he wondered, trying to come up with a good reason why a carriage house would have a cellar. Failing to come up with even a clue, Wade reached his foot down to the top step and tested its soundness by gradually putting some of his weight on it. It held. *So far so good*, he thought, and then he transferred a little more weight to it. Suddenly, he heard a snap beneath his foot and he grabbed for the railing, just as the staircase fell away with a crash to the cellar floor. Just as he was thinking how lucky he had been, he heard a loud crack overhead and knew instinctively what it meant. Without wasting the time to look up, he jumped down to what he hoped would be the relative safety of the cellar, rolling away from the opening, as he hit the floor below. As he rolled to a stop, he heard above him the terrible crashing crunch of the roof coming down. The cellar filled with dust, and except for a creaking from above, quiet reigned once again. He remained motionless, praying that the cellar ceiling would hold up under the weight of the fallen roof. If not, his exploration of this subterranean room was all but over. Realizing he was vulnerable where he was, he moved quickly to the closest wall, hopefully out of harm's way.

Although the cellar was dark, there was just enough light coming down the fallen stairwell to navigate through the slowly settling dust. Staying along the wall Wade looked for another way out, and just around the first corner, he came to a heavy wooden door. With his eyes burning and his mouth and throat choked with the bitter taste of ancient dust, he fumbled for a knob, or latch that might allow him access to whatever lay beyond the old door; hopefully, an escape route. Just as he managed to locate and throw open the door latch, his cell phone began ringing. *Who the hell?* he thought, as he pulled the phone from his pants pocket.

"Hello, who's this?" he snapped.

"Wade, oh thank God. Are you all right?" Annie asked, hysterically. "Are you in the carriage house? I heard the crash of it falling and then I realized..."

"Yes, I'm all right for now, but I'm *under* the carriage house, not in it. I found a cellar beneath it and just as I started down the stairs into it, all hell broke loose. The stairs fell, and then that must have been just the shove the roof needed to give way, because it came crashing down right after."

"Who should I call; the fire department, or who? You can't get out of there yourself can you?"

"I don't know. Don't call anyone yet. I'm okay for now and I just found a tunnel that seems to lead back in the general direction of the house. It may lead back to that trapdoor in the living room for all I know. I'm gonna try to follow it and see where it leads me. It's pretty dark down here, but I think I can feel my way along."

"You be careful, you hear?"

"Yeah, I hear you."

"Did you take a flashlight with you? You did, didn't you?"

"No, I wasn't that smart, but I've got most of a pack of matches and I just spotted a stack of old newspapers down here. Maybe I can make a torch. Look, I'm gonna turn off the phone now to save the battery in case I can't find a way out. Give me twenty minutes and if you haven't heard from me by then, call the fire department and have them try to uncover that stairway opening to the cellar I mentioned before. If I can't get out the way I'm going, I'll go back there."

Wade clicked off his phone and walked over to the stack of newspapers he had just spotted a moment ago. He knelt down and picked up the top paper, noting the date on the old yellowed front page. *Jeezle, December 29, 1905*. The headline caught his eye next.

MAJOR ULYSSES PIKE MISSING - FAMILY FOUND MURDERED

Wade stared in disbelief at the headline, wanting to read the rest of the story, but realizing that he didn't have the time to waste now. He folded the paper and tucked it into his shirtfront; then he picked up a second paper, rolled it tightly into a tube, and lit it with a match. Gently blowing on the flame to coax it into burning brightly enough to serve his purpose, he entered and began following the passageway toward the manse.

As he proceeded, he took note of the fact that this was no haphazardly built tunnel, but very well constructed, with heavy oak timbers supporting the earth above. It was not unlike a mineshaft, about six-foot square, dry, and with a very flat, hard-packed earthen floor. About twenty yards down the passage he came to a junction, where the tunnel went both left and right, as well as straight ahead. The cross-passage was identical to the tunnel he had been following in every detail, and suddenly the thought occurred to Wade that this underground system took some serious labor to excavate and shore up. He began to doubt that the contractor that the Reverend Taylor had hired to build the manse had also dug this out. Certainly not in

the three-year's time afforded him between the time Taylor had arrived in Buffalo Brook and purchased the land, and when he finally moved into the manse in 1880. Wade began to wonder if this was indeed part of an old mine that predated Taylor's arrival. Had Taylor known about it beforehand? Was this the reason Taylor had purchased this particular plot of land? If so, why? If this was an old abandoned mine, surely it had played out long before Taylor purchased the land above it. Why else would it have been abandoned, *if indeed it had been a mine?*

Wade had no time for a game of twenty guesses right now, so he forged on, coaxing his flame, and proceeding straight toward what he hoped was the manse and the trapdoor in the living room floor. Another twenty yards brought him to a dead stop at the foot of a wooden staircase-leading down-not up, as he had expected. There was a cold and dank draft rising up the stairs, carrying with it a most unpleasant odor. Instinctively, he backed away, as a certain dread came over him. *Down? That's not right. The living room would be above me, he reasoned. Maybe I should have taken one of those cross-passages.*

Realizing that he was running out of time before Anne would call the fire department, and the smell emitting from down the stairwell growing more noxious by the minute, Wade headed back the way he had come. He figured he had just about enough time remaining to check out one of the two passages he had passed on his way in. Maybe, if he guessed right, he'd find his way out yet, and before the fire department even showed up. What he didn't want to have happen was for the fire department to arrive and come looking for him in these passageways. For now anyway, he wanted to keep the tunnels a secret from everyone except Anne.

When he reached the cross-tunnel he turned left and was surprised to find another tunnel off to the left again, not five yards down the passage. Since this new tunnel would take him back toward the manse again, he turned left into it and proceeded with caution. If there was another staircase going down, he didn't want to stumble down it in the now waning light of his nearly spent torch. Another twenty yards again led him to another set of wooden stairs, this time-going up. "All right," he mumbled, and he began climbing.

Why he did it, he wasn't sure, but as he climbed he counted the steps to the top. There were thirteen in all, something that didn't escape his attention, as the thought of that number sent a shiver up his spine. *Coincidence*, he thought, as he reached up overhead to the feel of wood. His torch had now died and the pitch black of his surroundings filtered in around him. He could see nothing at all, so he began feeling the wooden obstruction above him, fumbling for what he hoped would be a bolt, or latch

that would open what he hoped was the trapdoor in his living room floor. Suddenly, his hand came to rest on an iron bar, bent to a right angle at the end. He pulled back on the short handle and the bar slid back several inches. He put both hands on the wooden ceiling overhead, and pushed up slowly. The ceiling moved and a slim line of light appeared before his eyes. He hadn't opened the lid far enough to see anything yet, but he could hear, and what he heard sent him reeling down the stairs. What he had heard was a woman's voice, screaming frantically, "No, Ulysses, No! Not the children! For God's sake, not the children!" Swallowing his fear, Wade climbed back up the stairs and pushed up on the door, just far enough to see into the room. It was his living room, but not empty and freshly painted, but wallpapered and full of old antique looking furniture. Peeking through the slit, he saw a tall bearded man, knife in hand, grab a small girl by the arm and raise the knife to her throat. The woman, standing helplessly, her hands clasped to her face, screamed again, "No, Ulysses, not Beth too!" Then, it was over in a crimson flash and Ulysses turned his attention to the woman.

Wade let the trapdoor drop back in place, turned, and bolted down the stairs, missing the last few steps and falling to the floor of the passage. He got up out of the dirt and ran, smacking headlong into a wall, blacked out, and fell unconscious to the floor. When he awoke, just moments later, he heard the sound of heavy footsteps coming down the stairs at the end of the passage. He stood shakily, turned right, and proceeded down the left wall, feeling for where it would turn and become the wall to the original passage he had entered from the cellar. Finding it, he turned left around the corner and ran for the cellar door. When he reached it, he stopped and listened for the sound of the footsteps he had heard coming down from the living room. There they were, crunching on the dry earth behind him, but going away from him. Then, he heard the sound of them change from crunching dry ground to thudding down on wood. *He's going down those first steps I found*, Wade thought. He listened carefully, and then said, "They're going down those stairs." It was two sets of footsteps he was hearing-not just one.

Wade wasted no time exiting the passage into the cellar. He flew through the old door, relieved to see that the cellar ceiling had not caved in under the roof's weight. Working his way to the debris-filled area where the cellar steps once stood, he sat down to await the arrival of the fire department. He closed his eyes and prayed that whomever had been behind him in the passageway wouldn't turn around and come his way. His heart nearly stopped, as a hand came to rest on his shoulder.

"There you are," a voice said from behind him. "Where the hell were you a minute ago?"

Wade turned and looked up to a smiling, dust-covered face beneath a fire helmet.

"I've been lookin' all over for you," the fireman said. "Where the hell were you?"

Wade smiled back, and replied, "Over there in a closet of some sort. I was afraid the ceiling might fall, and that seemed like the safest place to wait. Then I heard you out here, but in all this dust and dark, I couldn't find you."

"Well, I'm here now. Let's get you up and out of here."