

Chapter 1: The Disappearance

“So tell us, Nanna, what do *you* think happened to Johnny Mack Willard?” Bailey and Amy sat at the big antique kitchen table watching Bailey’s grandmother prepare a batch of apple turnovers. Loose wires on the back screened door moved slightly as a warm summer breeze entered the spacious room, lifting Bailey’s hair momentarily from her neck.

Doris Wallace began flipping pies as they sizzled on the griddle. “I’ve told you before, Bailey, I have no idea what happened to Johnny Mack. I was just a girl back then.”

Amy propped her elbows on the wooden table, cupped her chin with her hands and breathed in the wonderful aroma coming from the stove. “Almost fifty years ago. That would make Johnny Mack...”

“Sixty-four years of age,” finished Doris quietly. For a moment she stopped what she was doing and gazed past the screened door to the gathering shadows beyond. “Yes, he would be sixty-four now.”

Watching her grandmother return to her task, Bailey gave Amy a small punch on the arm and nodded toward Doris. “Would you tell us again, Mrs. Wallace, about Johnny Mack?” asked Amy.

“Well...,” Doris Wallace began heaping apple turnovers onto a large china plate, “it was simply terrible when he disappeared. People didn’t know what to think. Rocky Creek had never had any crime to speak of.” Bailey’s grandmother reached around and placed the platter of hot food onto the table before heading to the refrigerator for a carton of milk. “Careful with those; they’re hot.”

“How old were you when Johnny Mack disappeared, Nanna?” Bailey used her fork to glide a steaming fruit pie onto her plate.

Her grandmother poured milk into three glasses. “I was thirteen, I think,” she replied, pausing a moment to count back. “Yes, that’s right. It happened the autumn of my thirteenth birthday, sometime late September.”

Doris finished pouring and returned the milk to the fridge. “Back then we had only one elementary school and one high school. And believe it or not, in the elementary school, there was only one classroom per grade, with only one teacher.”

Seeing the expressions of disbelief on the girls’ faces, Doris laughed and took her place across from Bailey. “Remember, the town was a lot smaller fifty years ago.”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot, ancient history.”

Doris sampled her cooking while faking a distasteful glance at her granddaughter. “I simply made the remark to inform you that for the most part, my classmates in elementary school were the same from beginning to end. We got to know each other pretty well.”

Amy bit into her pastry, chewed fast, and quickly gulped milk from her glass. “So you and Johnny Mack were good friends?” she finally managed to ask, fanning her mouth with her hand.

Doris played with her food and shook her head slightly. “No, I don’t think anyone was really *good* friends with Johnny Mack.” Bailey and Amy gave her puzzled stares. Doris smiled. “Now, don’t get me wrong, Johnny was a very nice guy; always a gentleman. Several of us girls thought he was the most handsome boy in school as

well: tall, slim, thick black hair, and the most beautiful green eyes you've ever seen." Doris gazed once more through the screened door.

Bailey raised her eyebrows at Amy and cleared her throat. "Had a thing for him, did you, Nanna?"

Doris answered with a chuckle and nibbled some apple filling.

"But Mrs. Wallace, if Johnny Mack was so terrific, why wasn't he close to anybody?"

"Well, Johnny was an only child; he lived with his parents on a large farm that required a great deal of work, a lot of time taken away from doing things socially." Doris sipped from her glass. "I think his responsibility to his folks was quite demanding."

Bailey blew on a fork full of apple turnover before popping it into her mouth. "And because of that he didn't have friends?"

"Oh, Johnny Mack had friends," replied Doris, "but not what you'd call best pals. As far as that goes I was one of his friends, which simply meant I saw him at school, talked to him at school, occasionally worked on school projects with him, and once in a blue moon ran into him at Mr. George's country store."

Doris fiddled with the bangs of her short gray hair. "What I mean to say is Johnny Mack didn't mingle much outside of class. I don't think his parents attended any of the nearby churches. That's where a lot of the town's socializing took place back then. Martin and Janie Willard were very private people. Johnny Mack was like them in that way."

Bailey finished her turnover and reached for another. "Okay, Nanna, we get it. Johnny Mack was a nice, polite, good looking recluse; now on with the story, please."

Amy's laughter sent crumbs flying. "Sorry," she blurted, spewing even more crumbs. Jumping up, she ran to dampen a paper towel. Doris covered her own mouth to keep any food from showing as she smiled broadly.

While Amy wiped the table, Bailey's grandmother quietly began her story. "Well, Johnny Mack had worked extra hard the previous

two summers to earn enough money from his parents to buy a new bicycle. It was his most prized possession, and rightly so. What a beauty: sleek, black, gears on the handlebars, different speeds; no one else in Rocky Creek had anything even close to it.” Doris idly traced designs in the moisture that had gathered around her glass. “It was called a Swingbacker and Johnny Mack rode it everywhere.”

Bailey wished her grandmother would hurry up and get to the good part. Enough with the depiction of Johnny Mack and his bicycle; they got the picture. Come on already!

Doris observed the slight fidgeting and did indeed move on to the *good* part. “Johnny Mack disappeared on a beautiful September Sunday,” she told the two girls. “His parents had decided to drive the family truck over to Riverside to visit Janie Willard’s sister and family. Johnny Mack stayed behind. He told his mother and father he planned to pack a thermos, some food, and bike over several roads in the upper northern part of the county. He promised to be home by four o’clock that evening.”

Outside, the summer breeze passed through swaying trees and rattled the screened door. Bailey exaggerated a shiver and rubbed her hands together. “But he never showed, did he, Nanna?” she asked in a low eerie voice.

“No, he did not,” her grandmother replied. “Janie and Martin Willard returned home around seven o’clock that evening to find the house dark and empty. By nine o’clock worry had turned to panic and Martin called the sheriff.”

Doris gazed at the kitchen ceiling a moment in thought. “Now, what was that sheriff’s name? I can see him like it was yesterday.”

Bailey sighed and put her hands over her eyes. Nanna was forever doing this; right in the middle of a good story, she’d invariably veer off course. Bailey lowered a hand to drum the wooden table’s polished surface, reflecting as she did on the fact that her great grandfather (Doris’ father) had built the table for his new bride (Doris’ mother) some eighty years earlier.

Doris snapped her fingers and brought her gaze back to the girls. “Bobby Vernon, that was his name: Sheriff Robert Vernon. Oh, goodness, was he ever a tall one. I bet he was every bit of six foot six; a mountain of a man! And seldom carried a gun. His size alone was intimidating. You know, I remember one time...”

“Nanna,” Bailey whined. “Could we please hear about the mountain sheriff another time?”

“Okay, sorry. I got sidetracked.” Looking at Bailey, Doris quickly added, “Again,” and grinned. “All right, where was I?”

“Johnny Mack’s father called the sheriff,” Amy offered eagerly.

“Thank you. Well, Sheriff Vernon arrived at the farm in no time flat. Because, you see, Johnny Mack was a very reliable person and folks who knew him knew that if he’d told his parents he’d be home no later than four o’clock and was still missing, then something must be terribly wrong.

“Sheriff Vernon called in two of his three deputies and some volunteers, and on that moonless night they all went in search of Johnny Mack. Using several cars, the group, which included Johnny’s father, drove all over the northern section of the county, often pulling over to the side of the road to call his name, stopping at people’s homes to see if they’d seen him.”

“Had they?” Amy asked, having only heard the story a hundred times already.

“We live in the northern part of the county,” announced Bailey, as though that was news to everyone.

“We do indeed, and in answer to your question, Amy, yes, a few folks had seen Johnny Mack ride by earlier in the day, heading away from his home. No one had seen his return.”

Doris’ fingers did their own silent drumming on the old table. “My father was one of the volunteers. He was out with the others until the early hours of the morning, but not a sign of Johnny Mack or his bicycle.

“At first light the search got under way again, this time with more volunteers and all three deputies. The weather was awful. A rainstorm had drifted over Mount Pillar and gotten itself hung between here and Fisher Mountain. The sky rained buckets. Everybody got soaked through and through. But there was no sign of Johnny Mack.

“The search went on more than a week. Everyday the sheriff, at least one of his deputies, and all the people he could muster combed the countryside. Martin Willard carried with him a picture of his son, who he showed at every residence, farmhouse, store, and church.”

Doris Wallace lifted her hand to her mouth and lightly patted her lips. “The Martins never saw their son again. The consensus was that Johnny Mack had been kidnapped.”

Amy leaned back in her chair and stretched her arms up high above her head. “Vanished without a clue,” she replied. “I bet Johnny Mack’s folks were brokenhearted, worse than brokenhearted. To have a loved one taken from you that way, to just disappear like that, never knowing the story behind it, the facts, that’s got to be terrible.”

Doris glanced at Bailey with a slight smile.

“Oh, Bailey,” Amy suddenly exclaimed, “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I mean, with your dad, that’s sort of like what happened...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bailey told her friend. “It’s okay, really.”

Doris began to gather the plates, utensils, and empty glasses. “You girls should start thinking of heading home. It’s past eight o’clock. Bailey, your mom will be looking for you.”

“You mean leave before hearing the rest of the story?” Bailey asked in mock surprise.

“You two know very well what happened next. Now, it’s getting late. I don’t want you riding on the road after dark.” Doris stacked the dirty dishes in the sink. “I’m sending along some pies for you and Laura.”

Minutes later, with nighttime closing in, Bailey and Amy coasted their bikes out of Doris’s driveway and onto Maynard Lane, racing the two miles back to Bailey’s house. Amy won. Amy always won.

“I need a faster bicycle,” declared Bailey, taking deep gulping breaths.

“It’s not your bike that’s slow,” Amy told her with a grin.

“Right, so I don’t have legs up to my chin,” replied Bailey. She stopped short when she saw Ian’s dark green van in the driveway.

“He’s here kind of late, isn’t he?” Amy asked, getting off her bicycle and walking it around to the back of the house.

Bailey said nothing as she followed her friend, parking her two-wheeler beside Amy’s and starting up the back porch steps. A slight whiff of cigarette smoke came to her as she opened the storm door and stepped into the small bright kitchen she and her mother had repainted last summer when they’d first moved in. Bailey stood still and quietly listened; Amy moved in behind her, careful not to let the door slam. They could hear small laughter beyond the kitchen; Laura Noble and Ian Landon were in the living room.

“Do you think he likes your mom?” Amy whispered into Bailey’s ear. “He’s a ton younger. I mean, he could be one of her students, almost.”

“Not quite,” Bailey heard herself say as she called out, “Mom, we’re home,” giving her mother a chance to snuff out the cigarette and desperately fan the air around her. At the sound of Bailey’s voice, Hannah came trotting into the kitchen. “Hi, sweetie,” Bailey told the little terrier, bending down to scratch her back; Hannah whined happily.

“Hi, honey,” she heard her mother call. Bailey, Amy, and Hannah crossed over to the open archway which led to the hall, and then across to the living room. Bailey’s mother sat at the end of the couch looking guilty as sin. Smoking was something Bailey didn’t like her mother to do and normally Laura Noble didn’t. “How’s Nanna?” Laura asked, keeping her arm on the edge of the end table to hide the ashtray.

“Fine, Mom. She made fried apple pies and sent some home with us.”

For the first time Bailey allowed herself to gaze at Ian, who sat in the big overstuffed chair she always claimed when watching television. His dark eyes settled on her and he smiled; Bailey felt her heart race and her face begin to flush. How could anyone be so handsome? “I can smell them from here,” he said, running a hand through hair that matched the color of his eyes. “That Doris is one good cook.”

Bailey wanted to ask Ian if he would like a pie or two but as usual her voice failed her.

“We brought a bunch with us if you’d like some,” she heard Amy say from behind her. Bailey mutely nodded.

“That would be great,” answered Ian, hoisting himself up from the chair. “I hope it’s okay if I take them with me. I really should be going.”

Bailey’s mother remained seated, her arm still hiding the ashtray. “Thanks for the company, Ian.”

“It was my pleasure, Laura.”

Bailey turned and followed Amy back into the kitchen. “Your mom must have had a bad day,” said Amy, taking an orange plastic glass from the cupboard and turning on the water faucet. Bailey didn’t answer as she opened the bag containing the warm pies.

Ian and Laura strolled into the room. “Here you go,” said Bailey, forcing some words out at last, handing Ian a fresh bag containing three of Nanna’s pies. “Enjoy.”

Ian smiled warmly at her and accepted the bag. “Thank you, Bailey. These will go great with coffee in the morning, a pleasant change from cereal.” With a light chuckle he started for the door. “You guys take care. Laura, I’ll be by in a couple of days to deal with that dogwood.”

“Okay,” Bailey’s mom replied. “I’ll see you then.”

Ian playfully pulled Amy’s ponytail on his way out. “Hey!” she cried, delivering a weighty punch to his shoulder. Bailey had never been more envious.

Laura walked to the cupboard, chose a plastic aqua-colored glass, and headed for the refrigerator.

“Are you okay, Mom?”

“Yes, I’m fine, sweetie,” her mother replied from the depths of the cooler. “I thought we had some cranberry juice in here.”

“Look behind the iced tea.” Bailey listened to Ian start his van and slowly back it out of the driveway. “How’s Ian doing?” She hoped she sounded sufficiently nonchalant.

Laura reappeared holding the container of juice. “He’s good. I think he’s going to have a good summer with his new business. He already has quite a few clients. I’ll bet by this time next year, Ian will have hired a couple of guys to help him.” Bailey’s mom slowly poured juice into her glass atop the counter. “That’s what we were talking about, mainly.”

But not totally thought Bailey, remembering the smell of cigarette smoke she’d encountered when she entered the house. *Something happened today to remind you of Dad.* When her mother glanced her way, Bailey saw the familiar pained look and wondered what had taken place to set her mom to agonizing over the day Jarred Noble was found dead at a picnic table in Reiner Park.