

STOLEN SLUMBER

by Brenda Hutcheson Fickey

Chapter 1

“Daniel!”

Hank waved at his best friend as he left the sheriff’s office. *Uh-oh! I know that look all too well.* He waited for a logging wagon to pass before running across the dirt street in Farmville, the business district of the Frenchport community.

Daniel waved back and waited for him outside the barber shop.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Where have you been? Beth Ann and I haven’t seen you at school for several days. Is Cliff in town? You look like you’re ready to start a fight.”

“Walk with me, will you? I need to pick up my mom’s order at Wood’s.” They stepped off the boardwalk and waited for another logging wagon to pass before crossing the street, going in the direction of the grocery store. “I haven’t been doing so well since that black cat ran out in front of me last week. You remember that, don’t you? You, Beth Ann, and Abraham were with me when it happened.”

“You mean Granny Ward’s big old black Tom?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Daniel, that was nearly *two* weeks ago. It’s just a cat. What does it have to do with anything?”

“That’s easy for *you* to say. I’m telling you it *definitely* has *everything* to do with me lately.”

“What are you talking about?”

Daniel pointed toward the nearby alley. “Let’s talk over here. It’s more private.”

They stepped several feet into the narrow space between the dry goods store and Wood’s Grocery, away from the bustle of the busy street.

“I know you and Beth Ann don’t believe in this stuff, but my grandma and great-grandma swear by it. I’ve never known them to be wrong about it, either.”

Hank crossed his arms over his chest, his brows scrunched and his feet shoulder width apart. “What’s going on?”

“That night...when the cat...”

“Yeah, okay...what?”

Daniel wrung his hands before wiping them on his trousers legs.

“Come on, Daniel, it’s me. I can see you’re struggling with something. Get it off your chest. Tell me what happened. You don’t have to worry about me laughing away what you’re dealing with.”

“Okay...Something woke me out of a sound sleep. I can’t explain it, but I could feel something or someone watching me. I sat up and looked around my room. It was still dark, but

the feeling wouldn't go away, even though I didn't see anything...right away, anyway. But when I looked toward my window, I caught a glimpse of something go past it."

Hank's eyes widened. "*In your room?*"

"No, outside...I think...I *hope*. Anyway, it looked like a person, but it...it was different somehow. So I'm not completely positive. I got up and that's when I heard *it* the first time. It was the mournful howl of a dog far off, but close enough to hear clearly. I was so sure every dog around here would start barking or howling, too; but they never did. It was just that one, lone dog. Grandma calls it a terrible sign..."

"Couldn't it just as easily have been a coyote?"

"No. It was an omen. That's the worst kind of sign, you know. All my life, I've heard Great-grandma and Grandma tell about how someone died every time they heard a 'spirit' dog howl. They always prayed they'd never hear it three times because that meant someone close to them was going to die soon. I'm pretty sure that's what I heard that night. I've heard it once more since then, but not the third time...yet. They always talk about things happening in threes...bad things..."

"But Daniel..."

"Look, that's just the beginning of my predicament. I can't eat...I can't sleep..."

"What else has happened? You can't stop talking now. You're upset, I want to help."

"Well, it took a while to go back to sleep the night I heard that first howl. When I woke up the next morning, something was crushing my chest; and I couldn't breathe. Someone was breathing on my face, taking my breath away. When I opened my eyes, I was nose to nose with my baby sister, Sadie. I jumped and stopped myself from yelling so I didn't scare her, but she nearly made me wet the bed."

“She’s three. She was just curious about you still being in bed when you’re usually up long before she is.”

“Maybe, but explain this, since you know so much. Every night this week, I wake up just before the clock in the parlor chimes three times. I sit up and find her standing at the foot of my bed staring at me. She doesn’t blink or anything. I tell her to go back to her bed, watch her leave, and try to go back to sleep. The first time that happened, it was a couple of minutes before I realized she sleeps in a crib still. How did she get out of her bed?”

“Well...”

“Here’s the part that has me worried the most. When I check on her to make sure she’s back in bed, she looks like she’s been sound asleep for hours, without ever being out of bed. When I check the clock in the parlor for the time, it’s always 3:05...*every* time! So I try to think of an explanation for what I’m seeing, but I can’t. Of course, going back to sleep is impossible.”

“So that’s why you have bags under your eyes.”

“If I’m not seeing Sadie, who, or maybe a better question is *what*, am I seeing in my room?”

“I don’t know, but I *do* know you’re scaring yourself silly, Daniel. You’re going to make yourself sick.”

“I’m not making any of this up. It’s really happening!”

“So why were you so angry just now when you came out of the barber shop? You looked like you were ready to...”

“Because he can’t fix what happened this morning.”

“Something else happened this morning?”

“Sadie was in my room, again; but this time she had scissors in her hand. While I was finally sleeping soundly, she gave me a haircut. I woke up when she nicked my ear.”

“Did she draw blood?”

“Yeah, but that’s not the worst part. She practically scalped me! It’s a miracle she didn’t gouge a chunk of skin while she did it. It’s embarrassing to have to wait for my hair to grow out before Mr. Moore can make it look normal.”

“It can’t be that bad, can it?”

Daniel looked around the alley, again, before taking his hat off. Hank hoped his sharp intake of breath was not echoing off the walls. To keep from looking shocked or laughing, he molded his lips around his teeth and bit down hard. Daniel quickly put his hat back on. Hank waited till he felt in control of his reaction to speak.

“Um...okay...wow...I guess I was wrong.”

“Yeah. What am I supposed to do when I go back to school or to church or...”

“Wear your hat?”

“You really think I’ll be able to get away with that?”

“Well...how...how long do you think it’ll take to grow out?”

“I don’t know! I’m hoping the cooler weather makes it grow faster than it usually does; but in the meantime, I’m stuck with it.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, well, I haven’t told you everything.”

“There’s more?”

“My mom told us last night she’s expecting another baby.”

“Hey, but that’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“I already have three little sisters. What am I going to do if this one’s a girl, too? That stupid black cat started all of this.”

“I think you just need a change of scenery. You’ve been under the influence of too many females around your house. Why don’t I help you take your ma’s grocery order home? Then I can ask her if you can stay with us tonight. I’m sure Ma won’t mind.”

“Are you sure you want to be around me right now? I’m liable to jinx you with all the bad luck I’m dealing with.”

“Stop it! I’m not afraid of your bad luck...or whatever you call those signs...your omens. Come on, let’s go. What would you say to a camp out before the weather gets too cold?”

“It beats a house full of girls, believe me.”

“Good. Let’s see if Abraham wants to join us.”

“Thanks, Hank. I’m feeling better already.”

* * * * *

“This is nice.” Daniel tossed the stripped chicken leg bone toward the woods near the boys’ campsite along the Ouachita River at Spoon Bend. “I’m glad Deputy Collins suggested this place to camp out overnight, but I’m also surprised.”

Hank stirred the fire and placed another log on it. “Yeah, he’s all right.”

Abraham stretched his legs toward the fire and leaned back on his elbows. “I’m glad it’s getting cooler. I hope Indian summer is about done this year after hanging on for so long.”

Daniel wrapped his blanket around his shoulders as a light north wind stirred the trees overhead and the blaze in their fire pit. “I’ll say. I’m glad we’re camping out, but I hope it’s not frosty in the morning.”

“Granny didn’t say anything about a frost coming.”

“Mr. Pete wouldn’t have suggested we come out here if that were the case.”

“We’ll see. With the way things have been going for me lately...”

“Stop right there. We agreed not to talk about that tonight. Let’s just enjoy being out under the stars and sleeping peacefully with nature all around us.”

“Sorry. You’re right. No talk about luck or signs or omens tonight.”

“Good.”

No one spoke for several seconds while they watched the night sky. Abraham suddenly sat up and pointed directly overhead.

“Did you guys see that? A shooting star!”

Hank smiled. “Yeah, I did.”

“I missed it.”

“I love looking at the night sky. There are so many stars up there I get dizzy taking it all in.”

Daniel yawned. “Looking up too long makes me yawn. Sorry, guys. Did Granny Rose say anything about rain, Abraham?”

“No.”

“What about those clouds, then?”

“I don’t think they’re rain clouds.”

“Isn’t it kind of...I don’t know...eerie, I guess, that the night skies in October look ominous?”

“Daniel...”

“No, I know. I’m talking about the way the sky looks at night every October, especially around Halloween. When I was younger, I used to think the white clouds were ghosts in the sky. No one had to tell me twice to go inside. I didn’t want those ghosts to get me.”

All three boys laughed and huddled around the open fire, listening to it crackle and pop.

Daniel sighed and looked at the fire instead of his friends. “Hank, how do you know...when you’re having one of your...you know...one of *those* feelings?”

“One of *those* feelings?”

“Yeah, when you *feel* like someone is watching you or something is going to happen.”

“I don’t know how to describe it really. It’s like something inside me pokes me in the stomach and sharpens my senses so I can see things I would normally overlook and hear things I would normally ignore. Why?”

“And then you get that tingly thing? On the back of your neck.”

Hank nodded. Daniel then looked directly at Abraham, his demeanor and the tone of his voice serious. “You haven’t noticed Granny Rose doing or saying anything out of the ordinary, have you?”

Abraham’s teeth gleamed white against his dark face as his smile widened and he shook his head. “No, my friend, she hasn’t.”

“Maybe it’s because I’m tired, but I can’t shake this feeling I’m being watched. It’s not all the time, but it’s making me crazy.”

Hank stirred the embers under the burning log. “Why would someone be watching you? Have you done something to upset somebody in particular?”

“Not that I know of.” Daniel paused for several seconds. “Well...what about this? Have you ever been somewhere that made you nervous when you went past it or were around it?”

“I’m not sure I understand your question.”

“The other day, Dad and I went to Cullendale. When we crossed the bridge over the Syn-Rac Pond there at the Keystone Lumberyard and Sawmill, everything was normal. But on our way back home later that evening, I had a strong, uneasy feeling as we crossed back over that same bridge. I looked around to see what was different, but I couldn’t really see anything because it was dusk. Now, whenever I get that uneasy feeling again, my mind goes right back to that bridge. I can’t help looking around for something out of the ordinary that would explain the feeling. I *have* noticed a couple of strangers who are always together, walking along the boardwalk in town or hanging out with one of the spit-and-whittle groups. I’ve noticed them when I’ve had that uneasy feeling, but I can’t make a connection with the feeling or them that makes any sense.”

“Maybe you should talk with Granny. I know you have some concerns about her, but she’s the best person I know to help you with this, Daniel.”

“Abraham’s right. Maybe she’ll help you with the other things you’re experiencing, too. If anyone can explain superstition, it’s Granny.”

Daniel nodded. “Okay, I’ll think about it.”

Hank and Abraham looked at one another with raised eyebrows. “Well, then... Abraham, why don’t you ask Granny when she has some time to sit down with us and give Daniel the advice he needs for how to deal with all of this.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Thanks, guys.”

“So to be clear, you’re agreeing to sit down with Granny Rose and talk with her about what you told me in town today?”

“I’m desperate! What can I say?”

Hank watched as Daniel yawned again and rub the back of his neck. “Uh-oh!”

Daniel immediately froze all his movements, his brows pointing toward his hairline.

“What?”

“When I rub the back of my neck like that, it’s usually because I’m having one of *those* feelings. What about you?”

Daniel’s eyes looked from one direction to another as he seemed to take a mental inventory of his thoughts. Then he looked directly at Hank. “Uh...no?”

“Are you sure?”

He brought his hand down to his lap, shaking his head slowly, “Uh...no?” and then nodded, “Maybe?”

“Which is it?”

His brows furrowed. “It’s kind of hard to explain. I think I’m under the influence of a strong, powerful, mental suggestion right now.”

Hank nodded. “That makes sense...I think. Maybe we should turn in.”

Abraham stood. “Sounds good to me.” He prepared his bedroll near the fire then wrapped himself in it and turned facing the treeline. Within a few seconds, he was snoring.

“I guess you’ve got the first watch, Hank.”

“I think we’ll be okay without taking turns on watch duty.”

“Suit yourself.” Daniel prepared his bedroll at a forty-five degree angle from Abraham’s bed. “I’m looking forward to a deep, full night’s sleep for a change.”

A raspy snore came from Hank's left. He laughed. "I hope that doesn't keep..." Daniel's snores joined Abraham's. "...*me* awake." He prepared his bed and hunkered down after stirring the fire one last time.

What seemed like only a few minutes later, Hank raised his head and turned toward the woods where a loud popping noise awakened him from a sound sleep. He couldn't be sure whether he had really heard something or dreamed it.

How long have I been asleep? He looked at the fire and noticed it was almost out. *A few hours, at least, from the looks of the fire.* He lay his head back down and argued with himself about whether to stir the fire or leave it alone. His bedroll was warm enough. Before he closed his eyes to go back to sleep, he noticed Abraham hadn't stirred from when he first lay down. When he looked across the fire to Daniel's bedroll, something didn't look quite right. He raised himself up on his elbow to get a better look. All of a sudden, his heart skipped a couple of beats before pounding painfully inside his chest. *Where's Daniel?*