

Chapter 1

He wound his way through the scrub trees, blackberry briars, and thistles, paying no mind to them pulling at his clothes. This trophy would complete his collection of victims buried on Killer's Knob. The last to lie in this barren Kentucky patch of ground. The woman, though small, grew heavier with each step.

He stopped to douse the lantern before climbing the hill. Dumping her on the ground, he rolled his shoulders to loosen the kinks. He waited 1 his eyes became accustomed to the dark. The full moon flitted in and out of the clouds. He looked at the luminous numbers on his watch: 2:10 AM. Lightning flashed in the west. The storm was coming fast he had less than an hour.

An owl called from a nearby oak. He knew some Native Americans believed owls carried the spirits of the dead. Was she here, watching her murderer preparing to bury her? He shivered at the thought, yet it was not an uncomfortable sensation. With an eye on the thickening storm clouds, he hauled up her corpse and continued climbing the hill. Reaching the top, he shook her off. Her head bounced off a headstone. It didn't matter. She was past feeling.

He surveyed the flat land below him. No lights this time of morning. He must be the only one up. There was only one house within a mile. In the last hundred years, his were the only kills buried in this forsaken ground. He buried his first victim here three years ago. This one would be the last. Tomorrow he would seek another graveyard, a piece of ground where the weeds grew thick and the dead lay forgotten.

He made his first kill the night after Buck Olsen was elected sheriff of Beaufort County. He was 19, just starting out. Even as a teenager, he was fascinated with serial killers.

At the house in the valley, moonlight glinted off the windshield of Buck Olson's patrol car. Since Buck's wife died last fall, he didn't sleep well or much. The sheriff kept to home unless there was an accident on Route 5 or one deputy called in sick. A quiet place to live, Beaufort County never saw much action except a few druggies and a moonshiner or two. Five years ago, a guy from Indianapolis robbed the local bank. He didn't get far. Buck chased him down and had him locked up before the FBI arrived. Now the guy was cooling his heels in the federal prison at Terre Haute, Indiana.

Crime seldom visited Beaufort County. When it did, Buck was on it like a chicken on a June bug.

But Buck didn't know Killer's Knob had become this man's private burial ground. The girl's murderer had studied the great ones—Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy and others, careful to focus on the mistakes they made and how they were captured.

Most of them did something stupid. They buried their victims in shallow graves, or left behind clues, taunting the police. One serial killer, Gary Ridgway, dubbed the Green River killer eluded capture for many years. He couldn't understand how Ridgway could dump his kills in the Green River and operate for so long without being caught.

Finding the right for her spot, he sank in his shovel into the ground and paused. Yes, this was the place for her. She would complete the circle. He dug for 30 minutes. Softened by the recent rains, the earth turned over easily. He had just hit what he thought was a child's bone when a light winked on at the back of Buck's house. He froze, though the sheriff couldn't have seen him even if clouds weren't covering the moon. He stood stock still, his eyes fixed on the light.

Another light came on in Buck's bathroom. Three minutes later, it blinked off and the one in the bedroom went out soon after.

With the house dark again, he kept digging. What he thought a bone turned out to be a root with its sheath rotted off. Working for another five minutes, he uncovered a small skeletal hand. Moving the shovel to the left of it, he dug deeper. He glanced at the sky; lightning lit the area five miles to the south. The grave wasn't deep enough, but rain was coming and would catch him before he made it back to the truck. He was forgetting something? What was it? He couldn't think. He racked his brain. Shrugging, he rolled her into the grave. A vague feeling that he should say something came over him. But what? He was not a religious man. They used to drag him to church every Sunday, that is until he turned 13 and refused to go.

His victims were girls who wouldn't be missed for months, if at all. He took them from the road, bus station or train depot. He wore disguises and chatted them up to make them feel comfortable. He weaseled from them the details of their lives. If they were travelling with someone, he'd leave them alone. Pinky was unusual. He didn't find out until after he abducted her. If her father didn't hear from her every night, he contacted local law enforcement where he estimated she would be. When he found this out, it was too late to turn back. Now Pinky would wander no more.

Pinky. He wondered why her dad called her that. Before the experiment started, she'd talked about her father like he was some kind of saint: honest, God-fearing, strict but kind, back and knees half busted from years of crop farming, struggling to support his family. Pinky his only child, and he wanted more and better for her.

As Pinky's killer stood over her grave, he brushed off the thought of anyone finding her. Rumors had long floated around that this hill being haunted. He wasn't worried; he didn't believe in spooks. He was scarier than any ghost. Besides, no one had been on Killer's Knob in years. He felt safe.

What should he say? He knew no Bible verses. Even if he did, her murderer saying something from God's Book over the body of his victim didn't seem right. Wait. Yesterday that preacher gave him his business card. He took it from his shirt pocket. Straining to make out the words, he leaned over until his nose almost touching the card's surface. He mumbled the pastor's name, the name of the church, and the rest written there. Maybe since the card touched the preacher's fingers, possibly those words would get to God. Thunder like a gunshot made him jump. Lightning flashed over the ridge, illuminating him. Hurrying, he finished covering her.

The wind picked up, rushing over him. It felt cool and refreshing. Thunder crashed. The light in Buck's house came on again. He must get out of there quick. Vaguely he heard Buck's dog howling. Pinky number eight, the completion of his graves on Killer's Knob. He lingered, taking time to smooth the sodden dirt that topped her grave, and then pushing a big rock down into the mud to mark it. The headstone said the kid buried next to her was named Stephen. Now he had someone like a mother to follow him into eternity. No others were to be buried here. Tomorrow he would search for a fresh burial ground.

He looked at Pinky's grave one last time and then grabbed his shovel he scurried down the hill. Nothing else to be done. He was halfway to his truck when the rain came. Drops big and heavy like liquid bullets pounding him. By the time he reached the pickup, he was soaked. Even his boots were fulling of water. Cold even on this hot night, the rain refreshed him. After emptying his boots, he sat listening to it drumming on the hood.

He closed his eyes, thinking about her. He saw her this afternoon hitchhiking on Route 5, just south of Barstow. It had been a few months since his last kill. Time for another. She was slim, almost willowy, and young, Surly just into her 20s. Her face was heart shaped, her complexion

rosy and her hair strawberry blond. She was the kind he looked for. His heart sped up. His breathing came in spurts. She was the one she was his next kill.

He expected her to stick out her thumb. She didn't. She kept her eyes on the ground when he passed her. Cautious, he liked that. It made the game more fun. He topped the hill and lost sight of her.

He'd taken a chance. A mile up the road, he pulled to the side, faking a breakdown. On weekday afternoons like this, traffic was light on this stretch of road. He knew she wouldn't have to wait long for a ride. He might lose her if he did; but that was part of the game. Then he would start the hunt over again. He knew in the eyes of the public, a young girl travelling alone didn't pose the same danger as a man. Also, she would feel comfortable if there was a woman or a child in a car that stopped for her. He had to appear nonthreatening to her. Likewise, if anyone saw them together, he'd be forced to let her live and hunt elsewhere.

He got out and popped the hood. He didn't have to wait long. One car passed, going the other way. He kept his head down, peeking through the opening between the hood and windshield. The dark glasses and fake beard concealed his appearance. Coming over a slight rise in the highway, she entered his field of vision. Seeing him, she hesitated. She walked forward, starting to cross the road. "Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly," he murmured under his breath. He straightened up and grinned at her with his best Ted Bundy smile. Some women considered Bundy handsome, that is until they looked into his eyes. Bundy's smile was alluring, his eyes cold and hard as stones.

"Know anything about motors?" he called. "She was running fine 'til I topped the ridge."

"No, I'm sorry, I don't." She slowly walking toward him.

"That makes two of us," he said as he pulled out his cell phone. "Guess I better call for help. Can't be late for my gig tonight."

She stood several feet back, almost to the tailgate, ready to run if she sensed danger. "Your gig? Are you a singer?"

"Drummer and back-up singer," he said, palming the sap with his hands hidden behind the open hood. He stuffed it in the back pocket of his jeans. "Ever hear of Garth Brooks?"

Her face lit up with a big smile. "Garth Brooks! Oh, wow, he's my favorite. You play drums and sing with him?"

"Yeah, and fill in on guitar sometimes," he answered. He straightened up and smiled at her.

"Hey, tell you what. I might be able to get you in the back door to meet Garth if you're in Nashville tonight."

Her smile faded. "There's no way I can make it to Nashville by tonight. It's too far."

"Well I have to be in Nashville by tonight, so you might as well come along." His cell phone rang. Bill collector. Great timing. He hit the end button and held the phone to his ear. He had planned to fake a call. This was better. "Hello? Yeah, Brian? What? No, don't worry, I'll be there. Truck's broke down on Route 5 about a hundred mile away. But if I can't get it fixed in the next hour, I'll... sure, send the chopper. That'd be great. Okay, I'll let you know." He put the phone back on his belt.

"Brian Petrie. He's Garth's stage manager. Good guy, just a little crazy." He grinned at her. "Course, we all are." She smiled shyly. This was taking too long. He tried to think of a way to make a move on her without scaring her off. She did it for him.

"Here, let me take a look," she said. "Dad used to work on engines, and I watched. He got so good at it our farm neighbors had him fixing their tractors. That is if there wasn't too much

wrong with them.” Stepping to the front of the pickup, she stuck her head under the hood. He backed up so she wouldn’t feel threatened and slowly pulled out the sap.

“Sometimes the battery cable comes loo...” He hit her in the back of the head just enough to knock her out. As she fell, he caught her. She was lighter than she looked. He laid her in the truck bed and covered her with a blue tarp. No, that never do. What if she woke up? Running to the front of the truck, he slammed down the hood. Picking her up, he put her on the floor in the passenger side. He lifted her eyelid. Out like a light. He wouldn’t have to tie her up. Grabbing the blue tarp, he covered her up. Jumping in, he started the truck and pulled onto the highway. A mile down the road, he passed a sheriff’s car travelling in the opposite direction. He recognized the driver. Rodney Newen, the sheriff’s chief deputy, going full bore, light bar flashing and siren screaming. Rodney just glanced at the murderer.

When he carried her to his secret room in the basement of the cabin, she was still out cold. He'd take his time with her. Holding her against the wall with one hand, he snapped the first of the four steel rings embedded in the concrete wall around her left ankle. She came to just as he finished restraining her hands. She knew he would kill her. Stepping back, he started setting up the camera. A small apparatus, it could record for hours on just one card. Spreading the tripod's legs, he aimed the lens at her, adjusting and readjusting until he was satisfied. When it was over, he would remove this card and add it to his collection. In times past, he had taken photos, but they didn't capture the excitement and intensity of the kill. Now he could relive each moment exactly. He hit the button, and the red light pulsed.

"What are you doing?" Her voice quivered with fear and dread. "Let me go. Please don't hurt me!" Big teardrops rolled down her flushed cheeks and dripped from her chin. She screamed. "Help, help! Somebody please help me!"

He grinned at her, his eyes cold as ice. "Scream if it makes you feel better. No one can hear you." He sat down in the old kitchen chair and watched her struggle against the chains.

After several minutes, she quieted down, whimpering softly. "What are you going to do?" she whined. He hated it when they whined. She looked pleadingly at him. "I have money. My daddy has money and if it's not enough, he'll get you more."

"It's not your money I want. It's your blood," he said, laughing. She screamed then, long and loud, her cries ending in sobs.

Garth Brooks played on the CD in the background. He turned up the volume to drown out her screams. She pleaded and begged. Through it all, she wept. He sat in front of her, typing on an iPad. How he enjoyed this part of the ritual. He was the embodiment of death. He had the power to say who lived and who died.

Her body shook with sobbing. Her straining limbs pulled against the unyielding chains attached to the rings. Her struggling left welts and cuts on her wrists and ankles. He stood and walked to within inches of her. "You like Garth Brooks, right? He asked, his nose almost touching hers. "He's singing this song just for you."

She stared at him, her eyes swimming in a sea of tears. "No!" she shouted. "No. I hate him! Do you hear me? I hate him!" She started sobbing again. He knew better. It wasn't Garth Brooks she hated, but him, her murderer.

He tried to interrogate her, to find out something about her. She refused to answer his questions. That was all right. He'd gone through her backpack and found her wallet and her student ID. There were clothes and an extra pair of walking shoes. At the bottom of the bag he discovered a 25-caliber pistol.

A small pistol just right for a girl alone on the road. He had an idea it was a gift from her daddy. Holding the gun in front of her face, he said, "Naughty girl. Don't you know you can get hurt with one of these things?"

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please don't hurt me. Please, just let me go," she begged, her face twisted with misery. Using her pistol, he shot her through the calf of her right leg. She shrieked, her eyes widening in shock and pain. She half cried, half screamed as she pulled at the chains. He let her wear herself out. After several minutes, she hung from the wall, exhausted. Blood streamed down her leg, forming a small pool under her foot.

Ignoring her suffering, he sat down in the rickety chair and again reached for his iPad. Bringing up the document he'd started, he added: Subject seems in extreme pain while retaining all her faculties. Wound is in the calf of her right leg, 3 inches above the ankle. Bleeding more than others. I may have to stench the blood flow if it doesn't stop soon.

He continued his experiment. Wedging a sledgehammer underneath the pad of her left foot, he pounded her big toe with a claw hammer. Her scream was blood curdling. She jerked her foot out of his grasp. He stopped to let her absorb the pain. Then, wrapping rope around her legs, he crushed the next toe. Her ear-splitting wails echoed into the upper part of the house. Good thing it was empty. If his wife was here, two women would be screaming.

Despite her devastating injuries, she yanked and strained at the chains. So much he became concerned the rings would break loose. Fortunately, for him, they held. She screamed, she pleaded, she begged, all to no avail. He had been through these many times. They all tried to bargain with him. When he smashed the third toe, she passed out. He noted her reaction on his iPad. After each blow, from the bruising of the toe to the crushing of the bone. Each time she fainted, he waited for her to regain consciousness on her own. By the time he finished with both feet, she had blacked out three times. He took note: Unlike subjects six and seven, subject eight appears to be highly sensitive to pain. I am ending the experiment.

She opened her eyes, her expression bleak and hopeless. Amazing. This afternoon her life had been filled with happiness and a promising future. Now her destiny was fear, despair and death. She wept until all she could muster was snuffling whimpers.

"All right. Now are you ready to tell me about your family?" She moved her head almost imperceptibly. "I can't hear you," he growled.

"Yes." she answered softly. He questioned her for the next five minutes, learning that her widowed father was a farmer in south-central Indiana. Her mother had died of cancer five years ago. She had attended the University of Southern Indiana in Evansville, studying life science. She loved children and planned to be a kindergarten teacher. Her grades good enough that her professors allowed her to take her finals early. Then, over her father's objections, she trekked south. This was her first week on the road. She planned to stay with her uncle in Florida, but that was a week away. When he pressed her, she confessed that she called her father every night at nine o'clock. Before she left, her father warned her that if he didn't hear from her by midnight, he would alert the police and would continue to call her cell phone every 15 minutes.

Glancing at his wristwatch, he saw he had just over three hours to torture and kill her before she was due to call her daddy. She'd be dead long before that. If they found her body, the bullet in her calf came from her own pistol. The weapon couldn't be linked to him. His hope was she would be just one of thousands who go missing every year.

Tonight, he would bury her on Killer's Knob. Tonight, she would complete the circle. It was time to send her into eternity. He turned up the volume on the CD player. Garth Brooks yawped the song's chorus:

It's just people loving people.

It's just people loving people.

It's just people loving people.

He sang along with Garth, but with his own lyrics:

It's just people killing people.
It's just people killing people.
It's just people killing people.

Enough of that. Time to perform the final experiment on this subject. He hit the button on the CD player, stopping Garth cold. The silence was deafening. The only sound in the darkening basement was her feeble sobbing and his heavy breathing. This was the moment he loved—watching her see her own death coming. He was the embodiment of death.

Her murderer had one last question for her. He hadn't asked before because he wanted to maintain the air of mystery. "What is your name?" He enunciated the words slowly and distinctly.

She raised her tear-filled eyes. "What?"

"What is your name?" he said, as before. He already knew from seeing her Student ID. However this was a very important part of the ritual.

Just above a whisper, she answered, "Carol Barber."

"Spell it for me." She did. He typed it on the iPad, then asked, "And what was your daddy's pet name for you when you were a little girl?"

"I won't tell you that," she said, wanting to keep at least that little bit of her world from him. She sobbed. Death was coming. As a Christian, she had prepared for it but not now, not this soon.

"Tell me or I'll shoot you in the other leg," he said, pointing the pistol at her.

"Go ahead, shoot, do it!" she shrieked. "You're going to kill me, anyway. Do it!"

He grinned. A little pluck. She had some backbone left. He picked up a plastic bag and a length of clothesline. She fought, shaking her head from side to side. Grabbing a fist-full of her hair, he jammed the bag over her head, then looped the rope around her neck and pulled it tight. Her eyes widened with fright. She gasped for air. He marveled at the capacity of a woman to produce tears. Her eyes had been leaking for hours, yet there were fresh tears on her cheeks. She struggled feebly. He held her head to steady it. Muffled by the bag, her sobs using up what little air left. Just before she passed out, he heard her say, "Pinky, he called me Pinky."

Chapter 3

Sheriff Buck Olsen woke with a feeling of foreboding. He couldn't understand it. He had looked forward to this day for weeks. May 1st. In the past, if the weather wasn't inclement, he and his departed wife Mattie always put the flowers out on this day. He knew in heaven she was enjoying countless flowers but Buck planned to honor her by planting more here today. Last night's storm had passed, leaving the world fresh and clean. Sunlight streamed into Buck's bedroom. He got out up and opened the window. It was a glorious spring day. In the trees encircling the house, the birds were engaged in a singing contest. He had put more seed in the feeders yesterday. He made the bird feeders last year just before Mattie took sick. He smiled, remembering how as a child he believed birds came from birdseed.

Going from room to room, Buck opened all the windows. The soft morning breeze rustled the trees' tender green leaves. The air drifted through the house, ruffling the curtains. Last night's rain had cleansed the earth, yet Buck felt evil lurking. He stepped back into the bedroom. Lying on the foot of the bed, his dog, Bud, raised his head, He looked at his master and went back to sleep. "You go ahead and sleep. Come out when you're ready," he told the pup.

This was the kind of day Mattie loved—sun shining, no clouds in the brightest of blue skies, just gorgeous. How Buck missed her. She would be already up, gleaning as much life as she could out of a day like this. By this time, the sheets would be off the bed and on the clothesline. With a jug of sun tea setting on the back steps.

Buck measured out coffee, filled the pot with water and plugged it in. Looking out the kitchen window, he could almost see Mattie tending her flowerbeds. He would work on them today. He wasn't as good a gardener as Mattie, but he owed it to her to do his best. Yesterday he stopped at Henry's greenhouse and bought three flats of flower.

Henry Morrison grew flowers and vegetables in his backyard greenhouse. He charged only a few cents over what it cost him to grow them. At 82, Henry was slowing down. Every year he would declare, "Well, sir, this will probably be my last." And every year when February rolled around, Henry would trudge out to the greenhouse, clean it up and start planting seed.

One morning last April, Buck and Mattie went to Henry's home. They picked out the flowers that would grace their yard that year. Henry treated them to some fresh, cold cider from his apple orchard. The three of them sat and talked for more than an hour. He and Mattie only left because Buck had to go on duty. That afternoon Mattie readied the flowerbeds. However, she waited for Buck so they could do the planting together the next day.

The cancer came on and took Mattie quickly. Just last spring she was healthy robust working each day in her flowerbeds. By the end of August, she started to feel some twinges. By the end of October, she was dead. After 40 years of marriage, Buck couldn't adjust to being alone. The house exuded loneliness. He spoke to Mattie constantly, as he had when she was alive. "Mattie, something is wrong," he said as he poured a cup of coffee this morning. "I can't put my finger on it, but something just don't feel right."

You'll figure it out, he could almost hear her say.

"Yup, you're right. I will."

In his 30 years of law enforcement, 21 of them as sheriff, Buck's hunches never proved wrong. Several years back Ken Staton's wife died. When they heard she tripped and fell down the basement stairs, everyone assumed it was an accident. Buck knew better. He kept investigating even when the prosecutor told him to back off. It took Buck six months to prove Ken murdered his wife. Faced with stiff resistance, he insisted Mrs. Staton be disinterred for an autopsy. Upon examining her, Doc Howell found her injuries incompatible with a fall down the stairs. Doc said, "Her injuries are consistent with strangulation. She was dead before he threw her down the stairs." It took the jury 30 minutes to convict Ken. He was now doing life at Eddyville. Buck almost lost his job over that one, but later that year he was re-elected using the conviction as his catalyst.

Now he grappled with the same feeling he'd had back then. Something was wrong. He felt it in his bones. He poured another cup of coffee and stepped out on the back porch. A hundred yards away, down by the woods, two deer raised their heads. Lifting his cup, he greeted them. "Good morning," he called, his voice still gravely with sleep. Raising their heads, the deer's watched him for a few seconds, then returned to their grazing. Bud padded onto the porch, set down beside his master. Emptying his cup, Buck flung the dregs onto the grass. "You stay out of my flowers, you hear?" he scolded the deer. They paid no attention, just kept on grazing. "You remind me of some of my deputies," Buck muttered, reaching down he scratched Bud's ears. "Now, you leave them alone, boy. They're just gettin' some breakfast." The dog looked up at him grinning, "Yeah, we best go inside," Buck said.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Buck opened his dog-eared Bible. The precious old book was the one he loved to study. He had a newer one, but this one was a friend that seen him through many of

life's trials. Turning to John 14, Buck read again the words of Jesus. One thought comforted him. Mattie was in heaven and someday he would be with her. After a time of prayer, Buck rose from his knees to face the day.

Opening the cabinet, he brought out the sack of dog chow. Bud danced around, almost knocking Buck down. "Easy there, pal, you're gettin' your breakfast before I do." He filled Bud's bowl almost to overflowing. The second he set it down, the dog dove in. Buck stood back watching the dog eat. He smiled what would he do without Bud's companionship? Meeting Bud's simple needs for dog food and vet care paid back many times over. The constancy of Bud's loyalty eased Buck's loneliness and brought him solace.

The night after Mattie's funeral Buck had gone on patrol. The house was so lonely without her. He had to get out of the house. She was everywhere within those four walls—her voice, her laughter, her just being there. Buck went first to the office, but couldn't take his staff's pitying looks. Therefore, he went out on patrol. He cruised down by the river. This stretch of road saw little traffic except for the druggies. They were always looking for an out-of-the-way place to get their fix.

Something moved in the shallow ditch catching his eye. He pulled over, got out and walked back along the road shining his Maglight into the ditch. A white and brown pup squinted in the beam of his light. Half submerged in a puddle, the dog was a whimpering bundle of skin and bones. After Buck's old dog, Woolly, died two years ago, he couldn't bring himself to buy another dog. There were none that could take Woolly's place. But he couldn't leave this little guy out here to die. Even if the dog didn't catch pneumonia or get run over or eaten by a coyote, he was sure to starve. Hurrying back to the patrol car, Buck took an emergency blanket out of the trunk. He approached the pup while speaking softly and holding out his hand. The dog whined and shrunk back. "Come on, little fella. I'm not going to hurt you," Buck coaxed soothingly. Still whining, the pup backed into the weeds.

Rushing back to the car, Buck unwrapped the ham sandwich he hadn't felt like eating. Hurrying back, he held out the sandwich to the dog. Smelling the meat, the pup took a step forward, then recoiled again. It took Buck 20 minutes to get close enough to gently stroke the little dog and another ten before he would allow Buck to pick him up. He wrapped the blanket around the wriggling, frightened animal and carried the pup to the car. The dog didn't try to bite his rescuer, just squirmed and thrashed his feet. Buck held the little dog to his chest and spoke gently to him until the dog settled down. "I know how you feel," Buck said with tears streaming down his face. "I'm lost without my Mattie. She was the love of my life. We were married for 40 years." Buck buried his face in the blanket and wept. When his tears finally stopped, the dog was asleep. Laying the pup on the seat beside him, Buck drove home, thoughts of Mattie flooding his soul. At the house, he fed the dog again, took him out, then went to bed and slept through the night waking refreshed.

That next morning, he woke to find the dog staring up at him from beside the bed. "Hi Bud! How do you like your new home?" Buck asked smiling. Throwing off the covers, he swung his legs to the floor. With his tail wagging wildly, the pup jumped clumsily onto the bed and snuggled into Buck's arms. Bud was home.

Unless something major called him to duty, Buck would spend today working in the yard. Last spring on a day just like this, Mattie filled the yard with flower seeds and plants. Buck took the

day off to carry top soil and fertilizer for her. At noon, they stopped for a lunch of Buck's grilled hamburgers and Mattie's salad. That morning Mattie had hung the freshly washed bed sheets on the line and set out a jug of sun tea. They sat at the picnic table surrounded by the fruits of their morning's labor. That afternoon they took a stroll by the river and sat under a willow, talking of their plans for the summer. She wanted to visit the kids; he spoke of possible retirement in a few years. They returned home refreshed. That night they slept on sun-washed sheets with the windows open. Buck and Mattie were unaware of how little time they had left, Buck would recall that day every day for the rest of his life.

This morning Buck stood at the kitchen counter chopping onions, green peppers, and broccoli. He slid them into a bowl, added cheese and bits of tomato, and finally cracked three eggs over the whole mess. He thought for a second, then broke a fourth. The eggs came from an elderly lady south of town who let her hens roam free. She treated them like pets, letting them wander around her kitchen in the summer. Buck and Mattie had bought eggs from her for years, Mattie refused to purchase city eggs (as Mattie called them) from the grocery store.

Buck could never make an omelet to match Mattie's, but his tasted almost as good. How chefs managed to neatly flip them Buck had no clue. He tried it a couple of times, made a mess of it, gave up and resorted to just scrambling the whole mess. When it was ready. Buck shoveled the delicious looking mishmash onto a plate, poured another cup of coffee and, followed by Bud, carried his breakfast out to the porch. Setting it on the small table, he looked around for the deer. They were gone, but he knew they'd be back in the evening.

Thanking the Lord for the day and the food, Buck dug in. The dog sat on his haunches waiting for the scraps Buck would drop to him. He grinned down at the dog. "You're becoming more like a kid every day," he said, splitting the last bit with the pup.

The sun had risen over Killer's Knob, its warm rays drying the dew-soaked grass. Buck shaded his eyes as he looked at the hill in the distance. Something was drawing him to that place. As he washed the breakfast dishes, he resolved to check it out.

Killer's Knob had been named for Jacob Adams. A local farmer Adams gained notoriety after murdering his family a little over 100 years ago. Arriving home from a supply run to town, Jacob walked in to find his wife in bed with the hired man. Flying into a screaming, cussing rage, Jacob ordered the children out of the house. Terrified, they scampered behind the tool shed, where they huddled together and tried to reassure one another. While the adulterers pulled on their clothes, Jacob took down his rifle from over the fireplace. Then going to the kitchen drawer where he kept his shells he pocketed 18 bullets. Returning to the living room he set down in his chair with the rifle crossed his lap,. Hesitantly, his wife came into the living room to plead for forgiveness. She fell on her knees in front of him, crying and swearing to never be unfaithful again. He listened for a few seconds, then lifted the rifle and shot her in the head.

Stepping over her body, he went hunting for the hired man. Having escaped through the bedroom window, the man scrambling to gather his few belongings from his hooch in the barn. Hearing the shot in the house, he took off running through a field. Jacob brought him down with a bullet to the right leg. Gasping with pain, the man begged for his life. In answer, Jacob shot him in the other leg. Screaming, the man dragged himself 15 feet while Jacob followed. With each step he kicked the hired man in one injured leg, then the other. He finally ended the man's suffering with a bullet between the eyes.

For reasons known only to Jacob, he reloaded and went looking for the children. He found the baby, a girl of two, bawling hysterically as she lay under her parents' bed. Jacob's loud, tortured sobs mingled with hers as he pressed the rifle to her head and ended her life. Half blinded by

tears; he found his youngest son hunkered in the cabinet under the kitchen sink. The eldest, a girl of 13, he shot in the loft of the barn. It took him an hour to find the last one. The eight-year-old boy was hiding in a hollow tree a half-mile from the scene of the massacre. Pulling him out by the arm, Jacob made the boy walk back to the homestead where he shot him in the head as he had his brothers and sisters. The last bullet Jacob used on himself.

Seeing no activity around the farm for several days, a neighbor went to check on the family. He found their bodies in the kitchen, each one seated in their assigned chair as though gathered for a meal. The expressions of horror on the children's faces haunted that man for the rest of his life. They found the hired man in the barn, propped up with a pitchfork jammed into the dirt floor. A dispute over where to bury the Adams family arose among the neighbors. No one wanted the adults buried next to their loved ones in the town cemetery. Most folks didn't mind the children being buried there. After all, the children weren't to blame for their parents' sins. But when it came to the adults, they objected. If the wife hadn't misbehaved with the hired man and if Jacob hadn't reacted as he did, the children would still be alive. In the end, they were buried on what became known as Killers Knob, close to where they fell. To purge the land, the Adams' house, barn and outbuildings were torched.

Once the ashes cooled, the townsfolk carved out a cemetery for the murderer and the murdered and no one else. They buried them in a circle. There were no caskets. There was no money for them. Besides, the adults didn't deserve caskets. Their bodies were simply lowered into the ground and covered over with dirt. They buried the hired man on one side of the woman, Jacob on the other. They buried the oldest boy next his daddy with the rest of the children completing the circle. Someone had the idea that the children should be connected in some way, so it was decided to link them together by entwining the fingers with their sibling. However, they bound the hands of the adults in chains. If the adults had kept their hands to themselves, no one would have died.

Naturally, within six months of the burials, rumors that Killer's Knob was haunted began. It was said that if you came upon the ridge late at night, sat quietly and waited, you would see the children's ghosts dancing around the adults. The children would be holding hands and chanting while the three adults stood in their midst, hands still bound in chains. The words of the children, indiscernible at first, became clear the longer you listened. With their eyes glowing with an eerie green light, they chanted:

Our daddy murdered us
Our daddy murdered us
Leave this place, never return
Leave this place, never return
Our daddy murdered us
Leave this place, never return
If you don't he'll murder you

At the end of the dance, first the adults, then each child would disappear with a pop that sounded like a gunshot, vanishing in the order in which they died. The only one hearing the pops was the

person observing the dance of death. No one ever stayed long enough to find out if the words of the children spoke were true.

And so the rumor grew into a full-blown legend. People stayed off Killer's Knob. Even the druggies found other places to do their wicked deeds. That was fine with Buck. Not that he believed in ghosts, but the tale gave him privately. One winter night two years ago, he did see an unearthly-looking light at the top of the ridge. The next morning, he trudged to the top of the knob, but found nothing. It had snowed during the early morning hours, covering the ground with a fresh two inches. Chalking the light up to his imagination, Buck forgot about it. Now, though, he wasn't so sure. Something was drawing him there this morning. Before he went to the knob, he called the office.

"Beaufort County Sheriff's department."

"Hello, Bertie, anything goin' on?" Buck tucked the cell phone between his shoulder and ear as he poured himself a fourth cup of coffee.

"Oh, hi, Sheriff. Nope. Everything's quiet on the home front. Oh, one thing. Clifford brought in the Benson kid last night. Smoking pot and burglarizing the drug store again."

Buck grimaced. "That boy ain't never gonna learn. They ever legalize that stuff; he'll keep the whole state funded, single-handedly."

"Yeah. Well, if that happens, I'm puttin' in for a new car for the dispatcher. Meaning me," Bertie chuckled.

Buck could hear the smile in Bertie's voice. "You and me both, my friend. Hey, is Rodney around?"

"Nope, your chief deputy is out on a traffic stop. Out-of-stater doing eighty-five in a fifty-five."

"Ouch. That's going to cost him," Buck said.

Yup. Money for the county," Bertie said. "Want I should radio Rodney?"

"No, nothing important. Just have him call my cell when he gets in. I'll be away from the house for a while."

"Will do. You enjoy your day off, hear?"

"I hear. Thanks, Bertie."

Hanging up the phone, Buck looked up at the hill. "Better get to it," he told the dog at his feet. But first I'm gonna give my buddy more food and finish my coffee." Bud wagged his tail. Food was his favorite thing.