

Murder ⁱⁿ the Thumb

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To Penny,
Deeply Loved and Sorely Missed



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WRITER'S NOTE

Murders are comparatively rare in small town America, and when they do occur most are quickly solved. During more than a decade of covering the Huron County Circuit Court at Bad Axe, Michigan, I reported on only two murder trials.

In 1985, three years after leaving the state for a newspaper job in Ohio, I learned a murder trial had been moved from neighboring Tuscola County to Huron County. State police charged a 27-year-old Caro man with the murder of his former girlfriend, a crime that occurred almost nine years earlier.

Because I was acquainted with the officer who reopened the then-cold case and the judge who would conduct the trial, I followed the media coverage with some interest.

As the case progressed through the courts, newspapers and TV stations from across the state picked up on its unusual aspects. Why had it taken so long to solve a homicide when the prime suspect was immediately known to authorities? Why had the suspect gone out of his way to antagonize local law enforcement? Before long, the locals had begun to speculate as to whether books would be written or movies made about the case. Then, just as quickly, interest in the story that made headlines near and far faded.

I struggled with the idea I might write such a book even 300 miles removed from the story. I was employed full time at a job I loved and this put limits on how much I could do and how quickly.

The deeper I dug into the facts of the case, the more I was struck with the bizarre twists the story took. The tragedy may have begun with the disappearance of a beautiful young woman — but it didn't end there, and I'm not sure the final chapter has been written even now.

As with any endeavor of this type, there are those whose kindness and cooperation should be acknowledged. Beginning with Dan and Barbara Miller, who opened their home and hearts to me, there were many others: Robin's brother, Danny; her friends, Kris Reh and Denise Keilitz; Shawn Finley and her sisters, Sue Osborne and Angela Myers; Millie Timko and Cheryl Hepfer; the men in blue at Post 39: Milt Wolner, O. J., J. D., Rick Harrington, Bill MacNicol and Ron Schneider; Judges Knoblock, Michael J. Callahan, Patrick Joslyn, Eugene Penzien, Larry Grey; and Court Reporter Ken Gangler.

I am indebted to the late Max Kravitz, a Columbus law professor and Constitutional scholar, whose research into Michigan's One-Man Grand Jury statute dramatically affected the telling of this story.

Joddy Ehrenberg provided valuable research assistance in Caro and personal insights based on her experiences with principal characters. Dawna Sinisi shared the pain at being unable to connect with her birth mother and how coming together with Robin's brother changed her life. Linda Deitch helped me find people important to the story.

The names of only a few characters have been changed after careful consideration.

Finally, my thanks to Bill and Clara Garza for sharing their story with me and introducing me to Melvin.

Dick Carson
Gahanna, Ohio

Chapter 1
LA NEGRA NOCHE

Like prying eyes, the headlights of an approaching car pierced the dense barrier of trees and brush separating the teenagers from the road at least three hundred yards away.

Walking alone toward her brother's car, she stopped abruptly. Fear gave way to panic. It was late, approaching midnight, and this was land set aside for fall hunting. Why would anybody be traveling this remote area on a stifling hot August night, she wondered, hoping to eliminate at least one possibility — law enforcement.

She regretted having worn shorts, even though it was too hot for jeans. In the pitch black of the forest, the branches of bramble bushes reached out their bony fingers and clawed deep scratches in her legs.

But this was no time for self-pity. Turning, she quickened her stride and returned to the place where her brother was smoothing the sandy soil around a seedling they planted moments before.

"Someone's coming," she said, trying not to sound as fearful as she felt.

He didn't respond, but picked up his shovel. Together they made their way toward his car, which was parked a third of the way back toward the road.

Before they reached the car, the headlights withdrew suddenly. Whoever was headed their way must have changed his mind. The siblings breathed a collective sigh of relief.

The remote trail and destination the brother chose was located on state land in Tuscola County, about four miles south of the village of Caro.

Tuscola is one of three counties comprising Michigan's Upper Thumb area, named for its place on the mitten-like outline of the state's Lower Peninsula. Chippewa Indians, or Ojibway as the tribal elders preferred, inhabited this land in the nineteenth century and earlier.

The area where the brother and sister completed their misbegotten mission is in the aptly named Indianfields Township, where white-tailed deer roam in abundance and arrowheads used by the Indians who once hunted them still can be found.

Bliss Road, a stretch of gravel that gives way to pavement, runs west off highway M-24. A small parking lot on the south side of the road about three quarters of a mile in provides an entry point for hunters, hikers and others whose definition of Lovers' Lane has a distinctly remote connotation.

Conservation officers sank a heavy post at the center of the two-track trail, which leads into the woods, hoping to discourage motorists from traveling beyond the parking lot. In time, the growth of weeds and bushes around the post obscured it from casual inspection by officers on patrol. Teenagers took advantage of this and rocked the post back and forth until they could remove it. The game was to pull up the post, drive in and replace it, leaving the impression the trail was still closed to traffic. Soon, the DNR officers caught on.

This portion of the Tuscola game area — the county has about 11,000 acres of state land — consists of light forest, stands of cottonwood, maple, oak and tag alders, interspersed with open areas of sandy soil and low-lying swampland. Power lines strung diagonally across the section create an open right-of-way through the trail hunters use to access the site.

At first, there was no way to know who might be driving down the trail or why the driver turned around — a risk, given the ease with which the sandy soil can swallow the wheels of cars.

To the brother and sister, the important thing was knowing their reason for being at this place at this time hadn't been found out.

Tim Burke, a thirty-one-year-old conservation officer with the state Department of Natural Resources, was on patrol that night in 1976.

More than likely, it was Burke's state car, which ventured part way down the trail. The sister remembered seeing such a car as she and her brother drove out of the woods.

CO's, as they are typically called by the locals, drive cars painted "DNR green," a dull shade. The overhead flasher light is blue, different from the larger red bubble on the blue state police cars.

Years later, Burke recalled seeing a young couple emerging from the game area one night in late August. He assumed they were "doing the things that I did when I was young." As a result, he didn't stop their car, didn't ask what they were up to, didn't even take down the license number.

"I remember seeing a young fellow and girl coming out in a car. They're just he-ing and she-ing, I figured, and being young and naive" — Burke was barely into his second full year as a CO — "I just wasn't doin' a good job, frankly."

What might have happened if he did what he would have done after a little more experience?

Burke is a straight arrow whose word is as good as the family Bible on which he would swear to it.

A rape occurred in a game area not far from his home, sometime after his chance encounter with the young couple. This reshaped his thinking and the manner in which he dealt with people parked in remote stretches.

“I would walk up to the vehicle, shine a light in, usually determine in my mind that everyone was of age. I wouldn’t ask for identification, but I would look in and ask, ‘Is everything OK?’

“Usually they would say, ‘Yeah, we’re OK officer.’ I’d ask the girl, ‘Are you here of your own free will?’ They’d usually say, ‘Yeah, I’m OK.’ I’d read the vibes and if she didn’t seem scared — beyond being approached by an officer — if everything seemed OK, I’d leave. I’d take down the license number, but I’d leave.

“That’s what I did after I had a little more experience, but I know I didn’t do it that night.”

The sister told a friend she and her brother planted a small tree on the spot where he was leveling the ground when the approaching vehicle hurried their departure.

That planting, whether it existed in fact or only in a girl’s imagination, would one day symbolize a poisonous tree whose fruit hastened a day of reckoning and retribution.

Two years earlier while the nation was in the throes of the Watergate scandal, a series of events were unfolding in the village of Caro, events that would come to have a profound effect on the community.

On February 10, Michigan State Police Post 39 opened for business. The locals and their legislative representatives had pushed for a post in Caro and fifteen officers were assigned there.

Troopers investigate crime as well as patrol the highways.

The new post was set up in an old but sturdy building. A throwback from the horse-and-buggy era, the structure originally housed a carriage factory, then a harness shop and later, the county road commission.

In late March, Robin and Danny Adams, aged fifteen and fourteen, respectively, moved from Bay City to rural Caro to live with Bill and Millie Timko. The Timkos would serve as their unofficial foster parents. The relocation of a couple of teenagers to Tuscola County wasn’t important enough to cause a ripple, even in a small town where everyone knows everyone else and has a story or two to prove it.

On May 14, a seventeen-year-old Caro High School student, due to graduate in just a few days, was killed when his car went out of control south of town and collided with another vehicle. Two of the three other students, also seniors and passengers in the car, suffered broken bones.

On September 8, Dan Miller, a twenty-six-year-old former resident of Ubyly, a half-hour drive from Caro in neighboring Huron County, re-enlisted in the Michigan state police. Dan’s plans to make a career of law enforcement

sank like a rock in December 1973 when he found out recruits were required to swim. This time, he was convinced, he would graduate.

At first glance, none of these events would appear to have any connective significance. Over time, that would change. A teenage girl's disappearance would test the mettle of the state police and lead to the extraordinary resolution of a case that nearly went unsolved.

* * *

Chapter 2 “IS SOMEONE OUT THERE?”

Cheryl and Robin's playful experimentation with the Ouija board began innocently enough. Not long after Robin and her brother, Danny, joined the Timko brood in the family's crowded mobile home, Cheryl rescued the board from a hall closet.

“We asked Mom if we could play with it, and she said we could,” Cheryl remembered years later. Millie Timko would in time regret having sanctioned this seemingly harmless activity.

The Timkos' mobile home was twelve feet wide, sixty feet long and set up parallel to Chambers Road, a sparsely populated stretch of blacktop southwest of Caro. An addition was attached at the rear on the side facing away from the road. This served as a bedroom, Cheryl's, and was dubbed “downstairs,” though it was only a step or two down.

The bedroom afforded Cheryl and her newly acquired “foster” sister, Robin Adams, the privacy two teenage girls required for their initial forays into the spirit world.

Months later, once the family moved into the house next door, the secret ceremonies in the quiet sanctuary of their second-floor bedroom became almost nightly occurrences.

Some people of faith believe demons from disparate dimensions are poised to prey on people who unwittingly open the doorway to the occult by using a Ouija board. Cheryl was at first oblivious to such risks. Later, she would admit she was drawn to inquire deeper of this mysterious device. And there would be a price to pay.

But for now, there was nothing to fear. If the reckless curiosity of adolescence had steered them into forbidden territory, this wasn't going to interfere with the fun they were having.

Cheryl, fourteen, and Tim, sixteen, were children Millie brought to her marriage to Bill Timko. Bill Jr., who just turned five, and Tina, two, were Millie and Bill's, bringing the head count of kids to six, including the Adams' children.

Robin's mother, Vera Adams, unmarried and conflicted by the notion her children preferred to live away from her, reluctantly gave in to Danny's pleadings and allowed the kids to "live with Dad."

Neither Robin nor Danny knew who their real father was, and Bill Timko had become the next best thing, often slipping out on Millie to visit the children and their mother in Bay City.

Bill took the kids camping and fishing. Their mother worked various jobs, usually waitressing or filling vending machines. At best, theirs was a lower-middle-class life style.

For a time, Danny clung to the hope Bill would someday admit they were father and son. Before long, Bill dispelled him of the notion and Danny realized he might never learn who his father was.

On most any night at the Timkos, once their chores were done, Cheryl and Robin would retreat to the bedroom to inquire of the Ouija board. Although Millie came to discourage its use, Cheryl tended to ignore the warning.

It wasn't as though Millie watched over their every move. She allowed them a certain level of freedom, but there were restrictions: no unaccompanied dates until they were sixteen, and their chores — dishes, room-cleaning, the regular drill — had to be finished *before* they decided to go running.

One night, while still in the mobile home, Robin fetched the Ouija board, laid it out on the rug beside the bed and the girls plopped down.

Cheryl usually did the talking and probably was more intrigued than Robin in pursuing whatever possibilities the Ouija board might offer.

Robin was impressed by how quickly Cheryl put things together and often deferred to the younger girl, partly because she was more a visitor than a family member.

"The board is not a WEE-GEE board," Cheryl told her one day when she mispronounced Ouija as most people do.

"Pronounce it like you would the state of Georgia, if you replaced the JOR part with WEE ... see Wee-gia," she said, happily playing teacher.

Using the board may be easier than correctly pronouncing it.

Usually three or four fingers of one hand are placed on the pointer, or planchette, and it's common for two people to use the instrument at the same time. The object is to set up a dialogue in which responses to various questions are sought.

Markings on the board are basic. The word "Yes" appears in the top left corner; the word "No" in the top right. Across the top half, which is rectangular and inscribed horizontally, is the alphabet, represented in two rows of 13 letters each. Each row is arranged in a slight arc

"Is anyone out there?" Cheryl typically would begin when the girls used the board. "Are you listening? What can you tell us?"

The first questions were followed by nervous anticipation.

"As we got deeper into using the board, we read about witchcraft, the occult, voodoo and Satanism — background stuff," Cheryl admitted.

"I wasn't really religious, so it wasn't hard for me to venture into this sort of thing. The more we did it, the more we wanted to do it. It became almost an obsession."

Over time, many people drawn to the Ouija board begin to believe some other force or being is communicating with them.

Cheryl and Robin had not reached this stage when a disturbing response came to a casual question Robin asked. Had this occurred later on, once their experience with the Ouija board had grown more involved, they might have taken it seriously. But for now, they were just experimenting. And this was more a lark than a dangerous game.

Like most girls her age, Robin wondered what the future held. Although her childhood was a rocky road, she was neither fatalistic nor fearful.

But, rather than ask the more predictable questions, she decided to inquire first about her mortality. Teenage girls often wonder whether and when they will marry, have children, including how many and possibly what sex they will be.

Robin asked, "When will I die?," avoiding the more positive, "How long will I live?" At fifteen, going on sixteen, life is everlasting; the notion of death is for the old and sickly to ponder.

Gradually the planchette began to move. As is usual when two people begin to experiment with the Ouija board, each suspects the other is gently pushing the planchette to spell out some predetermined or wishful response.

The answer to Robin's question came slowly and caused much less alarm than it would have only a few months later. If the Ouija is the doorway to the occult as some believe, Cheryl and Robin were about to cross the threshold.

"When will I die?" she repeated.

The response came correctly spelled and, if taken seriously, should have terrified both girls: “Y-O-U-W-I-L-L-D-I-E-B-E-F-O-R-E-Y-O-U-R-1-7-T-H-B-I-R-T-H-D-A-Y.”

Robin looked up from the board and directly at Cheryl. For a moment, neither said nor did anything. Then, they broke into laughter.

This couldn't be right, they decided. This was, after all, a playful inquiry relying on an elaborately decorated piece of cardboard for any legitimacy, which might attach to it. Life and death pronouncements like this were nothing to fret about. And besides, Robin was happier than she had been in a long time.

After the board predicted Robin's early demise, Cheryl, undeterred, was tempted to inquire about her own life. She avoided asking the same question and instead concentrated on such things as “Would she marry?” and, if so, “How many children would she have?”

The board said Cheryl would have four children, all boys. The Ouija board, it turns out, was only partly correct. Cheryl and her husband, Dennis, had four boys all right, but also a girl — Jessica Robin. And Robin lived beyond her seventeenth birthday.

* * *

Chapter 3

“NOT TROOPER MATERIAL”

Dan Miller's decision to pursue a career as a state trooper got off to an uneasy start.

It was 1973. Dan and his wife, Barbara, were living in Traunik, an Upper Peninsula community of roughly fifty in-town residents southeast of Marquette. Both Dan and Barb graduated from Northern Michigan University at Marquette, she one year ahead of him. Traunik is a five-minute drive south from Trenary, where Barb taught a combined class of fourth and fifth graders.

“We lived in a real rag bag apartment,” Dan said, recalling their beginnings as a newly married couple in the rough-and-ready UP where the weather and employment opportunities, especially iron mining, test the sturdy stock of inhabitants.

The apartment was a converted tavern and a bit shabby by contemporary standards. But it was all the couple could afford on a beginning teacher's salary and the various jobs Dan took after graduating from college.

"We had two bathrooms, one male and one female, and the guy's bathroom still had a urinal," which visitors found odd but funny.

Traunik is essentially a crossroads surrounded by a dozen or more houses mainly occupied by retired ethnic Slovenians.

Across the street from the former tavern was an old country store, which doubled as the local post office and was run by Louis Mikulvich Jr., a colorful bachelor who inherited the business from his father.

Dan and his wife appreciated the sense of close-knit community Louie's store and the post office typified. Whatever was happening in town, the proprietor and customers of the Mikulvich General Store knew all about it.

While living in Traunik, Dan substituted several times as a teacher in the two-room schoolhouse just down the road.

The precise inspiration for Dan's decision to become a state trooper may be found in two memorable experiences he had, one as a small boy and another while still in college.

The first occurred in the mid-1950s during a weekend trip his family took from their Ubly home into southern Michigan. Dan figures he was six or seven years old when the Millers' car was stopped at a roadblock one evening in the vicinity of Jackson. Jackson was the home of Southern Michigan Prison — once the largest walled penitentiary in the world.

"There must have been a prison break. The troopers had traffic backed up and were checking all the cars. I remember seeing one trooper standing there eye-balling the vehicles. He was holding what I later learned was a Thompson submachine gun. I thought he looked really cool from my perspective as a little kid."

The other encounter with state police occurred when Dan was a student at NMU and occasionally hitchhiked the four hundred miles from Marquette to his home in Ubly. When he was only ten years old, Dan began collecting Civil War memorabilia and other military hardware and ornamentation. Starting with miniature likenesses of Union and Confederate soldiers, he graduated to full-scale artifacts, uniform pieces, medals and some weaponry.

During one weekend hitchhiking venture, he was carrying a German officer's sword, circa World War II, which he acquired in Marquette. The weapon, while it might have been mistaken for a cane protruding from his backpack, probably did little to inspire motorists to pick him up.

Fortunately, two state troopers on patrol somewhere east of Bay City decided to offer the then-bearded and long-haired Dan a ride.

“I was carrying the sword because it would not fit in the old Army duffle bag that I used for luggage. The rides were not good that night — it was dark and cold — and I had walked several miles when they picked me up.

“They gave me a ride after they went through my bag and secured the sword in the front seat. The troopers were friendly and professional, but they definitely shook me down.”

After the officers satisfied themselves the scruffy college student was a collector, they developed common ground with Dan and he began to inquire about what life was like for state troopers.

Then, only a few years later, Dan began wondering if becoming a state trooper might be just the challenge he was looking for. Teaching was not something he wanted to do for the rest of his life. For the moment, the notion of donning a blue uniform and substantially revising his hair style was just a passing thought. Soon, this would change.

“We were going into Marquette one day and drove by the prison post,” Dan said. The couple would occasionally travel the fifty or so miles from Traunik to Marquette for shopping opportunities not available in the smaller towns.

When the Michigan state police was originally organized, posts were set up at each of the state prisons. The Marquette post was at the time situated near the gate of the Marquette Prison, or Marquette Branch Prison, as it was formally known.

The Millers’ mode of transportation in those days was a tan-colored 1972 Volkswagen Beetle, which Dan impulsively turned into the post parking lot.

“I’m gonna go in and see what this is all about,” he told Barb, who gave him a puzzled look.

If Dan was expecting a warm welcome from the desk sergeant, he was going to be disappointed. Trooper Richard Goad, who was on duty when the still bearded and hirsute twenty-six-year-old strode into the post, viewed him suspiciously.

“Are you hiring?” Dan inquired.

“We are but not the likes of you,” Goad responded, tight-lipped and considering Dan more hippie-like than trooper material.

“We’re not really looking for people like you,” he continued, exuding old-school toughness.

But Dan wasn’t going to give up easily.

“Are you telling me you won’t even let me fill out an application?” he demanded.

Goad stood his ground a bit longer before grudgingly agreeing Dan could apply. Next came the preliminary physical test. Applicants were required to perform a standing jump and a number of pushups.

So, before Goad was through, the Volkswagen-driving hippie-type job applicant had taken the first step toward becoming a state police officer. Other obstacles requiring more than a shave and a haircut lay ahead.

* * *

Chapter 4 “STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN”

Bob Capling was hoping his luck and Gene Riggs’ lunch would hold until the crew got back to the Caro warehouse. The hulking yellow Edison truck was lumbering along at forty-five miles per hour, headed north up M-24, about nine miles south of town.

Capling was chief of a three-man C-crew whose principal business was setting poles and hanging wires. Gene and Louie Muska, linemen in their early thirties, were working under Capling, who was about ten years older.

It was May 14, 1974, a Tuesday, and Capling decided to knock off a few minutes early. Gene had picked up a flu bug and was pale as a bleached peach.

“He looked like he’d been plugged full of green apples,” Capling said. Though the events unfolding happened twenty years earlier, he could describe them in detail.

Around half past three, a maroon-colored Ford XL Fastback sped past the line truck.

“When the kids blew by us, I’d say he was doing a hundred — I know the guy was going awfully fast. He was flying, just screaming.”

Capling didn’t realize it then, but the driver of the car was seventeen-year-old Mike Clark, a high school senior and the youngest in a family of seven children — three boys and four girls. Mike was well known to Capling and his wife, as a neighbor and occasional visitor to their home.

With Mike were three classmates, all seventeen: Mike Parker, the front-seat passenger; and Steven Woloshen and Melvin Garza in the back seat — Steve on the driver’s side and Melvin on the passenger side.

The boys volunteered to help clean up the site of a house they helped build as part of a high school vocational project. The house was in Mayville, twelve miles south of Caro.

Louis Spaeth, the boys' high school shop teacher, was a friend and mentor. He didn't ask for help in cleaning up around the by-then-finished house; he didn't have to. Spaeth had the rare ability to direct a group of headstrong adolescents without being heavy-handed himself. Sticking him with clearing the site of leftover construction materials was out of the question for four kids whose youthful energy seemed sufficient to launch a battleship off a dry skid.

Another carload of boys from Cass City who worked on the house agreed to meet the Caro crew and help out. Spaeth brought an earnest, grandfatherly quality to his work. The turnout of eight kids to complete a job he was more than willing to do himself pleased him.

Spaeth liked the Caro crew. He was pleased Mike Parker had become a carpenter and was especially impressed with Melvin Garza's work habits.

"He was a good carpenter and quickly picked up a builder's license," he said of the latter.

Two years after the boys graduated, Spaeth recommended Melvin for a job on the crew at the Senior Commons, which was under construction in Caro. He was disappointed Melvin hadn't bothered to tell him when he got the job. Unknown to Spaeth, in August 1976 Melvin Garza was the target of a police investigation and feeling the heat.

This day, the boys made quick work of the cleanup project and left in separate cars, Mike and the Caro crew departing a couple of minutes before their Cass City counterparts.

As Mike's car cleared the Mayville village limits, shortly before the big curve redirects M-24 in a straight northerly direction, he tromped on the gas. The XL's 302 engine responded, albeit meekly. The car rounded the curve before the speedometer registered seventy miles per hour. A mile into the straight route, Mike was going eighty. In less than three minutes, Mike closed the distance between his car and the Edison truck.

If Mike had one trait contrary to his image as a good kid who was respectful to adults and non-confrontational with schoolmates, it was his lead foot. He wasn't a reckless driver, but like other guys his age, he liked to jump on the accelerator, especially if the highway was clear of traffic.

Mike glanced at the speedometer as he sped past another vehicle ahead. Unknown to him and his passengers, the Cass City crew's car, though not yet in view, was gaining on them. Mike held his speed, filled for the moment with the odd sense of freedom and uncertainty young people feel as they leave high school and make their way in the adult world.

Those first tentative steps sometimes move teenagers to test the limits of their own indestructibility. Whatever Mike Clark was thinking as he sped up the two-lane highway, he was unaware of what lay ahead.

Refocusing, he spotted the Cass City boys' car coming up behind him. Vernie "Moose" Frump was at the wheel. Moose, as the name implied, was a formidable creature, all six feet four inches and two hundred sixty pounds of him. He combined the freckle-faced innocence of a farm boy with the physical stature "workin' hard and eatin' good" tend to produce. Moose was a high school football coach's dream, a born middle guard. He loved to compete, but never took himself too seriously and had an engaging playfulness about him.

Now Moose was about to challenge Mike to a race. Nothing formal, mind you. He pulled alongside and slowed enough to throw down the gauntlet — a move accomplished with quick hand gestures.

The dangerous exercise in teenage exuberance unfolding might have turned out innocently enough on any number of weekday afternoons in the spring. Traffic normally would have been light and the five or so miles ahead posed no real driving challenges. But the treacherous uncertainties along the path to young adulthood, the unforgiving succession of "if onlys," which prey on the tender sensibilities of parents were clearly at work.

Having received a "let's go" response from Mike, Moose was prepared to hit the gas and begin the race in earnest. But when he looked ahead, he froze for an instant. Approaching from the north was a car he hadn't seen as he pulled alongside Mike's car. There would not be time enough for him to pass and Moose, like Mike, was hardly an experienced driver. Given the high rate of speed of both cars, the rate of closure between Moose's car and the approaching vehicle, there was little room to negotiate.

Mike also saw the other car and immediately tried to give ground by pulling to the right. He was prepared to take to the shoulder if he could make room enough for Moose to squeeze in. But there is a danger hitting a gravel shoulder at nearly 80 miles per hour.

Unfortunately, Mike's squeeze play wasn't working. As his car hit the shoulder it began to skid. Moose had begun to brake and was inching his way back into the northbound lane behind Mike's car.

Instinctively Mike made a desperate attempt to bring his car back onto the road — a terrible mistake.

"No!" he shouted, his voice a mix of fear and panic, as the car all but vaulted back onto the road and skidded toward the center. Pulling back onto the pavement from the shoulder at high speed is risky. Experienced drivers reduce their speed before trying. Mike hadn't.

As his car, out of control, crossed the center line, Mike could see he couldn't avoid a collision with the oncoming car.

A fifty-eight-year-old Lapeer woman, Lillian M. Voss, was driving alone headed south. She must have sensed danger developing across the road, but

was startled to see Mike's car hurtling toward her. She swerved to avoid the collision and may have prevented a direct bumper-to-bumper crash.

Although the impact was glancing — the right front portions of each vehicle came together — it was intense. Amid the chaos of squealing tires and grinding metal, the two vehicles broke their deathly clinch and skidded helter-skelter along the southbound lane. The passenger side of the Voss auto was peeled like the top of a sardine can.

Remarkably, just as the two cars came to rest, a double-bottom truck heading south and hauling powdered cement roared through the tangled wreckage like a speeding coal train on a midnight run. The driver laid on his air horns, which belched a deep-throated warning. This was a frightening coda to the carnage, which spilled onto the highway as this hulking heavyweight asserted itself — no time to stop; no time to care about the pain and death unfolding before it.

“It was one of those big Z's — those big rails,” Bob Capling said of the gray mass, which rumbled unscathed through the mix of mayhem and debris on the highway. Capling's truck had reached the accident scene moments after the crash, but ill-equipped, given the precarious state of Gene Riggs' stomach to be a great deal of help.

“How the driver of that cement rig got by without hitting anybody is beyond me, but he kept right on coming — and going.

“And you know something funny, the guy held his hand up circling it as a signal for us to put on our roadways (warning lights atop the truck cab), but he didn't stop, and I'll bet the thing happened right in front of him.”

If the linemen were angry the truck driver sped through the accident scene without stopping, there were more immediate concerns. The occupants of both the crashed autos were hurt and hurt badly.

The collision occurred on a straight stretch of road about two and a half miles south of the M-46 - M-24 intersection, and maybe four miles from Melvin Garza's home. The M-46-M-24 intersection would become a locus of events in the coming months, events destined to push Melvin toward another dalliance with personal disaster.

Bob Capling pulled off the road, and jumped down from the cab, leaving the truck's warning lights flashing. As the father of a son roughly the same age as Mike Clark and his passengers, the scene before him was horrific. The boys, none of whom was wearing a seat belt, lay bleeding and battered along the west side ditch, each having been thrown clear of the car.

“So you got four kids down there, and blood running down the pavement. Louie starts puking and Gene was already losing his lunch.”

Officers who routinely investigate serious auto accidents recognize the peculiar odor emanating from the twisted metal, shattered glass, leaking

fluids, bloodied and broken bodies. This smell of death was part of the scene laid out at the end point of a most unfortunate road race.

Mike's car came to rest crossways on the road, facing east with its rear wheels on the west shoulder. He was lying on his side, near the car. Capling remembers blood was coming from Mike's nose and ears. His legs were moving, almost automatically, as though he were riding a bicycle. Capling figured Clark had a broken neck and, worse, he feared the boy probably wasn't going to make it.

Melvin Garza and Steve Woloshen were lying together in the ditch a few feet farther away from the car. Melvin's legs were on top of Steve's, but Steve was struggling to get up. Capling told him to lie still and wait for help.

Mrs. Voss, the other driver, remained in her car, which came to rest across the west ditch. What remained of her passenger-side door was open, and she was lying across the seat, seriously, though not fatally, injured. Her legs were protruding from the door.

Mike Parker, who had been working construction after school and full days since the seniors completed classes, was asleep in the front seat when the accident occurred. He remembers nothing about it. He suffered a broken leg, lacerations and spent two weeks in traction at St. Luke's Hospital in Saginaw.

Mike Clark was his best friend, and, two decades after the accident, Mike Parker remained uncomfortable talking about it.

Steve Woloshen won't discuss the crash at all. Friends say it's likely he watched helplessly as life slipped away from Mike Clark. Melvin Garza escaped with a broken collarbone and a few cuts.

The significance of the accident to future events in Melvin Garza's life depends upon whom you talk to. Some people believe a change came over him after Mike Clark's death. Melvin is willing to talk about the accident. He recalls the physical pain from his injury and the altogether different hurt he felt at Mike's funeral, a few days later at the funeral home.

Coming as close to graduation as it did, Mike's death could have hung over the commencement events and celebrations like a dark cloud over a Sunday school picnic. Strangely, it did not.

Mike was a good student, well-liked and seemingly without an enemy in the world. He was not seriously involved with a girlfriend, though he dated the same girl quite consistently before the accident.

Talk to anyone in Mike's graduating class and you hear the same thing: "He was happy-go-lucky, an excellent student, rarely drank, and when he did it was never to excess. Everybody liked him."

The theme of the senior prom in 1974 was "Stairway to Heaven" inspired by the Led Zepplin hit. The theme, it turns out, was selected before the accident.

In the weeks after the accident, Mike Parker remembers demanding the car radio be turned off anytime “Stairway to Heaven” came on while he and his buddies were together.

While there was no shortage of people who felt Melvin Garza was deeply affected by the death of his friend, and changed markedly after that, there was only one person who offered a bizarre explanation for those changes. Her version runs counter to what virtually everyone who knew Mike Clark said about him.

That person was Heather Cates, a self-styled teenage witch, whose high school experience was troubling at best.

An attractive girl as a teenager with a clear complexion, pretty brown eyes and long brown hair, Heather grew into plus sizes as an adult and changed dramatically in her beliefs and attitudes. As an adult, she is assertive, controlling to a point, articulate and given in certain situations to melodramatic mood swings.

Heather was not disliked in high school, but neither was she accepted among those who might be loosely described as the in-crowd. As an adult, she looks back on those years more in anger than regret, claiming to want nothing further to do with the people she graduated with.

Heather’s openness about her practice of witchcraft may have been off-putting to her classmates and contributed to what she perceived as a mild form of ostracism. One time, for a class speech assignment, she discussed in detail her involvement in the dark arts. Not exactly what every guy is looking for in a prom date.

Were it not for an unusual encounter between Heather and Melvin, which occurred more than ten years after they graduated high school, describing Heather’s account of how and why Melvin changed after the fatal accident would be better left alone. And people who knew, or thought they knew Mike Clark well are certain to shake their heads in disbelief over Heather’s version of events.

Some years later — Heather had since converted to Christianity — she said Melvin shared a strange secret with her. She said Melvin told her Mike’s spirit had passed to him as he lay dying on the roadside that tragic spring day.

People who knew Mike considered him friendly and virtually without an enemy. So the spooky notion of the spirit passing from a dying teenager to one of his friends wouldn’t be such a bad thing, except Heather Cates had a whole different take on Mike Clark.

Heather tells the story this way: “I had always known Melvin to be just a nice guy, a nice kid, very likable. We were in 4-H together. I had nothing but good that I would have ever said about Melvin.

“But that’s what really freaked me out (when, as she claims, Melvin told her that Mike’s spirit has passed to him the day of the accident) because Mike was not the guy that the public thought he was.

“He was a nasty boy. He had no problem with homosexual relationships, he had no problem with the demonic arts, no problem with swinging sex. And let me clue you in, there was many a time in the private practicing rooms for band members when we were stripped down naked.”

Melvin said there were windows in the practicing rooms and dismissed as preposterous the notion of nudity in lieu of music notes.

Heather said her high school experience was much like her family life — dysfunctional.

“As it was, I barely graduated, not because of academic problems, (but because) I didn’t show up.

“I said, ‘screw you guys’ (presumably her classmates). I think I missed about seventy days of school, just skipping and cutting. I was bored with it all. I was off in the world by then, driving cars and having fun.

“And I’m telling you, Mike Clark was not the prim and proper guy that everybody thought he was. I was choking at his funeral as the eulogies were being recited. This was not the Mike that I knew.

“He was a nasty boy,” she repeated. “Because by the time Melvin told me about what happened at the roadside that day, I was a well-grounded stable Christian and realized the ramifications of what he had just said.”

She said after the accident, Melvin changed and became a regular on the party circuit, dabbling in drugs — marijuana, mainly. She said she observed the relationships between Melvin and some of the upper class at the parties and how they treated him.

Melvin was wearing a cast at Mike’s funeral, the result of the fractured collarbone he suffered in the accident. Mike Parker was still hospitalized and unable to attend the funeral.

“When Mike died, Melvin changed,” Heather added, “he became moody, brooding and introspective.”

None of Mike Clark’s friends or acquaintances consider Heather’s characterization of him accurate in any way, save one. The wife of one of Mike Clark’s close friends privately told a journalist that she had “heard something about that (Mike’s other side),” but quickly clammed up when her husband approached and said nothing further.

Heather Cates sticks to her story, however strange and difficult to accept, to this day.

Terry Creteur, another classmate and drinking buddy of Melvin’s, said Melvin felt a sense of remorse or guilt after the accident, suggesting if someone had to die in the crash, it should have been him.

Don LaJoie, another of Melvin's classmates, agreed. "After the accident, he (Melvin) was not the same person.... (He) was having a real hard time dealing with Mike's death."

Tragically, LaJoie himself was killed May 3, 2002, when his car was struck broadside by another auto on a rural road near Caro. He was forty-six.

* * *

Chapter 5 "YOU WILL SWIM"

Dan Miller graduated with the 88th State Police Recruit Class on December 13, 1974. His first assignment as a rookie trooper would be the Manistique post, which meant the Miller family would continue its residency in the second part of the geographic rarity, which divides the state in two.

Recruit school in Lansing is where prospective state troopers learn the rudiments of law enforcement, the rules of the road, arrest procedures, how to shoot, to subdue unruly suspects and drive as safely as possible at high speeds.

Recruits are instructed on the basics of criminal statutes and what to expect when called to testify in court. And they also have to demonstrate their ability to swim, which proved something of a problem for Dan Miller the first time out.

The thirteen-week training program is a spit-and-polish process combining military-type discipline with detailed classroom training on the fine points of law enforcement.

Unlike other states, whose highway patrols are limited in the off-road crimes they can investigate, state police in Michigan not only patrol the roads but also investigate a full range of offenses from simple misdemeanors to serious felonies, including murder.

The recruit's day begins at 5:30 a.m. when he or she gets up and prepares for a forty-five-minute session of calisthenics in the gym. Afterward, it's back to the room and into uniform for breakfast, followed by a military-type inspection of the recruit, including uniform, weapon (service revolver) and room.

Classes start at 8 a.m. with a ten-minute break between sessions. Recruits march, eyes front, from class-to-class and to and from the cafeteria for meals.

After lunch, recruits are divided into groups and take turns on the shooting range, in the gymnasium, and in the “training tank,” another name for the pool, which proved daunting to Dan’s first attempt to become a trooper.

Recruits are taught to be comfortable in the water, techniques at recovering objects from shallow water and beginning life-saving,

Dan was first admitted to the 86th Recruit Class in November 1973. He was aware of the swimming requirement at the academy. He knew he couldn’t swim and expressed his concerns the summer before the class began when the officer arrived to do his background investigation.

Sgt. Francis G. Hyre arrived at the Millers’ converted-tavern apartment on schedule. At first glance, Dan was taken aback by Hyre’s imposing presence; he literally filled the doorway. A sturdy fellow, big-framed and closing in on six feet four inches tall, Hyre talked in slow, drawn-out sentences and was, for all his bulk, absolutely unthreatening in his approach and personality.

Dan remembers offering him coffee, then noticing the cup looked like something out of a little girl’s tea set in Hyre’s large hand, which was the size of a small ham.

The background check is routine and, combined with a separate FBI investigation, makes sure no skeletons in the recruits’ closets will come back to haunt the department.

Before Hyre completed the interview, Dan brought up the swimming requirement.

“Sgt. Hyre, I can’t swim; is that going to be a problem for me?” he asked outright.

“Ohhh, noooooo,” Hyre responded softly, giving emphasis to each word by extending its pronunciation. “They’ll teach you.”

Relieved, Dan thought to himself, “This is cool.” He would learn to swim as a fringe benefit of his police training.

Hyre’s assurance, while sincerely offered, would differ dramatically from Dan encountered at the academy.

Dan’s initial experience with the training tank was a disaster.

“I remember the first day in the goddam pool. I think we were in three lines. And the instructor barks, ‘When I blow the whistle, you will jump in the pool, swim to the other end, turn around and swim back. Any questions?’

“I can’t swim,” Dan responded, trying not to sound as though he feared drowning, which he did.

“I never asked you if you could swim, you dumb asshole,” the instructor snapped. State police recruit training is not unlike Marine boot camp in one respect. All recruits are presumed dumb assholes until they can prove otherwise, which usually occurs in close proximity to graduation day.

Faced with the unpleasant choice of sink or swim, Recruit Miller opted for sink, the only realistic option at that point.

“So I took a deep breath, jumped in and sort of walked along the bottom until I could get my head out of the water at the shallow end of the pool.”

Dan’s earnest attempt to substitute underwater walking for swimming did not escape the instructor’s notice.

“I didn’t tell you to walk,” he said.

“But I can’t swim,” Dan replied, prepared for the worst.

“You will swim!” was the instructor’s uncompromising response.

In later years, Dan would offer a physiological explanation for his lack of buoyancy.

“You know how some people, maybe it’s their bone structure, and they float naturally? Well, I float all right — about a foot off the bottom.”

Unfortunately, Dan’s inability to swim was interpreted by the training officers as more a question of attitude than bone structure.

“So every day at 5:45, I would fall out for the mandatory run because of my attitude and then report to the pool for remedial swimming.”

Adding to the daily, and nightly, stress of anticipating another go at the pool, where he would flounder about like a beached carp, Dan was beginning to rethink state police training.

“I was never so physically tired in my life. I had to run every day because of my attitude.”

Strict military discipline, a demerit system, and a heavy classroom and training schedule combine to make recruit life a difficult and stress-filled experience. Recruits who receive demerits usually work them off by running laps after dinner. This was Dan’s penance for his failings as a swimmer.

The balance of their evening, until lights out at 10 p.m., is spent transcribing classroom notes and studying material related to subject areas covered earlier in the day. The attrition rate among graduate troopers is extremely low — around two per cent — while the academy runs about thirty-seven per cent.

The pressures usually catch up with all but the most dedicated recruits. Each is free to walk out the door at any time.

For Dan, Trooper George Gougher, who was part of the temporary training staff, would hasten his trip toward the nearest exit. Gougher zeroed in on Dan’s “bad attitude,” exemplified by his tendency to sink like a rock every time he entered the training tank.

“I had to run every day because I had a bad attitude and because I didn’t like Trooper Gougher.”

Anyone who has been through the boot camp equivalent of military or police training remembers at least one training officer like Gougher.

Decades ago at Camp Pendleton in San Diego, a Marine drill instructor singled out a recruit who had unusually large, protruding ears. The recruit thereafter was addressed as “Ears.”

Every day in formation, the DI would shout, “Ears, do you like those fucking big ears?”

To which Ears was required to respond, “Fucking A, sir.”

For Dan Miller, there was Trooper Gougher.

“He was a little weeble fuck I couldn’t stand.”

When this became common knowledge, Dan became party to a ritual not unlike that to which Marine recruit Ears was subjected.

“During inspection, he asked if I liked him. ‘Recruit Miller, do you like me?’”

“No, sir!”

“So now I’m sucking wind, running every day because of my bad attitude and dislike for Trooper Gougher. It became a standing joke. Every day I was asked, ‘Recruit Miller, have you learned to like Trooper Gougher?’ And every day the response was the same: ‘No, sir.’”

After five weeks of sucking wind, swallowing chlorinated water and developing a mounting dislike for Gougher, Dan dropped out of recruit school. He made up his mind he wouldn’t come back until he learned how to swim. And that, it turned out, was going to entail a whole new set of embarrassments.

What’s a twenty-six-year-old man to do when he has to learn how to swim and lives in a landlocked town in what most residents of warmer climates would consider the frozen north?

Dan’s wife knew there was no pool in nearby Trenary, where she taught elementary school.

Once a thriving town of five hundred and sixty residents, mainly farmers and loggers and businesses, which catered to their needs, Trenary today is about half the size. Even the toast of the town left, literally. Trenary Toast, a crunchy cinnamon and sugar-coated Scandinavian bread treat, was handmade at the Trenary Home Bakery, which years back relocated to more lucrative locales.

But for Dan Miller in 1974, the future of Trenary Toast was the furthest thing from his mind, and he knew his future as a trooper would be toast if he didn’t learn to swim. He was hoping to catch the 87th Recruit Class, scheduled to begin on February 25, but that was pushing it.

Checking around, Barbara Miller heard swimming classes were being offered at Gwinn High School, which is about thirty-five miles west of Trenary and roughly the same distance from Traunik, where they were living.

Gwinn High School, located not far from the since-mothballed K.I. Sawyer Air Force Base, had a pool, and classes for children and adults were available, sort of.

Dan was faced with two choices, neither of them inspiring. The adult men's class had been canceled for lack of participation. Dan was the only person to sign up. There was still a class for adult women and another class for scouts — *Girl Scouts*.

In the end, Dan asked if he could enter both classes. The woman in charge of the classes gave him a quizzical glance, then dispensed a matronly pronouncement, "Of course, I'll have to ask the ladies if they have any objection to having a gentleman join them."

Actually, the women could have done worse. Despite his obvious problems with buoyancy, Dan was a handsome six-footer, well-toned and instinctively polite and soft-spoken around women.

His recollections of the three classes he took with the girl scouts are the most painful. Dan's wife asked if she could participate in the class to at least bring one additional adult on board.

The first night Dan entered the pool he realized sticking out like a sore thumb in a group of eleven- and twelve-year-old girls would be only part of the problem. Many of the girls' parents attended the swimming classes and watched intently from the bleachers set up safely outside the splash zone.

Quickly realizing the big guy was going to need special attention, the instructor assigned one of the scouts who had experience in the program to "help Mr. Miller."

"So here's an eleven or twelve-year-old girl and she says, 'Don't be afraid Mr. Miller. Go ahead, lean back, I've got you.'

"Goddam! This is genuinely humiliating. I took three lessons (with the Girl Scouts), that was the first."

Decades later, he can still hear the high-pitched voices who took pity on his penchant to sink like a rock, "Poor Mr. Miller."

"I said, 'I can't do this, I don't care if I never get in the state police.'"

The adult women's classes made fewer assaults on his masculinity. In fact, the ladies seemed to enjoy his being there.

Down the road, Dan also found other swimming instruction available at his alma mater, Northern Michigan University.

After probably two or three months attending various swimming classes, Dan could swim well enough to make two laps in the training academy pool and was able to enroll in the 88th Recruit Class, from which he graduated in mid-December.

Finally, after two shots at the academy, he was a state cop. Unbeknownst to him at the time, he was headed for a rendezvous with destiny a decade later

in the village of Caro, one certain to bring about dramatic changes in his life and in the lives of others.

* * *

Chapter 6 “THERE’LL BE NO COMING BACK”

Whenever Danny Adams revisits the painful memories of 1974 and the tragic turn of events two years later, he can’t get past one question: How might things have been different if he and his sister, Robin, had remained in Bay City with their mother instead of moving to Caro to live with their adopted “Dad,” Bill Timko, and his wife, Millie.

Life doesn’t often allow for a replay of decisions made in haste and the admonition, “be careful what you wish for,” is best considered before venturing down the road paved with unintended consequences.

But at fourteen years old and feeling “caged” under the strict rules of his mother, Danny impulsively pushed hard for the move, bluntly telling her, “I want to go live with Dad.”

Robin, fifteen, wasn’t opposed to the move but agreed to go along more out of loyalty to her brother than from an overwhelming desire to leave Bay City.

Vera Adams, a single mother working low-paying jobs and collecting some state assistance for the children, must have had mixed emotions about their leaving. Only recently, Vera and the children had moved into a new house — her first — which she bought under a HUD program, ending years of rented apartments, usually in poorer neighborhoods.

The house at 500 S. Wenona St. was across the river on Bay City’s west side. Clearly, the family was moving up for the first time in memory.

But as Robin and Danny grew into adolescence, they resisted their mother’s tight rein and she was, in Danny’s words, “a lonely person” who had difficulty expressing affection for the children.

Years earlier, they twice moved from the family’s native Altoona, Pennsylvania, to Bay City to further their mother’s apparent but futile attempts to cement her thirteen-year on-and-off relationship with Bill Timko. Now the children were becoming part of Bill’s extended family without her.

Neither Robin nor Danny knew who their real father was and accepted Bill as the next best thing. Both called him “Dad.”

Despite having no real tie to their family, other than his affair with their mother, Bill showed genuine interest in Robin and Danny, often slipping away on weekends to take the kids on camping and fishing trips.

Late in March of '74 — Millie Timko said it was sometime before Easter — Robin and Danny arrived at the Timkos' mobile home on Chambers Road.

Vera Adams conditioned the children's leaving her care and supervision emphatically: “You leave now and there will be no coming back.”

In later years, Danny conceded that his mother was probably hiding her disappointment. Just when things were finally coming together in her life — a steady job, a new house — the kids wanted to live with Bill Timko.

But their mother's no-return policy was no idle threat. This was one oral contract not subject to renegotiation.

The rules of the relocation having been set in concrete, Robin and Danny joined the Timko family in the cramped confines of the mobile home. Next door to the south was a two-story frame house, then owned and occupied by Millie's parents. Overall, the Timko spread comprised thirty-eight acres, leaving room for a pole barn and a garage, a garden and ample space for the kids to raise hell.

Robin and Danny assumed unofficial status as foster children in a family of eight, which would place certain demands on facilities and relationships, at least as long as living in the mobile home was necessary.

At first glance, life in the country might have been just the thing for the Adams children.

To hear Danny tell it, he and his sister were more valuable to their mother for the maid service they provided than for anything else, a harsh judgment he would come to regret.

While Robin's enthusiasm for the change was less than her brother's, leaving her mother was a small price to pay if this made Danny happy, and Bill and Millie were willing to welcome them aboard the super-stuffed Timko abode.

Their new family's version of rural life included chickens, which contributed eggs and poultry to the food budget; a goat, who for lack of inspiration was named “Billy;” and various cats and dogs.

The kids arrived at the Timkos' with little more than the clothes on their backs.

“Robin had two pair of jeans and three or four blouses when she arrived,” Millie said, and Danny wasn't doing much better.

The Timkos weren't well off by any stretch, but the couple worked hard. Bill was a mechanic at the local Ford dealership and often came home to work on cars that friends and acquaintances brought to the house. Millie worked as a housekeeper at the Caro Regional Center (now called the Caro Center), a state-run care facility for mentally retarded and developmentally disabled residents.

Millie, smallish at five feet two, but direct in her manner and parental pronouncements, gave no quarter to the children when it came to running the household. Possessed of a quick warm smile and quicker retort when she felt the kids were testing her, Millie genuinely loved children but kept her soft spot carefully under wraps. With four going on six kids who were rarely at a loss for creative ways in which to try her patience, she knew she had to keep her growing progeny in line.

Skeptics outside the family circle said Millie's immediate affection for Robin — “The minute I saw Robin, I fell in love with her” — was conditioned in part on Robin's availability as a baby sitter. Because Cheryl spent most weekends with Ronald Tyson, her natural father, Robin was an instant solution if Bill and Millie wanted to get away for awhile.

Robin quickly took to the younger Timko children and they to her. After all, baby-sitting wasn't such a bad rap for a fifteen-year-old whose experience never included a family setting as comfortable as this. Tim, at sixteen, the eldest of the children, had his own set of friends by the time the Adams' kids arrived and was less a factor in their lives than were his younger sisters and brother.

Bill Timko did what he could to make Robin and Danny feel welcome, starting with buying each of them a 10-speed bike from the Western Auto store. Not long after, Bill bought a mini-bike for Danny, which immediately put the Timko chickens at risk.

Danny was the wiry embodiment of hell on wheels. Standing barely five feet tall, at least four inches shorter than Robin, he was slim and topped with a thatch of sandy colored hair. His hazel eyes, often shifting quickly from side to side as he assessed his latest exercise in bad judgment, projected a mulish stubborn streak.

What's worse, Danny was oblivious to the likely consequences of behavior that ran the gamut from tolerable mischief to motorized mayhem. When he cranked up the five horses on the mini-bike and sped around the yard, pity the first chicken that deigned to cross his path.

Then there was the lawnmower, which he managed to break during another of his forays into the world of mechanical mishaps.

“He was a typical klutz,” Millie said. “He didn’t give a damn. He had a chip on his shoulder because he’d been kicked around. I gave him a few whippings, but he was tough.”

Before long, members of the family circle began taking odds on how long Danny Adams was going to last.

Meanwhile, Robin was blending well with her new family. A bubbly, blue-eyed blonde, she soon became the belle of the school bus, which transported her and Cheryl to classes during the week. She was quick to make friends and more than pretty enough to turn the heads of most teenage boys.

Robin’s relationship with Cheryl blossomed almost immediately. Some nights, when they should have been sleeping, they spent hours talking about everything from school to clothes to boys.

As familiarity added glue to the sisterly connection between the two, they took to adopting risqué nicknames for one another. Finally, they decided each would call the other “Bitch,” carefully choosing the time and place where this easily misunderstood term of endearment would be applied. “Sis” would have to do in more restrained settings.

Although the girls found things to disagree about, especially later when Robin began to date, their relationship for the most part was close and, more often than not, fun.

When the weather was warm, Robin and Cheryl jumped into the bed of Bill’s pickup for short trips. En route, they would launch into a discordant duet, “Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz,” which was more an expression of youthful exuberance than a knock on their less-than-limo transportation.

The girls took to their assigned tasks of doing the dinner dishes, cleaning their room and helping out with the younger children but not always without complaint.

Meanwhile, the few broken windows, slain chickens and assorted mechanical problems Danny brought to the Timko aggregation continued to take their toll on his relationship with Bill and Millie.

Probably sometime in late April or early May, Robin adopted a puppy, a blond-colored mutt who returned her attention and affection with tail-wagging, face-licking fervor. Robin named him Toby. He was the only dog she ever had aside from Lucky, a Pekinese, whose stay with the Adams’ family in Bay City was short-lived.

Lucky’s luck ran out when he made the mistake of biting Danny on the lip, which required a quick trip to the emergency room. Their mother wasn’t big on pets anyway and a new owner was promptly arranged for Lucky.

Robin quickly grew attached to Toby, who, unlike his predecessor, showed no disdain for her brother. Unfortunately, as was often the case in

Robin and Danny's lives, just when things were beginning to work out, fate or just plain bad luck would jump in and foul up everything.

And so it was with Robin's puppy. Danny remembers the day well, perhaps because it was another occasion when his attempt to do what he thought was the right thing turned out badly.

Most dogs have a natural attraction to anything that moves, especially passing cars, and Toby was no exception. The choice between keeping the dog tied up or allowing him to roam free was an easy call for Robin but, it turned out, an unfortunate one.

Traffic passing the Timko spread was not restricted by speed limit and the two-lane road, straight and little affected by crossroad traffic, offered a quick jog between state highways M-46 to the south and M-81 to the north.

Only days earlier, Terri Lynne Johnson, a twelve-year-old neighbor girl, was struck and killed while riding her bicycle a half mile from her home. The accident occurred on a Saturday just south of the Timko spread and the children, most of whom were home at the time, looked on anxiously as police and emergency vehicles converged on the accident scene.

That Terri's death affected the children deeply may account for future attempts by Cheryl and Robin to communicate with her spirit as they became more deeply involved with the Ouija board.

Scarcely had the frightening recollection of Terri's accident begun to recede from their memory when, one sunny afternoon in late June, Toby wandered onto the road as a car approached. The sudden screech of brakes, gentle thump and plaintive yelp are the stuff of childhood nightmares. Danny watched helplessly as the ball of fur skidded to a stop and lay motionless as the driver sped away.

Robin, who was nearby, burst into tears at the sight of her happy little puppy now silent and, by all appearances, lifeless. Danny leaped into action. A quick and proper burial for the puppy was in order.

Grabbing a shovel from the garage, he began to prepare a plot, what he visualized as the beginning of a pet cemetery.

As quickly as he could, Danny committed the puppy's remains to a sandy section of ground on the Timko property and covered the hole. He probably would have added the perfunctory makeshift cross but for an unexpected development.

Robin, who lingered at the impromptu grave site, suddenly cried out, "The ground is moving! The ground is moving!" The loose sand Danny backfilled into the hole had begun to shift suggesting a premature burial.

This "Oh-Shit" moment left Danny with another agonizing decision. He was convinced the dog was dead when he buried it and equally certain the animal could not survive its injuries after being hit by the car.

What was he going to do now?

He decided digging the dog up was out of the question, as was the option of letting it suffer under the ground. Surely the *coupe de grace* was made for moments such as this one.

Danny ran into the house and fetched Bill's gun, a .22-caliber rifle, and returned to the burial site. He took aim and fired one shot into the ground. The movement ceased and Danny, not altogether satisfied his prompt response yielded the best of results, returned Bill's gun to the house.

* * *

Chapter 7

ADAMS KIDS PASSED AROUND

Millie Timko was running out of patience with Danny Adams. School was out for the summer, meaning she would have to find new ways to contain the volatile mixture of Danny's impetuosity and boundless energy. Clearly, this wasn't happening and the situation appeared likely to get worse before it got better.

He wasn't a bad kid at heart, but his reaction to being bounced around as he was growing up seemed to have taken a greater toll on him than on his sister.

By now, Vera Adams' relationship with Bill Timko was on low heat, though Bill was still attentive to her transportation needs, making sure she had a car and keeping it in good mechanical condition.

Bill met Vera Adams in the early sixties when he was working as a concessionaire at a circus at the Jaffa (Shrine) Mosque in Altoona, Pennsylvania. She caught his eye while she was selling tickets at a movie theater there.

Years later, the beginnings of the relationship became the topic of conversation between Danny and his mother. Bill told Danny he met Vera in 1963, not two years earlier as she insisted. As Danny understood it, Bill met Millie and became interested in her before he met Vera. To support her version of events, his mother produced a copy of a letter she claimed she sent Bill.

When Danny read the letter, he wondered whether his mother had an ulterior motive in writing it. Later, when he talked to Bill, then living in

California (Bill and Millie had divorced), Bill said he never received such a letter.

Troubled by these inconsistencies, Danny remembered the time his grandmother, Mildred Adams, told him about a young woman who came to her house and suggested Vera Adams might be her biological mother.

His grandmother said she told the young woman she was mistaken. Danny wondered if there was a connection between the time line his mother related in the suspect letter and the possibility he had another sister he never knew.

Reduced to specifics, Vera's letter describes a vagabond lifestyle in which Bill and she traveled the country while he, sometimes they, ran carnival rides and games at state fairs and festival events. When she wasn't working with Bill, she would find a waitress job, especially if Bill's job meant an extended stay wherever they were at the time.

Her letter traces their Gypsy-like odyssey from January 1961 through June 1963 — Bill and Vera were in their mid-twenties at the time — but contains no mention of the children, even though Robin and Danny were with relatives in Altoona all this time and Bill and Vera occasionally stopped there.

Altoona is a tough town of roughly fifty thousand inhabitants at the base of the Allegheny Mountains in south-central Pennsylvania. About one hundred miles east of Pittsburgh, Altoona grew up around 1850 as a switching point for the Pennsylvania Railroad and was hard-hit by the decline of big rail lines one hundred years later.

As railroads ceased to be a sustaining force in Altoona, the city came to rely on a collection of a dozen or so smaller industries each employing between four hundred and six hundred workers. Conrail is the sole surviving railroad presence in Altoona, employing only a few hundred people.

Vera Adams was the middle child in a family of twelve children, five boys and seven girls, born to George and Mildred Adams. He was Dutch and she, a full-blooded Blackfoot-Cherokee Indian. Vera inherited her mother's high cheekbones.

George Adams was a railroader with Penn Central, a man of rugged demeanor and ornery disposition who, according to family legend, was accustomed to bringing co-workers home to share his food, drink and daughters.

Vera's siblings were willing, though not always thrilled, to take care of the Adams' kids in their mother's absence.

"Everybody thought it was OK to drop off kids," in Danny's words — the quality of care tended to vary among the various aunts and uncles.

Aunt May, Uncle George's wife, stands out in Danny's mind as the worst example. She was a towering figure to Danny — he thought she was at least seven feet tall, compared to Uncle George, who was five feet eight at best.

"She was like Frankenstein as a woman," he said. Aunt May was the lead player in a frightening event that Danny said occurred when he was probably six years old and Robin was seven. Their mother was living in Bay City.

"Robin was in first grade and I was in kindergarten. One night she wet the bed. When Aunt May saw that Robin peed the bed, she sat her little butt on the gas stove and turned on the burner. Just then, Uncle Ray came in. He yelled at her, 'What the hell are you doing?'" Danny said his uncle threw a coffee cup at Aunt May, who responded by ordering him out of the house.

"'And don't come back,' she snapped, claiming the last word. 'Aunt May took Robin down, but after that we had to sleep on the coil springs. I guess she figured rust was less a risk than having to wash pee stains out of the sheets.'"

On other occasions, at least once during the winter, Aunt May locked Robin and Danny out of the house and they spent the night huddled together in a car trying as best they could to keep warm.

Finally, when Robin was nine and Danny seven, their mother brought them back to Bay City, ending the practice of exporting them to Altoona when the mood moved her.

Life with their mother was an improvement over life with Aunt May, but Vera Adams tended to err on the side of strict rules and discipline first and affection — what little there was — later.

Because she was often working (usually as a waitress) when the kids got home from school, they were ordered not to leave the house, not to watch television or make telephone calls and to make sure the dishes were done and the house was clean.

Early on, when the family was living in a rented apartment on Broadway in Bay City, Vera would tie a rope tightly between the door knobs of Robin and Danny's bedrooms to prevent their venturing out at night.

This makeshift restraint was hardly foolproof, and Danny once opened his bedroom door to the disturbing sight of his mother in a compromising position with a young man (as it turned out, a nephew of Bill Timko's). Later the same night, Danny said his mother woke him up to ask what he had seen. What he saw troubles him to this day.

Discipline varied in Vera's world. Danny once was forced to eat a cigarette in church when she found out he had been smoking. He threw up. Another time a petty theft required him to sit on the front porch for hours wearing a sign on which his mother printed "I am a thief."

Other offenses usually required a strapping. Danny or Robin would pull out a chair, present their mother with the belt, then lie over the chair and take the licking. If the offense were serious enough, the pants would come down.

“But there were good times,” Danny said. “Sometimes when things were going well, Mom would take us to Tony’s Park at Euclid and Beaver streets.” The park consisted of an arcade, a large slide where kids would ride burlap bags and concession stands.

“We could each bring a friend, and Mom bought snacks and ice cream for us.”

When Vera returned from a long shift at Roma’s or one of the other Bay City restaurants where she worked as a waitress, Robin and Danny took turns rubbing her feet with lotion.

And the kids, by Danny’s admission, weren’t always angels.

“I’d cover for Robin, and she’d cover for me,” he said, of the times the stay-in-the-house rule was violated by either or both of them.

And like most brothers and sisters, Robin and Danny fought.

He remembers she always gave a good account of herself, but one time their sibling squabble nearly ended disastrously. Robin was probably thirteen at the time and Danny, twelve. They were living in a second-floor apartment on Grant Street in Bay City and their mother was at work.

Danny can’t remember exactly what started the fight, but in the heat of battle, he pushed Robin and she fell backward into a bedroom window. The glass shattered, but Danny grabbed her arm in time to prevent her from falling out the window. Robin somehow avoided being cut by the broken glass, but concocting an excuse for the broken window severely challenged the kids’ collaborative ingenuity.

Another time Robin broke a large vanity mirror in her mother’s bedroom. If, as the superstition warns, seven years of bad luck attach to anyone who breaks a mirror, Robin Adams wasn’t going to be the one to disprove this ancient admonition.

While living on Grant Street, Robin and Danny would occasionally hang out with a neighbor girl, Karla Penzien, whose father was then serving as Bay County prosecuting attorney. Karla’s father would one day figure prominently in a process that profoundly affected Vera Adams’ family.

* * *

Chapter 8
“YOU’RE GOING TO ALTOONA”

*Do you still feel the pain of the scars that won't heal — from
“Daniel (My Brother),” by Elton John*

By late June 1974, the showdown brewing between Danny and Millie Timko was reaching a boiling point.

One night when Danny didn’t return home, Millie was rightly concerned and dispatched Bill the next morning to round up the usual suspects, one in particular.

Bill sensed he was onto something when he drove past Archie’s gas station, which was on the south side of M-46 at Chambers Road, about a mile away, and spotted what looked like Danny’s 10-speed bike.

Archie’s was adjacent to the Ber-Wa-Ga-Na campground, a commercially run getaway for families with travel trailers and campers. The parents of Danny’s friend, Tim Taggett, owned the campground, and Tim and Danny were known to hang out at the gas station and plot whatever mischief came to mind.

Johnny Ezakovich, a close friend of Millie’s son Tim, lived just down the road from Archie’s and worked there. Johnny drove a Mercury Cougar, which despite its weathered appearance, Danny considered the coolest thing on wheels. Johnny liked Danny and Tim and was therefore not necessarily reticent when the boys asked him to buy a fifth of whiskey, Southern Comfort, for them.

Duly equipped, Danny, Tim and a couple of girls their age they recruited from the campground ventured into the nearby woods to indulge their illegal possession of alcohol. Details of what happened next are sketchy, but Danny remembers he somehow ended up passed out on a mattress in the back room of the gas station. This was where an angry Bill Timko discovered him massively hung over the next morning.

When Bill arrived home with Danny in tow, the fourteen-year-old’s eyes looked like two piss holes in a snow bank, and Millie’s matriarchal ire was at flashpoint. If wearing out one’s welcome were an art form, Danny Adams had perfected it.

As Millie usually did when decisions and/or ultimatums affecting the children were beyond her considerable grasp as the family’s chief rule maker

and disciplinarian, she took Bill aside and told him it was time to make a change regarding Danny. She had put this off long enough.

Looking back on that time, clearly one of the most painful in his young life, Danny admits, “I had a lot of anger toward Millie, but I wasn’t her responsibility.”

Finally, it fell to Bill to tell Danny he would have to return to Bay City. With his mother’s edict — “You leave now and there will be no coming back” — ringing in his ears, Danny felt trapped. He didn’t want to face his mother and, worse, he didn’t want to return to Pennsylvania and the pinball existence his life there represented to him.

Finally, on a Saturday in late June, the decision was made to return Danny to his mother in Bay City. His reaction was swift, impulsive and, like other decisions he made as the temporary ward of Bill and Millie Timko, wrongheaded.

Danny jumped on his 10-speed and headed north on Chambers Road toward the Caro Regional Center. As have so many other fourteen-year-olds facing a personal crisis with no easy solution, he ran away.

Soon, Bill and Millie realized Danny had run off, they loaded into Millie’s car and went looking for him.

What followed was a cat-and-mouse game as Danny tried to pick back roads where his pursuers were least likely to catch up with him.

After about an hour on the run, Danny resigned himself to the inevitable and slipped into a wooded area not far from the Timko’s. Walking the bike, he sought to hide, or at least delay, the dreaded confrontation with his mother.

He leaned his bike against a tall pine tree, climbed the tree and disappeared in the foliage a few feet from the top.

As soon as he reached his lofty perch, he heard the sound of a car pulling to a stop on the road. He figured Bill must have seen him when he rode past the house.

“I could hear him park the car. And here he came walking, and I was up the tree, but like a little dumb ass I (had) set the bike down against the tree. So Bill sees me and he says, ‘Don’t worry you little son of a bitch, you’ll have to come back down sooner or later.’

“So I thought, what better time than now. He already knows I’m up here. So I climbed down and he took the pump off my bike and started whappin’ me with it.

“And he said, ‘You’re leavin,’ you’re going to Pennsylvania. Let’s get your ass home.’ And that was when we got in the car and headed for Bay City.”

The trip to Bay City, Step One in the process of relocating Danny Adams, was wrenching for him and Robin. Their first real separation as brother and sister was about to happen.

When Bill and Millie arrived on her front porch with Robin and Danny, Vera Adams made it perfectly clear Danny wasn't going to spend another minute with her. He would return to Altoona to live with his grandparents.

"I told you when you left that there was going to be no coming back," she said.

Millie remembers how Danny cried and begged, promising to do better.

"I felt like a failure," she said, torn between tolerating Danny's stubborn unwillingness to live by the rules and breaking the kids' hearts by splitting them up.

But Danny's mother was undeterred, he was going to Pennsylvania, and the Timkos would be the ones to put him on the Greyhound bus, which would take him there.

Robin tried to control her emotions on this darkest day in her relationship with her brother and her mother. Shuttled from one relative to the next in Pennsylvania, they always supported each other. Now, their mother was about to impose the cruelest sanction on them.

Finally, Robin could no longer contain her anger.

"I hate you, you fucking bitch, I hate you!" she screamed at her mother through tears.

Decades later, Dan still grows somber revisiting that day: "My sister cried so much. That hurt more than (the fact) I was leaving. She wouldn't stop. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't help her. I couldn't sooth her. I couldn't make her know that it would be OK."

When, a few hours later, Danny finally boarded a Greyhound bus in Saginaw, Robin was still sobbing. The tears returned every time she heard Elton John's song "Daniel (My Brother)" on the radio.

* * *

Chapter 9

"CAN YOU GIVE US A SIGN?"

In the attic, lights, voices scream, nothing seen, real's a dream —
"Toys in the Attic," by Aerosmith

It was late summer in 1975 when Robin and Cheryl's Ouija board experimentation came to an ominous conclusion. Not only would their attempts to keep from Millie and Bill what started out as a lark — a playful walk in a forbidden park — fail miserably, but the darkest aspects of this dangerous game would finally give way to the light of day.

The increasing incidence of sounds and sensations, which grew out of their almost nightly indulgence with the Ouija board had crossed the line. No longer were the girls able to ignore the lights turning on and off unexplainably, strange sounds emanating from the attic or the apparent footsteps on the stairs outside their room. Terror replaced the level of fear, which at one time they found stimulating.

Over time, the girls — by then Cheryl was fifteen and Robin sixteen — made contact with a mysterious presence identified only as “Glenda.” The quest to contact someone “out there” began innocently enough one night when Cheryl tried to reach Terri Johnson, the neighbor girl who was killed the previous summer.

As the girls ventured deeper into the Ouija ritual, Robin became a ready, though often skeptical, accomplice. At least once she questioned Cheryl as to the advisability of pushing deeper into the uncharted dimensions of the netherworld.

“Don't worry; Mom won't find out — we'll be careful,” Cheryl reassured.

At the outset, neither Cheryl nor Robin believed the board was anything more than a toy, a diversion about as reliable as the daily horoscope.

Although she had little money and often had to borrow clothes from Cheryl, Robin was genuinely happy at the Timkos and didn't want to risk the arrangement by delving too deeply into something she was certain Millie would object to.

As their experiences with the board grew more intense, the girls sat, their eyes fixed on the planchette, seldom exchanging glances at one another. There were moments when they had to suppress a nervous giggle. Still, there was the feeling that if they were patient, the board would satisfy the curiosity, which propelled them into this unknown territory.

Their connection with “Glenda” gradually developed as the girls spent more time using the board. Typically, Cheryl issued an open invitation as they sat on the floor anxiously awaiting an answer.

“Hi, I'm here, I'm ready to talk. Is there anybody out there? Who's listening?”

“I — H - E - A - R — Y - O - U,” came the response, slowly spelled out one letter at a time.

“Who are you?” Cheryl asked, glancing momentarily at Robin.

“G - L - E - N - D - A.”

Pressing their unseen source further, the girls learned Glenda had perished in a car fire at the age of forty-eight. They made no attempt to check local records to determine if a woman named Glenda — the response implied she was from the area — died in a car fire, accidental deaths in this manner being comparatively rare.

From that point on, Glenda would be their personal contact. She would always respond when they sought a connection through the Ouija board.

As the frequency of their nighttime correspondence with Glenda grew, Cheryl sought to enhance the experience by leaving the lights off and lighting candles, usually black candles.

Soon, however, the covert correspondence between Glenda and the girls developed some mysterious and unnerving components. Because these phenomena did not always occur *during* the Ouija sessions, there might have been a tendency to attribute them to some other source. Again, Cheryl, who was nothing if not honest with herself, perceived a connection.

First they heard footsteps on the stairway outside the closed bedroom door. The footsteps sounded heavier than they were accustomed to hearing — and troubling because no one was on the stairs at the time.

At one side of the bedroom was the door to an attic. In time, there developed in the attic a sound as though someone, or some thing, was clawing at the walls. At first, these manifestations occurred gradually and ended quickly.

By now, Cheryl and Robin had been experimenting with the board for months and their association with Glenda was getting downright scary. Cheryl said the girls sensed a cold, forbidding presence in the room as these clandestine conversations continued.

The sounds of footsteps, noises in the attic and even the chance appearance of a fleeting image outside their window deepened the fear and anxiety the girls were feeling.

One night, as they began communicating through the board, the girls saw a human-appearing image outside their second-floor window. Whatever it was they saw — and Cheryl said both described the same thing — it vanished as quickly as it appeared.

“What was that?” Robin asked in a frightened whisper. “Did you see it?” Cheryl, wide-eyed and pale, nodded and took a deep breath.

This occurred about the time Cheryl began pressing Glenda for more information and some indication their mysterious correspondent was possessed of powers, which could be demonstrated to them.

One weeknight when Millie and Bill were out of the house for some reason, Cheryl summoned Glenda. And, after some perfunctory small talk, she asked: “Can you give us a sign that you are with us?” Cheryl had brought a cup of tea up from the kitchen. It was more than half full.

As the planchette moved slowly to the “yes” response on the board, the cup began to rattle in the saucer, shaking so violently Cheryl had to hold it with both hands to stop it. Cheryl and Robin were satisfied Glenda — whoever she was and whatever she was up to — was very much with them.

The girls had crossed the verboten threshold linking Glenda to a place, which was hardly a product of their collective subconscious but something far more sinister.

Cheryl admits this simple question, “Tell us who sent you,” was not made from an uninformed perspective. However intriguing or stimulating their extended contact with Glenda might be, Cheryl knew they were traveling treacherous territory.

So, one night after many days when the sound of footsteps, movement in the attic and other unexplained events pushed them closer to the limit of apprehension and nearer to panic, Cheryl decided to inquire of Glenda: “Tell us who sent you.”

There was a pause, and then the planchette began moving slowly toward the latter half of the alphabet settling first on the S. Whether anything then could have frightened the girls further is debatable, but the effect of the response was chilling: S - A - T - A - N.

So it was true, Cheryl thought to herself. The things she read about, but dismissed in her enthusiasm to press ahead with what seemed like an enlightening exploration of an unknown entity, were coming true. The vile creatures of the night who lie in wait to inhabit the bodies of unsuspecting victims are tools of the devil. All it took to welcome them into their lives was the Ouija board, which appeared no more menacing than a Monopoly game.

Perhaps the signal event, which served to bring the Glenda dialogues to an ignominious end occurred one night while Cheryl and Robin were sitting outside as dusk settled on Tuscola County. Suddenly Robin noticed a light in the second-floor window near their bedroom.

“Look, there’s a light on upstairs,” she said to Cheryl, a sense of uneasiness clear in her voice.

“I don’t remember turning on the light, do you?”

Cheryl looked at Robin and could tell by her expression she was thinking the same thing. Something strange was going on, and the phenomena were becoming increasingly more visible and harder to deal with.

If Cheryl and Robin’s infatuation with risky rituals involving the Ouija board unleashed some dark power — already the presence identified to them

only as Glenda had claimed to be a messenger from the devil himself — there was no putting this unfriendly genie back in the bottle.

Tuscola County authorities, going back as far as human memory and the persistence of rural legend permit, have no record of a woman named Glenda dying in a car fire. The only such death anyone remembers occurred in February 1983, long after the Glenda experience ended. A 44-year-old Kingston woman was killed instantly when her car was rear-ended and burst into flames not far from her home. The other driver was charged with manslaughter.

If Glenda was, as the girls grew to expect by the masculine quality inherent in the content of *her* responses, in fact a male presence, why did *he* try to pass himself off as a woman?

Men of faith who have investigated the Ouija board and caution against experimenting with it say the early encounters are most often predicated on some form of deception. Whatever it was Cheryl sought in the early going was beginning to overwhelm her and Robin.

Childhood fears reborn amid adolescent anxieties are one thing. Surely at some point in the life of most every child there lurks the fear of some mysterious presence roaming an attic or a vacant or locked room.

At different times, they not only heard footsteps in the stairwell, a creaking of boards in the adjoining attic, but also a sound almost like a baby crying when there was no infant in the house. If the source known to them only as Glenda was responsible for these unexplained occurrences, it appeared she or he was upping the ante.

Then there was the presence of Aubrey Vincent, a twenty-three-year-old cousin of Millie's who led a Spartan existence in a one-room shack built on a few acres just north of the Timkos. While it is doubtful Aubrey encouraged or contributed to the Ouija board experimentation, he was likely aware of it from his regular interaction with the girls.

At dark during the warmer months, Aubrey often would build a campfire outside the sixteen-foot-by-twenty-foot structure he called home and invite the girls to join him for conversation and maybe a little cheap wine or marijuana. While the conversation during these sessions dealt with topics quite apart from the occult, it was clear to Cheryl and Robin that Aubrey was either a Satanist or someone with an unusual bent toward the dark side of human existence.

Aubrey was viewed as a loner. His shoulder-length hair, beard and attire inspired at least one adult observer to refer to him as a "mountain man."

Standing just shy of six feet tall, but weighing only one hundred and seventy pounds, Aubrey may have been into drugs, which contributed to his inability to pack pounds on his slender frame.

By most standards, Aubrey Vincent was good looking. His only marriage ended quickly and unsuccessfully. But Aubrey's interests and artistic expressions seemed to mark his preoccupation with the occult.

"Aubrey never came out and told us that he worshiped Satan," Cheryl stressed years later, "but there were signs that his thinking went in that direction."

There was one occasion, however, a direct result of the girls' Ouija board indulgences, when Aubrey became uncharacteristically assertive, acting, one could easily infer, as the devil's disciple.

Surprisingly, Cheryl does not remember this intervention, even though she was deeply involved and Aubrey's role is well documented.

As a painter and sculptor, Aubrey's sketches, paintings and sculptures were vivid expressions of his inner turmoil. His parents died when he was very young, and he bounced between various relatives until he set out on his own as a teenager.

One sculpture, a horrific looking skull-like embodiment bearing an agonized expression, may best reflect what Aubrey was dealing with beneath the surface.

Lee Jae Kitchen, another rough-and-ready Caro guy who knew Aubrey well — he nicknamed him "Vinnie the Quail" — still owns the sculpture, a macabre image suggesting someone who was frantically trying to transcend the turmoil of his own existence.

Ironically, Lee Jae became a bit player in Vinnie the Quail's momentous exit from a life he could no longer deal with. But that gets ahead of the story.

While there is nothing to suggest Aubrey Vincent participated in, or even encouraged, the girls' Ouija board dialogue, there is a missing page. During the period when these sessions were going on, Cheryl spent most weekends with her father.

At these times, Robin often would take part in campfire-side chats with Aubrey but without Cheryl. Whether these occasions affected the girls' inclination to push the limits in their liaison with dark forces is debatable. But one thing is clear: when the dramatic climax to these events finally occurred, Aubrey showed up, bent on opposing religious intervention as a means of dealing with the girls' fears.

Cheryl remembers how terrified she and Robin became.

"By the time the upstairs lights started going on and off by themselves, we were terrified. We didn't want to go up there anymore. We were afraid to sleep in our own room."

The collective effects of mysterious footsteps, unexplained noises from the attic and vanishing images paralyzed the girls with fear.

"We knew we had to do something," Millie Timko said.

Her first step was to identify the culprit.

“You kids have been foolin’ with that damned Ouija board, haven’t you?” The truth was out.

Millie and Bill talked privately about what to do next.

Millie believed they needed to involve a clergyman and, even though Bill was Catholic, they decided as a matter of expediency to contact the Rev. Allen E. Stebbens, who was then pastor of the Wahjamega Country Church.

The church is a quaint, wood-frame building on the grounds of the Caro Regional Center.

Wahjamega Church is conservative, nondenominational — part of a fellowship of churches, which don’t wish to be identified with a formal denomination.

Stebbens, who trained at Grand Rapids Baptist College Theological Seminary, was a good fit for the church. He had been there six years when he was summoned to the Timko residence to rid the premises of whatever was scaring the girls.

The minister was forty-three years old when the Timkos asked him to perform what essentially was an exorcism. Twenty years later, he described the occasion, including his peculiar encounter “with the fellow living to the north of them,” a “bearded, unkempt fellow.”

When Stebbens arrived, Cheryl and Robin were in the living room.

“They were shaking and crying,” he said, “afraid to go upstairs.”

Stebbens said as soon as he entered the house, “the bearded fellow,” Aubrey Vincent, walked in. It was not uncommon for Aubrey to wander in and out. After all, he was family, Millie’s cousin. But this time Aubrey appeared to be on a mission.

“He quickly became the adversary,” the minister said.

Stebbens was taken aback, but undeterred.

“Why are you here?” Aubrey demanded.

“I’m a minister, and these girls need spiritual help. They are frightened.”

Aubrey spotted the Bible the minister was carrying.

“I suppose you’re going to give them a bunch of crap out of the Bible,” Aubrey continued, visibly angry.

His tirade lasted no longer than five minutes and was a mixture of profanity and denunciation of the Bible and God.

“That’s fuckin’ bullshit, that’s all it is,” was Aubrey’s final pronouncement before he stomped out.

Freed of this unexpected opposition, Stebbens set about to do what he could for the Timkos and their hysterical teenage charges. It was clear to him the girls’ fear of mysterious spirits was the root of their problem.

The minister opened the Bible and asked the girls to pray with him. Then he read from Romans 10:9-10:

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God has raised him from the dead thou shalt be saved.

For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

Stebbens asked the girls to accept Christ as their savior. Although the girls seemed ready to do almost anything to escape the fear they felt, their conversions were tenuous at best.

Meanwhile, an ecumenical touch was lent to the proceedings as Bill Timko sat nearby reciting Hail Marys and crossing himself with a zeal seldom seen before or since.

Stebbens wondered if Aubrey Vincent had served as a motivator in linking the girls to whatever it was that left them benumbed with fear.

“He may have kept it going,” he said.

Cheryl vehemently denies this. “Aubrey may have made his own pact with the devil, but he didn’t influence us,” she insisted.

The minister continued to pray with the girls and recited scriptures, including the ubiquitous John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Finally, the time came for the girls to face their fears head-on. Stebbens invited them to accompany him to their upstairs room. Arriving there, he continued to pray silently.

The girls’ greatest fear seemed to attach to the adjoining attic from which a number of strange and unexplained sounds originated.

The minister stood away from the small door, which opened into the attic. He prayed a bit more, recited another passage of scripture, then stepped forward and jerked the attic door open.

“I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of there,” he demanded, the volume and tenor of his voice rising to the occasion.

Whatever the impact of this emphatic order on events real or imagined, there was no doubt Stebbens meant business and by tone and appearance was convincing enough to give Millie and Bill at least a temporary sense of relief.

Afterward, the minister spotted the Ouija board lying on a small table in the bedroom and asked the girls, "Have you been using this?"

Cheryl spoke up, not only admitting they used the board but also detailing their problems with the weird manifestations it generated. She said these began only after they broadened their experimentation with the Ouija board.

The minister took the board with him.

Oddly, afterward, as he drove down Chambers Road headed northeast, Stebbens stopped on the bridge over the Cass River. Here the river runs along the southern boundary of the Regional Center where his church was located. He tossed the Ouija board into the river, then watched as it sank slowly out of site.

"It took probably forty-five seconds," he said.

The minister returned to the Timkos' home about two weeks later to see how the girls were doing and was assured everything was fine.

Years later, Cheryl reflected on the Ouija board experience with some regret.

"Did I push her (Robin) into something she didn't want to do? By this time, I was steeped in Satanism and the occult. It wasn't so much a belief system as a curiosity. I wanted to know more."

As for the devil's advocate, if he were indeed one, Aubrey Vincent briefly continued to live stoically in his humble shack, which lacked plumbing, save for a hand pump whose handle stuck up intrusively beside the bunk beds he erected near the center of the cabin.

Three years later, Aubrey accompanied a small group from Caro on a bear-hunting trip to Lake Linden in the Upper Peninsula's Keweenaw Peninsula. There, on a Monday afternoon in the second full week in September he told his buddies he was going to take a nap. It would be a long nap.

Aubrey had mysteriously left the camp the night before and wandered off into the woods, failing to return until morning. Later, under the guise of napping, he rolled himself into a sleeping bag, put a .44 magnum revolver to the right side of his head, pulled the trigger and blew off the top of his skull. Why he chose to end his life there and in this manner is the subject of speculation.

Aubrey Paul Vincent was pronounced dead on September 11, 1978.

Although his death was ruled a suicide, like so much else in Aubrey's life, an element of mystery attached to the event that ended it.

State police at the Calumet post received a telephone call from a Caro woman who claimed to know Aubrey and his Caro friends. She said she doubted Aubrey's death was a suicide, suggesting instead that he knew too

much about illegal drug use among his companions. This, she said, might have been motive enough for one of them to kill him.

The Calumet post contacted state police at Caro and recommended a follow-up investigation once the hunters returned home. Detective Sgt. Milton Wolner arranged a polygraph examination for Tim Richards, one of the three from Caro who were at the hunting camp with Aubrey and the first person police interviewed after the shooting was reported.

Years later, another Caro friend of Aubrey's, who arrived at the camp shortly after the shooting, intimated Aubrey had been intimate with Tim Richards' wife.

But the polygraph examination showed no deception and, combined with the detailed state police investigation at the hunting camp, led to the suicide ruling.

Aubrey Vincent's troubled life, his attraction to the grotesque evident in his art and the possibility he was a Satanist may never be fully understood.

One person who offered some insight was Anna Belle Bognar. An almost legendary figure in the Thumb counties harking back to her days as a biker, Anna Belle cut quite a swath through the area as a member of, The Outlaws, a Bay City motorcycle gang.

Thumb area lawmen ruefully dubbed her, "Fat Anna Belle," owing to her height and weight — six-foot-one and four hundred and twelve pounds at her peak. After she hung up her biker colors, she lived with Aubrey Vincent, whom she always refers to by his surname, in the mid- to late-seventies.

Anna Belle still has a series of Aubrey's paintings, including one titled, "Looking for a Way Out," which may have been autobiographical. The painting depicts a scene at sunset. A tree at the edge of a steep cliff is silhouetted against an orange-tinted sky. Its branches extend in tentacle-like configurations. Suspended from a branch on the right is a children's swing and from a branch on the left, a noose.

"Vincent was always a mystery, even to himself, a person who hid in plain sight," she said of her relationship with the young man even she never completely understood. She said Aubrey's parents were alcoholics and abusive toward him.

"He had siblings but never spoke of them," she said.

"He was such a vain shit," Anna Belle stressed, and could be "gentle as a lamb (one moment) and capable of Manson moments (the next). "His art reflected his life at the time."

Anna Belle said Aubrey experimented with drugs, including Peyote imported from Mexico, a substance known for its transformational effects on human perception.

She said Aubrey told friends that, upon his death, he wished to be cremated with his ashes divided among select individuals and a portion deposited on a mountain in Washington state. The latter task, Anna Belle said, was carried out by Millie Timko's eldest son, Tim.

"Vincent put me down as his next of kin before he committed suicide, and one day I get his ashes in the mail. Every year I put his ashes under the Christmas tree and bitch at him.

"Five days after his death, we had a two-day wake at a place on Hutchison Road (a short stretch a few miles north of Caro). Probably two hundred people showed up. Everybody got wasted on booze and drugs and talked about Vincent, how they met him, what they knew about him."

* * *

Chapter 10 MELVIN MEETS ROBIN

Not long after the Ouija board departed from Robin Adams' Caro experience, Melvin Garza arrived. What brought them together was, indirectly, a school bus, which, especially in rural districts, plays a significant role in shaping the social interaction of the younger generation.

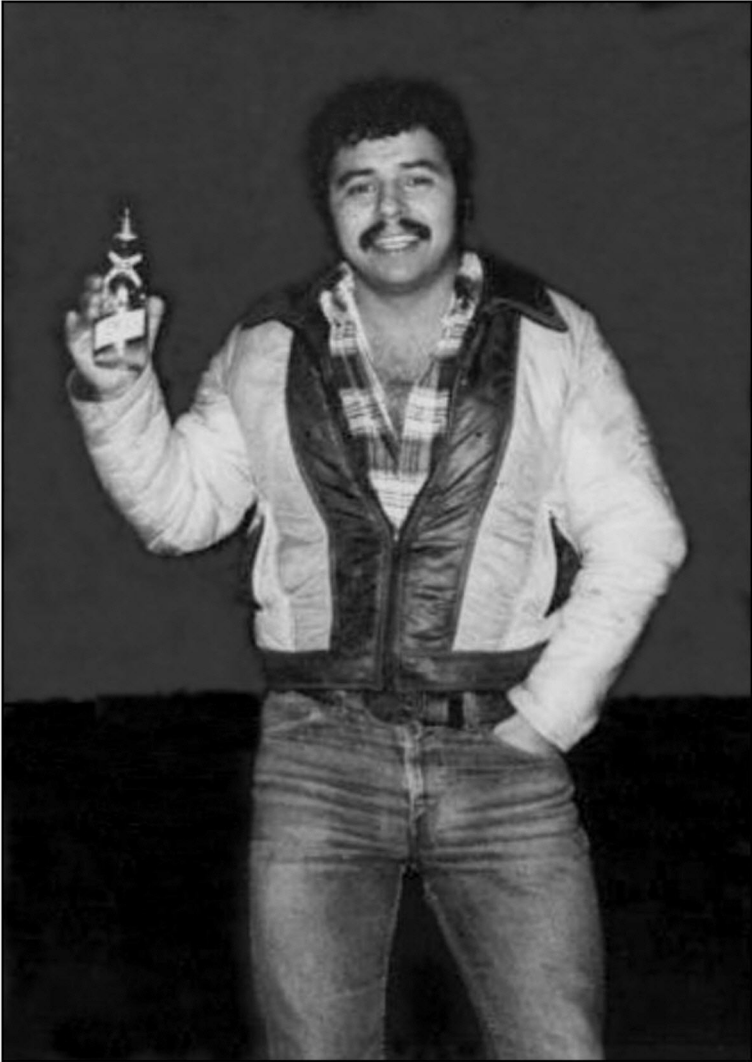
Nora Garza, Melvin's younger sister by just shy of three years, rode the same bus as Robin, Cheryl and Mindy Snider. As she had been with Mindy, who dated Melvin previously, Nora became the conduit in bringing Melvin and Robin together.

There was an equivocal dimension to Nora's role as a matchmaker for her brother.

"Nora seemed jealous of Melvin when he gave his attentions to other girls," Mindy said. "Melvin bought more expensive gifts for Nora than for his girlfriends."

Other girls who dated Melvin said they sensed Nora was at first eager for her brother to meet them, but later saw signs of jealousy when his relationship with them continued.

Nora befriended Robin before introducing her to her brother. By this time, Robin was spending time after school at the Garza home, which was not far from the Timko's house.



Melvin Garza in 1978, two years after Robin Adams disappeared

One October day, a month or so after school started in 1975, when Robin got off the bus with Nora after school, Melvin, who just turned nineteen, was at home, and they met.

Melvin briefly dated another girl after ending a nearly year-long relationship with Mindy, one that dramatically demonstrated his need for control and the lengths he would go to achieve it.

Sixteen years old by then, Robin had dated some, but nothing developed from those experiences. Melvin would be different. His interest in her was immediate and, as was his custom, he quickly moved to close the deal.

He was driving a red 1969 Dodge Charger at the time.

Robin took to Melvin at once. Lost, at first, in his thoughtful gestures and demonstrations of affection were the careful steps he took to effect a framework for control. Melvin, after all, had a car, money to spend on concert tickets and small gifts.

Melvin was by any standard a handsome young man, though he some times let his weight intrude upon an otherwise slim physique. He was five feet ten inches tall and weighed about one hundred and sixty-five pounds, though in his mid twenties, his weight ballooned to as much as two hundred and ten pounds.

His high school friends described him as outgoing and friendly, and some said his smile alone was the embodiment of charisma.

If there were a darker side of Melvin, one some acquaintances said emerged after the fatal auto accident in 1974, this was well hidden until after he graduated and began to lose touch with some of his high school friends.

Millie Timko was not happy about Melvin's attraction to Robin and Robin's to him. Although she admitted Melvin could be "so damned charming" when he wanted to be, it wasn't long before Millie developed concerns about him.

"I didn't like his personality. I knew he was trouble. But you don't tell that to a (teenage) girl."

Cheryl was almost instantly wary of Melvin. Unlike her mother, she was privy to girl talk, including the details of the amorous exchanges between Melvin and Robin, which quickly led to sexual intimacy and soon after to the controlling tendencies Melvin began to exert.

Although Millie was uncomfortable about Robin dating Melvin, she said little at first, especially when Robin seemed happiest. Privately, Millie and Bill were concerned about Melvin. Bill, in fact, rarely spoke to him.

Within the family there was a sense Melvin "had something" on Bill Timko, information he somehow acquired in the manner typical of him, information that could be embarrassing if disclosed. Cheryl wouldn't discuss this, dismissing it as too personal.

Once Melvin laid claim to Robin as his steady girl, he was a frequent visitor at the Timkos' Chambers Road home. The 8-track player in his car was

usually loaded with the latest KISS recording, the sound of which could be heard well down the road when he approached the house.

One weekend later in the spring of 1976, when Cheryl was away with her father, Robin spoke privately with Millie about her relationship with Melvin Garza.

“Mom, he wants to marry me,” she said.

“You kids haven’t been seeing each other that long,” Millie responded, clearly cool to the idea. “Why don’t you give yourselves some more time?”

“I know he loves me,” Robin protested.

“Maybe he does, but you really ought to wait awhile before rushing into anything.”

Although they reached no real understanding, Millie could see the situation she never liked in the first place was getting out of hand.

* * *

Chapter 11

“WHERE’S THE DIARY?”

I found her diary underneath a tree, and started to read about me
— “Diary,” recorded by Bread

Next to the Ouija board, which caused them many anxious moments, the diary Cheryl and Robin kept was part of a secret world they wished to share only with one another. The girls began a co-authorship, each writing in the diary, mainly about boys they were seeing or were attracted to.

The diary was one of the few things Robin brought with her from Bay City, a means of connecting two distinctly different chapters in her life.

Details of Robin’s early dating, many of them highly personal, were dutifully recorded in the diary and, in some cases, subject to editorial comments by Cheryl.

The diary was safely stashed in their second-floor bedroom, sufficiently hidden from view so the contents — highly classified at this point in their lives — would be safe from prying eyes.

One afternoon, upon returning home from school, Robin noticed the diary was missing from its appointed hiding place. She decided Cheryl must

have it, as the girls' pact regarding the diary was clearly one of mutual disclosure.

"Hey, Bitch, where's the diary?" Robin asked when Cheryl and she were alone in their room. The appellation was neither accusatory nor condescending. The girls relished the naughtiness of such references, which to them affirmed the closeness of their friendship.

"I haven't seen the diary," Cheryl said, "Where'd you put it?" She wasn't defensive. She knew Robin couldn't have cared less if she had the diary and she thought the juicy journal was misplaced somewhere in the clutter teenage girls refer to as a "clean room."

Concerned, the girls commenced a search. Privately, each of them was hopeful but doubtful. Diaries require certain attention and care. Some discretion is required. In this case, as both girls feared, the diary was nowhere to be found. For a moment, they paused, each eyeing the other with knowing apprehension. The thought that someone, anyone, had the diary was upsetting to them.

But who? And why?

Cheryl, a quick thinker and incurably skeptical about the motives and inclinations of Melvin Garza, was the first to consider him.

"Melvin?" she said, implication unmistakable.

"You think he would?" Robin said, answering with a question. Robin was well-schooled on Cheryl's doubts about Melvin, though she shared few of them.

Cheryl saw in Melvin a tendency to find subtle inroads to a person's sense of privacy or security. His most potent tool? Information.

Knowledge about people — the way they behaved, the little secrets they held, their feelings for one another — is a powerful weapon. Properly applied, it instills fear and allows control.

"I can't believe he'd do that," Robin said, more hoping it was not true than conceding that it wasn't.

"I wouldn't put anything past him," Cheryl said.

Robin believed Cheryl was genuinely concerned for her, rather than motivated by the petty jealousy teenagers are prey to when one scores more points in the dating game.

If Melvin took the diary, Robin thought to herself, he would know not only about how she felt about him, but also about her relationships with boys she dated before meeting him.

By this time, Robin naively accepted Melvin's possessiveness as a positive, something that showed he really cared for her. Aside from her brother, there was no one in her life who cared this much about her.

Cheryl and Robin were thinking the same thing. If Melvin did have the diary, how could they find out? And if he didn't have it, who did?

Almost a week later, a weekday afternoon, when Cheryl and Robin arrived home from school they found Melvin comfortably seated in the dining room. When she spotted his car parked beside the house, it gave Cheryl a chill.

As the girls entered the house, she volunteered a sarcastic, "Make yourself at home." She didn't want him to see how angry she was that he would invite himself in when no one was home.

Unfazed, Melvin let it pass.

"So, whatcha doin'?" Robin asked, clearly more interested in reducing the tension than in complaining about him being there, uninvited or not.

"I had a little time," Melvin replied, offering nothing.

It was his arrogance, the sense of entitlement, that bugged Cheryl. Even if she called him on the presumptuousness of his parking himself in someone's house when no one was around, she knew he would find a way to make it seem it was her, not him, who was out of line.

But the thought of Robin's missing diary was fresh in Cheryl's mind. This might not be the best time, but dammit, he couldn't have gotten the diary if he hadn't come into the house when no one was around. And here he was sitting around like he owned the place.

She would be direct, catch him off guard, Cheryl thought.

"Did you know Robin's diary is missing?" she began, not waiting for a response.

"You have it, don't you?"

Robin had gone upstairs to get something and heard neither the accusation nor the response.

"Is it snowing outside?" Melvin said, unruffled and mindful the sun was shining.

"No," Cheryl responded, wondering where he was going with this. She wanted a straight answer, not a weather report.

"Then, there's your answer."

What's he playing? Word games, Cheryl thought to herself. She was tempted to press him further, but could tell from his tone and demeanor he was going to offer her nothing.

Still, she believed in her heart Melvin took Robin's diary. He went out of his way to get it and was up to no good.

After Melvin left, Cheryl admitted she confronted him about the missing diary. Robin, at first, wished she hadn't, but believed Cheryl's intentions were good.

The girls couldn't stop thinking about the missing diary, hoping against all likelihood it would turn up in the house somewhere ending the mystery and the attendant paranoia. They pictured Melvin poring over details of Robin's life before she met him — the boyfriends, the parties, the details she was willing to share only with Cheryl.

About two weeks later, an unusual twist occurred in the mystery of the missing diary. One day, after school, a package arrived in the mailbox. Wrapped in plain brown paper, it was addressed in bold, black ink marker to "Robin Adams, Chambers Road, Caro, Michigan 48723." There was no return address and no note inside, just the diary.

"You know he had it," Cheryl pronounced with her best "I-told-you-so" inflection. "He didn't have the nerve to give it to you himself."

Robin was less concerned about Melvin's tactics than in how he would respond to the contents of the diary, if he were the one who took it. And, for once, there was little doubt in her mind he was.

Her diary made references to all the things Melvin objected to, or said he did: smoking, drinking and, above all, other guys. Even past "other guys" were still other guys. There was a distinct impression the don't-drink, don't-smoke, don't-swear edicts he tried to enforce were as much to effect control as they were a product of any real objections he had.

Robin made no effort to substantiate Cheryl's theory that Melvin took the diary. She would leave bad enough alone. Cheryl was probably right: Melvin would never admit taking it anyway.

* * *

Chapter 12

"I KNEW HE WAS TROUBLE"

In one sense, the growing relationship between Melvin and Robin was taking on a Romeo and Juliet quality. As Millie and Bill grew more uncomfortable with the situation, they began applying pressure on Robin to stop seeing Melvin.

Robin, now sexually intimate with him, would have no part of this. At the same time, she was not comfortable about the prospects of leaving the Timkos with high school graduation only a few months down the road.

Millie's objections to Melvin were less a matter of his being Mexican than a result of the changes she saw in Robin's personality as the "goin' steady" process developed.

Much of the happy, helpful inclinations Robin exhibited a little more than a year earlier were yielding to periods of moodiness and brooding. Uncharacteristically, Robin became irritated with the younger children and less attentive to the household chores.

Millie Timko was no stranger to teenagers and would have accepted Robin's behavior as typically that of an adolescent trying to cope with choices free of undue influence from adult authority figures. But to Millie, there was a darker dimension to whatever defiance she sensed on the part of Robin. Somehow, by accident or design, Melvin was driving a wedge between Robin and her de facto foster parents.

Robin rarely complained when things between her and Melvin were not going well, but Cheryl blamed Melvin's penchant for control for these down periods. The free-as-a-bird side of Robin was being constrained as Melvin built a cage around it.

Melvin objected to Robin smoking. Millie wasn't real excited about this either, and usually insisted Robin "go outside," if she was going to smoke.

Melvin wanted to know where Robin was going and who she was going to be with. He was becoming almost a substitute father figure, continually tightening the reins on virtually everything she did.

At first, Robin gave in to the pressure. She was, or at least thought she was, in love with Melvin. He was her first real boyfriend.

But whatever positive aspects there were to her relationship with Melvin, there also was a down side. Millie and Cheryl could see Melvin's increasing demands on Robin's time and behavior made her tense, less talkative, less open with the family, which welcomed her into its fold under less than ideal circumstances.

One day when Melvin and Millie were engaged in small talk while he waited for Robin, he eased the topic of marriage into the conversation, saying he and Robin had been talking about it. Against her better judgment, Millie let whatever latent concerns she had about his being Hispanic — "In a way, it did bother me that he was Mexican" — bubble to the surface.

"Kids of mixed nationality have a problem; if you have children, the kids will suffer," Millie lectured, "they will suffer; they'll be called little half-breeds."

These were the seventies, and intermarriage between Mexicans and Caucasians was hardly a rarity here and elsewhere. Young Mexican women often prefer non-Mexican spouses, having grown up in households where male dominance was taken for granted.

Melvin's reaction to Millie's lesson in human relations was muted, and, in reality, what she said was actually a mask for how she felt intuitively about him.

"I knew he was going to be trouble," she would say later on.

Bill Timko's relationship with Robin was typically father-daughter. He privately disliked Melvin but withheld those feelings from her. Once Millie and Bill reached a consensus that Melvin was having a negative effect on Robin, it was Millie, the designated family enforcer, who would play the heavy.

So, when the day came, Millie was ready to play hard ball.

One afternoon, when Melvin pulled into the driveway, Millie happened to be outside working in the yard. It was time, she thought.

Melvin greeted her politely, but sensed something was up.

"Bill and I have been talking about you and Robin. We think you two need a break from one another. We don't want you and Robin to see each other anymore — at least for a while," Millie began. In her heart she knew "for a while" was an understatement, but figured there was no sense playing all her cards at once.

Melvin's instinct when dealing with adversaries was to play directly to their weaknesses. He knew Robin's "foster parent" arrangement with the Timkos was informal and lacked legal standing.

"You're not her mother; you have nothing to say."

Losing neither steam nor composure, Millie countered, "Her mother entrusted her to me and I can tell her what to do until she's eighteen."

Millie doesn't recall the rest of the conversation, except that Melvin called her a bitch.

Millie knew she was hardly in the driver's seat, but she did her best to put the brakes on Melvin and Robin's romance. And she wasn't counting on a U-turn on the part of Melvin or Robin. The battle lines were drawn.

Not long after this confrontation, Robin began taking long walks, alone, during the late afternoon and evening hours.

In fairness, Millie wasn't all strictness and rules. In some respects she was surprisingly broad-minded. She looked the other way, for example, when the older kids visited the nearby trailer home of Johnny Ezakovich and smoked a little pot. Kids were kids, after all. Ultimately, Millie relied on her instincts, and they told her Melvin Garza was trouble.

It shouldn't have come as much of a surprise and it didn't when Millie found out Robin's solitary strolls in the evening were a way to secretly meet Melvin. Cheryl reluctantly spilled the beans when her mother casually inquired one afternoon.

The Timkos made it clear Melvin was not welcome at the house, they didn't want him on their property or to hear from neighbors that his car was parked in the driveway while they were away.

But, as time passed, Millie knew in her heart Melvin was winning the test of wills. The more she and Bill tried to come between Robin and Melvin, the more Robin was driven toward him.

"You're not going to stop me from seeing him," Robin said one day in a rare but telling act of rebellion.

Privately, the inability to turn Robin off a relationship he believed was going to do her no good was getting to Bill Timko. One day he took Millie aside and told her it was time for Robin to choose: "Either she breaks up with him or she gets out." But this was one time when Bill would have to do the talking.

"You'll have to stop seeing Melvin, or find another place," Bill told Robin.

The ultimatum was unconditional. Robin would have to decide and, not surprisingly, her relationship with Melvin won out.

* * *

Chapter 13

WAS HE SETTING HER UP?

In December, a signal event occurred in Robin's relationship with Cheryl. It was no secret to Melvin that Cheryl didn't trust him. He must have thought she was an obstacle to his controlling interest in Robin, constantly planting doubts in her mind, including whether Robin would be better off without him.

Melvin's solution to this would be relatively simple: He would employ the time-honored battlefield strategy of divide and conquer. His vehicle would be a powerful emotion, the staple among the host of adolescent uncertainties: jealousy. His only real challenges would be opportunity and timing.

Conveniently, the former presented itself rather quickly. Whether he would be able to capitalize on it would depend on his ability to at least temporarily overcome Cheryl's suspicions about him.

On Saturday, December 20, a few days before Christmas, Cheryl was uptown shopping with her father.

She stopped at the Kroger store to pick up something and was approaching her father's van when she saw Melvin getting out of his car, which was parked nearby.

"Hey, Cheryl!" Melvin called to her, with an uncharacteristic friendliness in his voice.

"Hi!" she returned his greeting, noticing he was approaching quickly as if he had more to say.

This will be easy, Cheryl thought to herself, having decided an impromptu conversation with Melvin Garza was the last thing she wanted at this particular time. She was with her Dad. She could — and would — make short shrift of Melvin by telling him she and her father had business to take care of.

"Whatcha up to?" Melvin inquired. His almost little-boy earnestness surprised her. Whatever existed between them was more of a cold war than any semblance of friendship. Cheryl made no secret of her dislike and suspicions about Melvin, and he countered with a predictable level of arrogance and disdain.

"I'm with my dad," Cheryl responded, setting up what she hoped would be a quick kiss-off. "We've got some things to take care of." She offered no specifics. It was, after all, none of his business where they were going and what they were doing.

"Sure," Melvin said, pausing almost thoughtfully as though he was ready to say something but didn't know exactly how to go about it.

Was he up to something? Cheryl thought to herself. Doubting Melvin's motives and intentions had become second nature to her. Still, there was something different about his demeanor this time.

For an instant, she wondered if Melvin might finally have grown tired of sparring with her over everything from his presumptuous intrusions at the house to the not-quite mystery of Robin's missing diary. Was Melvin, of all people, turning over a new leaf?

Cheryl wanted to believe something positive was happening. She had seen relatively little of this forthcoming side of Melvin from her perspective as a third party to Melvin and Robin's relationship.

If Melvin could be more like he was here, she thought to herself, her attitude toward him could be a lot different, Cheryl saw he wasn't going to stick to small talk.

"Hey," he began — he was forever beginning sentences with "hey" — "if you could spare a couple of minutes, I could use your help." He was looking her straight in the eye and, for once, there was an unusual sincerity about him.

“My younger brother, Marty — I know it’s a lot to ask — but it’s his birthday Sunday,” Melvin said. “I wanna get him something nice to wear and, well, girls always know better what guys look good in. So, if you could take a few minutes, hey, that would be great. Marty really likes to dress nice. I know you got really good taste in clothes....”

Cheryl was struck by Melvin’s seeming humility. She thought for once he was yielding ground to her, suggesting something she could do better than he could. Whatever their past difficulties, this time he seemed genuine, like he really needed — and wanted — her help.

“Well, I don’t know....,” Cheryl was torn. She was always protective of the time she spent with her natural father. It wasn’t like her to commit time to him on a weekend, then suddenly bug out.

“Hey, it won’t take long and I could give you a ride back to your dad’s place right away,” Melvin promised.

Was this a new Melvin, pleading for her, his adversary on numerous occasions, to help him? As much as she wanted to say, “No,” there was something about his tone and the manner she couldn’t turn her back on.

“Look,” Cheryl said, “as long as this isn’t going to take a lot of time, I can spare a few minutes, but I’ll need to get back to my dad’s house afterward. There’s some things I have to do.”

Cheryl and her father had no real plans for the day, but she wanted a fallback position. Many times before, she saw Melvin’s solicitousness dissolve into contention.

“That’s great!” Melvin said.

Cheryl walked over to her father’s van and told him Melvin had asked her to help him pick out a birthday gift for one of his younger brothers. She said she would be tied up only briefly and Melvin would bring her home immediately afterward.

Her father was skeptical of the arrangement, Cheryl said, but acquiesced, with the paternal advisory: “Don’t be gone all afternoon.”

Cheryl was pleased. Maybe this was an opportunity for a new beginning with Melvin. Maybe they could cut through some of the tension and acrimony, which marked their relationship up to this point. Melvin’s desire to pick out something nice for his brother seemed genuine. When he said she had good taste and could help him make the right choice, she was flattered.

The trip to Fred’s Men shop, a couple of blocks away, went off without a hitch. Cheryl and Melvin settled on a sweater outfit for Marty, and Melvin capped the successful shopping venture by stressing to the sales clerk how helpful his friend was in making the selection.

Mission accomplished, or so she thought. Cheryl climbed into Melvin's Dodge Charger. He gunned the engine in neutral, before slipping the car into gear.

Cheryl was about to offer Melvin directions to her father's house, when he spoke up, almost as if expressing an afterthought.

"Hey, I gotta stop home for just a minute. It won't take long, then we'll swing over to your dad's place."

Tempted to offer a "Wouldn't it just be easier to...", Cheryl thought better of it. She wished he would take her home first, but why rock the boat? This was one of those rare occasions when she and Melvin found something they could agree on. A quick stop at his house surely could do no harm, though it sure as hell was out of the way.

Melvin made small talk during the roughly five-mile ride to his home. Nothing he said or did concerned Cheryl. She was, after all, just along for the ride.

Cheryl was surprised when Melvin pulled into the driveway, killed the engine and asked her to come inside. "We'll only be a minute," he reassured.

Her better judgment told her to say, "No, I'll wait here for you," but again, she thought, this was no big deal.

Melvin flipped open the door to the attached garage and entered the house through the garage entrance. This being a weekend, Cheryl was surprised the house seemed empty. If his parents or any of the other children were there, she couldn't see or hear them.

Cheryl tagged along as Melvin descended the basement stairs. She was surprised at what she saw. The basement resembled pictures she had seen of Army barracks with beds lined up in a row. I guess when you have this large a family in a small house you have to make certain concessions to privacy and available space, she thought to herself.

Melvin entered his room, which was small, in one corner of the basement but separate from the collection of beds that Cheryl assumed were reserved for the younger family members. Cheryl stood outside the door as he tossed the bag containing Marty's birthday present on the bed, grabbed a handful of 8-track tapes and made a pretense, at least, of looking for something else.

Cheryl felt uncomfortable. Nothing untoward happened, or appeared likely to, but she did not feel she should be in this place under these circumstances. Something about it didn't feel right. Why hadn't she just stayed in the car?

Apparently unable to find what he was looking for, Melvin emerged from his room and he and Cheryl made their way up the stairs and returned to his car.

She was mildly relieved. There was something about being alone in a house with her best friend's boyfriend that didn't feel right.

The balance of the brief outing with Melvin Garza was uneventful and Cheryl began to think her fears were unwarranted. This brief encounter was nothing more than what it seemed.

But before long she would realize Melvin had used her in another of the head games he was so adept at playing.

* * *

Chapter 14 MOVING DAY

Whether this was one last act of defiance in overcoming their objections to her seeing Melvin or merely because there was no one else to turn to, Robin asked Melvin to help her move her out of the Timkos' house on the sly.

It was early spring, near the start of her second semester as a senior at Caro High School. Robin prevailed on her mother, who was none too happy about the prospects of shuttling her daughter between Bay City and Caro — a seventy mile round trip twice a day — while she finished high school. But Vera Adams relented when Robin insisted she could no longer be happy at the Timkos'.

One day, Robin left school early, while the Timkos were at work. She arranged for Melvin to pick her up at school and drop her off at the house. He lined up a pickup truck he could use during the day, and Robin would call him at his house when she had her things together and was ready to move. The situation with her and Melvin was difficult enough without further tempting the fates by having his car or a strange truck parked outside the house.

Sadly, this would amount to an angry parting of the ways for Robin and her erstwhile foster parents.

The one thing Robin wanted most was a clean break. Her worst nightmare would have been for Millie or Bill to pull up while she and Melvin were loading her things. Her second worst nightmare actually played out.

On the appointed day, a Tuesday, Robin met Melvin outside the high school in mid-morning and they made the less than ten minute drive to the house on Chambers Road. As soon as they pulled up, Robin went inside and Melvin left.

"I'll call you as soon as I get my things together," she told him before they parted.

Robin was in her room, doing a brief mental inventory of what she would need to take when she heard a car in the driveway.

"Who the hell is that?" she thought to herself.

The next thing she knew, Cheryl was popping through the door to their room.

"What are you doing home?" Cheryl asked.

"Well, I guess I could ask you the same question."

"I'm starting my period, and I feel shitty. These damned cramps are something else."

Cheryl had hitched a ride home with one of the boys who drove to school and planned to go to bed until she felt better. Robin knew this wasn't going to work because the bed was among the items she planned to remove from the house.

"I forgot a book I need for class," Robin offered, lamely accounting for her presence in the house. She slipped downstairs, quietly called Melvin, informing him the move was off.

"I'll meet you at the corner in ten minutes," she said. Bliss Road was a short walk from the house, and Robin didn't want to risk having Cheryl see Melvin picking her up.

Moving day was rescheduled for the next day.

Things went better on Wednesday. There were no unforeseen interruptions.

Millie didn't know whether to feel relief or heartbreak at Robin's departure. Clearly, she had grown to love Robin as one of her own. Still, the conflict over Robin's seeing Melvin put a severe strain on the family relationship and, while Robin couldn't see this herself, brought about changes in her personality and demeanor.

For the next two months, Robin alternated between living in Bay City with her mother and staying with the Betty LaPratt family in Unionville, friends of her mother, so Robin wouldn't have to change high schools and could graduate with her friends.

During this time, Robin's relationship with the Timkos remained strained. They didn't attend her graduation, and Millie was hurt they weren't invited.

Later, while she was staying in Unionville, Melvin would drive her the thirteen miles to school in the morning. In the afternoon, she would take the school bus to his house. After he finished work, he would drive her back to Unionville. This maximized the time they could spend together and increased her dependence upon him.

As she was often at the Garza's Mertz Road home, she came to know Melvin's mother better. Clara Garza, eternally deferential to her husband and forever sacrificing for her brood of seven boys and two girls, took to Robin immediately. She called her "Birdie," in a well-intended play on Robin's name.

Through the combined efforts of her mother, her boyfriend and the LaPratts, Robin Adams managed to finish high school and graduated in June. Although the Timkos missed her graduation, Millie believed the hurt feelings Robin's cut-and-run departure caused would heal in time. Robin's senior pictures had been mailed to the house, and Millie hoped they might be the means to a reconciliation.

On April 8, shortly after Robin bolted from the Timkos, she and Melvin attended an Aerosmith concert at the Pontiac Silverdome, near Detroit.

After the concert, they headed back to Caro on M-24, a route that took them through Lake Orion, Oxford and later Mayville, where the tragically concluded journey in Mike Clark's car had begun not quite two years earlier.

Melvin recalled that Robin "came sick" as they were passing through Lake Orion, a small community not far from Pontiac, and asked him to stop at a store and buy some sanitary napkins for her. He said he stopped at a small market and bought a package of Tampax, which he dutifully delivered to the car.

"I can't use these," Robin protested. She asked him to exchange them for another brand, which he did.

Whether Melvin's recollection of this event, not quite twenty years after it happened is flawed — or worse, contrived — it squares with an experience Denise Abke remembers.

She said one time when she was alone with Robin and they were talking about things girls usually talk only to other girls about, Robin inserted a Tampax in the customary place and asked her friend Denise Abke to assess her pantied profile.

"There's a bulge," Denise confided, with characteristic honesty.

"That's why I won't wear them," was Robin's response, Denise said.

The significance of Robin's preference in menstrual pads would one day inject another of the little mysteries into her star-crossed relationship with Melvin Garza.

During her junior year, Robin began what developed over time into close relationship with Kris Zeitler. Denise Abke was the third party to this emerging teenage sisterhood. Together the girls shared secrets, the details of their relationships with boyfriends and good times.

Robin's close ties to Cheryl Tyson naturally were affected by her departure from the Timko residence in the spring of 1976, Robin's senior year. The abruptness and secretive nature of her exit were offensive to Cheryl.

She said Melvin's calculated disclosure to Robin about the time she spent with him the day they picked out a birthday gift for his brother exacerbated tensions between the two girls. She said Melvin exaggerated her willingness to help him and pushed Robin's emotional buttons by stressing only those points, which best suited his purposes: Cheryl went with Melvin to his house. Nobody was home. She accompanied him to his basement bedroom while he ostensibly searched for an 8-track tape.

The details he provided and those he withheld left Robin feeling betrayed, Cheryl said.

"I had always warned her to be wary of Melvin, and now she has this image of me jumping into his car — at the first opportunity for God sakes! And I had gone with him to his bedroom. What was I thinking?" she said in mocking self-deprecation.

Robin's trusted "sister," the one with whom she shared so much in so short a time had violated the unwritten loyalty code between them.

For Melvin, one suspects, it was mission accomplished. Robin was out of the Timko house, and it would be months before she even spoke to Cheryl again. No longer would Cheryl or her family be a problem for him.

As things turned out, it wasn't going to be quite so easy.

Billy Timko Jr., Cheryl's half-brother, would one day turn the recollections of a seven-year-old boy into a weapon against Melvin Garza, whom Billy Jr. would come to hate until his dying day, which in his case came much too soon.

The turmoil arising from Robin's break with her de facto foster parents probably strengthened her ties with Kris and Denise.

* * *

Chapter 15

ROBIN TAKES A JOB

When she worked with children, she was loving, caring and vivacious. And the children loved her because she was pretty. —

Karen Mahan, child-care class instructor at Caro High School told the local newspaper.

During their senior year, Robin and Kris were in a child-care class with Denise, who was a year younger, a junior. The class met from eight-thirty until noon off the school grounds in the Nazarene Church — the church the Garza children attended.

Because the Nazarene Church is located a couple of miles outside of town, the girls either provided their own transportation, usually in Kris' car, or rode the school bus. Each day, with the guidance of an instructor, Robin, Kris and Denise, provided day care for eight to ten preschoolers, the children of working parents.

For Robin, child-care class was a labor of love. However stormy and bereft of affection her relationship with her mother had been, Robin had a natural affinity for children. She was pretty and warmly engaging with youngsters, who returned the easy affection she felt for them in kind.

Four-year-old Johnny Papp was a personal favorite of Robin's. Johnny had one blue eye and one brown eye; his genes apparently could not agree on the color of his eyes and split the difference. Robin always went first when the girls performed finger plays or played games with the children. It was clear she genuinely enjoyed them and they her.

As Robin, Kris and Denise, "Gertrude," as she was been nicknamed by the girls, grew closer, they began arranging time together outside of school.

Caro High allowed students a limited number of absences before their grades would be affected, and the three girls conspired to "save up" days toward the final weeks of the semester when all three were conspicuously out of school on the same day.

Kris drove a faded blue Buick LeSabre, the "Big Bomber," so-named more for the noise it made than its destructive potential. This was the girls' transportation to skip-day outings. These occasions often consisted of nothing more than a walk in the woods where they would take pictures, indulge in girl talk, or — in their wilder moments — decorate a bridge with spray-painted graffiti representative of their current love interests.

When they drank on these occasions, and they did, Boone's Farm Strawberry Hill wine was the beverage *du jour*. Once, in the midst of one of these random outings, Melvin tracked down the girls. He pulled his car in front of Kris' car, blocking it.

Kris said Melvin seemed resentful when Robin was with her and Denise. And, as was her custom, Kris wasn't about to cut him any slack. She said when she asked Melvin to move his car, his expression in response was "pure evil," something she had never seen before nor forgotten since.



Robin Adams, 17 (*Photo courtesy of Carl Miller, used with permission*)

Whether fair or an exaggeration, the three girls were considered a tad outside the realm of small-town prim and proper, Kris in particular. But their

indulgences in cheap wine, bridge art and conspiratorial hooky were hardly the makings of a Manson family.

Still, under the subjective microscope of rural America, they quickly were consigned to the “wrong crowd.”

This caused Kris problems with her mother, Jean Geiger, who taught art at the high school. Kris’ wild-child moments provided ammunition for the community gossips.

Kris’ parents divorced when she was fifteen years old. She got along well with her step-father, but tended to be more rebellious toward her mother than were her younger sister, Lucy, and her older brother, Peter.

At seventeen, Kris was ninety-five pounds of feisty defiance, inclined to walk on the wild side and afraid of nothing, including Melvin Garza. She was sensitive to the fact that, compared with Robin, her bust line scarcely intruded upon the consistently linear structure of her body. But Kris was attractive in her own right with brown eyes and facial features plain but pretty.

Whatever difficulty might have existed between Kris and her mother was never serious enough to cause an estrangement. As a result, Jean Geiger came to know Robin through frequent visits she would make to the house, including an occasional sleep over. And she came to know something of Melvin Garza, who often turned up when Robin did.

Denise Abke, while younger than Robin and Kris, shared their enthusiasm for boys, a good party and raising hell when the time was right. Scarecrow skinny, weighing just over one hundred and ten pounds, Denise was five feet four inches tall, has brownish-blond hair and green eyes.

The youngest of six children born to George and Betty Abke, Denise, while clearly the third party in the friendship shared by the girls, was fiercely loyal and quietly observant of the developments leading up to Robin’s graduation and her increasingly turbulent association with Melvin Garza.

Although Robin tended to confide more in Kris, Denise looked on anxiously as the disintegration of Robin’s relationship with Melvin accelerated during the summer of 1976. The degree to which Melvin influenced, however subtly, Robin’s decision to leave the presence and influence of the Timkos, is uncertain. But her insistence she be allowed to continue seeing him was certainly the deciding factor.

Melvin’s relationships with girls typically were marked by his tendency to isolate and control, a pattern, which often necessitated his interference with friendships Robin developed with her peers, or with adults she liked and trusted.

Robin worked as a student assistant in the guidance office at the high school. Her association there led to her accepting a job as a baby sitter for

Marleen Davis. Joan Sayers, who was a full-time employee in the office, was married to Lewis Sayers, Marleen's cousin.

When Marleen asked Joan to suggest someone to care for her two-year-old son while she worked afternoons at the Caro Regional Center, Robin, who was dependable and mature for her age, was recommended.

Robin moved in with Marleen sometime in May, a week or so before her June 2 high school graduation.

At twenty-one, slender but for the blossom of motherhood around her midsection, Marleen was about five foot two, with green eyes and a slightly freckled complexion. Quietly earnest and not inclined to share her problems with people outside the family, Marleen was toughing out some trying times for a young mother.

She was expecting her second child and, for the time being, on her own after her husband, Gary, was sentenced to prison for physically abusing their son.

At least two incidents drew the attention of authorities. The first occurred when Billy was just six weeks old and the second when he was five months old. The latter resulted in a broken arm and cracked ribs. Gary was charged and convicted of child abuse.

Billy's injuries were a bitter pill for Marleen to swallow. Her parents, Gordon and Opal Sayers, suspected the injuries were no accident and notified the state police.

Gary was prone to epileptic seizures and nerve-shattering migraine headaches. He had problems holding a job and his temper when the headaches flared up. During the times he cared for Billy while Marleen worked, the little boy's crying sometimes drove him to rage and violence.

Marleen was concerned the trauma Billy suffered would hamper his development. She was eager to restore whatever tranquility she could to their home.

Robin, no stranger to difficult family situations herself, quickly bonded with Marleen and with Billy. He took to her like a snuggly puppy, finding in her the affection and security lacking in his father. Billy was comfortable sharing his love for his mother with his new "big sister," whom he called "Obbie," not yet having mastered his Rs.

Marleen would later say Robin was more a friend than an employee, someone she trusted implicitly to care for her son when she could not. And Robin's affection for her little charge was genuine and reflected patience and maturity. In fairness, Billy Davis' "two" was not really terrible, but it was still a two.

With that came the morning ritual. Billy would scramble up the stairs leading to the second-floor bedroom where Robin slept, climb into bed and throw himself on her.

If this amounted to a rude awakening, Robin never showed it. Typically, she would grab Billy by the shoulders hoist him at arm's length above her head and inquire, "And what brings you here so early in the morning?"

Without waiting for an answer, she would pull her by now giggling little tormentor tightly against her, hug and kiss him and then wrestle him around the bed, an exercise, which delighted him.

But Robin knew the baby-sitting job would be temporary, part of a sorting-out process taking place in her life. At seventeen, she was coming to grips with her identity, her sexuality and relationships genuinely meaningful to her.

In time, one aspect on Robin's residency at Marleen's house would prove problematic: While Marleen was at work, Robin and Billy would be alone in the house for extended periods of time.

Although Robin's relationship with Melvin was almost from the start hot and heavy in the vernacular of the time, Kris, Denise and Robin's new friend, Joan Sayers, then in her twenties, began to see problems were developing. It wasn't as though Robin openly discussed difficulties she was having with Melvin. She didn't.

But it was clear to her friends Robin and Melvin's relationship was sexual. She was on the pill, but was having difficulty regulating her periods and consulted a doctor in Bay City. Her mother knew this.

Through bits and pieces, the impression emerged that Melvin's tendency to control Robin intensified during the spring and early summer to the point that she began to doubt whether she wanted to continue the relationship. There may have been a more disturbing reason for Robin's decision to break up with Melvin. But that possibility would not come to light until some months later.

Joan Sayers sensed there were problems when Robin returned to school after a weekend clearly depressed.

"She would sit in a chair, slumped forward, knock-kneed and pigeon-toed, with her head down," Joan said. Although she showed no outward signs of having been physically abused, Joan in time found out Melvin often punched Robin in the upper arm, bruising her.

When the couple fought, whether verbally or physically, this often prompted an appearance by his sister Nora, who would come to the guidance office as a peacemaker.

Melvin often showed up at the school as graduation neared. He would regularly pick up Robin after class and frequently came inside. Schoolmates described seeing the two openly embracing and sometimes arguing outside the classrooms.

One former student remembered a time when Melvin called Robin out of a class and could be heard shouting angrily at her.

Whether their difficulties went beyond those typical of adolescent relationships is arguable. But there is agreement among those who knew Melvin best. Whatever genuine affection he felt for Robin, it was important for him to be seen publicly with her and, to be perceived as in control.

Among his male friends and co-workers at the supermarket, he would boast of his sexual exploits with this girl, whose “whiteness” he often mentioned.

Robin and her two schoolmate accomplices spray-painted graffiti recognition of their senior-year boyfriends on the concrete railing of the Hurds Corner Road Bridge over White Creek. The familiar “Robin & Melvin” also appeared as a postscript to what Robin wrote in Kris’ yearbook, which began “To the most super person I know.”

But even before the paint faded on the “Robin & Melvin” bridge graffiti, there were subtle signs the relationship was coming apart.

* * *

Chapter 16

BREAKING UP IS HARD

Although Robin and Melvin continued to be a steady item after she graduated, her friends began to see further strains in the relationship. These became more pronounced sometime around the end of June or the start of July.

“They were breaking up during most of the month of July,” Denise Abke said.

And one thing was clear about the break-up, Melvin wanted no part of it. He tried in vain to convince Robin that the good things they enjoyed together, attending concerts, traveling to vacation spots in the northern part of the state and even the possibility of marriage were worth hanging onto.

Soon, Melvin's attempts to resuscitate whatever once existed in their relationship was breathing its last gasp. And, as was his custom, when he couldn't charm his way into a young woman's heart, his next option was force.

Ed Kimbrue is a big guy at six foot two and two hundred and twenty pounds. Ed and his wife, Mary, and their two children lived across the street and one house over from Marleen Davis' home on E. Congress Street.

Kimbrue was working for the county as environmental health director. With the assistance of one other inspector, he drove twelve to fifteen thousand miles a year inspecting water and septic system installations, restaurants and campgrounds.

Like most others on the street, Kimbrue's house didn't have air conditioning. In the evenings, when the weather was warm, he enjoyed sitting on his front porch. From that vantage point, there were two occasions during the summer of 1976 when he saw things that troubled and angered him.

Kimbrue's an old-fashioned guy, especially intolerant when it comes to the abuse of women. One July afternoon, he came outside as Melvin and Robin were arguing, standing beside Melvin's car, which was parked in front of Marleen's house.

It wasn't clear to him whether the couple were coming, going, or if Melvin had merely stopped to see Robin. Kimbrue couldn't tell what the argument was about, but he could see it was heated.

Then, in a flash, "he smacked her one." It was a slap, not a punch, but the blow to the side of her face was hard enough and "she went down on her knees."

As Robin gamely scrambled to her feet, she was crying. Kimbrue decided he had seen enough. He was never fond of Melvin Garza as the squire to the pretty blond baby sitter who lived across the street. And this was not the first time Kimbrue witnessed abusive behavior on Melvin's part.

One other time, he watched in disbelief as Melvin literally threw Robin out of his car and she landed on the ground. Then came a perverse rendition of the mating dance as Melvin floored the Dodge Charger and peeled away from the house putting up a small cloud of burning rubber and street dust.

"He screeched off at a high rate of speed down to State Street, did a power U-ee (U-turn) and came back down.

"He was racin' up and down the street, goin' sixty or seventy miles an hour; my boy was six and my daughter was three at that time. About the third time he did this, I called the cops." As was often the case when Melvin was involved, by the time the police arrived, he was gone.

On the day Melvin slapped Robin, Kimbrue decided to intervene. But, as he stepped off the porch and headed across the street, Robin saw him and motioned him away.

“It’s OK, it’s OK,” she said. In Kimbrue’s mind it wasn’t OK, but he decided he wasn’t going to get involved if she didn’t want him to.

“I coulda taken him,” Kimbrue said, with a knowing grin.

And this wasn’t the last time the big fellow across the street would be troubled by matters involving Melvin and Robin.

Marleen Davis’ rented home, third house from the end of E. Congress Street on the south side, is a weathered, two-story structure, sided with white asphalt shingles and has front and side entrances.

An opening between the rear of the house and the front of the unattached garage gives way to a narrow but sizable back yard, one virtually enclosed on both sides by a heavy growth of mature trees and bushes.

The garage has an ill-fitting wooden door obviously built from scratch, a rear window, but no side windows, which is somewhat unusual.

The yard overlooks the county fairgrounds. An open space at the rear of the lot and behind the other houses on that part of the street was wide enough for a car to drive through, although vehicles were rarely observed there.

Robin was alone with little Billy on the afternoon of the first Friday in August. The Tuscola County Fair was in progress and, because the fairgrounds run parallel to Congress Street, the blaze of neon and the discordant blend of merry-go-round music and public address pitches pervade the normally quiet neighborhood for one week each year.

Whether the sounds from the fairgrounds provided any cover for Melvin when he arrived at the house is debatable. At any rate, he was able to remove the screen from a window, push up the window and climb inside.

Robin saw him coming and might better have run outside and tried to alert neighbors. Melvin immediately went after her. There was no conversation, no time to get to the phone. Billy was napping, which was just as well.

Robin’s decision to break up with Melvin, her indifference to his efforts to re-establish their relationship stoked his anger. Now there was no time for talking. He flew at Robin, striking her repeatedly with vicious blows to the head, neck and arms.

As Melvin pummeled Robin and she did her best to block the blows and break free of him, he began demanding the return of gifts he gave her, a watch and a ring. Then, he suddenly shifted gears and said she could keep them.

When Robin at one point unwisely fled to the upstairs bedroom, Melvin followed. There he knocked her to the floor and, grabbing a pillow from the bed, jumped on her, forcing the pillow over her face as if to suffocate her.

Somehow Robin managed to kick Melvin in the groin. When he recoiled in pain, she jumped up and ran down the stairs out into the street where he dared not follow.

The beating was over; the terror was just beginning.

A few days later, Kris Zeitler moved out of her parents' home and in with Robin, ostensibly to make her friend feel safer but also with an eye toward more freedom and less accountability when it came to dating and partying.

Marleen Davis did not object to Kris sharing Robin's room with her, and Robin welcomed the idea because at least part of the time, there would be another hand on deck should Melvin again try to force his way into the house.

Beyond the bruises and physical effects of the beating she suffered, Robin saw something when Melvin attacked her she had never seen before. His anger was not unfamiliar to her, but for the first time she saw something in his face, at once cold, cruel and unforgiving. His expression alone convinced her she was in grave danger.

Privately, she told Kris, "If he gets a hold of me, he's going to kill me."

Left to her own devices, Robin probably would have let the beating pass, hoping she could somehow protect herself against a recurrence. She wasn't sure how long she was going to stay in Caro anyway. She wanted to stick around at least until Marleen had her baby, which was due in December.

And Robin was the prime mover behind plans to give a baby shower for Joan Sayers, with whom she worked at the school. Joan was expecting her first child.

Robin bought shower gifts, diapers, a brush, feeding set, pants, a bib and a stuffed giraffe. Joan's son, Brian, born on December 24, 1976, chewed the ears off the giraffe. Joan was sure this would have pleased Robin, whose love of children was never in doubt.

Joan knew Robin wouldn't suddenly decide to leave Caro and disappoint the people who reached out to her and made her feel part of their lives.

Events have a way of conspiring against the best intentions and Vera Adams' decision to visit her daughter the day after the beating may have thrown a wild card into the hand Robin was dealt.

Mrs. Adams had taken a job answering sales calls for a Bay City man and caring for the man's two daughters, of whom he had custody after a bitter divorce.

Bob Cronkhite was an amiable fellow who traveled through the week selling hardware supplies and took wedding photos on the weekends.

In time, the hired-help connection between Bob Cronkhite and Robin's mother developed a more personal aspect and before long he began referring to himself as her fiancé.

Cronkhite treasured his relationship with daughters Becky and Sarah, and found himself feeling protective of Robin as news of her acrimonious relationship with her ex-boyfriend became known.

Mrs. Adams knew the county fair was underway in Caro and suggested she, Cronkhite and the girls drive to Caro to visit Robin and attend the fair.

Although she knew Robin was trying to break off her relationship with Melvin and was having some difficulty, Mrs. Adams wasn't prepared for what she saw when she, Cronkhite and the girls arrived at Marleen Davis' house.

The deep bruises on Robin's face and neck were unmistakable and her mother wanted to know how they got there.

"Robbie, what happened to you? Those marks on your neck"

"I fell off my bike, it's nothing serious," Robin interrupted, as though she wanted to change the subject.

"No, I think it *is* serious," her mother countered. "Those look like finger marks on your neck, like somebody was choking you. You don't get that from falling off a bike."

Robin sensed it would be futile to deny what really happened. Besides, she already told Marleen and Kris, and Kris' mother knew all about it.

"All right," Robin began, "Melvin and I had a fight. We broke up, and he came over to get some stuff he had given me and we fought. It was no big deal."

"I think it *is* a big deal," her mother said. "He has no right to beat you like that. Did you call the police?"

"Police? No, I didn't call the police. I don't want to do that. It'll only make things worse."

"No, Robin, you can't just let him get away with this. If he thinks that you won't do anything, he's going to keep doing this. You need to call the police and let them see what he has done to you."

Cronkhite agreed. He had no patience with beaters. His ex-wife had problems with depression and at times became not only verbal but physical. Cronkhite won custody of his girls, but had endured considerable abuse when his then-wife flew into a rage. But men weren't supposed to beat women. And he had no tolerance for what Melvin did to Robin.

"Your mom's right, Robin, you oughtta report Melvin."

So, after further prodding, Robin gave in and called the Caro Police.

Clayton Montei, the police chief, arrived at the house soon after and made out a report. The report indicated the assault the previous day was the second time Melvin had beaten Robin. It was not clear in the report whether this referred to the incident Ed Kimbrue witnessed, or some other.

The police chief said if Robin wanted to press assault-and-battery charges against Melvin, she would have to contact the prosecutor's office, which was located in the basement of the county courthouse.

Robin went to the prosecutor's office the following Monday. As was often the case in the seventies, she was advised to wait for two weeks — a sort of cooling-off period. Prosecutors were leery of domestic violence cases, which often dissolved into kiss-and-make up situations wasting the lawyers' time and the taxpayers' money.

But Robin assured her mother she would return to the prosecutor's office on the twenty-third of August and sign a complaint.

Patrick Joslyn was Tuscola County prosecutor in 1976. Years later, then-Judge Joslyn said he had no recollection of Robin's visit to his office, which is not surprising considering the developments of later in the month and the likelihood she spoke to someone other than the prosecutor himself.

After the Caro police chief completed his report, Robin's mother followed through on plans to take her, Billy and the girls to the fair. Cronkhite decided to do some shopping uptown, and agreed to meet them afterward.

The short trip to the county fair was not without complications when Robin and her mother chanced to run into Melvin Garza. Whether he was watching them from afar — not unusual for him — or just happened to be there when they were is unclear. But Melvin wasn't going to waste an opportunity to try again to patch up things with Robin.

"Robin, could I talk to you for a minute?" Melvin began, more pleading than assertive. And Melvin, when his celebrated temper hadn't got the better of him, could be persuasive. His bag of tricks included the most sincere-sounding apologies and convincing vows of behavior modification.

But before Robin could answer, or Melvin could continue, Robin's mother went into attack mode. "No you can't talk to her — you can't do anything except leave her alone. And you're not going to beat her anymore, either, we called the police and she's going to press charges. Just stay away from my daughter, that's all you need to do."

Probably sensing he was losing more ground than he was gaining, Melvin backed off. He must have decided a different strategy was in order.

Sometime during fair week, possibly earlier that day, Martha Koza, who lived across the street from the Davis' home, said Melvin arrived at the house with two stuffed animals he won or bought for Robin. Mrs. Koza, who was outside at the time, told Melvin Robin had gone to the fair with little Billy.

“That seemed to make him angry — that she was there — and he threw the stuffed animals on the ground near the front entrance and left in a huff.”

Johnny Ezakovich, who contributed to the undoing of Danny Adams by providing booze for Danny’s last-straw campground outing, remembered seeing the effects of the August 6 beating on Robin.

“Two or three nights a week, we would go to Aubrey Vincent’s place” — his austere shack located just north of the Timko spread.

“He had a fire pit, and we would sit around and talk and ... ,” he paused, not wanting to be too specific about whether any drinking or pot smoking went on during those collegial gatherings.

“When I saw her, it looked like she was recovering from a black eye.”

Johnny died on September 9, 1992, ostensibly as the result of a root canal infection, which went straight to his brain. He was thirty-five.

* * *

Chapter 17

POST GETS A NEW DETECTIVE

On March 28, 1982, Dan Miller walked into the Caro post for the first time. He was accompanied by his family. Barbara was holding Laura, just shy of her third birthday, by the hand. Dressed in pink with a matching bonnet, she edged closer to her mother when one of the troopers passed by. Nathan, who was five, straggled along behind his father, looking on curiously at the blue-uniformed officers who came and went during the brief time they were there.

Dan considered the stop at the post perfunctory, a courtesy as much as anything, a way to check in, meet the new boss and find out when he should report for duty.

He was in for a big surprise.

To hear Lt. Lee McDowell tell it, the first meeting with his new detective was short on pleasantries and almost exclusively concerned with McDowell’s growing preoccupation with a missing-person case. He inherited the case when he took command of the post a year earlier.

Although the actual exchange of words between the post commander and his new detective probably was more detailed than what follows, McDowell

remembers it this way: “Good morning, lieutenant, I’m Detective Sgt. Dan Miller.” He introduced his wife and the children and mentioned they would be looking for a house in Caro later in the day.

McDowell welcomed Dan and his family, then got straight to the point.

“You may not find the pace here at Caro quite what you experienced in Detroit (Dan served just over four years at the Motor City post before accepting a promotion and transfer to Caro), but maybe we can make up for that with some other challenges — one in particular.”

McDowell walked into an adjoining office and returned carrying a pregnant file of reports, which he handed to Dan.

“I won’t mince words with you,” he said, “I want this to be your first case.

“It’s an old case, a cold case — we carried it as a missing person. It’s not a missing person case. You’ll see that when you read the reports. I don’t want you to work on anything else until you solve it.”

Dan was momentarily at a loss for words. He didn’t know whether to be flattered or skeptical. His first day on the job and he’s handed what amounts to a six-year-old unsolved case.

Read between the lines, a person missing for six years has either done an extraordinary job of disappearing or is probably dead. Most any cop who has worn a badge for more than a week knows the first forty-eight hours on any homicide investigation are the most critical. After that, each passing day increases the odds against success.

Starting out with such a handicap was hardly something to celebrate. At the same time, there was something about McDowell’s straight-from-the-shoulder attitude, which told Dan whatever doubts he might have going in, he’d better give this one his best shot.

McDowell told the detective there was little evidence available: a couple of letters and two cassette recordings. A suspect’s interrogation was taped and a phone call between the suspect and the victim’s mother had been secretly recorded.

When Dan reported for duty later in the week, he was assigned an unmarked patrol car, a rusting, old Dodge Volare, a “shit-brown”-colored heap with bad springs. He was told he would work in plain clothes, present his badge when talking to witnesses or suspects and, despite earlier assurances, would not be working the missing-person case right away. Something more pressing had come up.

Whatever the forces of destiny bring to bear on the decisions one makes in life, the sequence of events, which landed the Miller family in Caro could easily have ended differently. One of the occupational hazards of state police work is moving around, especially in the early stages. Dan lucked out, in a

manner of speaking, when his first post assignment was in Manistique in the Upper Peninsula where Barbara had grown up and where she and Dan met and fell in love.

Next came the Detroit post, a noble experiment to provide some needed assistance and professionalism to the Motor City cops. Initially Post 29 was run by temporary transfers but Dan was part of the first wave of troops who understood they were committed to four years there.

Dan came into his own as a trooper in Detroit, leading the post in felony arrests and allowing his family some sense of stability at least for the duration of the assignment. The Millers purchased a home in nearby Redford Township and Barbara was at home with the children, both preschoolers. She planned to resume teaching once the children reached school age.

In Dan's case, however, success came with complications. He took the sergeant's examination during the latter days of his commitment to the Detroit post and scored well. But shortly after he arrived in Detroit, he was informed of a mandatory transfer to the Erie post.

"Dreary Erie" were the first words that came to mind. Not eager to uproot his young family so quickly and less than enthused about the non-choice of assignments, he appealed the transfer, hoping to buy a little time and possibly negotiate a better deal. Some of his fellow troops at Detroit filed suit to block their transfers, but Dan elected to go it alone. He was granted a three-year reprieve in response to his appeal.

Once he exceeded the four-year limit on service at the Detroit post, the prospect of the mandatory transfer resurfaced. After a period of time, which could best be described as a standoff between Dan and the state police brass, he was offered three options: uniform sergeant at the Erie post; detective sergeant with the Southeastern Criminal Investigation Division, a special unit set up to focus on drug crimes and other serious felonies in Southeastern Michigan; and, finally, detective sergeant at Caro.

Caro sounded OK to Dan. After all, it would be a homecoming of sorts, having grown up in neighboring Huron County. But Barbara wasn't all that excited. True, in Caro, they would be nearer to Dan's family and at least two hours driving time closer to hers. But the flat, agricultural land of the Thumb counties offered next to none of the variety and natural beauty she enjoyed growing up in the UP.

Whether accepting the Caro assignment amounted to the lesser of three evils or was more a matter of a lucky guess is an open question. One thing is certain, Dan's life would change dramatically and for the better once he completed his Caro assignment, and Barb would come to enjoy life in the village, which initially held little attraction for her. Of course, neither of them could have known this at the outset.

Caro is by all accounts a pleasant community, a village by choice, though its population of more than 4,000 easily qualifies it for city status. Although newer homes have sprouted up in the outlying areas, the bulk of housing stock consists of frame houses. Most were built in the '30s, '40s and before along heavily shaded streets.

Tuscola being an agricultural county, Caro is the depository of farm crops, which arrive at the grain elevator or the plant where sugar beets are processed. A few small manufacturing plants; county government evident in the courthouse and jail complex; and local retail outlets make up an important part of the local economy.

Southwest of town, the Caro Center, a state-run home for mentally retarded and developmentally disabled residents offers job opportunities. Industrial jobs and other work can be found for locals willing to travel to Saginaw or Bay City, which are little more than a 40-mile drive away.

Caro struggled mightily to keep its original downtown area fresh and viable against the incursions of Wal-Mart and the other discounters. The retail strip along State Street is home to the weekly newspaper, the venerable *Tuscola County Advertiser*; the movie theater and a handful of retail businesses and restaurants; as well as the county courthouse.

Simply put, Caro is a clean, quiet place to live, free for the most part of the crime and violence found in urban areas. Neighbors know their neighbors and tend to look out for them.

But like any town this size, Caro has semblance of class structure. As the editor of the local newspaper observed several years after Robin Adams became big news in Caro, "If she had been a member of the (high school) homecoming court," a barometer of social status in rural America, "the community would have been more alarmed" at the violence committed against her.

As much as Dan would have preferred to hit the ground running in Caro he soon found out, as so often happens in police work, the best of intentions have to give way to the needs of the moment. So Dan hit the ground running all right, running to Sandusky in Sanilac County, where an unusual bombing case demanded his attention. Sanilac is Tuscola County's next-door neighbor to the east.

The Sandusky crime, one surprisingly out of character for the area, would instead become Detective Sgt. Dan Miller's first case — and it was a doozy.

A Sandusky attorney had received a bomb in the mail. The device exploded in the lawyer's home but caused only minor injuries.

Still, this was nothing to be taken lightly. As the celebrated Unabomber cases demonstrated, mailed bombs can be lethal weapons. Theodore

Kasczynski, who was arrested in those attacks, had, beginning in 1978, killed three people and injured twenty-three others. Was the Sanilac bomber somehow inspired by or copying Kasczynski?

Because the Sandusky state police post was without a detective when the bomb case came up, it fell to Dan to travel the thirty-six miles between the two towns each day to investigate the crime.

The mail-bomb case took thirteen months from start to finish. But in the early phases of the investigation, Dan found time during evenings and on weekends to pore over the contents of the missing-person case file as he considered the strategy he would employ when the time came.

Later, once charges were filed in the bomb case and larger blocks of time opened up — mainly in late October — Dan began to spend more time on the Caro case.

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Chapter 18 TENSIONS MOUNT

The events of August 1976, beginning on the sixth when Melvin Garza broke into Marleen Davis' rented E. Congress Street home and severely beat Robin Adams, read like the plot of a B-grade stalker movie.

If this were happening in a large city where many neighbors rarely speak to one another and police are outnumbered and often outgunned, this might have escaped attention.

But this was Caro, a typical small town where secrets weren't secrets very long and minding your neighbor's business was something done out of habit, if not duty.

So many people knew Melvin wouldn't accept Robin's rejection, that he resorted to violence and she was afraid of what he might do. And those same people quietly mobilized behind Robin.

Because it was often necessary for her to stay alone with Billy Davis for hours at a time, she set up an informal network of "safe houses."

Robin's senior pictures were sent to the Timkos because she was living there when the photos were taken. Millie got word to Robin, who paid her a visit.