

## Chapter Two

At a time when most churches were half full at best, ours always drew a crowd. Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church held about eighty people at most, and only because kids didn't take up much space. Because there were so many Camps, and because most of them wanted to attend the same church, we had to have two services on Sunday morning. Sunday school was always packed.

The family elders assumed that, when you reached the right age, you would be born again and join the church. I made a profession of faith when I was ten, mostly to keep everyone from bombarding me about the fate of my eternal soul. The whole thing was a big act, and I suspected the same was true of many of the other children who were pressured into making their spiritual choices. It made my parents happy, though, and there was a lot of kissing and hugging afterward. When I was baptized at a local dunking hole (our little church didn't have a baptistery), there was a lot of snot slinging. Some of our women folk, not to mention a few of the men, could really lift their voices to heaven in holy crying. I often thought they could make good money as professional mourners.

The most fascinating part about our church to me was outside the building. There was a graveyard next to the church, and it had grown over the years to almost two acres. Generations of Camps were buried there, not to mention others with strange names we had never heard of. I liked wandering through the tombstones looking at the names and dates, and thinking about who some of those people were. Pop's family was buried there, but I already knew something about them.

I wasn't the sort to believe in ghosts, but in the back of my mind was the idea that strange things must happen in the graveyard at night. In the same year I was "saved", I convinced Mikey and Kermit to sneak over one evening after dark to check it all out. Both of them had watched too many horror movies, and had images of axe murderers rising from the grave to chop us into pieces. There was a family legend about a banshee that wandered among the tombs at night, but I figured that was just to scare kids like us away.

Getting away from the house without waking up my parents wasn't easy; it was simple enough to climb out of my window, but I never when I might startle one of the dogs. We had a bunch of them. I knew where the noisy one, Trump, usually slept, so I sought him out and petted him, so he'd know it was really me. He stirred for a moment, then yawned and went back to sleep.

The others were waiting for me at the end of our driveway, under the "Jesus is Lord" sign. We decided not the chance walking down the road, since there were other houses between ours and the church, across the holler. All of them had dogs. We all had flashlights, so we decided to take the path through the woods. It came onto the road about a hundred feet below our driveway, below a rock cliff, and wound through a small field down toward the creek at the bottom of the hill. Ordinarily we wouldn't have thought twice about it, but it was dark once we entered the trees. We jumped at every sound, giggling like nervous girls.

The path came back to the road below the church, short of Alfonse Camp's house. His dogs barked furiously as we passed, but none ventured to the road to check us out. Mikey and Kermit both began whispering nervously and loudly as we drew near the graveyard.

"Henry, maybe this isn't such a good idea." Mikey was bit of a whiner, and even in a whisper I could hear the whine. "I'm not saying I believe in ghosts, but there's still bears around here. Besides, what if there really *is* a banshee, or an axe murderer or something."

Kermit agreed with his brother. "Yeah, I mean, we could get in big trouble if anyone found out. It's like we're disrespecting the dead. Papa would tan our hides if he found out, even if the ghosts don't get us."

“Listen, guys, I get enough of chickens at the house. Nothing’s going to happen. You’re acting like a couple of girls. Matter of fact, maybe I should have brought Martha and Julie along.”

My appeal to their masculine pride, a big deal in the Camp family, did the trick. They lined up in single file behind me as we climbed the steps leading up the church yard, but they came. The first few minutes among the tombs were uneventful, and they started to relax. There was a half moon, and the shadows of the tombs didn’t seem as threatening as the darkness under the trees. I had just shone my light on the Snodgrass tomb when it happened.

Something white popped up about twenty feet away from us, and began shrieking like a stuck pig or some demon out of Hell. We didn’t wait to see what it was, but the word “banshee” popped into my head. When I turned toward Mikey and Kermit, they were already on the run. They had dropped their lights, and they were both screaming at the top of their lungs. For some reason I have yet to understand, I stopped to scoop up their lights, and followed hard behind them. I did my own fair share of yelling. I was almost sure I heard whoops of laughter behind me, but I didn’t stop to make sure.

The brothers cleared the bank above the road in a single bound, not breaking stride. I all but fell down when I landed short, in the ditch, but I kept on going. As we passed Alfonse’s house again, the dogs came bounding out, and I heard a front door slam as we rushed down the hill. The dogs followed us for a little ways until Alfonse called them back.

By the time we reached the bottom of the hill, where the road crossed the creek, I was limping. I must have sprained my ankle jumping off the bank. Mikey and Kermit surged ahead of me, and by the time I reached our driveway, they were nowhere to be found. As I rushed into our yard, and headed for the back of the house where my bedroom was, Trump was already barking. I had forgotten about the return trip. Even if I had thought about it wouldn’t have mattered; Alfonse’s dogs had set off all of the dogs in the neighborhood.

When I climbed back in my window, favoring my left foot, I saw somebody sitting in the chair across from my bed. The first thing my fevered mind thought of was that the ghost had somehow followed me, but I quickly recognized Pop’s solid form. He turned on the overhead light.

“Where you been, boy? You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Finally made the night trip to the graveyard, huh?”

I expected stern disapproval on his face, but he actually smiled. As seldom as my father talked, he smiled even less.

“You know, son, secrets are hard to keep in this family. Milo passed the word on to me early this evening; seems Mikey has a big month, and Clarice has big ears. She’s got a big mouth, too; I heard her screech all the way over here, until you all started yelling so much.”

When Pop laughed, it was like hearing a thunderstorm off in the distance on a summer day. He didn’t really laugh; he rumbled.

“Just about every boy in the family has made the visit to the graveyard. We never talk about it, ‘cause that would spoil the fun. You remember that when you have your own kids. Don’t forget to tell them about the banshee.”

With that, he got from the chair, opened the hall door, turned off the light, and walked out of the room. The rumble followed him down the hall to his own room. I heard Mama’s shrill note of protest before he closed his door behind him. Clarice was going to be hard to live with for a while. More than that, what would the other guys think?

I got off with nothing more than hurt pride and a sore ankle. As expected, Clarice gave me a hard time when she saw me the next day, doing her banshee imitation for me again. The older boys teased us, but they had been through it already, so they didn't press it too much. Those younger than us listened to the new tale about the banshee with wide eyes.

Not all of my experiences connected with the church ended so harmlessly. By the time I turned eleven, about the time Bobby Matlock showed up in school, I decided there really wasn't much point in Sunday school. We were going over the same old stories and the same old passages we had studied since I was a little kid (never mind I was still both little and a kid by any definition).

I started spending my time in Sunday school whispering with Kermit and Mikey, and passing notes back and forth. Our teacher, who happened to be Alfonse, warned us repeatedly to shape up. We would agree meekly that we would behave, but by the next Sunday we were back to our old tricks. We made repeated trips to the bathroom, mostly to get out of class, and usually interrupted the younger kids' class on the way back.

This went on for months. One Sunday morning, finally, Alfonse didn't say a word. He seemed to just ignore us, and went right on teaching the class. I figured he had just given up trying to change us. At least, that's what I thought until I got home.

Pop didn't whip me often; he didn't need to, because I was totally intimidated by just his presence. As we walked home, though, I couldn't help but see the look of grim determination on his face. That was definitely not a good sign, and my cocky mood from Sunday school quickly disappeared. By the time we reached the house, I was literally shaking in my new boots.

We had a woodshed behind the house, where we stored fuel for the big stove that provided our heat in winter. My father was old-fashioned in administering discipline, too. I think we would have had a woodshed even if we heated with electricity or gas like most of the rest of the world.

It didn't last long; Pop didn't enjoy inflicting pain. Once inside the shed, I took the obligatory position, hands on knees, without being told.

"You know why you're being punished, don't you?"

"Yes, Papa."

"The church is God's house, and you *will* respect it, whether you want to or not."

"Yes, Papa."

*Whack. Whack. Whack.* I felt the blows in every corner of my body, even to the roots of my hair. It was over almost before it started, but the sting and humiliation didn't end so quickly.

"I hope you learned your lesson, boy. If there's a next time, you'll get double what I gave you today."

"Yes, Papa. I'm sorry, Papa."

I discovered early that the apology was a necessary part of the ritual.

"Now go change your clothes and wash up. Your mother will have dinner ready directly."

When I saw Kermit and Mikey later, I didn't have to ask if Milo had taught them the same lesson. The sheepish look on their faces told the tale. Milo wasn't as stern as Pop, but he wasn't one to let things slide,

either. Maintaining strict discipline was another Camp family tradition.

That was the last time I misbehaved openly in Sunday school. After that, I found more subtle ways to express my frustration. They ranged from relatively harmless pranks like putting chewing gum on the seat of the preacher's chair, to more serious ones such as tearing random pages out of Bibles. I was careful not to get caught, and when the finger of suspicion pointed my way I laid low until the heat was off. Pop obviously suspected I was the culprit behind the rash of problems, but without proof he wouldn't punish me. He did exhibit a certain coldness toward me, though, and that in itself hurt more than the whippings. Mama, on the other hand, was convinced I had really learned my lesson, and she defended me vigorously.

In the winter, I had to cut back my visits to the church, because my footsteps could be easily followed in the snow. We didn't have snow all the time, though, and there were still plenty of opportunities for mischief. Kermit and Mikey covered for me to the extent of saying I had been with them when asked, but they didn't take part in my escapades. One spanking was enough for them.

It all came to a head the following spring. I managed to sneak into the church on Friday evening, when my parents thought I was out playing with Kermit and Mikey. I had long since learned how to pick the lock on the front door; it could be opened with anything thin and flat. A particularly devious plan formed in my twisted brain. I knew the preacher, Rev. Woods, kept his sermon plan in the pulpit. He was a very meticulous man, and planned his sermons out months in advance. Along with the sermon topic, he put down the Scripture passage he planned to address.

The topic for the next Sunday was "After the Fall," and the texts were in Genesis and Romans. I took out my trusty knife, and, holding the flashlight in one hand, meticulously cut out the pages of the pulpit Bible where the passages were located. I tore the pages into small pieces and put them in the trash. For good measure, I cut the same passages out of some of the pew Bibles.

I was almost giddy as I let myself out of the building, looking around cautiously to see if anyone noticed. Seeing nothing unusual, I crept away from the building. I sneaked past Alfonse's house, confident no one had seen me. I actually went up the hill to Milo's house, and came back down. I felt proud of myself for having covered all of the bases.

This time, though, my long string of luck had run out. My secret mission wasn't nearly as secret as I thought.