

Cammy of Ottawaquechee

The Secret of the Ancient Pines

By Dave Clark

Chapter 1

The first snow of the season had come early to the Ottawaquechee River Valley. Early, even by Vermont standards. The bushes of leaf peepers had just begun to disappear, and grasses in the meadow above Dewey Pond were still green and bent under the soft white frosting. Halloween was around the corner and I had been considering whether it was worth the effort to construct a Large-Mouth Bass costume for the occasion. I had spent many happy hours fishing in Dewey Pond over the past summer with my dog, Cammy, and I thought it would be a nice way to commemorate the many bass we had caught and released.

Cammy and I were walking one night and I was thinking about ways to make this crazy contraption when I found that we had wandered off in an unfamiliar direction. There was no moon and Old Quechee Road had become very dark. I turned and looked back at the yellow house on the corner. The porch light seemed very far away. A breeze stirred the still night air and needles dropped on us from the old pine trees high above.

As I turned back toward Cemetery Road, I heard a loud thumping followed by a grating sound as if a stubborn door was being pushed open. I heard a growl beside me and saw that the hair on Cammy's back was standing straight up. She heard the noise, too, and stood perfectly still at the end of her leash, baring her teeth at the darkness.

I quickly turned on my flashlight and pointed it in the direction of Cammy's nose. There, in the light beam, was a large concrete entrance built into the side of the hill on which was inscribed the dates 1829-1899. The double wooden doors were unlocked and the iron bars swung loose. I thought I saw a slight movement. The noise stopped as suddenly as it had begun. My heart was pounding and I stood frozen—not from the cold night air, but from fear.

Fear of the unknown is a common human trait. I have a vivid imagination, but Cammy's reaction confirmed that I had indeed heard something. I could not wish it away. Cammy turned and looked at me. Her hair on her back had returned halfway to normal and she gave a slow wag to her tail as if to say "Well, what are we going to do now?"

"Good girl," I said, mostly to reassure myself.

I didn't want to know what had made that sound, but I was rooted to the spot. Finally, my brain made contact with my legs and we turned away. We began to walk toward the back porch light—at first slowly, but then, as I began to imagine something behind me, more quickly. By the time we reached the edge of our property, it was all I could do to keep from breaking into a run.

Chapter 2

“Hello,” I heard, as Cammy and I entered the door to the mud room. The yellow house was cheerful and warm, and Helen was baking bread in the kitchen. “How was your walk?” she inquired.

“Oh, fine,” I replied. I was a little embarrassed about being so scared and I needed time to think about the experience. We had just moved into the yellow house and the last thing I wanted was to scare Helen with this strange story. She would never believe me anyway. I have to admit I have a bit of a reputation for fooling people with practical jokes. But now, had the tables been turned? Had Helen put someone up to this? I heard nothing in her singsong voice and saw nothing in her beautiful smile to hint of a joke.

“Cammy and I took a walk back toward the graveyard and got a little spooked,” I admitted. Helen looked at us with humor in her eyes and cheerfully chastised us for not being brave.

“That’s just too cute,” she said later. “Were you really scared?”

“Oh, no, my imagination just ran away with me,” I said.

By the next day, I had all but forgotten the events of the night before. Warm days had returned and we were enjoying the last comfortable fall weather before winter set in. I was reading in the living room when the doorbell rang. Cammy and I went to answer, but when we arrived at the front door, no one was there.

“Strange,” I said to myself. The yellow house was a place where people dropped in and our friends normally just let themselves in. Then, on the porch floor, I saw a small bundle, old newspaper tied with string, and looking as if it had been there forever. Cautiously, I bent to pick it up. The newsprint was yellowed with age, and the ads and typesetting immediately made me feel that this was a very old package indeed. “Who would have left it here,” I thought, “and why?” Just then, the phone rang. I went into my office and laid the ancient package down on the desk. I read the date—September 12th, 1889—as I picked up the phone.

“Hello, this is Dave,” I said.

“Mr. Clark? This is Liz DiFranco, of the Quechee Garden Club.”

“Oh, hi Liz,” I said, careful to be courteous. I had wanted to get in touch with the garden club for some time. “What can I do for you?” I asked.

“Well, Dave, I wanted to let you know that there has been a suggestion that the town cut down the large pine trees at the edges of the cemetery. Something about insurance and liability, and we want to enlist your support to help save the trees.”

“Save the trees,” I mumbled. “Hmmm, Liz, were you just by the house to speak to me in person?” I asked.

“No, why?” she said.

“Oh, nothing.” I shifted forward in my chair and put on my glasses to inspect the package more closely. It smelled of mildew and was barely legible. This was getting really interesting. “Sure, I’ll help out. I love those big old pines. They remind me of wise elders overlooking the Ottauquechee. Three of us standing in a circle can barely get our arms around the largest.”

“Oh, good,” said Liz “so you’ll come to our meeting next week? We’ll be at the library at 7 PM on Tuesday evening.”

“Okay, I look forward to seeing you.” I replied. My curiosity was piqued and I reached out to open the package.

Chapter 3

I turned the square package over in my hands. It was hard to tell what it might be, but whatever it was, it was older than 1889. As I carefully untied the leather laces, I noticed the article on the torn and crumpled newspaper page.

"Tinkham Family Donates 20 Pines to Quechee Cemetery" read the headline in bold letters. Apparently the Tinkhams were a long-standing church-going family in Quechee and they had a great deal to do with establishing the Quechee Cemetery.

"And probably the church as well," I thought to myself. I returned my attention to the package and, with a few deft turns of my hand, I was looking at the cover of Old Mrs. Tinkham's diary. It had a beautiful gilt edge cover with a Victorian style picture of a cathedral with birds flying high overhead in front of fantastic cumulus clouds. The effect was spectacular. I marveled at how well the book had been preserved and then found that it was dated 1917.

"Hmmm," I mused, "Someone took great pains to keep this newspaper around just to use as wrapping paper. What was so important about the Tinkham family tree donation to the Quechee Cemetery?"

"Whatever," I said to myself. Things like this didn't happen very often. I couldn't wait to finish with work so I could settle back into my overstuffed green chair and take a closer look..

Chapter 4

Tuesday came quickly—too quickly in fact. I had completely forgotten about the garden club gathering when I got a reminder call from Liz.

“Oh, yes, I’ll be there,” I said, thankful not to have let her down. She was such a nice woman and missing the first meeting would have been a bad way to start off with the garden club. I had big plans for improving the rock wall from the cemetery all the way into town and I needed their help.

I had read most of Mrs. Tinkham’s diary and been nominally entertained by the normal comings and goings of life at the turn of the century. Mrs. Tinkham was the wife of a successful businessman. It seems they did, in fact, live in the yellow house for a time. Mrs. Tinkham’s father had been a builder and had constructed it as a wedding present. At one time there had been stables in the lot next door and the house had been at the center of Quechee society.

As the wife of a successful businessman and the mother of only one son, Mrs. Tinkham had few responsibilities and spent her afternoons in the parlor of the Parker House drinking tea and playing bridge. Mr. Tinkham traveled frequently and was appreciated mostly for supplying Mrs. Tinkham with a generous and steady amount of cash, which she bestowed upon the town for many and various good causes. I was right about the church; Mrs. Tinkham had been a large supporter.

There was one page, however, that totally baffled me. It was not in Mrs. Tinkham’s usual handwriting and it made no sense at all. The letters were awkward and the words unrecognizable. It looked like this:

Τοδαψ Ι ασκεδ Αλαν Δυτωειλλερ το ηελμ με ωιτη α σπεχιαλ προφεχτ. Ι η απε δεχιδεδ το η
ιδε της φαμιλψ παλυαβλεσ ιν τηε λαργεστ οφ τηε Τινκηαμ πινεσ. Τηε ουτχομε οφ τηε ωα
ρισ υνχερταιν ανδ Ι ωαντ το ασσυρε τηατ μψ σον ωιλλ ηαπε σομετηινγ οφ παλυε το στα
ρτα νεωλιφε σηουλδ τηε Γερμανσ ωιν τηε ωαρ. Αλαν ηασ προμισεδ νεπερ το ρεπεαλ μψ
σεχρετ υντιλ τηερε αρε νο Τινκηαμσ λεφτ ανδ ηε ισ ατ τηε ενδ οφ ηισ λιφε.

Unable to decipher the meaning of these lines, I had set the book aside and put it out of my mind.

When I arrived at the garden club meeting it had already begun. I didn’t recognize anyone in the small gathering. Liz DiFranco was speaking.

“So I’m thrilled that all of you could make it for this emergency meeting tonight. Our goal is to develop a strategy for saving the ancient pines in the cemetery and delegate responsibilities so that we can make a strong presentation to the town council next month.”

After settling in my chair, I looked around the room. It contained the usual contingent of healthy, active seniors. Anyone who plays 18 holes of golf every day has to be fit. And this group still had energy left over to tend the impressive flower garden above the rock wall across from the covered bridge. There was, however, one person who didn’t quite fit in.

He was older, to be sure, and he looked tanned and healthy, but his clothes were worn and his shoes were heavy and had bits of mud on them. His face was lined. He sat conspicuously alone at the back of the room, writing in an old notebook.

“The town council has received a notice from the insurance agency informing us that the ancient pines overlooking the Ottawaquechee River pose a potential hazard to motorists and other passersby. They shall need to increase insurance rates substantially should the trees be allowed to remain.”

A murmur went through the group.

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“Those trees are perfectly healthy,” one of the women declared. “They’ve been here as long as I’ve been coming to Quechee.”

“Are you trying to tell us you aren’t as old as the hills, Esther?” a man joked.

The amiable group laughed together and the tension in the room dissolved.

“Seriously though, we must all work together to save those trees, even if it means paying higher insurance rates. We must make a case that the trees are an historic part of the town of Quechee.”

I raised my hand. I had the newspaper article after all and I could certainly help identify the history of the trees. “I’d like to take on the historical side of this battle,” I volunteered. “I’m kind of a history buff and I’d enjoy doing some research on the cemetery and its occupants.”

I decided not to divulge the fact that I had mysteriously received the diary wrapped in a newspaper from 1899—the very year the trees were planted. “Better to solve that puzzle before I mention it to anyone,” I thought to myself.

As the meeting was about to adjourn, I turned to look at those around me, hoping to be able to recognize a few people at some future time. The old man in work clothes was gone.

Chapter 5

Every morning at 6 AM, Cammy begins to toss and turn. Our morning routine goes something like this: get up, go to kitchen, open large green tub of dog food, feed Cammy, pour coffee from automatically-timed coffee machine, go back to our room. From there it is a battle of wills. Cammy is always ready for her morning walk immediately after eating, but Helen and I like linger in our sitting room to drink coffee and read to each other. By 8 AM, Cammy has won the day, and we set off with dog treats in our pockets and Cammy on her leash.

Cammy is a joy to see dashing around the green. She stays absolutely in the moment, tail constantly wagging, paying close attention to everything in her path. No visit to the green is complete without a quick swim in the Ottauquechee River.

After Cammy has explored every corner of the green, I fetch the mail at the post office while Helen goes to the village deli to get raisin scones. On the day after the garden club meeting, when I went into the post office, there was a table set up with petitions to sign. I walked up, introduced myself and put my name and number down on the page. Just then I heard a voice behind me muttering.

“Them dad-burned tree huggers don’t know whut they’re talkin’ ’bout. Back in my day we’d take down those pines and cart them off to the sawmill and think nuttin’ of it. We’d make a good dime on them, too.”

I turned and found myself face-to-face with a grizzled man in a worn plaid shirt and faded blue bib overalls. His pale blue eyes were cold. One of them had a filmy glaze over it.

“Well, sir, times have changed,” I said, “Obviously, you haven’t.”

“That’s right. And I never will.” His voice had risen and so had the hair on Cammy’s back. “You flatlanders bring all your money up here and think you can tell us how to live our lives. But whut you can’t see is how ridiculous you look to us.”

Cammy was baring her teeth and growling now. The old man slowly pulled his fist out of his pocket, lifted his thumb and pointed his index finger at her in the shape of a pistol. “Pow,” he whispered. And with that, he turned and pushed his way out the post office door. Silence had descended over the garden club members sitting at the petition table.

“Well, I guess he won’t be joining us,” I joked.

“Oh, he’s just a cantankerous old bat,” one of the women spoke up. “His wife died a few years ago and he just hasn’t been the same since.”

“Still,” I thought, “He seems dangerous to me.”

Just then a small object on the floor caught my eye. I stooped down to pick it up. It was a business card bearing the words “Wolfgang M. Stevens, Oak, Ash and Pine delivered 7 days a week.”

“I don’t think we’ve heard the last from Mr. Stevens,” I said as I stuffed the card in my pocket and headed out the door to meet Helen outside the deli.

Chapter 6

Libraries are wonderful places. They are quiet, almost church-like in their reverence to the almighty books that they uphold and protect. The Quechee Library has the added feature of being a modern, well-designed building. This is where I decided to start my research on the cemetery.

I discovered that the pines had been planted by the Tinkhams to celebrate the birth of their only son and heir. Sadly, he died one winter when he was still a young man. One of the large burial stones in the cemetery was dedicated to his unknown future. He was a man of good character, a war hero. After an evening spent courting his future bride on Clay Hill Road, he had taken a shortcut home across the frozen Ottawaquechee River, fallen through the ice and drowned. His death was a huge loss to the Tinkhams and the entire community.

The Tinkhams' dreams for the future died with their son. A year later, Mrs. Tinkham's health faltered, and Mr. Tinkham was forced to spend his time caring for her. She never recovered, and the family business failed from neglect. After Mrs. Tinkham's death, Mr. Tinkham gave in to despair and could be seen sitting in his rocking chair on the front porch, staring into space for hours. He died ten years after his son, alone and broken.

"So, the pine trees are a monument to a family that did so much for Quechee" I told Liz. "It's really very sad how it turned out for the Tinkham Family. The least we can do is care for the trees they planted."

"Yes, it is sad," said Liz. "Now I understand a little better the stories I hear about the cemetery being haunted. There have been quite a few reports from people who have said that they hear crying and moaning from the bank by the river. Of course, I've heard it too, but I know it's only the wind in the pines." As she spoke, I began to wonder if that was all there was to it.

Chapter 7

Friday is the best day of the week at the yellow house. That's when my two daughters, Cassady and Cailey, come for the weekend. Helen bakes cookies and bread, and I make sure the beds are freshly made. Clothes are washed and put away. Everything is organized. The arrival of a 9-year-old and an 11-year-old is not to be taken lightly. I have found much wisdom in the Boy Scout motto, "Be prepared!"

On the Friday after my encounter with Wolfgang Stevens, the girls dropped their backpacks and lunch boxes in the mud room and raced back outside to play in the cemetery. It was one of those incredibly warm fall days that make you want to play all your favorite summer games one last time while you can. I was in the kitchen preparing dinner when suddenly the back door flew open.

"Dad," Cassady yelled, "Come here! Quick!" I dropped my chopping knife, and went to her.

"There's a grave dug up in the cemetery," Cailey shouted, meeting me in the hall. "Dad, we're scared and we don't want to go back there."

I put on my shoes and went out the back door. There hadn't been a funeral in the Quechee Cemetery in over 40 years and I certainly hadn't seen any hearses or activity there recently. The kids have pretty good imaginations, and they aren't beyond a good practical joke now and then. But, they were really scared, one on each side of me, holding my hands, lagging behind me a step, reluctant to take the lead.

"Well, where is this grave?" I asked as we entered the cemetery.

"Over there," Cassady pointed in the direction of the ancient pines. "There's dirt all over the place, Dad. It looks like something pushed out of the ground. And it stinks!"

I approached with caution because the kids were present. If there had been gravediggers here, the scene could be quite unpleasant. There was a sickly smell in the air as we approached the pines.

"Wait here," I said. "I want to check this out by myself." Cassady and Cailey didn't argue. There were content to watch from a safe distance.

"Be careful, Dad," Cassady warned me. "There's a hole so big you could fall in."

"What is this?" I thought to myself. I'd never seen anything quite like the scene in front of me. There were scraps of wood lying on the ground and small piles of dirt everywhere. In the midst of all of the debris was a large opening in the ground. I hesitated to peer in. The smell was strong now and I was having trouble processing what I had seen so far. I didn't know how I was going to explain all of this to the girls. There was a brown bundle wrapped in burlap in the bottom of the hole with a skull and cross bones silk-screened on the cloth.

"Poison" I thought. "But why?" I was grateful that it wasn't a body, but we were still in danger. The fumes could be toxic. We needed to get out of there.

"What is it, Dad?" Cailey asked.

"I'm not sure," I lied, not wanting to panic the girls. The important thing was to get them out of there. I looked up at them and my heart leaped. They were sitting on a grave stone and not 50 feet behind them was Wolfgang Stevens with an axe in one hand and Cammy on a short rope in the other!

"Guys," I said. "We have company. I want you to stay close by me and do whatever I do." Cassady and Cailey turned around and caught sight of Cammy at the end of the stranger's rope.

"Hey!" Cailey said, "That's our dog!"

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“Let’s find out what’s going on,” I said, and we headed over to confront Mr. Stevens.

“Dogs aren’t allowed in the cemetery.” Wolfgang said as we approached. “I found her digging in the ground and messing up one of the graves.”

“Yeah, well someone’s made an even bigger mess over there,” Cailey pointed in the direction of the pines.

“And it wasn’t Cammy,” I added.

“Don’t matter now,” said Wolfgang, “Because I’m taking her. And unless you cooperate, you’ll never see her again.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, “there must be some confusion. If dogs aren’t allowed in the cemetery, there ought to be a sign, and I haven’t seen one. We’ll be glad to keep her on a leash in the future, but you can just give her back right now and we’ll put her in our yard. We live just over there, in the yellow house.” Then what Wolfgang had said came crashing in on me like a tidal wave. “What do you mean ‘cooperate’?” I asked slowly.

“You seen the poison,” Wolfgang replied, “And no doubt you’re off to the police to get them over here to save these here trees. Well, I aim to cut them down and sell them for good money. And that there poison is going to help my cause. There’s just one little problem, or three little problems, now that you and your kids know what’s going on. The only choice I have is to keep your dog as security so’s you won’t turn me in. Just as soon as my saw bites into these big trees and they hit the ground, you’ll get your dog back, sure enough. But if you tell anyone, I swear I’ll shoot this here dog of yours and throw her in that hole with the poison.”

“You’re not very nice,” Cailey scowled at Wolfgang. Cassidy turned to me with tears in her eyes. “Dad!” Her eyes were huge and her face was white with fear. “Dad, do something!”

The world seemed to stop for a minute as my mind reeled and raced for answer. A woman and her three children crossed the street, the sound of the river reached my ears and the pines rustled high overhead. “How could this be happening,” I thought. Why couldn’t everything be normal, like it was for everyone else around me? The world seemed to be mocking me with beauty and peace on the surface, while in reality it was gruesome, cold and deceptive.

“You’re not going anywhere with Cammy,” I said as I took two or three steps toward Wolfgang. Suddenly the axe was gone, replaced by a small pistol.

“Get over there,” he waved it slightly. “If you know what’s good for you, your daughters and the dog, you’ll do as I say.” His voice had changed now. I could tell he meant business. “There, that’s much better,” he taunted us as we moved together next to a huge gravestone. “Just keep this little incident to yourselves and everything will be all right.”

He turned and yanked on the leash, nearly pulling Cammy off her feet. She let out a sharp yelp and turned her head for one last look as he dragged her away. My blood boiled in rage as they disappeared among the graves. I reached in my pocket and felt Wolfgang’s business card.

“Helen!” Cailey shouted as we entered the house. “Cammy’s gone!”

Helen came to the front door as we all tumbled in.

“A terrible man took her from us, and he pointed his gun at us, too.” Cassidy buried her head in Helen’s shirt and started to sob. Helen looked at me in shock.

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“It’s true,” I said. “Remember that man I told you about at the post office? Well, he’s trying to poison the pines in the cemetery so he can get the money for the wood. We caught him red-handed and now he’s taken Cammy and has threatened to harm her if we tell anyone what we know.”

“I’m calling the police,” said Helen. “We can’t just let this guy run around town taking dogs hostage. He’s got Cammy.” Helen had tears running down her face now and I felt awful. Cammy had been her dog first, before we’d met.

“But what about Cammy,” I said. “He’ll shoot her.”

Helen stopped and looked at me. “Oh, god,” she breathed, and sat down on the floor.

I didn’t sleep that night. Half of the time I spent consoling Helen. The other half I spent trying to devise a plan to get Cammy back. We were all emotional wrecks and in shock through dinner. I came up with a hundred things that I could have said or done that would have saved Cammy, but it always came back to the same thing. Wolfgang Stevens was crazy. He had a gun. If I had tried to take Cammy, someone would have gotten hurt.

Chapter 8

Saturday morning dawned and with it the memory that Cammy was no longer with us. I went over to the cemetery to see where Cammy had been kidnapped. The holes had been filled in and the ground had been raked smooth. It looked like there was nothing more than a family of ground hogs residing under the pine trees. Wolfgang had obviously returned in the middle of the night to finish his job. The trees were being poisoned. And Cammy was being held hostage. "This is crazy," I thought and a crazy plan began to form in my mind.

As soon as I got home, I rang up Liz DiFranco to tell her my idea.

"We should hold a vigil at the base of the trees," I suggested, "To draw attention to the fact that the town council is considering cutting them down. We could stage a rally just before the town council meeting and get more signatures," I said. It was also a way to protect the trees from further damage. "I can start the vigil any time, but we need a permit to stage a demonstration."

"That's great," said Liz. "I've already got 200 signatures and the vigil would put us closer to the 1000 we're trying to get. I'll get permission for the vigil and a permit."

"Great," I said. "I'll start preparations for the vigil right away."

"As soon as I get rid of that poison," I thought as I hung up the phone. That would be tonight. "Now," I wondered. "Where was that business card?" I needed Wolfgang's number.

Cammy lay on the cold wood floor, her head between her front paws. She wasn't used to this kind of treatment. It was dark and she hadn't been fed. She'd missed her run yesterday, and it looked like more of the same today. She was just letting out a big sigh and rolling her eyes for the thousandth time when she heard the shuffling of feet and the door came flying open.

"Git back, you varmint," Wolfgang shouted. Cammy shied and dodged a flying boot. "I've got work to do." Wolfgang tied Cammy to a hook and opened the double-doors in the far end of the shed. He had received three orders for wood today and was anxious to get his work done.

"Three calls this morning," he muttered to himself, "in weather like this. Those tourists don't know what cold is."

Wolfgang backed the ramshackle pick-up into the opening of the woodshed, turned off the engine and began tossing pieces of split wood into the back. At first he muttered under his breath, but soon the work caught up with his breathing and he settled into a quiet rhythm. When the truck was loaded, he jerked open the cab door. Glancing back, he saw Cammy sitting in the corner, her ears down and eyebrows going in different directions simultaneously.

"What's wrong with you," he shouted. "Go lie down and mind your own business." He got into his truck and drove away.

Chapter 9

Alan Dutweiller swung his legs over the side of his bed. It was early and he had a lot of work to do. The cemetery grounds needed their fall clean up and he wanted to get an early start. He had lost a lot of time dealing with the strange happenings at the cemetery yesterday.

Mr. Dutweiller was not a man who liked to be in the spotlight. And the events of the previous day had made him uncomfortable. He had spent his entire life keeping to himself and staying out of harm's way. But now he was being pulled out of his cozy routine. "Maybe it was because I'm getting older," he thought. After all, he was past 90 and he had to let someone know about the secret that he had kept all these years.

As he pulled on his clothes and started his pot of coffee, he planned his day. "Mostly mowing and trimming," he thought. But he kept mulling over that nagging memory of Wolfgang and the dog from the yellow house. What was he doing with the black Labrador? "Mind your own business," he admonished himself. "Keep to yourself and everything will be all right."

Mr. Dutweiller got in his truck and headed out to the Quechee Cemetery. The sun was coming up through the rising fog from the river valley below. As he rounded the bend and descended through the gray curtain, he spotted a black dog walking along the side of the road, and the scene from yesterday came back to him again.

Wolfgang had been in a hurry, and was trying to pull the cowering Labrador into the back of his truck. Finally, he picked her up and with a supreme effort pitched her into the back. And then he had seen those adorable kids and their father crossing the street. They seemed upset about something. Wasn't that their dog Wolfgang had?

"Get to work," he reminded himself. "You'll never finish here today if you keep up that incessant mumbo-jumbo," he thought as he turned off the engine. It was going to be a long day.

I was looking for my tent and ground cushions when Helen came downstairs with the phone.

"For you, handsome" she said and flashed me one of her precious smiles. There's something really special that happens when you're with the right person and you realize that no matter, everything will turn out all right as long as you care for and look out for each other. Right now we were both under a tremendous amount of pressure. I had shared my plan for getting Cammy back and saving the trees with her, and she believed it would work. But really she believed in us and that's what gave me strength.

It was Liz de Franco on the phone, telling me that she had gotten permission to start the vigil. I had promised to cover the first night and Liz had lined up a couple of others from the garden club to take the next two nights. We would rotate from there. I had a few misgivings about being out in the cemetery at night, especially after the episode at the mausoleum with Cammy. But I was a rational man and really couldn't seriously allow myself to be concerned. Still there was that mysterious diary appearing on the porch and the aberrant behavior of Mr. Stevens.

"Dad," a voice called from above. "Helen says you're camping out in the cemetery".

"Yeah", I said. "Want to come with me?"

"No way!" It was Cassady. "I'm not ever going out there again!"

"You can sleep with me tonight" Helen said, "and keep me company while your Dad protects the trees from evil spirits." All of a sudden this was sounding kind of risky, but the die were cast and I couldn't back out now.

"You guys sure you don't want to come?" I asked meekly. "I could use some company."

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“No thanks, Dad,” said Cailey and Cassady in unison. I could tell they were already looking forward to cuddling with Helen. I was in for a long, cold, lonely night.

Around 3 PM, Alan Dutweiller looked up at the sound of children’s voices. He smiled and waved at the girls playing at the yellow house. He had seen them before, playing tag in the cemetery. Visions of Wolfgang Stevens and the black Lab came rushing back. He strained his aging eyes to see and his mind to remember. Wasn’t the dog wearing a red bandana?

“Yes,” he remembered. “And where was the girls' black dog?” Wolfgang’s final violent act, heaving the black Lab into his truck, flooded his mind and he knew. Wolfgang had stolen their dog. He couldn’t ignore it any longer.

Chapter 10

Wolfgang Stevens was in a rage. Three calls and three false orders! He had wasted his entire day trying to deliver one load of wood. He thought through the list of acquaintances had it out for him and then gave up as the list became too long.

“Probably some high school prankster”, thought Wolf as he pulled into his driveway and looked with horror at the empty woodshed, the unlatched door swinging in the breeze. “Dang it!” he swore as he slammed down the parking brake and threw open the door. “Where in Sam Hill is that dog!”

Cammy was nowhere in sight but there was a note scrawled in tight cursive penmanship: “You can’t have what’s not yours” read the unsigned message.

Wolf stormed around the woodshed, throwing heavy chunks of wood and cursing. It wasn’t so much that Cammy was gone. It was that someone had dared to invade this place. His private world! He would find that dog. And he had a good idea of where to start looking.

“No use backing down now” I thought as I hoisted by backpack, sleeping bag, and bedroll. “And as long as I’m doing this, I might as well do it right”. I had brought a small candle, some munchies, a good book, my cell phone, a high-powered flashlight and a large kitchen knife. “Just in case” I thought. I hadn’t forgotten our nighttime adventure over by the mausoleum and the repeated stories about crying and moaning on the bank by the river gave me chills, especially now that I had read about how the Tinkham son had died.

I was getting my sleeping bag and other gear arranged at the campsite when Helen and the girls came over to say goodnight. Cailey came over and sat in my lap.

“I want Cammy back,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

I wished I could just get up and go find her. But I had no inclination to go snooping around Wolfgang Stevens’s house. Flaring tempers and loaded guns are dangerous companions. I would just have to trust that my plan would work.

“I want her back, too”. I squeezed Cailey. “It’ll be all right. We’ll get Cammy back.”

“Tomorrow”? Cailey asked.

“I hope so. But let’s not worry about that right now. I’m just as upset as you guys aren’t out here with me.

“All the kids say this cemetery is haunted” Cassady said. “There’s no way I’m going to sleep out here.”

“I’ll camp out with you”, said Cailey. “But you have to go get my sleeping bag.”

As I hopped up and started over to the yellow house, a cloud darkened the face of the almost full moon, making it difficult to pick my way among the gravestones. I felt a shiver run across my back. “I must be out of my mind,” I thought.

When I got back to the tent, Helen, Cassady and Cailey were all cuddled together, content in my sleeping bag.

“Tell us a story, Dad” Cassady begged. “Pleeeeeaaaaasseeeee.

“Okay, but just one,” I agreed.

I closed my eyes and waited. This was how my best stories came to me. It was like trying to see in a pitch black night or trying to remember a dream in the morning and you feel yourself sinking down, down, down.

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“Once upon a time”, I began, mostly just to get started. I believed that every great story should start that way. “Once upon a time there lived a young man who played in this very cemetery and he was just about your age, too. He had a dog that went everywhere with him, except to school, of course. And the one thing he liked to do more than anything else was to catch fish.”

“Now one day—and this was a long time ago—he and his dog were playing in this very cemetery, catching grasshoppers for bait and such, when the wind whipped up all of a sudden and blew the boy's hat off right his head and down the hill. He and his dog chased the hat down to the river, but a big gust of wind picked it up and tossed it far out in the water. He was about to give it up for lost, when suddenly a huge fish jumped completely out of the water, grabbed the hat and swam over to the boy, hat in mouth—much like Cammy swimming with a stick,” I added.

“Thank you, grandfather,” the boy said to the huge fish, mostly because he couldn't think of anything else to say. The fish stood straight up in the water, fluttering his tail and danced for a few seconds in front of the astonished boy, then sank down to the bottom of the Ottauquechee River.”

“Oh, Dad,” Cassady said, “You're just telling us a big fish story”.

“No, no, there's more” I said. “No one in Quechee believed the story either, and most people forgot all about it ... until much later when the boy was a young man. One cold winter night he was crossing the iced over river when he went straight through. Old folks say the huge fish had made such an impression on him that he had become possessed with the idea of seeing him again. A few people speculate that he didn't fall through the ice, but that he missed the grandfather fish so much that he drowned himself in an effort to be with him again.”

“Okay, enough of that now,” said Helen. “This story is starting to get a bit scary.”

“Well, you ought to be scared,” I joked. “that was one big fish!”

“Yeah, and an even bigger fish story,” retorted Cailey with her usual dry humor.

“Well, you guys better get off to bed” I stretched. “So you can come wake Cailey and me up early in the morning.” Cailey was already asleep on my lap and I gently moved her into the waiting sleeping bag. I gave Helen and Cassady a hug and a kiss, and watched them as they walked off arm-in-arm back to the yellow house and the comforts of home.

Chapter 11

The night crept in close after Helen and Cassady left. Their absence sat heavily upon me. With Cailey fast asleep beside me, I felt alone. The air was unusually warm and moist, and there was an intermittent breeze that rose and fell every few minutes. Eerie clouds raced across the full moon, darkening its face. I heard a tapping noise and my blood ran cold. “Why am I scared”? I thought, those were just pine needles dropping on the tent. And that shadow moving back and forth across the tent fabric ... that was just a tree branch between the moon and me, wasn't it?

“Get a grip”, I thought. “You keep this up and you won't make it past midnight.” I remembered why I was out there lying under the hundred-foot pine trees. It was to protect them from further harm. Earlier that day I had gone back and dug down into the bare patches of earth where the poison had been buried and had found nothing. Did Wolfgang return and remove it? I thought not, but maybe he was concerned that I would report him. Maybe someone else had seen the poison and removed it. Whoever it was had done a thorough job and hadn't told anyone. That made two of us. I hoped I hadn't thoroughly screwed up by not going to the police immediately. Tomorrow I would begin phase two of my plan. I was reasonable sure Wolfgang Stevens was unbalanced and that it wouldn't take much to push him over the edge.

Suddenly the wind rose and I became aware of a whooshing sound high above. Pine needles rained down on the tent. Then I heard something that made me sit straight up. The unmistakable sound of moaning and crying coming from the river was carried high in the trees. This must be the sound that others had reported—a broken, high-pitched sobbing that at first instilled pity and then fear. It was as if the dead souls in the graves beneath us were commiserating with the wind in the trees. All the sorrow and tragedy in the world rode in the wind as it rose to a furious pitch.

A small animal shrieked. I heard a guttural growl and the sickening crack of bones. An animal had hunted its prey successfully. “Scary out here,” I thought as I burrowed deep into my sleeping bag. The crying subsided along with the wind and I regained my composure.

“The world is constant,” I reminded myself, “and there's no room for the inconsistency of ghosts, animal spirits and evil forces.” Maybe once upon a time when the world was new and not completely mixed up, there might have been anomalies like Greek gods coming down to earth, dragons slain by knights and even little people who inhabited remote woods in virgin forests. But not now when the world was homogenized and categorized into known quantities, and reported daily by the mass media. One had to search pretty vigorously to discover life's mysteries—like black holes in outer space, El Ninos, the Bermuda Triangle and auras. Even these had either been proven or passed off as illogical. But for a moment I had believed that there really was someone crying by the river and in that belief lay the source of all the mystery of life. That something should defy logic excited me for therein lie new possibilities.

I was settling off to sleep—happy with my realizations about mystery and logic—when I heard a loud crack just outside our tent. It had a presence accompanying it as if a heavy weight had relentlessly crushed something. The silence that followed was deafening. The blood rushed to my head, my heart pounded. I stopped breathing. Slowly, silently, I pulled myself up to the tent flap and peered out a crack in the fabric.

There stood the old man from the garden club meeting with Cammy at the end of a leash. I scrambled out of the tent and went straight to her—rubbing her all over, checking for injuries. I had half-expected to be confronted with the spirit of the Tinkhams' son so my joy at this turn of events was undeniable. I must have carried on this way for a minute or two. Cammy licked my face, and squirmed and moaned with appreciation.

Remembering the man who brought her, I straightened myself to thank him and found him gone. He was over on the other side of the cemetery climbing the stone steps to his car. I shouted out to him, but he did not reply. He just got in his car, started it and drove off into the night.

“Well, girl” I said, “Lets see if there's some room in the tent for you”.

Chapter 12

Morning came early to the Ottawaquechee Cemetery and with it the trademark breathing of dragons high overhead as hot-air balloons launched from the Quechee Green were carried down river by subtle air currents. I felt a tongue on my face, followed by a shriek of joy as Cailey discovered Cammy in the tent with us. We were face to face with an expectant, bright-eyed beast. She was rumbling in her chest and alternating between moaning and nudging us with her cold, wet muzzle.

“She’s hungry!” Cailey laughed.

“You’re right,” I said. “I’ll bet that she hasn’t eaten in 36 hours, she must think she’s about to die of starvation.”

Just then we heard a truck pull up to the driveway, stop its engine and open the door. I looked out the tent flap and saw Wolfgang Stevens opening the gate to the picket fence of the house and walking up the sidewalk to the front door. As he clomped up the steps in his heavy shoes, my first thought was to race out of the tent and intercept him. But then I got hold of my senses, picked up the cell phone and dialed 911.

“Yes?” the dispatcher was on the line.

“I’m calling to report an intruder.” I half whispered the address, name and phone number as I climbed out of the tent. “Wait here,” I said to Cailey as I zipped the tent closed. “And keep Cammy quiet!”

I quickly made my way across the cemetery to intervene when the front door opened. Helen peered out and was shocked by what she saw. A grizzled old man who hadn’t bothered to shower or shave, shotgun under his arm, cigar stub in his mouth, was standing on the porch. He was balding and long greasy strands of hair were plastered back in an attempt to cover his head.

“Can I help you?” Helen inquired through a half-open porch door.

“I came to get my dog back,” Wolfgang said. He shuffled his feet and looked down at the porch floor. He was in the presence of a lady and he was on a strange mission. A thief attempting to retrieve stolen property from the scene of the crime.

“What dog?” asked Helen, her curiosity piqued.

“You ain’t seen him around then?” said Mr. Stevens. He was starting to wonder why he had showed up in the first place

“Look, we haven’t seen our dog for two days, and if you know something about it, I’d sure like to know”.

“Helen!” It was Cassidy tugging at Helen’s robe.

“Hold on just a minute,” Helen said to Cassidy.

“Maybe if you give me a description of the dog you are missing ...”

“HELEN!” Cassidy’s voice was louder now and the robe was pulling her back from the door.

“What?” Helen turned to address Cassidy with a sharp whisper.

“That’s Him!” Cassidy was trembling in fright. “That’s the man who stole Cammy.”

Helen stared at Cassidy. “He’s got a shotgun!” Helen mouthed the words as at Cassidy. Cassidy just nodded her head.

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“Okay. Just go to back of the house and be ready to run up the back hill to get help if you need to.”

I crossed the street at a trot and quietly opened the side gate to the yard. There was Helen talking to Wolfgang Stevens. “She doesn’t know who it is!” I thought in alarm. “I have to warn her.” Without thinking I moved around a large bush and quietly made my way to the porch.

About that time Helen turned away from the conversation and went back into the house. It was my only chance. I bounded up the steps, wrapped my right arm around his neck and groped with my left for the shotgun. Luckily things went my way. I got my hand on the shotgun and my sheer weight from carrying me on his back wore him down. Rage boiled up from within.

“You sorry excuse for a man!” I yelled at him, “What do you think you’re doing carrying a shotgun up here on my front porch!” He spun around a few more times, but I held on tight and soon he was dizzy from the effort.

“Tarnation!” he said, “A man’s just trying to make a living.”

“That’s a sad excuse,” I gasped from the exertion. The shot gun was now in my hands and Wolfgang seemed to realize the struggle was over. He hung his head and stared at the floor breathing heavily. I opened the shotgun and found no shells in the chamber.

“It would still make a good club,” I thought as I eyed him warily. I said to him “I’ve called the police and I’m pressing charges against you for theft, trespassing and destruction of property.” Just then I heard a siren and saw the flashing lights of a police car speeding along the river toward the yellow house. “That’s them.”

I turned and saw Cassidy, Helen and Cailey at the door, peering out at us. I knew it would all be over in a matter of minutes. I kept the gun trained on him, more for show than anything else. As the police cruiser pulled in to the driveway, I felt a wave of sympathy wash over me for Wolfgang Stevens. The world had overtaken him. Even here in Vermont, his ideas weren’t in step with the times. Was being arrested a just reward for holding on to his parent’s values?

“What’s the problem here”, the first policeman asked, his hand on the butt of his revolver.

The second officer was talking on the radio. “Probably calling in reinforcements,” I thought. And why not? From the looks of it we could both be armed and dangerous. Wolfgang was staring at the floor muttering to himself, seemingly in another world. Almost as if he was talking to someone.

“I’m sorry, Martha,” he said. “I didn’t mean anyone no harm. I know, I know, I know!” his voice rising then dropping back down to a whisper. “I know I should change my ways, but that’s your wolf man.” A tear streaked down his grimy face, leaving a clean streak where the rivulet ran.

“Officer, we’ve had a bit of a misunderstanding,” I said. “This man came to visit an old friend who used to live here. Gave us quite a scare, especially with him carrying this shotgun. No harm done though—it’s not loaded.”

The tension level dissipated. Wolf’s head seemed to rise a little.

“So you’re not pressing charges?” the first policeman asked, incredulous. I could hear other sirens in the distance and the second policeman getting out of his car. Soon every law enforcement vehicle in the township would be here. All six of them!

“Nope. Everyone’s okay and there’s no more to it than that.”

The policemen looked at each other. They seemed disappointed.

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“Okay, then.” They tipped their hats and turned to leave. Wolfgang turned and looked me in the eye.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ve been a little out of alignment lately. That could’ve been the end of me.”

“Well, Mrs. Stevens,” I put my hand on his back. “It seems to me all you need is a good forest to harvest. How about we get you some of that kind of work. I know a place out in Strafford with lots of old growth trees that could use some thinning.”

“We could be partners.” A light seemed to come on in Wolfgang’s eyes. “That would be something now, wouldn’t it?” said Wolf. “Now wouldn’t that be something.”

Chapter 13

Watching Wolfgang go, I heard the front door open behind me and was suddenly surrounded by wonderful, wiggly girls.

“Dad, you were great,” said Cassady. “You really showed him, didn’t you?”

“He didn’t show him anything, he just jumped on his back,” argued Cailey.

“You were wonderful.” I felt a squeeze around my waist from Helen.

“Well, it sure didn’t go as planned,” I said “but we did get Cammy back.”

Cassady screamed, Cailey jumped up and down and Helen threw her arms around me and started to cry. “Where is she?” she asked.

Just then we heard a sharp bark followed by another and then another.

“In the tent,” I said. “And you’ll never guess how I got her back.” But they were gone—skipping down the front walk, out the gate and running hand-in-hand across the cemetery to the tent. My story would have to wait.

Later on that day I was in my office looking through Mrs. Tinkham’s diary, reveling in the mysteries of life when Cassady came in and sat down on my lap.

“Dad,” Cassady said, “who gave you this diary?”

“I don’t really know, Cass,” I replied.

Cass lifted one eyebrow and scowled the scornful look she had been perfecting over the past few weeks.

“Yeah, right, Dad, it just appeared out of nowhere.”

“That’s about right. The doorbell rang and there it was on the floor of the front porch.”

She was leafing through the diary and fingered it curiously—then she bent down to look at something more closely.

“Hey, Dad, there’s a secret pocket in the back of this book. Look.” She held a piece of paper with numbers and letters carefully inscribed. “This is strange,” she muttered to herself. “It looks like the key to a secret code.”

My heart jumped. “That key may explain the strange page of symbols in the middle of the diary.” I leaned forward to see more closely. “Let’s decipher the message,” I said eagerly and we both set to work. I had a sudden thought.

“Cass, how well do you and Cailey know Mr. Dutweiller?” I asked.

“Not very well, Dad,” Cassady replied. “He can’t talk.”

“Can’t talk?” I said. “How did you figure that out?”

“Well, we started out waving at each other. Then when he was closer and we said hi, he made signs to us. We studied some of that in school and we were able to find out a little bit more about him. He’s been the caretaker of the cemetery since he was our age.”

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I did some quick calculations. It was possible that he knew the Tinkhams. Had he been the one to put the diary on the front porch?

“Hey, Dad, look at this!” Cassady said excitedly. “There’s his name.”

Sure enough the cryptic page when decoded included Mr. Dutweiller’s name.

“Today I asked Alan Dutweiller to help me with a special project. I have decided to hide the family valuables in the largest of the Tinkham pines. The outcome of the war is uncertain and I want to assure that my son will have something of value to start a new life should the Germans win the war. Alan has promised never to reveal my secret until there are no Tinkhams left and he is at the end of his life.”

“Cailey! Helen!” Cassady shouted excitedly. “There’s a secret treasure in the pine trees. And Mr. Dutweiller put it there when he was little.”

It all started to make sense to me now. The secret treasure was in danger of being found. Mr. Dutweiller must have left the diary on the porch that morning. Was he trying to give me a clue about the hidden treasure? He had an even bigger reason why he wanted to save the trees. And then he had brought back Cammy to help us continue our efforts to protect the trees.

“What a kindly soul. And what loyalty! Maybe it was better to keep a secret than all the treasure in the world. In fact, Alan Dutweiller had managed to keep the secret and maybe the knowledge of the treasure was enough.”

I found the girls in the living room, chatting excitedly.

“So Mr. Dutweiller put the treasure in the ancient pines when he was just a boy?” Helen asked.

“And he wants us to keep it that way” I said. “He chose us to keep the secret. That’s why he brought Cammy back. And I think that’s who left the diary on the porch. I wonder if he ever figured out the code.”

“We’ll have to ask him,” Cassady said “next time we see him.”

But we never would see Mr. Dutweiller again. News came to us a week later that he had died in his sleep, leaving us the keepers of the secret of the ancient pines.

THE END