

ONE

Jeez, it's colder than I thought," Noah Phelps said to himself. The October air was crisp, but clear, with the promise of a beautiful sunrise teasing the eastern sky. He straightened his John Deere ball cap, snugged up his jacket, and closed the door to Number 13. Just outside the motel room was a workman's ladder, leaned against the second floor balcony, which Noah ducked under at precisely the same moment that he stepped on a crack in the concrete walk. Not a black cat was in sight, though.

"Your back is fine, Mom."

Noah had arrived at Hoopeston three days ago on the thirteenth, a Friday, and was scheduled to be here thirteen days. His wallet held thirteen dollars in cash. On his thirteenth birthday, his parents gave him a camera, which led to his graduation from college with a fine arts degree in photography on June 13th, 1992. Thirteen's were all around him, always had been, but this didn't worry Noah, and he had, in fact, reasoned that thirteen was his *lucky* number. He was also unafraid of black cats, walking under ladders, and cracks in the sidewalk.

Just two things frightened Noah: heights, and the Gremlin.

Logic demanded a fear of heights, Noah thought. Falling kills, which was an easy to understand cause and effect relationship, and fit with Noah's desire to live an ordered, predictable life. A life led no more than six feet off the ground at any time.

Noah feared the Gremlin just as much, because it trailed disorder in its wake. The Gremlin caused your camera to fail at that no-one-will-ever-be-able-to-get-a-shot-like-this-again moment. The Gremlin allowed light to leak unseen into your darkroom, made light meters read incorrectly, and covered the sun with clouds the instant you clicked the shutter. Noah felt sure the Gremlin was a real, mean-spirited supernatural creature: a photography demon.

He walked south past the long line of doors toward Henning's Root Beer Stand, where the drive-in intercoms and menu boards hung by the indoor tables instead of in the parking lot. A breeze chilled his damp hair and sent a shiver through him.

"Why couldn't I have found a nice indoor job," he said, then felt eyes on him. Sam, the day clerk in the office, appeared to be looking for Noah's companion.

Busted.

Noah waved, sheepish, and turned his gaze back toward Henning's. His mother had cursed him with talking to himself, as her mother had cursed her. Noah had taken the affliction to new heights by also talking to inanimate objects. Mostly his cameras.

After the short one block walk along Illinois State Route 1, Noah pushed open the heavy glass door at Henning's and glanced to the rear of the building where a group of old men expected him. One of them waved and hallooed, leading to a chorus of greetings.

Noah walked to the coffee maker first, since his adopted son status earned him the privilege of filling his own cup. The shapely waitress who presided over the counter gave him a flirty smile as he poured, so he grinned and winked. Noah liked to think his trim, muscular frame elicited this usual reaction, but he knew better. His magical grey eyes were the thing, an old girlfriend had said.

The Henning's gang, as Noah called them, sat at their reserved table, some in denim overalls, and some in Carhartt's. Harry, the big talker, commanded the show, assisted by next-in-charge Frank, the

comedian. Louie, a retired farmer, sat quietly, content to just listen. The oldest was Lawrence, who professed an inability to hear but joined in the conversation anyway. A new member, unknown to Noah, sat at the table today, dressed in shirt and slacks with brightly polished shoes.

Animated discussion punctuated with laughter came from their table, more than should be expected on a Monday morning, but then they had likely all been up since 4:00 am. They offered loads of unsolicited wisdom, and the years of toil in their gnarled hands and crooked backs demanded respect. Best of all, they knew every back road and trail within twenty miles. Noah liked them, but he also needed them. The conversation paused as he sat down, with the aromas of strong black coffee, tobacco, and hair tonic washing over him.

“Well, young man, what direction are we off to today?” said Harry.

“Wait, Harry, Noah hasn’t met Stanley yet,” said Frank. “Stanley, this is Noah Phelps, photographer extraordinaire.” Noah had nodded to the newcomer when he sat, and keeping with protocol, stood and reached his hand out to shake hands with Stanley, who, also following protocol as the elder, remained seated.

“Good to meet you, Stanley,” said Noah.

Stanley smiled. “Same here. Heard a lot about you already.”

Noah laughed. “Oh, I’m sure.”

“Tell him what it is you’re doing here, Noah,” Harry urged.

“It’s quite simple really. I photograph nature and write articles for magazines. Right now, I’m on assignment to shoot as many Illinois backwoods ponds as I can find for an article in *Outdoor Midwest* magazine. Preferably natural ponds rather than man-made, unless they’re really old. They want an article about how these ponds are disappearing.”

Stanley nodded. “You’re a farm boy, aren’t you?”

Very observant.

“Is it that obvious?”

“It’s hard to get the farm out of a guy,” said Stanley. “So where you from?”

“Wisconsin, northeast of Madison. I grew up on my dad’s dairy farm.”

“He’s looking for ponds at least as old as Lawrence here,” Harry interjected with a laugh.

“What?” asked Lawrence.

“Never mind,” said Harry. “So where you goin’ today, Noah?”

Noah started to answer but before he could speak, Louie did. “Southeast. He should go southeast.”

So, Louie, you do have functioning vocal cords.

“Southeast?” said Harry. “Why would he go that way? Nothin’ out there but Jones’s Woods.”

“Jones Woods?” Noah asked. “No one mentioned that before.”

Lawrence scowled at Louie, and then turned to Noah. “That’s ‘cause you got no business goin’ there, is why. Bad stuff happened at that place, and you don’t need to go there. Them are bad people.”

“Bad stuff?” Noah asked. “Like what?”

“Just bad stuff,” said Lawrence. “Some people was kilt, years ago. Least most people think so. Police say they just disappeared. That woods is a bad place, I tell ya, ya shouldn’t go down there.”

“When did this happen?” Noah asked.

“Oh, thirty or so years ago,” said Stanley. “Quite a big play in the papers. Lots of stories about ghosts and strange goings on ever since. Doubt there’d be anything interesting anyway, the woods is so thick you can’t see fifty feet into it. The daughter still lives out there by herself. She was always pretty shy, but she became a real recluse after her parents vanished. Downright hermit, she is. You almost never see her around town. Little bitty thing, cute as a button if she’d just smile a little.”

“She’s a witch, they say,” said Lawrence in a low voice, as if someone might overhear. “Living out there alone in the wild ain’t natural.”

Stanley rolled his eyes as Frank took up the story. “I hear that every now and then she’ll get into a to-do with Chester Jones. He’s heir to the Jones family fortune and keeps a feud going, they say. Claims the Joneses were tricked into selling the property to the par-

ents.” He looked toward Stanley. “Their name was Brown, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Stanley. “The daughter’s name is Willow. Anyway, most people shy away from the woods, except Louie here.”

All eyes turned to Louie, who was looking out the window and sipping his coffee, seemingly ignoring the conversation once he had started it.

Harry broke the uncomfortable silence. “Louie works for the Brown’s daughter.” Another long pause ensued.

“Just odd jobs,” Louie said in a low voice.

Wow, you’re up to eight words now.

From experience, Noah knew the old men’s tale was half truth and half conjecture. “Are there any ponds on the property?” he asked.

Everyone looked at Louie again. “One,” he said.

Harry took command of the situation and shifted the conversation in a new direction, literally, suggesting Noah should shoot around Milford, to the north, the opposite direction from Louie’s suggested course. Everyone agreed and described numerous back roads and shortcuts to wooded areas that might have ponds. Noah scribbled in a small spiral notebook.

Everyone volunteered help except Louie. He sat for a few minutes without speaking, then drained his coffee cup and said his goodbyes. As he left, with the slightest motion of his head, he indicated Noah should follow.

What does he want?

Noah kept one eye on Louie as he left. The old man stopped outside to withdraw a cigarette from his shirt pocket with his left hand, while his right hand dug in his pants pocket for a lighter. He cupped his hands around the cigarette to light it, took a long drag, and peered through the window at Noah. A jerk of his head again signaled Noah to follow. He walked away, passed the corner where he should have turned to go downtown, and instead walked north toward the motel.

Noah listened to advice and wrote down directions for a few minutes, then finished his coffee, bade them all a good day, and left, walking rapidly back toward the motel.

"This better be good, Louie," he growled. "You just cost me breakfast."

Louie was leaning against Noah's red Dakota when he arrived at the motel. The old man straightened when Noah approached and waved him over close, as if to share some great secret. He tossed the cigarette to the ground and smashed it with his boot.

Louie was about Noah's height, but his stoop said he used to be taller. Noah assumed he was in his late sixties. His hair had remained dark brown, though it had thinned. Rough farmer's skin, toughened by years of hard outdoor labor, was tanned deep brown. He wore thick glasses now and walked with a limp, but Noah suspected this old man could still buck bales with the young guys. Jeans and a checked shirt completed his farmer's uniform.

"I didn't wanna talk around them guys," Louie began. "They think I don't know nothin'. My old dad, years ago, was a groundskeeper for the Joneses. Worked at the Big House. That's what they call the old mansion in the woods. You met Chester Jones yet?"

Jones again.

"No," said Noah, "but I've seen the Jones name on a few things around here."

"Yeah. Lots of things. The bank. The new nursing home wing. He's a big deal on the village board. Thinks he's hot stuff. Likes to push people around, just like his granddad used to. You'll meet him if you're here very long. Sticks his nose in everything. The Jones family's been here a long time. Come up from the south after the Civil War. Always want to run things, tell people what to do. Uppity."

"So tell me about this pond in the woods."

Louie's expression turned wistful. "I remember the first time I seen it, long time ago, when I was a young man. Goin' where I wasn't

s'pose to." He paused, remembering the scene, Noah assumed. "She's still there, in a little house near the pond. Used to be like a bathhouse for when the Joneses went swimmin'. The Big House, it's all closed up. Hasn't been nobody living in it for years." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Just a little wisp of a thing. Livin' out there in the woods all by herself."

"Who?" Noah asked. "The hermit?"

Louie jerked back to the present. "She's not a hermit, exactly." He paused for a moment, squinted at the bright sun. "She just likes her privacy is all."

"Do you know her well?" Noah asked.

"No, no," Louie answered, and then added, "Well, a little. I do jobs for her every now and then. But she don't care to talk much to me."

"Do you think she'll talk to me?"

"Yeah. I think she'll like you."

"What makes you say that?"

Louie shrugged and grinned. "Just a hunch. You have a lot in common."

Hermit, photographer ... sure, lots in common.

"Do you think she would allow me on her property to shoot the pond?"

"Don't really know. Worth a try though. Beautiful place. Just beautiful."

"How do I get there?" Noah pulled out his notebook and scratched notes as Louie gave directions, including a shortcut through the woods to the woman's house.

"The lane's hard to find," Louie said. "She's never had a car, so the road's pretty much growed over. There's several spots that look like they might be a road but they peter out. You want the one where the sign's missin' on the right. The Big House is a fair distance from the paved road, to the south. The cottage is farther even, down a little path to the west, unless you take the shortcut." He glanced toward Henning's. "Well, I'd best be goin'. We'll be seein' ya." He turned to leave.

Noah placed a hand on Louie's arm. "Louie, why did you tell me all this? You haven't said ten words since I came to Hoopeston."

A sly grin spread across Louie's face. "You'll see." Without another word, he strode away toward downtown.

Noah removed his ball cap and scratched his head while Louie walked away.

"What was all that about?" he muttered. "Does he want me to see the pond ... or the woman?"

Noah headed east on Maple street to the post office, where he mailed an expense report to headquarters, and then drove north to Main Street and turned west. As he traveled through downtown, he perused a store located on the first floor of an old whitewashed brick building. He had driven past this place many times since he came to Hoopeston. Noah knew about it long before the old boys at Henning's told him its story. In fact, he chose Hoopeston for his base of operations because of it.

Named The Broom Closet, the store, a source for all things magical and mysterious, specialized in witchcraft supplies and paraphernalia. That's what drew Noah's interest.

Noah was a witch.

His devout Lutheran mother didn't like the term witch; he wasn't comfortable with it either. He preferred just Wiccan.

The store's name appealed to Noah. In Wicca circles, people like him who kept their beliefs private were "in the broom closet." Wicca's witchcraft and magic aspects drew fire from conservative folks, so Noah preferred the low profile. It amused him that those people were unaware of the practice of magic in every major culture for thousands of years in various guises. Noah thought the conversion of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus in the middle of a church full of people quite magical, though many of the partakers would be shocked to hear him say so. He preferred to avoid controversy, however, and so lived by the number one Wicca philosophy, *harm none*, and remained in his comfortable, magical closet.

During his numerous Internet investigations of Wicca, he'd run across the story of Hoopeston and its witch school and store. When his current assignment arose, Hoopeston was an easy choice for his headquarters. Noah heard all about the "crazy witch people" one morning from the Henning's gang. He hadn't let on that he already knew all about it, and certainly not that *he* was a crazy witch person.

He slowed as he passed the store, but did not stop.

Noah, when are you going to grow enough balls to come out of the broom closet and go into The Broom Closet?

He reached the end of Main Street where it intersected Route 1, and sat for a moment.

"Okay. Right to Milford or left to Jones Woods?" Milford was a crapshoot; none of the old guys had told him of an actual pond there, or of a particular landowner to visit. At Jones Woods, he had directions, a pond, a name ... and a mystery.

"Jones Woods it is."