

Prologue

October 1956

The heavy car sped down the narrow country road; the light from its headlamps swept the dark night sky before falling to the gravel trail ahead and then back up again. From a distance, it must have looked like some sort of an automobile rollercoaster. It was his dad's car, a 1955 Buick Special, and this was the first time he had been allowed to take it out for more than a half-hour run around town. His dad liked the girl he was with tonight and made an exception this time to allow the boy to use the car for a movie date.

The two teenagers in the back seat, a boy and a girl, held on to each other and screamed at the top of every hill while the girl hunched down in the passenger seat pounded the driver's arm and pleaded for him to slow down. They had just come from some sort of a teenage movie, and the boys in their leather jackets and duck-tail hairdos were intent on impressing the girls by how tough they were. They didn't know it then, but the biggest test of their bravery was about a quarter mile away.

The young driver slowed the car to a crawl, not by request but to maneuver the right turn on to a little-used farm road. The mood in the car had changed, and no one spoke. They were approaching a place that was either haunted or hallowed, depending on how you understood the story. Eight people had been brutally murdered here just over thirty-six years ago.

The driver knew the story better than other kids his age. His dad, older than their fathers, had firsthand knowledge of the murders of a farmer, his wife, five of their six daughters, and a hired boy. For as long as he could remember, when he visited the town cemetery with his father he would ask about the gravesite on the hill, covered with overgrown lilac bushes, that contained the graves of all eight victims.

“We shouldn’t be here,” the girl in the front seat said to no one in particular.

“That’s right,” agreed her friend in the back. “Let’s go back.”

“Come on, girls. Don’t be scaredy-cats,” said the boy in the back. “This is just a stupid old abandoned farmstead. Nothin’ living here except varmints and critters same as you find on every one of these old farms where people couldn’t make a living from the land and gave up.”

“This place was different,” argued the girl in the front. “These people were making a good living here before that god-awful day when someone killed them all except the baby. My dad heard that Mr. Wolf was a good farmer, better than most, and that he had two farms and that he was well off.”

“So what?” the boy shot back. “They were all killed. It was a long time ago. They’re dead and gone. The place is abandoned. All it is now is just a bunch of empty buildings. Nothing more.”

There was a long pause. Finally, the girl continued in a hushed voice.

“How could anyone have done such a horrible thing? How could anyone—a friend and neighbor, no less—come over here one day and kill the whole family except the baby? I just can’t imagine such a thing.”

“My dad visited him in the state penitentiary at least once, maybe more, and he told me that he went to his grave denying that he did it,” the driver explained.

“Yeah?” replied the boy in back. “Well, he signed a confession, he was found guilty, and he died in the pen. That’s good enough for me.”

Everyone was silent again.

“I heard the place is haunted,” said the girl in back. “I heard people tried to live here but had to leave because of the ghosts, in the house mostly, but also in the cow shed. Isn’t that right?” she asked, looking to the driver as he pulled the car to a stop.

“You’re both right,” he said. “They were all murdered, the place is abandoned, and that’s that. But we’ve all heard stories about people trying to live here and then leaving because they thought the place was haunted. It was all in their heads, I say.”

The car lights were fixed on the boarded-up house. It was quiet again in the car. Everyone was lost in their own thoughts. It didn’t matter much whether they thought the place was haunted or not or whether they believed the stories about people being run off by ghosts. When they looked at that house standing vacant and alone, they could only think of the stories they had heard about the gruesome deaths suffered by those little children who never got to grow up and enjoy life like they were able to.

“I heard the mother and the girls were all killed in the house,” the girl in back told the others. “Isn’t that so?” she asked, again looking to the driver.

“That’s not exactly the way I heard it,” he said. “My dad said the mother, the hired boy, and three of the girls were killed there. The father was killed in the yard and the other two girls were killed in the cow shed, and the worst thing was that there were hungry pigs...”

“Stop it! Stop it right now!” shouted the girl next to him. “Don’t say another word! I don’t want to hear anything about the pigs. It’s bad enough thinking about the brutal murders, of children especially, without those stupid stories that were probably made up by wicked people who didn’t think that cold-blooded murder of innocent children was bad enough.”

“You’re right,” said the driver as he pushed in the knob to shut off the headlights. “They’re probably just stupid stories anyway. You know how people are. We should have some respect for the dead.”

“Enough talking, kiddies,” the boy in the back said with some sense of urgency in his voice. “It’s time to get out and pass the test.”

“What test?” his date asked.

“You know. Whenever anyone comes out here at night, in order to appease the ghosts and spirits haunting this place, they have to touch the latch on the door of the barn where the bodies were found. If you don’t, the ghosts get all worked up and unsettled.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” she replied. “You’re making that up. No one ever heard of such a stupid test. Besides, I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts.”

“Never mind,” he said. “It’s time to get out of the car.”

No one moved.

“What? Are you afraid?” the boy asked as he opened the back door to get out. “Anyone coming with me or are you just a bunch of little chickens afraid of the dark?”

The driver opened his door and the girls followed their dates from the safety of the car into the unknown darkness of the autumn night. It was getting cold, but the chills they felt were probably not from the night air alone. They moved past the back of the car toward the dark form of a building visible only by the dim light of a moonless sky.

The girls hung on to their dates and the two couples inched forward, squinting as they tried to make out what was before them.

“This is stupid,” whispered one of the girls.

“And it’s wrong to be here,” said the other. “Let’s go back and get out of here.”

“We’ve got to pass the test,” reminded the boy from the back seat. “We’ve got to touch the latch on the barn’s door.”

“You’re the only one who ever heard of such a test,” his partner scolded. “You just made that up to get us out of the car.”

What a sight this was. Four frightened children dressed up in grown-up clothes clutching on to each other as they walked into the unknown darkness of a haunted farm. They were teenagers, to be sure, but tonight, at this moment anyhow, they were frightened babies wishing they were home with their mothers.

Together they inched on toward the barn where bodies of murdered children had been found years before. Were their spirits still here, roaming the farmstead where little children used to laugh and play? Was this sacred ground? Was it wrong to be here?

All of a sudden, the couple in the lead stumbled on something or got tangled up in each other's feet. As they tried to keep from falling, the girl let out a scream that she tried desperately to suck back in. Suddenly, out of nowhere, they heard the sound of grunts and snorts as two huge, dark and ominous forms sprang out from the barn and thundered their way.

In an instant, all four turned an about-face and ran as fast as they could to the car. The first boy slammed against his door and opened it as quickly as he could. His buddy did the same and the four of them hurried into their seats while the driver fumbled for the ignition with one hand and the headlight knob with another.

The car started immediately. He released the brake, put the shift lever in reverse and turned to the right as he backed away. When he started forward to find the road out to the highway, the light from his headlamps flashed across the forms of two large horses. At that moment, they seemed like giant, wicked stallions. Only then did he see the barbed wire fence that had been put up between the house and barn to keep the horses from running off.

The horses looked all worked up. They were frightened or angry, he couldn't decide which. But the image that stayed with him as he sped up the farm road was of the angry eyes of one horse. Huge, wild eyes that looked—what was it?— that looked like the horse was haunted!

The couple in the back seat was caught in a tight embrace while the girl in front hung on to the driver as best she could without interfering with his attempt to get them out of there.

"Holy shit," said the boy in the back. "Those horses scared the crap out of me. Nobody ever said anything about anybody keeping some stupid horses out here."

The girls echoed their surprise, as well, and the conversation from all but the driver was the kind of excited jabber you get from people after they have had a frightful experience. Adrenaline was running high and talk was coming fast. Little children in grownup clothes, scared to death.

When the car reached the top of the first hill out of the farm, the driver, unexpectedly, pulled it to a stop. With lights on and the

engine running, he put the car in neutral, pulled the emergency brake and opened his door.

“Stay here,” he said. “I have to do something.”

He slowly closed his door and walked to the back of the car. His friends peered at him as he moved past them, but no one said a word. What, in heaven’s name, was he up to?

Standing by the back of the car, he could hear the slight rumble from the tailpipe but, other than that, it was a still, quiet night. He looked back down the road to the dark images of the buildings nestled against each other in this peaceful valley that had been visited by horror, anguish and death.

In his mind, he could alternately hear the sounds of children laughing and playing and then the sounds of gunshots, screams, and, finally, silence...dead silence.

As he looked down the road at the vacant farm below, he thought to himself: We shouldn’t have come here. It was wrong to be here.

He felt some shame and some remorse. He knew too much about that awful day in April of 1920 when this man his father knew so well had been shot down in his own yard, murdered along with all the rest of his family except for the youngest daughter, then only eight months old.

He vowed that the next time he was at the cemetery he would visit their gravesite and say a special prayer for the souls of these faithful departed. Eight faithful souls too-soon departed.

“What were you doing back there?” asked his girlfriend as he closed the door and started the car down the road.

“Just checking on something,” he said.