

Jenny's world turned upside down when her father died. Now, she and her mom must start over in her mother's childhood home. She's scared of the dark woods she must bike past to get to school-and of that awful Dogman sign. When Pete moves into their garage apartment, he soon becomes her best friend. The warnings begin and danger is everywhere. Jenny and Pete must find some answers. Who, or what, is the Dogman?

The Mystery of the Dogman

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The Mystery of the Dogman

Beware of
the
Dogman

A Jenny & Pete Mystery

by Hays Williams

A Children's Mystery Series

**A story of adventure and friendship
for kids who love dogs, ghosts,
angels, and best friends.**

www.hayswilliams.com

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Although the town of Hamilton is loosely based on a real town, this book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter 1

““Where are we, Mom?”

“Almost to the bridge. Did you have a good nap?”

“I guess so.” Jenny sat up and then leaned close to the window, startled by the sight of a sprawling group of brightly colored buildings.

“Look, Jenny. That must be the casino. I heard last year they were building one,” her mother tried to make conversation. Another effort to cheer Jenny up and take her mind off of Boston.

As the van moved onto the bridge, Jenny glanced back at the casino, thinking how out of place it looked at the edge of the river.

The Mississippi River was high in its banks and wider than she remembered. She liked the way the sunlight danced on the surface, creating silvery highlights in the brown water. A towboat struggled to push a row of barges against the current. After a few seconds, Jenny decided snails moved faster.

The van left the bridge and a weather-beaten sign welcomed them to Hamilton. Jenny gazed at the tree-covered ridge on which much of the town was built. An old southern town, her mother called it. It was too far south to suit Jenny, and she hated the thought of living there. She looked back at the bridge and wished she could sprout wings and fly back to Boston. Back to her home and the places she loved. She knew Hamilton might have a park, but there would be no ice rink.

She leaned back, remembering her last visit to Frog Pond. Her dad said she was his favorite partner and he took her skating whenever he could, even after he became sick. Her mother took a vacation day and went with them on their last trip. She watched Jenny and her dad skate to some of the slower music. Jenny didn't know which was worse, her mom dabbing her eyes as she watched, or the weariness in her dad's face. In spite of that weariness, he mustered enough strength to skate one final waltz with her mom, and then enjoy hot cocoa before going home. Jenny cried whenever she remembered how her parents looked

at each other and the way her dad caressed her mom's hands. It was their last family outing together.

The van rounded a curve and hit a pothole. Swept back to reality, Jenny stared into the darkest woods she'd ever seen. She remembered the woods, but she didn't remember the trees being so thick and tall. No sunlight reached the ground, and a person would disappear if he wandered a few yards from the road. Something else caught her eye and she gasped.

"Mom, look!" Jenny pointed.

They were halfway past the woods when she saw the sign. Made from an old rough board, it was nailed to a large tree and impossible to miss, even in the late afternoon shade. Jenny swallowed hard as she read the huge black lettering: **BEWARE OF THE DOGMAN!**

Her mother laughed. "I guess Hamilton hasn't changed much. Boys still play pranks."

Jenny hoped it was a prank. If not, what could it mean? She wrapped her arms around Sam's neck and looked back at the sign. It had to be a prank. Whoever heard of a dogman? She turned away from the woods.

Her stomach growled. "Mom, I'm hungry. When do we eat?"

Sam's ears perked up and Jenny laughed.

"A better question would be where do we eat. Hamilton isn't exactly like Boston, you know."

I know, Jenny sighed and closed her eyes. *Please don't remind me*. Her mother turned the van into the winding driveway of a huge two-story house. Jenny gazed at her new home as they drove around to the back porch. She longed for a way to fast forward her life to adulthood, or at least say some magic words and make her fear vanish.

"Want to go out for sandwiches after we unload the van?"

"Sure, Mom. Okay by me."

She preferred pizza, but the past year had taught her that sometimes it was easier just to go along than argue. Their last big argument was a few weeks ago when her mom blindsided her with the decision to move to Hamilton. It had been a desperate act, like a drowning person reaching for a life preserver. Jenny wasn't convinced it would work.

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And she now realized even small disagreements seemed to throw her mom.

The house reminded her of one she'd seen on a magazine cover, and like the one in her dream, the size of it frightened her. She'd never seen a house with so many staircases. And she'd never seen such gigantic oak trees. They lined the property and surrounded the house on three sides like a protective cloak.

The original owners gave the house its name and Jenny wondered what the Bonner family was like. Her grandfather loved Bonner House and made certain Jenny knew its history. It was built before the Civil War and served as a military headquarters because of its wide view of the river from the east windows. Now the tall oak trees blocked the view, and the river could only be seen after the leaves fell. Jenny looked at the trees and wondered what winter in Hamilton would be like. There would be no snowmen and no sledding, and no snowball fights with her dad. She'd never have another white Christmas.

She looked back toward the woods, glad to see the trees thinned out a little near her home. *Why do they have to be so close to the house, and on my only route to school?*

“Well...we're home, Jenny.”

“Looks that way, Mom.” Jenny didn't move.

“It'll be okay, sweetheart, you'll see. We have to give ourselves time.”

Jenny watched her mother head to the back door with Sam close behind, before picking up a small box close to her feet. Its old mailing label with the Christmas tree printed in one corner was now a segment of her history. The box was addressed to Dr. and Mrs. Thomas Evans and daughter. *Now it's Mrs. Elizabeth Evans and daughter. Nothing will ever be the same.*

She heard the crunch of footsteps and looked up. Rudy Mitchell, a neighbor and lifelong friend of her grandparents sauntered into view.

“Hello there, Jenny girl. It's been a long time.”

Uncle Rudy looked like Santa Claus, and he laughed like Santa when she first told him so. Jenny wondered if he remembered.

He held out his arms. “Come over here and give old Santa a big hug.”

She laughed and got out of the van. “Uncle Rudy, you haven't changed one bit.”

“Well, young lady, I sure can't say the same about you. You've grown into quite a young woman. And a pretty one too.” Uncle Rudy spoke with so much emphasis on the word “pretty” that Jenny wondered what her mother told him before they arrived.

Jenny thought of the small dinner party her parents hosted four years ago to welcome a new doctor and his wife. She was supposed to stay in her room, but she went downstairs for a snack. She was about to walk through the kitchen door when she heard her name.

“Poor child. Doesn't look a thing like her mother.”

“I know. Isn't it a shame? Elizabeth's so lovely, and that auburn hair is divine.”

“I wonder how someone so beautiful could have such a plain child.”

Jenny ran back up the stairs with tears pouring down her cheeks. She didn't look like her mom, except for her deep blue eyes, but she'd never felt ugly before.

Her dad could always tell when something wasn't okay. Two days later he caught Jenny studying herself in the mirror. She never forgot what he said.

“Sweetie, you're one of the lucky ones...what I call a late bloomer.”

When Jenny looked at him quizzically, he explained. *“Think about the flowers, Jenny. Some of them blossom and are gorgeous in the spring. Then they wither away. Others don't bloom until summer, but they continue to bloom until frost. And they're the best.”*

“Hi, Uncle Rudy.” Jenny's mother hugged the big man. “Thanks for taking such good care of the place. It looks wonderful.”

“No trouble at all, Elizabeth.”

“Looks like a lot of work to me, Uncle Rudy.” Jenny looked around the neatly manicured yard.

“That's okay, sweetheart. Having you and your mother living here is worth all the work in the world.” He paused and dug around in his right pocket. “I almost forgot something.” He pulled out two sets of keys and dangled them in front of Jenny and her mom. “You might need these.”

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“So that's why I couldn't get in.”

“That back door lock finally played out, so I got a new one. Went ahead and installed new dead bolts on all the doors too. Can't take chances nowadays.”

“You're a darling, Uncle Rudy. Thanks.”

“By the way, Elizabeth, I've rented the garage apartment to a nice lady and her son.” Uncle Rudy nodded toward the garage. “The mother works at the hospital, and I think the boy must be close to Jenny's age. Thought it might be nice for Jenny to have another young person here.”

“That's great, Uncle Rudy. Don't you agree, Jenny? I was a bit worried that you would be lonely out here, after living in the city.”

“Sure, Mom. Sounds great.” Jenny smiled.

“I think it'll work out okay,” Uncle Rudy said. “They seem like good people. I can tell Connie and her boy have never had much. She has a second job at the Country Club. Waits tables in the evening, I believe. Goes there straight from the hospital job.”

“Sounds like a difficult life,” Jenny's mother shook her head.

Uncle Rudy patted Sam on the head. “The boy worked for me some this summer. Good kid, but I know he must get mighty lonesome. He and Jenny have something in common. Like Jenny, he skipped fifth grade. I guess that's good in a way, but it makes them younger than their classmates.”

“I know, and that worried me for a while, until I realized Jenny was okay with it. I just hope she copes as well at Hamilton High.”

“I don't think it bothered him either. That boy has a good head on his shoulders. He and Connie want to move in on Saturday, if that's okay.”

“That's fine. Our moving van is due on Saturday morning, so it looks like we'll all move in together. I guess we'll store our furniture in the attic.”

Jenny wanted to use her own bedroom furniture from Boston, but she said nothing. Her mother wanted to leave the house unchanged, since the antique furniture suited the place. Jenny was glad the den was furnished comfortably. Her grandparents managed to find big stuffed sofas and chairs that went well with the antique tables and other pieces. It was the only room where she felt a little bit at home.

She looked toward the garage. Another girl living that close might have given her a good friend, but the boy might be okay. Jenny's thoughts were interrupted when her mother asked about the dogman sign.

“Who in the world would put up such a sign?”

Uncle Rudy laughed. “Sounds like some kids want to hide their secret clubhouse. Most boys go through that stage. I'm sure that sign is meant to keep the younger kids out of the woods.” He gave Jenny a reassuring look. “Nothing to worry about. Now, why don't I help carry these boxes into the house?”

After Uncle Rudy said goodnight, he winked at Jenny. “Found a good buy on that cider you love. The basement fridge is full. Now, you must excuse me, I've got to get ready for bingo night at the senior center. There's a mighty pretty lady, new to Hamilton, and I'm hoping she'll be there.”

Uncle Rudy's comment made Jenny giggle, but she knew he'd been lonely since his wife died years ago.

Jenny tried to ignore the dogman sign when they drove into town for dinner, but she could feel it. Her imagination got the best of her and she tried to turn it off by thinking about Boston. That didn't help.

If she tried for the rest of her life, she couldn't imagine anything worse than losing her dad, although moving to Hamilton came in second place. A few weeks earlier, her mother came home from work and made the announcement.

“Jenny, we're going to sell this house and move to Hamilton.”

Jenny was too shocked to reply.

“We need a change, and this place has too many memories. Your grandparents left us their house and property, so we'll have a nice place to live. And Uncle Rudy's there. He's been like a father to me, and I know he'll be just like a grandfather to you.”

“Mom, no...what about your job? And my school?”

“No problem, sweetheart. A nurse can get a job wherever she goes. In fact, I've already got one lined up, but I didn't want to tell you until I knew for sure. I'll be second in charge at the Belmont Clinic, and you know Hamilton has a perfectly good school.”

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“Please, Mom. You can’t do this to me.” Jenny buried her face against Sam’s thick fur.

In a matter of minutes Jenny's life turned upside down again, and her future was planned. She had no say into the matter. Her mother was set on leaving Boston and nothing Jenny said changed her mind.

Jenny confided her feelings to her school counselor, Mrs. Orwell. Mrs. Orwell explained how difficult it could be to stay in the same home, or town, after losing a spouse. She suggested Jenny keep an open mind for her mother's sake. “It might be the right thing for you too, Jenny.”

Jenny tried but she still had her doubts. Changing her attitude might be the solution, but she didn’t want to change.

Since it was a weeknight, Bo’s Drive-In wasn’t crowded, so dinner didn’t take long. When they arrived home, Jenny took Sam outside. They were going down the back steps when a huge raccoon scurried across the walk at her feet. She screamed and sank down on the bottom step. Sam barked twice before realizing the raccoon was harmless. Then he ran back to Jenny.

“Jenny...what's wrong?” Her mother called from the back door.

“I’m fine, Mom. It was only a raccoon.”

Light from the tall streetlights filtered through the oak branches, creating strange shadows. A light breeze made the shadows move, giving the yard an eerie atmosphere. The shadows didn't bother Sam. He took his time and enjoyed being outdoors, while Jenny waited on the steps.

Uncle Rudy had changed all the outside lights around the house and garage to security lights, and then he’d called the power company to install special streetlights across the front of their property. Jenny wondered what happened in Hamilton that made him feel such precautions were needed. Or was he only being protective of them? She glanced around, then went inside.

“Jenny, wouldn’t you like to explore the house? It’s been a while.”

Jenny nodded and Sam trailed behind them. She remembered the happy times with her grandparents. When she was small, her grandfather played hide-and-seek with her and she ran up and down the staircases searching for him. Even then she was overwhelmed by the

size of the house. She wondered why people wanted such enormous houses, but the big rooms with the high ceilings and all those staircases fascinated her.

Hide and seek in Boston was no fun, but her grandparents came every Christmas and they had a great time decorating the tree, shopping, and visiting Santa. The year Jenny turned nine their plane crashed, killing everyone aboard. Instead of learning to bake chocolate chip cookies with Grandma that Christmas, Jenny spent her nights crying. Now their house felt empty without them. And much too quiet.

Jenny noticed they had gone into every room, except her mother's old bedroom. She was about to ask why, when her mother took her hand and led her down the hallway. "Come on, Jenny, I've got a surprise for you."

They stopped at the bedroom door.

"It's your room now. Go ahead and look."

"But this is your room, Mom," Jenny said.

"Not any longer. It's time you had a larger room with your own bath. I've decided to use your grandparent's old bedroom. I think they'd like that."

"I think so too," Jenny said.

"Oh..." For a moment Jenny felt like she'd stepped into the bedroom of a stranger. The ivory walls and carpet were still the same, but now the room reflected the color of her eyes. It was a young lady's bedroom, all done up in blue antique satin and ivory lace. An arrangement of silk flowers sat on top of the chest of drawers, completing the picture. The air smelled faintly of fresh varnish and cinnamon potpourri, her favorite.

"It's beautiful, Mom."

"It was finished yesterday, Jenny. Uncle Rudy found these bookcases to match your bed and dresser. He even found a rug for Sam." A thick blue rug lay close to the bedroom door.

Her mother was trying to help, but she had no idea the massive furniture made Jenny feel small. The bed sat so high off the floor Jenny would have to jump to get in and out of it, and she wondered if the tall headboard could fall and crush her. The size of the room matched the size of the furniture, and that frightened her.

“Your desk can go over there by the window when it arrives.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Her old desk from Boston would help. She could set up her computer and have a good place to study.

Her mother looked around the room and smiled. “All it needs now is your collection of books and bears and it’ll be perfect.”

Jenny nodded. She knew she was too old for her bears, but her two favorites, H.B. and Boo, were like family and she’d brought them in the van. The others would remain packed away for now. H.B. was a huge brown bear and, before Sam, he was her guard. Boo was gray and small, just the right size for cuddling. Both of them would look lost sitting in the middle of the big bed. *Will they feel as out of place as I do?* Jenny felt ridiculous, but she didn't care. *Maybe stuffed bears don't have feelings, but they sure help mine.*

“Why don't we save the attic and basement for another time,” her mother said. “Right now we both need a hot bath and a good night's sleep. I'll start your bath water.”

“You go on, Mom, I can do it.” She hugged her mother and said goodnight.

After her mother left, Jenny looked around the bedroom and tears welled up in her eyes. She started her bath and found her pajamas, then pulled her long brown hair up to the top of her head and pinned it. Her image in the mirror, blurred by tears, looked like the face of a sick doll.

Wiping away her tears, Jenny picked up some bubble bath and poured it into the running water. Gripping the edge of the deep claw-footed tub, she got in and sank down into the bubbles. She soaped and scrubbed herself, wishing she could wash away her problems. By the time she pulled the plug and watched the water swirl down the drain, she knew there was no magic available. *I'll just have to handle this myself*, she sighed, as she pulled on her pajamas.

She looked around the room, then walked over to her window and turned on the old floor lamp, the one her mom used for a night light years ago. The light was dim. Jenny peeped under the shade and saw a small wattage bulb, and she felt a bit sheepish. Uncle Rudy knew she was scared. Finally, she flipped off the ceiling lights and climbed into bed. She blew H.B. a kiss, then pulled Boo into her arms and let exhaustion take over.

Jenny woke to the loud crowing of two roosters. Sam had never heard a rooster before and she laughed when he jumped up and ran to the window. She lay in bed for a few minutes, wondering if the roosters belonged to Uncle Rudy.

After breakfast Jenny and her mother went to the new Benson's Supercenter and picked up school supplies. Then they got reacquainted with Hamilton. She memorized the route to school, but tried not to think about going there. The signs in front of the school indicated that Hamilton High and Junior High occupied the same building.

"Hamilton is a small place and it saves the town money by combining the two," her mother explained. "It's really two buildings connected by a new addition that houses the cafeteria and the library."

During their lunch of soup and salad at The Big River Deli, Jenny saw her mom reminiscing. Hamilton might be a little different, but it held memories. After lunch, they drove down Cherry Street. Both sides were lined with turn-of-the-century lighting, green lampposts topped with big frosted globes. The river walk on the levee was visible from Cherry Street and its black colonial lampposts reminded Jenny of Boston. It made her homesick, but she knew the effect would be enchanting at night.

"Looks pretty, doesn't it, Jenny? When I was a teenager this was the place to go on Saturday night. We really had some good times."

Remembering the old days agreed with her mother. Jenny hadn't seen her look or sound so content in a long time. She liked it and wanted the moment to last.

"What do you mean, Mom?"

Her mother smiled. "On Saturday night all the teenagers piled into cars and cruised up and down Cherry Street. We'd start at Cassie's Restaurant and drive down to the doughboy. Then we'd circle back and do it over, again and again. And we'd honk the car horn when we spotted a friend."

"Why?"

"We thought it was great fun. Cherry Street was our place on Saturday night, and everyone knew it."

As she talked, her mother turned the car at the doughboy. She pointed out the courthouse and Echols Drugstore on the opposite

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corner. Jenny wasn't interested in either place, but she remembered the doughboy statues from history class. They were erected to honor World War I soldiers.

After a brief visit to the library, they stopped at the tourist office and picked up a map of Hamilton. The map was designed for newcomers, with every point of interest marked and listed, including the old army surplus store they passed at the edge of town. Uncle Rudy said the store had been there for decades and it never changed. Jenny thought the window mannequin dressed in camouflage made the store look like a shop for hunters.

They hurried through the supermarket shopping, then headed home. When they passed the woods, Jenny got a good look at the dogman sign.

Her mother read her mind. "Don't let that sign worry you, Jenny. The boys here in Hamilton have always pulled stunts like that, and Uncle Rudy is probably right about the clubhouse. Or it's just another way to get attention. Best to ignore it."

Jenny couldn't ignore it. She'd have to ride her bike past those woods to get to school. With her mother's job schedule, she had no choice. Thinking about it made her stomach weak.

At bedtime, she found her diary where she'd tucked it into her tote bag. Writing in it used to be a ritual she enjoyed, but she stopped doing it when her dad died because her thoughts were all sad. Right now she needed a diversion and her diary would have to do.

This place is supposed to be a whole new life for Mom and me, but I'm so scared. I know life will never be the same as it was in Boston, and I'm afraid we'll never be happy again. Those woods scare me, and there's nothing I can do about it. What does that sign mean?

She put her diary away and wrestled with the bed covers. Unable to get comfortable, she crawled out of bed and went to the window. She spotted her star above the oak trees—one brilliant star among thousands of tiny ones. She found the star a few days after her father died and she imagined the star was her dad watching over her and her mom. She looked for it every night until they left Boston. It blinked now, acknowledging her presence.

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Jenny felt a terrible loneliness for her father. For the first time since he died, she knelt down and said her evening prayers. “Dear God, please watch over my dad and take care of him. And please help me and Mom and Sam to be happy here.”

She wiped her tears on her pajama sleeve and climbed back into bed. That night she dreamed she was being chased by a man with long shaggy hair and floppy ears. And Sam was no longer there.

Chapter 2

Jenny heard the wind howling and rain hitting the windows before she was fully awake. She thought about the dream and the way the man looked, and she felt ridiculous. The weather reminded her of the dream she had in the van on the way to Hamilton, a dream she'd just as soon forget. She went to the front window of her bedroom and watched big fat raindrops splash in the driveway puddles below. Then she glanced toward the woods. They were dark and in the early morning rain they looked ominous. She hated rain, but today it brought blessed relief; her mother would drive her to school.

Her dad knew how to calm her fears, and she felt like such a coward remembering his secret signal. He held up two fingers in a v-shape. "This is for victory, kiddo. You can do anything. Remember that." Her mother caught on and started using the signal, and Jenny wished she wouldn't. It was something special between her and her dad, and she wanted to keep it that way.

She climbed back into the bed and turned on her radio. The seven o'clock news blared into the room and Jenny reached to turn it off, but her hand froze on the button.

"...and the police concluded their investigation yesterday. It's believed the suspect may have killed dozens of dogs in the past two years..."

Jenny sat up and grabbed Boo, while the reporter continued his chilling story. "The man is charged with raising dogs to eat."

Jenny slapped the radio off and tried to block the news report from her thoughts. She wished she could forget everything that worried her, but it was impossible. She couldn't push a button and make them go away. It was all around her.

School was waiting. She got out of bed and brushed her long brown hair, before pulling it back into a ponytail. Then she leaned close to the mirror and examined the freckles that ran across her nose. She reached into her tote bag and pulled out an ad she clipped from one of her

mother's magazines: **Fades Freckles and Age Spots – Guaranteed to work or your money back.**

She'd been saving for something special, and getting rid of the freckles was about as special as anything she could think of. For the one-millionth time she wished she looked like her mother.

At least her eyes were pretty. Sometimes Jenny wished she could hide the rest of herself, like she did one Halloween. She dressed in one of her mother's silk robes and put on tons of costume jewelry. Then she pulled a scarf across her face so that only her eyes and forehead were visible. When she looked in the mirror, a tiny blue-eyed princess looked back. It gave her hope, for a while.

If only I looked like that. She gazed at the painting hanging over her headboard. The girl in the picture was pretty, and dressed all in blue, even her shoes.

“Shoes...!” Jenny ran into the closet. *My favorite shoes...where are they?* One look at the stack of unlabeled boxes and she groaned. They could be anywhere. Her mother had suggested they wait and do the main unpacking over the weekend. Now Jenny wished she hadn't.

“I should have listened to Mom and labeled my boxes with more than my name,” Jenny scolded herself. *And I should have put those shoes in my suitcase.*

She grabbed a nail file from her dresser and started ripping through the packing tape that sealed the boxes. When she squatted down to get to the last boxes, her mouth dropped open. Lying on the floor behind a box was a page torn from a newspaper. Jenny picked it up and stared at the rough-looking man standing beside the hanging carcass of a dead animal. In the background was a large pen full of dogs and doghouses. Several of the dogs were German Shepherds. The bold headline summed up the story: **MAN ACCUSED OF RAISING DOGS FOR FOOD.**

Jenny crumpled up the paper and threw it into the wastebasket. Then she ran to the bathroom and tried to throw up. Someone had a sick mind; she was sure of that. She walked back into her closet and looked at the boxes. She'd carried them up and stacked them herself. There was nothing on the floor then, or she'd have seen it. Someone had been in the house since she and her mother arrived. Jenny shivered,

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and felt the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand up. *Someone doesn't want us here.*

She fought back tears. This was too much of a coincidence after seeing the dogman sign. Were they connected? She'd have to forget it, or she'd never make it past those woods.

She wiped her tears on her pajama sleeve, then opened up the last box and found her shoes. Seconds later her mother knocked on the door.

“Breakfast in ten minutes, Jenny.”

“Okay, Mom. Be right down.”

Jenny glanced at the wastebasket, then fished out the crumpled page and smoothed it before tucking it beneath her mattress. Her hands trembled as she buttoned her blue cotton shirt and pulled on her jeans. Her backpack lay on a chair, organized and ready to go. She started downstairs, but the smell of bacon sent her flying back to the bathroom. She splashed cold water on her face and took a few deep breaths. She glanced at her pale reflection, then patted and pinched her cheeks until they were rosy. Finally, she made it to the kitchen.

Her mother looked up from setting the table. “Hi sweetie. Ready for the big day?”

Jenny nodded and her mother gave her a sympathy hug. “It'll be okay, Jenny. Kids are the same no matter where you go. You'll adjust and make friends in no time.”

“I'm sure you're right, Mom.”

“Of course I'm right. Wait and see.” Her mother poured orange juice into two glasses. “I've decided to spend part of the day at the clinic. I need to see how everything looks. This rain is supposed to stop early, so we can take your bike for you to ride home this afternoon.”

“Why can't I wait and start school on Monday, Mom? One day won't matter.”

“Because I think it's best for you to get acquainted with your teachers and some of the students today. Since we got you registered by mail, you can go straight to class. And, sweetie, postponing something never makes it easier.” Her mom smiled. “This way you'll have the whole weekend to relax with no more worrying about that dreaded first day.”

Jenny's stomach sank and she turned toward the window. The rain was slowing down. Ignoring the bacon, she poured a bowl of cornflakes and milk.

By the time they got to the school, the rain stopped. They took Jenny's bike out of the van and chained it to the rack. Her mom smiled and gave her the victory signal before driving away.

Students stood around the front steps, paired off or in groups. No one seemed to notice her, so she went inside and looked around. The school was smaller than her school in Boston, and filled with strangers. Jenny walked down the hallway, feeling like a minnow struggling to swim in a tank of large fish. She ducked into a doorway and studied the map she'd received in the "new-student" packet. By the time she walked into first period English, she felt sick again.

With one exception, all the students looked older than her. A small blonde-haired boy sitting in the back seemed at ease, and she wondered whether his size ever bothered him.

Jenny ate lunch alone and envied the obvious friendships around her. By two o'clock her head was throbbing, so she stopped by the nurse's office for some aspirin. The bronze colored sign on the door read "Myra Lawrence, School Nurse & Counselor". Jenny had never heard of one person doing both jobs. She pushed on the door at the same time it was being pulled, and fell into the waiting room.

A tall blonde woman reached down to help her. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

Jenny nodded. She was, except for her aching head.

The woman's face was red. She apologized again, then rushed across the hall and out the front entrance. Jenny watched her leave and wondered what happened in the nurse's office. The lady was upset about something more than causing her to fall.

When Jenny turned around, she saw a woman in a white coat in the office doorway. Myra Lawrence wore her copper colored hair swept back from her face, held with a pair of emerald green combs. She smiled at Jenny and her expression gave no hint as to what happened a moment earlier.

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Jenny asked for some aspirin, so Mrs. Lawrence turned on the tap to get her a cup of water. Then she opened a fat brown bottle and shook two aspirin into Jenny's hand.

"Headaches often hit you on the first day of school, especially if you're a new student." She looked at Jenny as if she understood. "I'm here to help if you need anything. Or if you just want someone to talk to."

"Thanks, but I'm okay."

What would Mrs. Lawrence think about her fear of the woods? Would she laugh about the dogman sign? Jenny thanked her again and stepped into the hallway.

"Hey, Jenny, wait up!" She'd heard that voice before, but couldn't remember where. She hadn't met anyone yet.

"Hey. You the girl who just moved into that big house? You know...out there by the dogman's woods?" The boy gave a half grin, showing a flash of white teeth.

"Yes, I guess that's me." Jenny studied his face and it took a moment to place him. The funny boy from math class. He'd kept the class entertained before the teacher arrived. One of the girls told him to stop acting silly, but Jenny thought he was funny. She hadn't laughed that hard in a long time, and it felt good.

"My name's Bobby Roland. Since we're gonna be classmates, I think I oughta warn you to be careful. That dogman's got a bad name."

"Who is this dogman?" Jenny's stomach quivered again, a feeling she was getting used to.

Bobby's dark face turned serious. "Well, I've never seen him myself, even though I've been out that way a few times, but all the guys say he's bad news. Say he raises dogs and eats them. Everybody's afraid to go into those woods."

Jenny thought of what she'd found on her closet floor a few hours earlier. "Who exactly is 'all the guys'? And who said the dogman eats dogs?" She could barely get the words out.

Bobby backed away from her. "Aw, you know...just a bunch of guys talking. Don't even remember which one said it now."

Jenny clinched her fists. No one had the right to do this to her. "Who are they?" She looked at Bobby and waited. Then the bell rang.

“Nothing to it, Jenny. Just a bunch of guys talking...you know how it is.”

Jenny wanted to scream back at him, “No, I don't know how it is!” She wanted their names, and she wanted to know why someone was trying to scare her.

She walked into geography class and grabbed a seat on the back row, right behind the blonde-haired boy from first-period English.

The teacher, Mrs. Pittman, introduced herself and insisted on having the students stand and do the same. Jenny wanted to hide.

One by one the students stood up and gave their names. The boy in front of Jenny stood up, but a boy across the aisle spoke first, just loud enough for them to hear. “My name is Shorty...G. T. Shorty.”

“Shorty” ignored the tall boy and gave his real name, but Jenny was too nervous to remember it. The whole class was looking at her.

Once the introductions were over, the rest of the class went okay. Jenny loved geography, but she couldn't stop thinking about the dreaded ride home. For the first time, she hated for a class to be over. She gathered her books and was almost to the door when two girls approached her.

“Hi Jenny, I'm Marilee Sanders and this is Katie Lawrence.” Some girls have all the luck, Jenny thought, admiring Marilee's dark hair and perfect features.

“Katie and I are in charge of greeting new students,” Marilee said. “Actually, we appointed ourselves to the job.” She looked back at Katie and smiled. “Welcome to Hamilton, Jenny. Is it true you've moved into Bonner House?”

Jenny's answer should have been easy. She had practiced what she would say to the other students many times. *“I'm not a stranger to Hamilton at all. My mom grew up in Bonner House and I've been here many times to visit my grandparents.”*

In Marilee's presence Jenny felt like a little gray mouse and she forgot her speech. She breathed a sigh of relief when Katie spoke up.

“It's a beautiful old house, Jenny. You're so lucky.”

“Katie's mom is our school nurse,” Marilee said.

Katie looked like a young version of her mother, with the same green eyes and copper hair.

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“It's really nice to meet you, Jenny. Maybe we can all get together sometime.” Katie smiled, and Jenny got the same comfortable feeling she experienced earlier while talking with Mrs. Lawrence.

Jenny felt certain she and Katie would become friends. Marilee was another matter; a friendship with her might be more difficult. Jenny listened to Marilee's chatter about cookouts and slumber parties and boys. Then she made some small talk before excusing herself, saying she had to get home to check on Sam.

She hurried down the hallway toward the front, anxious to get her bike ride over with. She hadn't gone far when two rough looking boys stepped from a classroom and swaggered a few yards ahead of her. When the boy on the right nudged the other one with his elbow, Jenny knew he was up to something. A second later he deliberately bumped into a smaller student, sending the boy's books flying across the floor.

“Watch where you're going, runt,” the bully laughed, then strutted away with his friend.

Jenny wanted to keep going, but she saw it was the blonde-haired boy from her class.

“Here...let me help you.” She put down her backpack and picked up a book. “I saw what happened.”

“Just their usual tricks.” He nodded toward the group the two older boys had joined. “They think it's fun to pick on someone who's younger than them.”

“I know what you mean. Guess I'm lucky to be a girl, or I'd have the same problem.”

The boy gave her a grateful look. “You have to ignore them, or you'll give them what they want. They'll do anything to get attention.”

“I know what you mean,” Jenny said. “I've seen that type before.”

The boy grinned at her. “I'm Pete, and thanks for the help.”

Jenny liked Pete's southern drawl, and she wondered if he was as smart as the wire-rimmed glasses made him appear. “My name is Jennifer, but you can call me Jenny. And you're welcome.” She glanced down at the book in her hand, *The Evolution of Cars*, and stopped wondering.

“I heard part of what Bobby Roland said to you earlier...you know, about the dogman.” Pete reached up and pushed blonde hair away from

his eyes. "Don't let it bother you, Jenny. It's just a bunch of stupid talk somebody started. The so-called dogman probably doesn't exist."

"I'm sure you're right," Jenny said. "But why would anyone start such talk?"

"Nothing better to do, I guess. Some people look for ways to cause trouble. Probably think they'll get a laugh out of it."

Pete was okay, Jenny decided. Besides Katie and her mother, he was the only one who made her feel comfortable. She appreciated his efforts to make her forget Bobby's remarks.

"Well, I've got to go home." Jenny handed him the book, and not knowing what else to say, she picked up her backpack and left.

"See you on Monday, Jenny," Pete called out as she hurried away.

Jenny pulled on her backpack and whispered a quick prayer. She wanted to be brave, but it was hard. The ride home took forever, even though she pedaled so fast her legs hurt. She forced herself to look toward the woods, but all she saw were trees, and a deep shade that gradually gave way to darkness. She got a spooky feeling just looking at it. She wanted the ride to be over, and she tried not to think about the next one.

The dogman sign glared at her from the tree, and it looked bigger and uglier than ever. Jenny hated the sight of it. She thought about the dogman story. Was it possible such a man existed here in Hamilton? In those woods? She heard dogs barking, and she tried to pedal faster. By the time she reached her back porch, she was out of breath.

She unlocked the back door and let Sam out, then she grabbed the cordless phone from the kitchen wall and collapsed on the back steps. Sam would protect her. She knew that from an experience in Boston.

Sam was still young, practically a pup, when it happened. She'd taken him for his afternoon walk along the edge of the park. A car slowed down, following her, and Jenny got scared. The car stopped and the driver opened his door and stepped out. Sam growled and lunged toward the car, pulling his leash from Jenny's hand. The man jumped into his car and sped away.

With her heart racing, Jenny hugged Sam and whispered, "Thank you, boy."

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When she looked up, a big bearded man with a funny looking cane was smiling at them. "Good dog," he said, looking down at Sam.

When Jenny told her parents what happened, they were overwhelmed. From that day on they treated Sam like a member of their family.

The telephone rang and startled Jenny.

"Hi, sweetie. Did you have a good day?"

"Sure, Mom. Where are you?"

"I'm still at the clinic. Thought I'd be home before now, but they're shorthanded and needed some help. I should be home by six."

Jenny looked down and didn't reply.

"Why don't you scrub some potatoes and put them in the oven? Give us a head start on dinner. See you in a little while."

"Okay. Hurry home, Mom."

She said goodbye to her mother as Bobby Roland rode up on his bike.

"Hey Jenny, I've been thinking about today at school. I was wrong to say those things to you. Didn't mean to scare you."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Just trying to make you laugh. That's all." Bobby fiddled with a small key chain attached to his belt. "I'm really sorry."

Jenny could tell he was sincere. "Okay, let's just forget the whole thing."

"Thanks." Bobby grinned. "Now, will you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Tried to catch Mr. Mitchell, but he's out. Tell him my mom and I moved again. Don't have a phone yet, but I don't want to miss any jobs. Here's my address and my neighbor's phone number." Bobby handed her a scrap of paper. "He can leave a message, and I promise to show up for work."

"Sure, Bobby, I'll see he gets it."

Bobby pulled a half-eaten pack of beef jerky from his backpack and broke it into small pieces. He offered it to Sam, one piece at a time. Sam wolfed down the treat, and then allowed Bobby to pet him.

"I think you just made a friend."

"He sure is a good looking dog, Jenny. You're lucky."

Hays Williams

“I know. Sam’s my best buddy.”

“Like I said, you're lucky. Well, gotta run. See you Monday.”
Bobby waved as he rode away.

Sam followed Bobby a few yards, before returning with a stick in his mouth. He nudged her leg, wanting to play. Jenny looked down at her jeans. It was her nicest pair and she didn't want to get them dirty. She decided to go upstairs and change into some old ones, but the phone rang again.

"The dogman eats little girls too—better be careful!"

Chapter 3

Jenny woke up Saturday morning thinking about the strange phone call. The man's voice, she assumed it was a man—was deliberately disguised. Who was he, and why was he trying so hard to scare her? Every time she closed her eyes she saw the big black letters of the dogman sign. *What does it all mean? Is there something in those woods? Does the man in the news report really eat dogs?* Jenny's stomach turned thinking about it.

Sam came to her bedside and nudged her hand. She put on her slippers and robe and followed him down the back stairs to the door. When she stepped into the warm morning air, the smell of honeysuckle enveloped her, and she took a deep breath, enjoying the fragrance. The back fence was alive with green vines, and two hummingbirds fed from the gold and white blossoms that still lingered.

August was the warmest month for Hamilton, and Jenny wasn't sure she liked it. She preferred the cooler mornings of Boston. Looking up at the tall oak trees, she understood why her mother loved this place. Their shade was a blessing, even though Uncle Rudy fussed about the mess they made. He started a small yard grooming business years ago, and he avoided taking on yards filled with trees. He and his crew of teenage boys picked up limbs and debris after every storm. Jenny and her parents always did their own yard work. "Good exercise," her dad said when she complained. She looked around and wondered how long it would take two people to clean up such a big place.

Sam made a game of chasing the squirrels, but never attempted to catch one. Some of them had figured him out and ignored him until the last minute, before scampering up the nearest tree. Jenny sat on the steps and yawned, wondering what the day would be like. Thank goodness it was Saturday and she didn't have to go to school.

She gazed up at the garage apartment. Like the house, it had been empty for a long time. Uncle Rudy had been hesitant to rent it to anyone while the house was unoccupied. If the Montgomerys were as

nice as he said, the place might soon come to life. She desperately hoped the boy wasn't arrogant.

Her mother opened the back door. "Jenny...breakfast is ready."

Sam heard the announcement and beat her to the door. On Saturday mornings he always begged for a piece of sausage or slice of bacon. Her mother noticed and started cooking an extra piece for him. It was his treat for the week.

Jenny buttered her pancakes, then drizzled maple syrup over them, while she listened to her mom talk about the day's plans.

"Better wear old clothes today, Jenny. We need to finish the yard work before the moving van gets here." Her mother poured a cup of coffee. "Uncle Rudy can help for a while, but he'll have to leave early. His friend from Memphis is coming down for a few hours."

Jenny knew Connie Montgomery and her son planned to arrive at noon, and that meant get-acquainted time.

"It would be nice if we could help the Montgomerys get settled in. Don't you think, Jenny?"

Jenny nodded, her mouth too full to talk, and again wished her new neighbor was a girl.

"Don't worry, Jenny. I'm sure he's a nice boy. You'll probably become great friends."

"I hope so, Mom." Jenny took a bite of sausage and wondered if all parents could read their children's minds.

"Besides," her mother continued. "It will be nice to have someone close by. We need to make friends and we can start with the Montgomerys."

A few minutes later Uncle Rudy knocked on the back door. Jenny let him in, then headed upstairs to dress.

"Got another surprise for you and Sam, Jenny," he called after her.

When they went outside, a huge igloo-shaped doghouse sat in one corner of Sam's dog run. Jenny giggled when she saw it.

"Uncle Rudy must think you're an Eskimo, Sam."

Sam wagged his tail.

The dog run was the first surprise. A few days before their arrival, Uncle Rudy decided to fence in a large corner of the backyard to create

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a place for Sam. When she saw it, Jenny's mother fussed at him for working so hard, but he always had a good comeback.

“Well, Elizabeth, I agree with you that Sam needs to be inside at night, but in the daytime a dog needs a safe place to play while you two are gone. Besides, that’s a gift from me to Sam.” Uncle Rudy’s blue eyes twinkled. “Gave me something to do, and a man my age needs to stay active.”

Jenny hugged him. “Uncle Rudy, you may not be my grandpa, but you sure make a good one. Doesn't he, Sam? Looks like we've all been adopted.” Sam barked his approval and Uncle Rudy grinned.

Jenny looked around at the tree limbs and debris left by Friday morning’s storm. Uncle Rudy’s old pickup sat next to the front driveway and he was filling the bed with limbs. While they worked, Sam played chase with the squirrels again and examined his new doghouse.

Two hours later Jenny wiped her face on her sleeve and wondered how much hotter it would get. She gathered an armful of small branches and twigs and walked toward Uncle Rudy’s pickup. Then she stopped and watched a blue car move slowly past their property.

“Must be some neighbors wondering who's moved into the old place,” her mother said. “Can't say I blame them for being curious. It's been empty too long.”

“Don't recognize that car, Elizabeth. Could be anyone. Some people are just nosy,” Uncle Rudy threw a bunch of limbs onto the truck.

Jenny watched the car speed up and continue down the road and she wondered why anyone would be so openly curious. She got a creepy feeling at the thought of some stranger watching them from behind dark windows.

“The Montgomerys should be here soon. Why don't you get us some lemonade, Jenny?” Her mother pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. “We can sit on the porch and rest a while.”

“Sure, Mom.”

Uncle Rudy spoke up. “You and Jenny have done enough for today, Elizabeth. Me and my boys can finish up next week.”

Jenny went to the kitchen and washed her hands, then filled three glasses with ice and lemonade. When she returned to the back porch, her mother and Uncle Rudy were in the middle of a serious discussion.

"...while back his wife and boy were killed in an accident in Memphis. Some drunk ran a red light and plowed right into their car. Terrible tragedy." Uncle Rudy picked up a glass and took a long drink of lemonade.

"Who are you talking about, Uncle Rudy?" Jenny glanced at her mother with concern.

"One of your mother's good friends from high school, Jenny. He's going through some tough times right now. And he seems to have dropped out of sight."

"He must be devastated." Jenny's mom dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "I wish he'd come home to Hamilton."

"I don't know, Elizabeth. Sometimes a man has to be alone with his grief," Uncle Rudy said. "Don't know where he is now. No one's heard from him in a while."

"He was the best of the best in our class, Uncle Rudy. He didn't deserve this."

"I know. I hated to tell you, but I didn't want you hearing it from someone else. It happened just over a year ago."

Jenny couldn't handle more bad news. She excused herself and went inside. It wasn't long before Uncle Rudy called out, "The Montgomerys are here, Jenny. We'll need two more glasses of lemonade."

She glanced through the back door glass and saw a small car and trailer pull up in front of the garage. She filled two glasses and placed them on a tray with some napkins, then headed outside. She heard Uncle Rudy making introductions.

"Jenny, come here and meet your new neighbors."

Connie Montgomery could easily pass for a child, petite and blonde, with a pixie haircut and face to match. She wore jeans and sneakers, adding to the youthful image. Her son was busy making friends with Sam and his blonde hair was half hidden by a red baseball cap. They turned to greet Jenny and her apprehension changed to relief as she recognized Pete from school.

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Pete was speechless for a moment, but quickly recovered.

“Hi, Jenny. I didn't know this was where you lived.” Pete looked at her over glasses that had slipped halfway down his nose, making him look a bit peculiar. But he was too busy petting Sam to notice. Sam wagged his tail in approval as Pete scratched him behind the ears.

Before Jenny could reply, Uncle Rudy stepped in. “Well, I see you kids have already met.” Then, with his arm around her, he turned to Pete's mother. “Connie, this is my favorite girl, Jenny.”

“Hi, Jenny. Pete and I have been looking forward to meeting you, but I guess he beat me to it.” Connie's smile was warm and sincere. Close up, she looked a bit older.

“We met at school yesterday,” Jenny said. “We have most of our classes together.”

“Sam's the biggest German Shepherd I've ever seen,” Pete interrupted. “How long have you had him?”

“Three years. He was a birthday present from my dad.”

“You're lucky to have him, Jenny.” Pete finally reached up and adjusted his glasses. Something in his voice made her wonder if he'd ever had a dog.

“We're waiting for the moving van to bring our things from Boston,” Jenny's mother said. “Why don't we all have some lemonade, then we'll help you unload.”

“We don't have that much.” Connie blushed. “We've always lived in furnished apartments. But we'd love help...if you let us return the favor when that van arrives.”

A few minutes later, Uncle Rudy opened the back of the trailer. He lifted Pete's bike out and looked it over, then glanced at Jenny's bike. “Would you two like to have a basket on your bicycles? Might be handy for carrying books and other things. I have two old bikes in my storage building with baskets. I think I can make them fit, if you want them.”

“I don't know about Pete, but I'd love to have one,” Jenny said.

“Me too, Mr. Mitchell, and thanks a lot,” Pete said.

“Good deal,” Uncle Rudy said. “It won't take long. I'll get it done and return the bikes before Monday morning. Come on, Pete, let's get

these boxes up to the apartment before I have to leave. Then you kids bring the bikes to my shop.”

“Behind your garage. Right, Uncle Rudy?” Jenny thought about the time she pushed her doll carriage down the back steps and broke a wheel. He dried her tears and took her to his shop to watch as he repaired it.

“Right, Jenny. I knew you’d remember.”

The Montgomerys' small trailer held only their personal possessions and the necessary items for keeping house. A television, a computer and a portable stereo appeared to be their only luxuries. They had packed in a hurry, using small boxes gathered from local stores. Some of the boxes were open at the top, revealing contents. A book titled *How to Find Almost Anyone* caught Jenny’s eye. She glanced at Pete, but he was looking at Sam.

Twenty minutes later after Uncle Rudy said goodbye to everyone, he gave Jenny a hug and whispered, “See, I told you they were nice.” Then he walked away, looking pleased with himself.

Pete and his mother walked through the apartment, admiring the newly painted walls and bookcases and Pete smiled when he saw the desk and chair Uncle Rudy found for him. Some careful rearranging of the furniture created the perfect computer center in one corner of the living room. They seemed so pleased with the place that Jenny felt a little embarrassed to live in a big house. She couldn't imagine living in the tiny apartment.

She and Pete emptied boxes and unpacked dishes while their mothers put things away. In less than two hours the apartment looked like a home.

“Who wants a snack?” Jenny's mom looked at her and Pete, and laughed when both of them raised a hand. “Me too. Let’s go the back porch and take a break.”

Jenny went to the kitchen with her mother and they brought out cold milk and a dish of oatmeal cookies. When the milk and cookies were gone, Jenny and Pete went for a walk with Sam.

“How long have you lived in Hamilton, Pete?” She wanted to make conversation, and didn't know what else to say.

“All my life. Never lived anywhere else. What's it like in Boston?”

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“It's wonderful, a big beautiful city. You'd like it.”

“I don't know about that. I'm more the small town or country type. At least I think I am. Since I've never been anywhere else, I might be wrong.”

“What about school? Do you like Hamilton High?”

“It's okay, I guess. I figure all schools are probably the same. Did your Boston school have cliques, you know, groups that keep to themselves?”

“Sure. I guess you find them everywhere.”

“Hamilton High has one major clique. You'll learn that within a week or so. You'll probably be pulled into it, that is, if you want.”

Jenny knew from his tone that Pete wasn't part of the clique, and didn't care to be.

When the moving van arrived, the movers unloaded the boxes first, taking many of them to the attic. In Boston, Jenny and her mom had carefully separated and packed what was needed and labeled each box to indicate what room it would go to. Except for their clothes, books, and some personal things, the house contained all the necessities. The packers handled everything else, preparing it for storage.

Jenny watched as they carried her bedroom furniture to the attic, but she said nothing. She'd get used to her new bedroom eventually.

She noticed Connie admiring the house. Seeing it through a stranger's eyes gave her a new perspective. She looked at the wide staircase and high ceilings. The antique furniture and chandeliers were ordinary to her, but she understood Connie's admiration.

“It's beautiful, Elizabeth. And I love all that dark woodwork.” Connie looked wistful. “Mr. Mitchell told me all about the house. It has a wonderful history.”

“Thank you, Connie. I guess I've always taken it for granted. My parents loved this old place. They bought it before I was born, and put a lot of work and time into restoring it. It's always been home to me.”

Jenny suddenly understood why her mother wanted to move back to Hamilton. This was home to her and what better place to run to when you're hurting.

Her mother continued, “The bedroom boxes are just clothes and personal things. Jenny and I can take our time and unpack those next week. I think we should get dressed up and celebrate.”

She looked around for approval, then spoke to Pete. “What's your favorite food, Pete, as if I can't guess?”

“Pizza!” Pete said.

“Me too,” Jenny said, and they both laughed. For the first time she saw that Pete's front teeth were slightly crooked. *Guess they can't afford braces like I wore*, Jenny thought.

“Thank goodness, Elizabeth.” Connie laughed. “When you said 'dressed up', you had me wondering. A pizza restaurant I can handle. Jeans okay?”

“Jeans are fine. Maybe I'll wear mine too. Jenny and I worked in the yard all morning, so we'll need a bath. We can be ready in an hour.”

Jenny glanced at her mother. She hadn't worn jeans in years.

The Pizza Place was crowded, with only two small tables available. Jenny and Pete took the table closest to the windows, leaving the other one for their mothers.

Jenny thought of the two books she knew Pete was reading. “Do you have a hobby, Pete?”

Pete grinned, then for the next five minutes he entertained her with his studies of tracing lost people, using the computer and the local library.

“I have a friend who needs to find someone. He doesn't have a computer, so I'm helping him.”

Jenny had wondered why he was fascinated with finding people, and she wanted to ask why he was so interested in cars, but she didn't want to sound nosy.

“Tell me about Boston. Have you ever wanted to live someplace else?”

“Not really,” Jenny said. “I was born there, and I love it. Of course you have to be careful, but I guess crime happens everywhere. Sam and I had a close call once.”

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Pete's face lit up when she told him about Sam saving her from the would-be assailant. He loved dogs and Sam had realized that immediately. And Sam was never wrong.

'Dog sense' her father called it, and then said, "It's a special gift, Jenny." She wondered if all dogs had it.

"Does anything exciting ever happen in Hamilton?"

Pete laughed at her question, then frowned. "Well, I heard the Hamilton mansion was robbed last night. The burglars stole a bunch of stuff. Guy on the radio said they left the house in a real mess."

A burst of laughter made them turn around. Their mothers seemed to be enjoying a joke, and Jenny knew her mom hadn't laughed like that in a long time. She looked like a young girl in her jeans and white cotton blouse, relaxed and happy, and the worry was gone from her face.

"My mom's good at making people laugh," Pete grinned and Jenny smiled back. Hamilton was looking better.

The evening was going well, when Jenny suddenly got the creepy feeling that someone was staring at her. She glanced around, and then felt her face burning. Someone at a window table sat watching her.

"Uh oh, you're getting the once over, Jenny." Pete looked amused.

"Who is that?" Jenny asked. She knew she didn't attract boys, so why was this one staring? She'd never seen anyone so handsome. His wavy hair glinted gold in the late afternoon sun, but he wore a serious expression.

"That's Rich Hamilton. God put him here for all the girls...so he thinks."

"His home..."

"...is the one that was robbed," Pete finished her sentence. "His family is probably the richest one in this whole area."

As Jenny and Pete talked, two older rough looking guys strode in and went straight to Rich's table. One of them leaned close to his face and said something. Rich nodded and they left as quickly as they came.

"It was probably creeps like those two that started the dogman rumors," Pete took a huge bite of pizza.

"Do you think any of it could be true, Pete?"

Jenny was glad Pete gave her an opening. Since her first look at the dogman sign, she wanted to explode and was dying to talk to someone. Someone who wouldn't make her more scared than she was already. She wished she could tell Pete everything, especially about what she found in her closet, but she didn't dare. He didn't seem to be afraid of anything, and she was afraid of everything.

"Nope," Pete said. "It's just some sicko getting his kicks. He probably enjoys scaring, or trying to scare, the younger kids."

"You think the sign is just for that, to scare the younger ones?"

"Sure, Jenny. Some weirdos dreamed up the dogman idea for fun. Now they're sitting back and having a good laugh. Like I said, for kicks."

"And Bobby Roland..."

"I know Bobby and he's not the type to make trouble or hurt anyone," Pete interrupted her.

"But how can you be sure, Pete?"

"Bobby and I spent a lot of time together this summer, working for Mr. Mitchell and some other folks around town, mostly yard work. He's okay, Jenny."

"Sam thinks so too."

"Sam?"

"Bobby came by yesterday after school. Said he wanted to apologize for the stuff he said. Sam took up with him right away, so I guess he's alright."

"See. I told you, he's a good person."

"I'm glad, but I still want to know why he said those things."

"I've been thinking about that since yesterday." Pete pushed his plate back and took a long drink of his soda. "I think someone put him up to saying what he did. They probably made it sound like a joke; otherwise he wouldn't have gone along with it. He'll do a lot to make someone laugh."

From the corner of her eye, Jenny saw Rich Hamilton get up and go to the cash register.

"Good looking, don't you think?" Pete teased her.

Jenny blushed. "Sure, but looks aren't everything."

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“That's a good thing. Otherwise, I might be in trouble.” Pete winked.

“Don't be silly.”

Across the room their mothers waved, a signal they were ready to leave. Jenny left a tip on the table, then she and Pete joined them.

When they walked out of the restaurant, it was almost dark.

“How about cruising Cherry Street?” Jenny's mother asked.

“I've heard about the kids doing that,” Connie said.

Elizabeth laughed and told her about the teenage pastime she'd enjoyed. “You are obviously not from Hamilton, Connie, and you don't know what you missed

“Sounds like fun.” Connie smiled.

On the way home Jenny thought about her conversation with Pete. She'd always felt self-conscious because she was small for her age. Pete had the same problem, but he didn't let it bother him, and he made her feel much better about the dogman situation. She hoped some of his courage would rub off on her.

After everyone said goodnight, Jenny and her mother hurried to the back porch. Sam's bark didn't sound like his usual happy greeting. When they reached the steps the motion lights came on, and they stopped, staring in horror at the big jagged hole in the back door glass.

Her mother tried the doorknob and found it was still locked. She unlocked the door and glanced around. “Thank goodness. Sam must have scared the intruders away.”

“Thanks, boy.” Jenny hugged Sam, but her relief was short lived. A brick with a piece of yellow paper wrapped around it was on the floor. Jenny watched her mother carefully remove the paper. Big black letters were scrawled across it.

“Warning! You'd better beware of the dogman!”

Chapter 4

Jenny's mother called the police and spoke with a detective. She assured him the intruder was gone, thanks to Sam.

“Maybe so, but it’s best that you get everyone into a secured place. Is there a bathroom close to the back door?”

“Yes, the downstairs bath is close to the den and the kitchen.”

“Okay. Don’t touch or move anything, and get in there now and lock the door. Don’t come out until you hear us arrive. We’re on our way.”

In spite of her fear, Jenny felt ridiculous being rushed into the bathroom. Sam would never let anyone near them. At least her mother agreed with that and left Sam in the den in case the culprit returned.

The police arrived minutes later. Jenny and her mother sat in the den while Sam followed the officers and watched them search the first floor. He waited at the top of the steps while they went to the basement. When they headed up the stairs, he returned to Jenny's side.

Jenny’s stomach tied itself into a knot as she scrunched herself down into her grandfather's old burgundy armchair. She wished she could hide there. She longed for her dad and the way he’d made her feel safe and warm. Sam laid his head on her leg and gave her a look of reassurance, before curling up on the floor.

Jenny wondered what her mother thought now. She'd been certain Hamilton was a new beginning for them and had talked at great length about how it was such a wonderful and safe place to live. *Who were you trying to convince, Mom? Me or you?*

Connie Montgomery's voice drifted in from the kitchen, saying something about Pete being in the shower. She'd seen the police car arrive and rushed over to check on them

“Woof!” Sam jumped to his feet, as the back door flew open and Pete rushed in.

“What's going on? What do the cops want, and what happened to the door?”

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Jenny told him about the brick and the note. She finished the story with a deep breath, hoping she didn't look as scared as she felt. "It's just a prank, of course, like that sign at the woods. It has to be."

"Don't worry, Jenny. Everything will be okay. You and your mom have Sam, and now you've got me and Mom. Whoever's doing this doesn't stand a chance." Pete sounded braver than he looked. He'd forgotten his glasses and his hair was still wet from the shower, making him look like a little boy.

Jenny felt like hugging him. Instead, she asked if he would go with her for Sam's evening trip to the yard. While they waited for Sam, they sat on the garage stairs where they had a good view of the back steps. She didn't feel like talking and was content to listen as Pete speculated about Hamilton's recent crime wave. Besides the Hamilton house burglary, there had been a series of earlier thefts, and the police were baffled.

"Something strange happened today before you and your mom arrived," Jenny said. Then she told Pete about the mysterious blue car with its dark windows. "Mom thought it was only some curious neighbors, but I wonder..."

Jenny stopped talking when she saw the police officers at the back steps talking to her mother, but she couldn't hear what they were saying.

"Do you think that car ties in with all of this?" Jenny asked.

"Beats me," Pete said, as they watched the police officers drive away. "There's not enough evidence to go on, not yet anyway."

Jenny heard the vacuum cleaner running and knew their mothers were cleaning up the broken glass. She and Pete walked back to the house in silence. A few minutes later they all said goodnight, again.

The door looked awful. All that remained of its glass was a jagged border around the edges. Jenny helped her mother place cardboard over the hole and tape it in place. It would have to do for tonight. They barely finished the job when Jenny realized she was very tired.

"Come on, Sam, let's go to bed." Sam caught up with her at the stairs and nuzzled her hand, then ran over to the back door and curled up on the rug.

Her mother smiled. "I think Sam has decided to stand guard until the door is fixed. Tomorrow we'll ask Uncle Rudy to recommend a repairman. I don't want to disturb him tonight."

Jenny said goodnight to her mother and went upstairs. After changing into her pajamas, she knelt by her bed and said her prayers. Then she went to the window and looked for her star, but the sky was overcast. "That's okay, Dad," she whispered, "I know you're there and I love you."

Going to bed in that huge unfamiliar room was the last thing she wanted to do. She felt like she was in a mausoleum and she knew it was because she was so scared. Someone wanted to run them out of Hamilton, out of their home, and she wondered who could be so cruel. One thing was certain; her mother no longer thought the dogman warnings were boyish pranks. She hadn't said a word to Jenny about her sleeping with a lamp on, something Jenny stopped doing in kindergarten but started doing again since they arrived in Hamilton.

After leaving her door open for Sam, she wrote the day's events in her diary, then took a favorite book from the shelf and tried to read. Exhaustion finally took over and she went to sleep. During the night she heard her mother wandering about the house, and it reminded her of the first months after her father died. The restless footsteps in the hallway convinced her she was right to keep quiet and try to hide her fear.

On Sunday morning Jenny lay in bed, wishing last night was another bad dream, but she knew it was real. She got up and walked barefoot to her window. Sam joined her in time to see the blue car pass by. It moved so slowly that Jenny wondered if the driver was an old person. Whoever it was, they seemed to be watching her house. The thought gave her more reason for worry, so she tried to push it from her mind.

The telephone rang and she sprang to answer it before it woke her mother. It was Uncle Rudy.

"How's my favorite girl this morning, Jenny?"

Uncle Rudy remained silent while Jenny told him about the break-in and the police search.

"It's just another prank, Uncle Rudy," she said, finishing her story.

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He agreed with her, but Jenny sensed the concern in his voice.

“Tell your mother I'll be over in an hour or so with someone to replace the glass. And if you two aren't busy after church, how about a picnic? There's a nice spot down by the river, and we could do a little historical sightseeing. I'll bring my portable grill and cook some burgers.”

“Sounds great, Uncle Rudy. I'm sure Mom will love it.” Jenny felt better when she hung up the phone. She got dressed, then pulled her hair back into a ponytail and bounded down the stairs. When she walked into the kitchen, her mother was flipping pancakes on the griddle. Jenny took one look at her face and got angry at the anonymous person who left last night's ugly message. The happy youthful look she saw at the pizza restaurant had been replaced with a face full of worry and strain. It was a look her mother's smile couldn't hide.

“Was that Pete on the phone?”

Jenny shook her head and told her about Uncle Rudy's call and the invitation.

“A picnic sounds like fun. Be nice if Connie and Pete could join us, and I'm sure Uncle Rudy won't mind. You know how much he loves people.” She glanced at Jenny.

Jenny smiled her approval.

“Hope Connie's not too busy. I'll give her a quick call.”

Connie accepted the invitation. “We'd love to go, Elizabeth, if I can help with the food. How about a macaroni and ham salad and some chocolate chip cookies? I was in a cooking mood last night.”

“That's great, Connie. Uncle Rudy is coming with a repairman, but fixing the glass won't take long. And Jenny and I should be home by 12:30.”

At one o'clock Jenny, Pete, and Sam piled into Uncle Rudy's big one-ton truck, while their mothers followed behind. The drive took them through an older part of Hamilton. One street was still paved with brick and some of the antebellum homes reflected an ageless presence. Others were in the middle of restoration.

Uncle Rudy explained that the town planned to restore Hamilton to its former glory. He belonged to the Hamilton Historical Preservation Committee and they worked hard to get grants and other funding to improve the old homes and other buildings. The business owners cooperated by sprucing up with paint and new window displays. The lights on Cherry Street were only one of many planned improvements.

The picnic spot turned out to be a small park overlooking the river. Bordering the park, the Maple Hill Cemetery stretched out and up a hillside, ending at a high plateau where the Confederate Cemetery began.

The Mississippi River sparkled in the sunlight, a wide brown ribbon streaked with silver. The casino buildings on the other side gave the scene a splash of brilliant color, but Jenny was more interested in the view next to the park. She'd been in a cemetery before, but she'd never seen one full of old monuments and statues.

Pete noticed her curiosity. "It's really a cool place to see, Jenny. Want to go look around?"

Jenny wasn't sure. Cemeteries had always depressed her, but this one might be interesting.

"Go ahead, Jenny," Uncle Rudy said. "There's a lot of history on that hill. Something everyone ought to see at least once. Besides, it'll take a little while to get the grill hot."

"We old folks can visit here in the shade while you kids explore," her mother said. "Go have fun."

"Be careful," Connie cautioned. "And I'll blow my whistle when the food's ready."

Pete frowned at his mother, then he and Jenny headed up the hill.

"She started that whistle stuff when I was little, back when we used to go hiking. She was always afraid I'd get lost if she couldn't see me."

"You don't need to explain anything, Pete. You should've seen the way my parents behaved when they took me to a shopping mall."

Visiting the Confederate Cemetery was a new experience for Jenny. She walked past the gravestones, reading the inscriptions, and thought how sad it was that some families never knew where their husbands and sons were buried. "Confederate Dead" was such a cold anonymous statement for a man's life.

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The Confederate Memorial towered over the little cemetery, its poetic inscription engraved deeply in the heavy stone. Pete stared at the words, then read them out loud.

“Our Confederate Dead: This monument represents and embodies hero-worship at the shrine of patriotism and sacrifice; devotion of the memory of the lost cause and honor to the soldiers, known and unknown, who rest in its shadow.”

Jenny squatted by one of the smaller stones and ran her fingers over the name of a young soldier. He was only a boy, not much older than her, when he died. *Uncle Rudy's right. Everyone should see this.*

With Sam walking between them, Pete led her to the highest point in the cemetery. “This must have been a lookout area for the troops. What a view.”

Jenny looked at the river, picturing young soldiers watching for the enemy, and she thought about the gravestones.

“Some folks say Hamilton has secret places, maybe even caves, that were used by the soldiers.” Pete gazed toward the river. “And they say there's hidden passages in some of the old houses. Wouldn't it be great to find one of them?”

“Maybe,” Jenny answered, not wanting to say “no” and sound like the coward she thought herself to be. She wondered what part her grandparents' home, now her home, had played during the war. She decided to go to the library one day and read about it.

“Pete, is that part of this cemetery?” Jenny looked back at the section they had passed through. Some of the headstones appeared to be old, but not as ancient as the ones where they were standing.

“That's just the regular old cemetery,” Pete answered. “It's called Maple Hill. People still get buried there sometimes. Want to go look?”

“Sure, I guess so.”

Jenny followed him down the winding trail that separated the two burial grounds.

Pete stopped and pointed to a large impressive headstone. It was engraved with a poem advising readers to live in the present and to treasure their lives. “I guess all cemeteries are sad places.”

“That's for sure,” Jenny said. “We'd better go back, Pete. They'll be worried about us.”

“Your mom might, but mine knows better. She's used to my exploring.”

“Hey Jenny, where are your grandparents buried?”

“Not here. Grandma said this place was getting too crowded and she wanted room for the whole family, so she and Grandpa bought a section in Sunset. That's the new place just outside of Hamilton.”

When they started down the hill, Jenny was drawn to an area surrounded by an old iron fence. The oldest readable headstone was dated 1859.

“That's the Hamilton family plot,” Pete said. “You know the town's named after that family.”

“That figures,” Jenny said. “No wonder Rich is a bit conceited. With a background like that, who wouldn't be?”

“That family must have lived here forever,” Pete said. “I wonder...”

Pete was interrupted by a shrill whistle. They looked toward the park and saw Connie waving a red bandanna in the air.

“Is that your signal, Pete?” Jenny laughed.

“She didn't need to do that,” Pete said.

Sam had stayed ahead of them since they left the picnic area, but something caught his attention as they headed back. He made a sudden detour to the right and barked excitedly. Someone moaned, then called out.

“Please...help me.”

They followed Sam to a group of large headstones and found him standing over an elderly man lying on the ground.

“Thank goodness. I thought no one would ever come.” The man looked at them and took a deep breath.

Jenny knelt down beside him. “Are you hurt?”

“I'm afraid I've broken my hip. You young folks better get me an ambulance.”

“Pete, Mom has a cell phone. Quick...”

“I'm on my way,” Pete took off running.

“What happened, Mr....?”

“Snyder, name's Fred Snyder. Came to visit my wife's grave. Do it every Sunday about this time.” He grimaced in pain. “Guess I need to change my schedule, 'cause somebody's been watching. They were

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hiding and waiting for me. Two of them. They took my wallet and my watch, even my wedding ring, and I've had that ring on my hand for over fifty years, young lady. That's a long time, you know."

"Yes sir, it surely is. Did you get a good look at them?"

"Afraid not. They were wearing those funny looking caps that covered their heads and faces, with holes for the eyes and mouth."

"You mean ski masks?"

"I couldn't remember what you call them. Didn't know anyone went skiing around these parts."

"Some people wear them in cold windy weather," Jenny said. "Did they do this to you?"

"No. They didn't hurt me. I was trying to get away from here after they left. Guess I was so scared that I lost my balance and fell."

"Jenny, the ambulance is on the way. Should be here shortly." Pete called out to her. Uncle Rudy, Elizabeth, and Connie were a few yards behind him.

They heard the ambulance siren wailing loudly as it passed through town. It arrived a moment later, with a police car close behind. Jenny wondered if this was routine procedure or if Pete called them too. Turning back to Mr. Snyder, she saw his pockets were turned inside out, something Pete may have spotted right away.

She and Pete told the police what little they knew while Mr. Snyder was being placed in the ambulance.

"Good job, kids." One of the officers smiled at them. "Good dog, too." He scratched Sam's neck. Sam wagged his tail, then took off down the hill.

"Thanks for your help," Mr. Snyder waved weakly to Jenny and Pete before the ambulance doors closed.

"Well, I think it's about time to eat," Uncle Rudy said. "Those burgers may be cold by now."

"I hope not," Pete said. "I'm starving."

When they reached the picnic area, they found Sam, looking guilty and licking his mouth. The dish that had been full of hamburger patties sat uncovered and empty.

"Oh, Sam...you didn't," Jenny scolded.

Sam lowered himself to the ground and laid his head on his front paws, then looked up at her with big sad eyes.

“Looks like he did, Jenny,” Uncle Rudy said. “But I guess he earned it. Mr. Snyder might still be out there if not for Sam.”

Uncle Rudy got the bikes finished and returned, but Monday morning came too soon for Jenny. She felt much better about passing the woods now that she had Pete to ride with her, and she was glad to see the dogman sign was gone. Although she wondered why, she breathed a big sigh of relief. They were almost past the woods when she heard the faint sound of dogs barking. She pedaled faster and glanced back at Pete. He grinned at her, giving no indication he heard anything.

Just before they reached the army surplus store, Pete moved ahead of her and motioned for her to stop. He parked his bike close to the store entrance and gazed at the window display. “Look at all that neat stuff.”

Jenny gave him a puzzled look. All she saw was camouflage clothes and old junk. “We'd better go, or we'll be late for English.”

“Wish we could just skip it,” Pete said. “I hate that class. Mrs. Jackson's known for giving the worst assignments.”

When they walked into class, Pete's words became reality. A student was handing everyone a printout. It was the toughest assignment Jenny could imagine: a one thousand word essay, on a subject of the student's choice, to be turned in one week before Christmas vacation. The essay would count as twenty percent of the semester grade, so it had to be researched and well-written, with accurate spelling and punctuation. Everyone groaned, including Jenny.

The rest of the day dragged by. During her last class, the teacher handed Jenny an envelope and asked her to take it to the principal's office. When the final bell rang, she rushed back to clean off her desk and almost collided with Rich Hamilton coming out of her classroom. He said a quick “sorry” and disappeared down the hallway.

Marilee Sanders caught up with her by the bicycle ramp. “We're having a Saturday afternoon cookout in a week or so. Hope you can

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make it, Jenny.” Marilee flashed her smile. “Have you met Rich Hamilton yet?”

Jenny shook her head, and Marilee continued, “Well, he's the cutest guy in school, and the richest. He's coming to the cookout, so I'll introduce you.”

Jenny saw Pete walking toward them. “Thanks, Marilee. That would be nice.”

Marilee spotted some friends and hurried off to join them, then Jenny and Pete got on their bikes and headed home. Jenny wondered if Pete would get an invitation to the cookout.

They were hurrying past the woods when the blue car whizzed by them. That's not an old person driving, Jenny thought. When they reached the garage, she told Pete about her suspicions.

“Why would anyone be so interested in our house, Pete? And why is someone trying so hard to scare us?” She unlatched the gate to Sam's pen and waited, hoping Pete could answer the question she'd been asking herself for days. As they walked to the porch, he looked thoughtful.

“Could be the same person who robbed the Hamiltons. Maybe they're sizing your place up, you know, by watching it every day. That blue car looked like an '82 Cutlass, one of the sporty models. Guess we need to pay attention next time we see it.” Pete knelt down and stroked Sam's neck. “Jenny, do you believe in ghosts?”

Jenny sat down on the back steps and laughed. “Are you trying to make me feel better or worse?”

“Neither one. I happen to think it's an interesting subject. A lot of people claim they've seen ghosts here in Hamilton. It's been going on for a long time, probably since the war. In fact, I saw something last night that made me wonder. Have you ever seen a big white German Shepherd around here?”

“No. Are you going to tell me you've seen one, and it's a ghost?”

“I know it sounds weird, Jenny. I tell you that dog looked strange, but he wasn't close enough to say for sure. Anyway, I'm pretty well convinced that ghosts do exist. Too many people have seen them.”

“I'm more concerned about real live people right now, Pete. Someone is trying to scare me and my mom and I want to know why.”

Hays Williams

“I don't blame you. Don't worry, Jenny. Sam won't let anyone hurt you, and you can call me anytime.” Pete gave her a reassuring look.

Jenny appreciated Pete's positive attitude, but she detected a hint of worry in his voice. She'd never had a friend like him before, and it was nice to have someone want to protect you.

“Sometime soon I'll show you around Hamilton. There's lots of great places to see. Right now, I guess it's homework time.” Pete picked up his backpack and left.

Jenny went inside and poured herself a glass of lemonade. Then she spread her books out on the kitchen table. When she opened her notebook, a piece of paper fell out. She unfolded it and stared in disbelief.

“The dogman really likes German Shepherds. Better watch your dog.”

Chapter 5

Jenny ran upstairs and hid the note under her mattress. She'd figure this one out alone, or ask Pete for help, but she'd have to tell him about the gruesome newspaper picture, or he might not take the note seriously.

When she returned to the kitchen she spotted a note left by her mom: "Get veggies out for dinner." Grabbing a bag of mixed vegetables from the freezer, she quickly poured them into a casserole dish and was sprinkling them with herbs and seasoned salt when the phone rang. It was Katie Lawrence.

"Hi Jenny. Want to come over tomorrow night? My mom's going to give us a demo on how to use makeup. That may take forty-five minutes to an hour, then we'll have pizza and ice cream while we watch a new DVD I found at Benson's."

"That sounds like fun," Jenny said. She was glad for the opportunity to get better acquainted with Katie. After listening to her go on and on about the party and which girls were invited, Jenny hesitated and then promised to be there by six. "If my mom says it's not okay, I'll call you back."

"Great," Katie said. "Too bad it's a school night, but tell your mom we'll have you home by ten. Mom says she'll bring you. We'll have another party on the weekend sometime soon. And you won't ever need a sleeping bag at my house. You'll see why when you get here."

By the time her mother walked in, Jenny had finished her homework and convinced herself that Pete was right about the dogman stuff. The note was probably written by some weirdo with nothing better to do.

Her mom smiled when she told her about the party. "I met Katie's mother a few days ago. Seems like a nice person, and very dedicated to helping the students."

"I liked her right away, Mom," Jenny said. "I got a headache the first day of school and went to her office for some aspirin."

“You know, Jenny, I learned something about Katie and her mother today, something very sad. Katie's father was in the military. They shipped him overseas for some kind of mission, but he never returned. Guess you'd have to call him missing, but Myra, Mrs. Lawrence, was never given an explanation that gave her any peace. I doubt that Katie remembers much about her father. She was so small when it happened.”

“I don't understand, Mom. Can't they find out what happened to him?”

“You'd think so, but all they will say is that he disappeared. Myra says a friend recently saw someone in Memphis who looks like him, but I guess everyone resembles someone else.”

Jenny didn't know which was worse, to watch your father wither away and die, or have him disappear with no explanation. She was glad Katie was small when it happened. It seemed to Jenny that little kids get over things quicker, but it had to be hard on Mrs. Lawrence.

Jenny didn't talk during dinner, but her thoughts raced around in her head like a whirlwind. Since her arrival in Hamilton, she'd been hit by so many weird events that she wanted to scream “stop” to whoever was responsible. She was certain it was all connected, and one way or another she would fit the pieces together and figure it out.

When the dishes were done, she excused herself and went upstairs. She took a hot bath, then found a pad and pencil. Sitting in the middle of her bed, she wrote down a list of the strange happenings, careful to keep them in order.

1. The dogman sign at the woods.
2. The hideous picture and story in my closet, and on the radio.
3. The phone call warning us about the dogman.
4. The broken back door glass and the brick with its ugly note.
5. Mr. Snyder being robbed in the cemetery.
6. The note someone placed in my notebook, telling me that the dogman likes German Shepherds.

Jenny didn't add the Hamilton house burglary or the blue car, but she wanted to. She was certain they were related to the other events. And she felt like including her bad dreams, though she knew it was ridiculous. After studying the list for a moment, she slid it under her

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mattress where she'd hidden the other things. Then she made a mental note to find a folder or envelope large enough to keep the evidence. She planned to be prepared when the culprit was caught.

Somehow she would find a way to tell Pete everything. She knew he could help, though she had no idea how, and she had to talk to someone. She pulled her diary from beneath her mattress and brought it up to date. When she finished, she said her nightly prayers, then went to the window. The night sky was filled with stars, but Jenny only cared about the one that was special to her.

"I sure wish you were here, Dad. There's so much I need to tell you." Sam stood beside her and looked up at the sky as if he understood.

"Mom has too much to handle already," Jenny whispered. "I can't let her know that I'm so scared. If you can arrange it, Dad, I could sure use that guardian angel you promised to send." She reached down and patted Sam's head. "Can you handle that job for now, Sam?"

Sam looked up at her and wagged his tail. She forgot her fear for a moment and imagined him with wings and a halo. He would make a unique angel.

She looked at her star again. "Goodnight, Dad. I love you."

Tuesday morning Jenny got up early. After letting Sam outside, she went to the mahogany desk where her mother had stashed paper and envelopes. A moment later she pulled an oversized brown envelope from a drawer and then quickly ran upstairs. After stuffing everything inside, she went to her closet and hid the envelope in the one place her mother would never bother, her keepsake box. The box was a special craft project for seventh grade art class. Following her dad's suggestion, she covered a large file box with deep blue paper and sprinkled it with silver stars. One star stood out, larger and brighter than the others. Just like her night star.

Sam barked at the back door and she ran down to let him in. By quarter to seven she was dressed and was making her bed, when her mother popped in.

“There's hot oatmeal on the stove. You have a good day, sweetheart.” She gave Jenny a hug. Just before walking out the door, she turned around. “Be sure all the lights are off when you leave.”

Her mother always said that. Jenny couldn't imagine what harm would be done if a light was left on, but she checked them anyway.

By the time she finished breakfast, Pete was at the back door. She let him in, then ran back up the stairs. “Be ready in a minute, Pete.”

“Take your time, Jenny. I'm a little early.”

When she returned, Sam was entertaining Pete with his handshaking routine. Jenny laughed, remembering the way her dad worked with Sam to teach him that first trick. Pete marveled at his intelligence. “He's really something, Jenny. He actually came up to me and held up his paw. It was like he wanted to shake hands with me, but I couldn't believe it.”

“Want to take Sam to his pen while I lock up?”

“Sure.” Pete grabbed his backpack. “Come on, Sam.”

Jenny made a quick check of the kitchen, then picked up her backpack and locked the door behind her.

As they headed toward the woods, she thought about yesterday's note. Glancing at her watch, she saw they had a few minutes to spare. “Pete, can we stop at the army surplus store and talk? I need to tell you something.”

“Sure, Jenny. Anything wrong?”

“I'll tell you when we get there.”

Jenny knew she'd never get over her fear of passing the woods, especially the tree where the dogman sign had been. She knew the sign was gone, but her stomach began to quiver as they approached that part of the woods. In her imagination the sign was still there, and she had a fear it would return. She forced herself to look, then wished she hadn't. There was something on the tree, but it wasn't the sign. When she realized what it was, Jenny lost her balance and fell. Pete had to swerve into the road to avoid hitting her.

“Hey! Are you okay?”

In an instant he was beside her, helping her up. Afraid she would throw up if she opened her mouth, Jenny pointed to the tree. A shaggy

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animal hide hung on the tree and a wide trail of red ran down the trunk to the ground.

“What the...?” Pete stopped just short of cussing. “Wait here, Jenny.”

Pete parked his bike well off the road, then waded through the weeds to the tree. Jenny didn't know how he could bear getting that close to something so horrible, but she was too sick to say anything.

He returned a moment later. “Jenny, it isn't what you think—it's a hoax. That's just an old coonskin with a lot of ketchup on it, and on the tree. Somebody went to a lot of trouble to set this up and they did it this morning, 'cause it's fresh. Here, smell this.” He held up a leaf tipped in the red stuff. It was ketchup.

“But why? I don't understand.”

“Like I said the other night. Somebody has a weird idea of fun. You okay?”

“I think so. It just made me sick to see that.”

“Don't look again. Tell you what, you go on to school. I'll skip first class and get rid of this mess. With an old broom and a bucket or two of water you'll never know it was there. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jenny agreed. Someone had to clean it up before her mother saw it, and she was grateful Pete had the stomach for the job.

“See you second period,” Pete said, then climbed back on his bike.

“Thanks Pete.”

“No problem.”

Jenny waved to him as he headed back to the house, then she continued on to school. She and Bobby Roland arrived at the bike rack at the same time. She didn't feel like talking to anyone and tried to ignore him, but it didn't work.

“Hi Jenny. Got a minute?”

“I guess so, but only a minute. I don't want to be late for class.”

“You okay? You look like you've just seen a ghost or something.”

“I'm fine, thank you.”

“Jenny, there's something I gotta tell you. Don't take that dogman stuff too serious, okay? Remember, it's probably just a bunch of guys having some fun.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, it's just what I think. Some guys have a real far out way of having their fun, or whatever you wanna call it.”

“I call it sick,” Jenny said.

“Yeah, I think so too,” Bobby said, walking away.

She watched him go, and wondered if he knew more than he was saying.

Tuesday evening Jenny arrived at Katie's house promptly at six o'clock. Pete knew the way to Katie's and offered to ride with her, saying he had to run an errand in that part of town anyway. Jenny wasn't sure he was telling the truth, but she was glad for the company. He promised to feed and walk Sam for her at the usual time.

Katie lived in a two-story brick home on a street lined with massive oak trees. The neighborhood looked like it had been there forever, but was well kept with neatly trimmed yards and shrubs. Pete got off his bike long enough to play with Katie's dog, Rusty, who greeted them in the front yard.

“Isn't he a beauty?” Pete scratched Rusty's neck. “We got to be friends this summer while me and Bobby worked on the yard. Katie's mom is one of Mr. Mitchell's customers. Well, I gotta run. Have fun, Jenny.” Pete waved to her and rode away.

Jenny was pleased to learn that Katie loved dogs, and Rusty was the prettiest Irish setter she'd ever seen. Katie called to her from the front porch, and Jenny soon learned she had the whole evening planned. She insisted on showing Jenny the pads they used for sleepovers.

“When I was little I wanted to have slumber parties all the time,” Katie laughed. “We never had enough beds for everyone, so my mom bought these foam pads and made covers for them.”

Katie turned out to be as much fun as Jenny expected, and she hoped her hunch was right, that they would become good friends. She looked around and noticed Marilee wasn't there, and wondered why, but she was secretly relieved and didn't ask.

Katie smiled at her. “Marilee had a better invitation. She and her folks are having dinner with the Hamiltons at the club.”

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The other girls ignored Katie's explanation and one of them took Jenny by the arm. "Come on, Jenny. You can be a model, like Katie." Jenny remembered Sara from math class.

"Oh no," Jenny protested. "I'd make a terrible model. Choose someone else."

Mrs. Lawrence walked in. "Okay girls, it's a school night so let's get started. Tonight you're going to learn how to bring out your natural beauty. Katie, we'll start with you. And remember, you just want to look pretty, and not like you're not wearing makeup."

Katie put on a headband, pulling her hair away from her face. For the next few minutes Mrs. Lawrence patted and dabbed, lightly applying foundation, blush, and a bit of eye makeup. She added a touch of lip gloss, then released Katie's hair. Katie still looked natural, but stunning. Jenny looked at Katie, then at Mrs. Lawrence.

One of the girls spoke Jenny's thoughts, "Wow! Marilee's going to be so jealous."

"Okay, who's next?" Mrs. Lawrence looked around for a volunteer.

Even though the movie was a bit sad for Jenny's taste, the night was fun. But she hoped her white blouse wasn't ruined from the pizza sauce. Two of the girls had put on a show and one of them fell against Jenny as she was about to take a bite.

The party ended at 9:30 and the girls said goodnight before running out to ride home with their parents. Mrs. Lawrence said they would leave in fifteen minutes, so Katie and Jenny took Rusty to the backyard for his evening trip.

"We can sit here while we wait for Rusty," Katie plopped down in the big swing on one side of the yard. "Wow, I am so thirsty. Must be all that pizza."

"Me too, Katie. I need a glass of water."

"Bring me some too. The glasses are in the cupboard over the sink."

Jenny went inside and headed for the kitchen, but stopped when she heard voices. She waited, hoping whoever it was would leave, but the visitor was angry.

"You've got a lot of nerve, Myra Lawrence, telling me how to raise my children. Richard and his sister have everything, including a

father.” The woman's voice grew louder. “As a matter of fact, we had dinner with both of my children tonight.”

“All I'm saying is they need more time with their parents.” Mrs. Lawrence's voice was so low Jenny barely heard what she said. “Kids need parents who will spend time with them, and I mean quality time, not dinner at the Country Club. I'm afraid you and Paul are so wrapped up in your careers and your social life that you don't realize what you're doing to the kids, or what you're missing.”

Jenny tiptoed to the bathroom, still thirsty and feeling guilty. She washed her hands, then cupped them under the faucet and drank. When she walked out of the bathroom, Katie stood in the hallway.

“Jenny, I know you heard my mom talking to someone just now, and I need to tell you something.” Katie kept her voice low.

“I'm sorry, Katie. I didn't mean to eavesdrop.”

“I know that. I just wanted you to know my mom sometimes talks to parents at home. Usually it's on the phone, but this time one of them came by. Whatever they say to her is confidential, so it's important you keep whatever you heard to yourself.”

“I understand. I promise I'll not repeat a word.”

“Okay. Let's go get Rusty, so we can load your bike into the van. Mom's visitor is gone.”

Wednesday morning as they passed the woods Jenny thought about the note. She hated the thought of anyone, especially Pete, seeing how scared she was, but her reaction to the ugly scene on the tree gave her away. After what he'd done for her, she had to tell him about the rest of the threats.

She slowed her bike and looked back at him. Then she came to a full stop and stared past him toward the woods.

“What is it, Jenny?”

At the edge of the woods a big man with long gray hair and a beard was picking up cans and putting them into a trash bag. He was dressed in overalls and held a strange looking cane under one arm.

“Hey, where did he come from?” Pete asked.

The Mystery of the Dogman

The man seemed familiar and Jenny was certain she'd seen him somewhere before, but how could she forget someone who looked like that?

"I don't know, but he looks like a street person. Pete, we need to stop so I can tell you what I didn't get to tell you yesterday." As she spoke she glanced back for one more look, but the big man was gone. She looked toward the woods, expecting to see him disappearing into the trees, but there was no sign of him.

At the army surplus store they remained on their bikes while Jenny told him about the other things that happened. "What I can't figure out is," she hesitated and took a deep breath. "...is when this person could've put the note in my book. The only time it was out of my sight was when I went to the office during my last class."

"Didn't you see anyone close to your desk when you got back to the classroom?"

"No, but the bell rang before I got back, so I suppose it could be anyone."

Pete assured her that someone wanted to play games and she shouldn't worry about it, but Jenny knew he was concerned. He was trying to hide it and she had to do the same. She certainly couldn't let her mom know.

Jenny thought about Mrs. Lawrence's visitor. She was certain it was Rich's mother, and she realized how lucky she'd been to have such good parents. She felt sorry for Rich and his sister.

Before first period, Jenny stopped at her locker and stashed the rest of her books. When she turned around, two girls blocked her path. Jenny recognized one of them from geography class, Lucy Mayfield.

"Well, if it isn't the lady of Bonner House herself."

"Excuse me, Lucy. I don't want to be late for English."

Lucy didn't move. Instead she turned to her companion and kept talking. "Miss Freckles here doesn't have a clue. She's so dumb she doesn't know the only reason she was invited to the party is because of where she lives. Must be nice to live in such a big house, and get invited to the school counselor's home for a party."

Jenny tried to get around her, but Lucy blocked her every move. She glared at Jenny and continued talking.

“Tell me, Jenny, does every woman in your family have freckles on her nose?”

Jenny felt tears threatening to surface and bit her lip to stop them. She didn't need harassment on top of her other problems. When the bell rang, she knew she was late and she got angry. With one push she moved around Lucy and ran toward English class. When she slid into her seat, Pete turned around.

“Where were you?”

“Tell you later.”

As the day dragged by, Jenny considered asking Katie if she'd seen anyone prowling through her stuff the day before. Then she thought about what Katie's reaction to such a question would be and changed her mind.

On the ride home, Jenny listened with interest as Pete described a contest he was planning to enter. “I have to mail my entry in a few days, so I'll need to work on it every night if I'm going to make the deadline. The winner gets a new computer system, top of the line.”

“Great prize, Pete. I hope you win.”

“Thanks. Did you know you can use a computer to locate just about anyone?” he asked, as they put their bikes away.

Jenny remembered the book she'd seen when Pete and his mother moved in, but she didn't answer him. The place was too quiet, and she knew something was wrong. Sam always greeted her with joyful barking, but all she heard was silence. Pete followed her to Sam's pen, but the gate was open, and he was gone.

“Sam, Saammmm,” Jenny yelled. Pete joined in, but there was no response. He walked back to the gate and examined the latch.

“Someone must have let him out, Jenny. The latch looks fine.”

“If Sam is as smart as you think, he probably opened the gate himself. I'm sure he'll be home before dark.” She didn't tell Pete that Sam never wandered off.

“You should go work on your contest entry. Sam will be fine.”

“Okay, if you feel sure about that.”

Pete's frown didn't make her feel any better. She thought of the woods and the ugly scene on the tree, and she wondered if he was thinking the same thing.

The Mystery of the Dogman

“Pete, it's obvious someone is trying really hard to scare us. Whoever's doing these things doesn't want us to be here, and I don't understand why.”

“It doesn't make any sense, Jenny. Your family has owned this place forever.”

“Over forty years. This was my grandparents' dream house. When Grandpa bought it, it was pretty run down, and Mom said they spent over five years restoring it.”

“It's really a neat old place, Jenny. Lots of history happened in there.” Pete looked at the house, and Jenny knew he wondered what it would be like to live there. Did he realize the big house seemed to have a life of its own and that it frightened her? She hoped not.

“Well, guess I'll see you later,” Pete said, as they parked their bikes in the garage.

Jenny quickly changed into some old clothes, then waited five minutes before checking the back for any sign of Pete. Then she left by the front door and ran across the yard toward the woods.

The woods terrified her, but she had to find Sam.

She stopped at the edge of the woods and looked in every direction, hoping to see Sam running toward her. When there was no sign of him, she walked a few yards into the woods. The deep shade reminded her of nighttime and she looked back toward the road, wishing she'd stayed home. Suddenly, the sound of a car startled her and she hid behind a large tree. The blue car with the dark windows was moving slowly past the woods, and her house.

She waited for the car to leave, but there was still no sign of Sam. If she called out for him, Pete might hear and wonder why she didn't ask him to go to the woods with her. How could she explain she needed to do this by herself? She needed to find Sam, and she had to get over her fear of the woods. No one could do that for her. Jenny bowed her head and whispered, “Please let Sam be okay and send him home, and please help me to stop being afraid of this place.”

When she looked up, she saw the big man again. He was standing close to a huge oak, leaning on his cane. He smiled and Jenny felt

strangely unafraid. *Go home, Jenny. Sam is okay.* Jenny wasn't sure if he spoke the words, only that she heard them.

Looking back toward the road, she saw the car was gone. She turned to thank the man, but he was gone too, and goose bumps popped out on her arms. Who was he? And how did he know her name, or know about Sam?

She ran home and locked the door. Ten minutes later she was trying to concentrate on a math problem when she heard a strange noise in the attic, a distinct thud, like an object hitting the floor. Something fell, she thought. *But things don't fall by themselves, Jenny.* She wished she was brave enough to go to the attic and look, but she was too scared. Suddenly she wanted Pete there. She reached for the phone, but it rang, and she jerked her hand back as if she'd touched a hot stove.

"I'm going to be late, Jenny. We should be through here by six. Why don't you call Pete to come over, and do your homework together?" Her mom didn't add, "so you won't be alone," but Jenny knew she was thinking it, and she didn't dare tell her that Sam was missing.

Pete was glad she called. "Be right there."

Jenny showed him the math problem, pretending to have trouble with it. He coached her through it and she thanked him.

"Wish English was as easy for me."

"Come on, Pete. You're too smart for me to believe that."

"Yeah, but that doesn't necessarily mean I like all my subjects."

Jenny understood. She could do math, but wasn't fond of it.

"Tell you what, Pete, if you help me with math, I'll help you with English, and with the essay. Speaking of the essay, why don't you write about how to find missing people."

"I might do that," Pete looked up at the high ceiling. "This old house is really something. Maybe you should write about it."

"The attic is huge, and it has a great view. Would you like to see it?" Pete's comment gave her the opening she needed. On the way to the stairs, she told him about the strange noise. The stairs creaked beneath their feet, and Jenny got the same eerie feeling she got watching scary movies. Only this time it was real.

The Mystery of the Dogman

“Let's check it out,” Pete said, moving ahead of her. “By the way, I saw the blue car a few minutes ago. It was parked down the road. Just sitting there, like it was waiting. Weird.”

Jenny saw nothing unusual in the attic, and she knew the noise would remain a mystery, for now. She and Pete walked over to the window. “Grandpa said this was a lookout point during the war. In the winter you can see the river for miles.”

“Bet the library has lots of stuff about this place,” Pete said as he looked around. “They have a whole section about the war. I bet some important decisions were made right here at this window. I've never seen an attic this big before.”

“Neither have I. Grandpa said it was designed to be roomy, so the servants had a comfortable place to live.”

“Let me guess. The back entrance and those two staircases let them come and go without disturbing the family.”

“Right. And there used to be a door at the end of the second floor hallway, to protect the family's privacy. Grandpa thought the door was a fire hazard, so he had it removed and all the woodwork redone.”

“He was probably right about that, Jenny. That open doorway gives another quick escape route. Like I said, this place will make a great paper.”

Pete's enthusiasm was contagious, and Jenny decided he was right. She would write her essay on Bonner House. Hopefully, she could use some of her grandfather's stories.

She walked to the back of the attic and looked down at the tall trellis that rose from ground level and ended next to the window. “Grandpa used to grow morning glories on that trellis,” she said. “That was after Grandma made him cut down the running roses. She said the vines looked ragged.”

Pete joined her at the window and looked down. “I wonder...” Then they heard Sam barking.

“He's home!” They both shouted, and Sam barked again.

Pete beat Jenny to the door, then stepped back in shock. Sam stood there, on three legs. One of his back legs was bound in a cast.

Jenny's world turned upside down when her father died. Now, she and her mom must start over in her mother's childhood home. She's scared of the dark woods she must bike past to get to school-and of that awful Dogman sign. When Pete moves into their garage apartment, he soon becomes her best friend. The warnings begin and danger is everywhere. Jenny and Pete must find some answers. Who, or what, is the Dogman?

The Mystery of the Dogman

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