

## ***NIGHT OF THE HELLHOUNDS***

A short story I wrote when I was 17 and finished eleven years later in between art projects. Told in six chapters, about a girl finding her place among her friends during one horrific night, *NIGHT OF THE HELLHOUNDS* is a Ridgewood tale of the macabre by me, Steven L. Campbell, writing as Steven Campbell. This story has gone through many rewrites to become the novel I published in 2014. Text of this short story is copyright © 1974 and 1985, and renewed 2002 when I published it at my website. Cover art by S.L.Campbell Graphics and Books. This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this book either are products of the author's imagination or are fictitiously used. Any resemblance to actual persons—living or dead, locales, organizations, or events is purely coincidental.

### ***CHAPTER 1***

My name is Nancy Louise Johnson. I'll never forget the night I almost died. Ghostly hellhounds were snapping at my heels when I slipped on some gravel and fell over the steepest side of Myers Ridge.

The day began like most August days in Ridgewood, Pennsylvania: hot and humid. Every hour, the weatherman at our local radio station promised more of the same, and every hour since seven o'clock that morning my twelve-year-old sister Krissy groaned from her spot in Dad's huge recliner. It was Friday and as usual, I was babysitting. Dad was at work and Mom and my big brother Ted were shopping in nearby New Cambridge for a new air conditioner.

I pulled the legs of my blue jean shorts away from my sweaty skin as I shifted from a sitting position to a reclining one on Mom's plushy sofa. After finding a cool spot on the middle cushion, I leafed through another romance paperback from the bag of books Ted's fiancée Jeanette had given me. Buxom women and muscular men seduced and cheated on each other in graphic description. I threw the book back into the bag and looked over at Krissy.

She lay semi-naked in pink bikini, sprawled out like a Hollywood corpse, her summer tan looking dark in the dim light of the living room. An oscillating fan blew on her every fifteen seconds and tried to lift her flaccid blonde hair away from her forehead and from around her sweaty cheeks. The arid breeze merely flicked the ruffles on her beachwear and rustled the pages of her beauty magazine. I dropped the bag of books next to her. She looked up with blue eyes opened in wonderment.

"What's up, Nanny Lou?"

"Knock yourself out," I said before I made my way to the kitchen.

My family calls me Nanny Lou—short for Nancy Louise, but I prefer to be called Nance. Nanny Lou’s more of a girl’s name and I’ve not been comfortable being a girl ever since I developed breasts and discovered boys stop looking at girls face to face when that happens.

The doorbell rang and took me away from peering into the refrigerator.

“I’ll get it,” I said and headed for the front door. Krissy sprang up at my heels and followed me to the sun porch where my once long-time friend Dave Evans stood at the front door and peered in at me through the screen. I stopped and frowned when I recognized his face through the screen’s murky grayness. I crossed my arms over my chest in case he should want to look there.

“Can we talk?” Dave asked.

I almost said no, but Krissy interrupted me to tell him the door was unlocked. I turned to her and replaced her flirty smile with a pout when I ordered her to return to the living room. She stomped away and when I turned back, Dave stood inside. Unlike me whose red hair and freckles seem to emit beacons of light and attract unwanted attention everywhere I go, Dave stood there looking average: medium height and weight, auburn hair, blue eyes and all—the kind of guy who blends into a crowd.

I started to ask him what he wanted, and then stopped. He wore a long-sleeved pullover shirt and heavy blue jeans and wasn’t even sweating! So okay, that part about him would certainly keep him from blending completely into a crowd.

“What’s up?” I asked, a little too icily.

“Can we talk?” This time his question sounded urgent instead of inquisitive.

“It’s been a while,” I reminded him.

“A long while.”

I pondered this before I nodded and led him inside. I pointed to the ceiling. “You don’t mind, do you?”

He managed a squeaky no and gave away his unease.

“Going to my room,” I hollered to Krissy.

“Turning on TV,” she hollered back.

Upstairs and at the back of the house, my tiny bedroom was a hotbox during summer afternoons. A small breeze coming through my window screen actually made the moment bearable. Dave sacked out in my beanbag chair—the one he bought me last year for my sixteenth birthday.

My dresser and nightstand were littered with swimming and softball trophies. He studied the softball batting trophy I had won two months earlier, the only Junior in our school's history to ever beat out the entire Senior squad. Preparing to brag about my feat, he interrupted me when he cleared his throat loudly.

"I have something I need to get off my chest," he said, and with that said he added, "I'm sorry."

The apology seemed dry and forced, and I surprised myself when I accepted it. I cursed myself silently.

Dave sorely smiled at me and I launched into all the reasons I should have said no. After all, he had taken advantage of me during my time of need. I didn't want him to think I'd completely forgiven him just yet. I wanted him to remember that our reckless time together last winter had tarnished our friendship. When I had needed him most, he had let me down. I still hated him for that!

He waved at me, caught my attention, and told me the date.

"August twenty-third," he said. It's tomorrow."

I sat next to my orange tabby cat Ginger asleep on my bed and listened to his plan to go camping that night on haunted Myers Ridge. Dave and I had been going there since we were kids. First with my brother Ted and his friends, and then by ourselves. And even though we'd never seen any ghosts there, the legend of Ben Myers drew us there every year. In fact, Dave and I and a boy named Jerry Hopper ever camped there anymore, waiting for a glimpse of the hill's namesake.

But I was no longer that girl—the flat-chested tomboy who used to fit in easily with the guys until my DNA had decided in January to show everyone otherwise. And Dave was not really as medium looking as I pictured him. He had grown a few inches since our high school graduation and had filled out some in the shoulders and chest. Camping at night with an attractive boy seemed like an unwise thing to do, especially when that boy had told me he loved me and then tried to make out with me.

Before I could turn down his invitation, heavy footsteps and breathing drew close to my door. The footsteps stopped and meaty knuckles rapped against the doorframe. Then Jerry Hopper's short, two-hundred pound frame entered my room and dropped to the floor between Dave and me. His red *AC/DC* T-shirt clung to him like soggy plastic wrap, and the waist of his blue jeans had fallen several inches below the tops of his bright white underpants. He gasped for air and tried to speak. After several attempts, he said to me, "Krissy said ... you were up here." He turned to Dave and asked, "Did you ask her? Is it okay?"

Dave glanced at me. His eyes were edged with glumness, but there was a flowering of hopefulness brimming his face. "You're coming, right?" He seemed to be searching my face for an affirmative answer.

I shrugged and looked down at Ginger. “I don’t know,” I said.

Dark-haired mop-topped Jerry peered at me with the same sad look as Dave’s. he said, “I really hope so, Nance,” he said. “What’s August twenty-third without the three of us camping on Myers Ridge and watching for old Ben Myers’s ghost at midnight.”

Dave nodded and Jerry let out a loud sigh as he waited for me to say yes.

I said, “That’s really kid stuff, don’t you think?”

“No,” they said in unison.

“I thought you apologized,” Jerry said to Dave.

“I did apologize. I guess she’s still too angry to want to hang with us.”

The atmosphere turned wistful as they looked at each other sadly—as though they had lost a best friend.

I sighed. “I’ll check with my folks and call you,” I said to Dave and ignored the foreboding feeling in my gut.

Jerry grinned. Dave rolled out of the chair, stood, and struggled to help Jerry from the floor. Jerry panted to catch his breath again, and I worried about his health.

“How’s the asthma?” I asked.

“Under control,” he replied, and grinned again.

“Come on,” Dave said. “We have to finish packing the gear.” He looked at me. Doubt crossed his thin face. “If your folks say yes, meet us behind my aunt’s store at six thirty sharp.” He clapped Jerry on the back, paid no mind to the sweat he sent spraying from the shirt, and led the way from my room.

## CHAPTER 2

After supper, Mom and Dad gave me permission to go camping with Dave and Jerry. Mom became too motherly when she reminded me that my sleeping bag was meant for me and no one else. Dad stepped in and offered to help me attach my sleeping roll and knapsack to my bicycle inside the garage, which I gladly accepted. When he finished, I straddled the seat and prepared to leave.

“You’re a woman now,” he said to me, “so your mother worries.” He stood there in his police officer’s uniform. His open shirt revealed an explosion of freckles like mine. He scratched at the base of his well-trimmed auburn hair and I asked if the scar there bothered him.

He ignored my question and kissed me on the forehead. A slight breeze blew dust between his blue sedan and us. The rear end of Dad's car sat on jacks and my brother Ted rolled out from underneath it. Blonde-haired like Krissy and Mom, and five years older than me, my brother was shirtless and handsome.

"Nanny Lou's a scrapper," Ted said as he wiped grease from his hands onto his blue jeans and smiled up at me with a grease-stained face. "She can take care of herself."

*Yeah. Just like I did when Dave tried to make out with me,* I thought. I had developed a mean right hook over the years and a short fuse over the past seven months. Together they were a combination I struggled to control.

"Have fun ghost hunting," Ted said.

"Be careful," Dad added. "There's something weird about that place."

I saw his concern as a way out of going and I leaped for the chance.

"I can stay home if you'd like. There's plenty that needs done around here."

Dad shook his head. "Promise me you'll stay on the ridge. That burned up house is old and unsafe and I don't want you going inside."

I nodded.

"Love you," he called as I pedaled off. I waved goodbye and started up Franklin Street for *The Evans Everything Store*. The store was a thrift shop that handled many unusual items in addition to ordinary junk. People actually came from miles away when they needed something they couldn't find elsewhere.

The brick store's extraordinary character was obvious from the long mural painted on its east side. An ocean scene covered the entire section, painted by Dave's aunt and some of the town's local artists. I rode past the store and turned down an alley that led to the rear of the store. I dismounted next to Dave's rusted blue Tempo, which had its trunk packed with camping gear and was waiting for mine. I put my gear on top and looked around. Neither he nor Jerry was there.

The back of the store was a junkyard of sorts, overrun by tires and refrigerators and stoves missing their doors. At a window, I could hear the weather-strained voice of Dave's Aunt Peggy inside the store. She was showing someone her collection of wind chimes, which tinkled whenever she touched them. She was a pleasant woman, but all business when it came to making a sale, or keeping Dave and Amy in line.

Peggy Evans and her husband Randall had taken in their nephew Dave and niece Amy after their parents died in a traffic accident several years ago. The couple had allowed Dave to use a thirty-foot mobile home trailer behind the store for a clubhouse. Randall Evans had bought the trailer

for junk more than ten years ago. In the course of time, Mr. Evans had apparently forgotten all about its existence, and we had gradually piled junk all around the outside of the trailer until it was hidden from sight. Now Dave and his friends had privacy whenever he was not actually needed to help his uncle or his aunt.

I went behind the clubhouse, pushed open a wooden panel and stepped inside. Dave's computer chair sat empty behind a steel office desk. In a far corner, someone—probably Jerry—had littered the floor with chocolate Yoo-hoo bottles. Magazines cluttered the La-Z-Boy recliner there, and one of them may have been a magazine of nude women, but I didn't look. The old clubhouse seemed different, especially now that I had stopped coming to it.

I headed back out into the stifling heat. Dave and Jerry had their backs to me, waiting for me at the car. Dave had on the same clothes and still looked untouched by perspiration. Jerry had replaced his sweaty *AC/DC* shirt for a dry blue one, although his belted jeans still hung dangerously low.

As I walked up, Jerry criticized me to Dave for riding a bicycle.

"It's good exercise," I said in my defense.

Jerry immediately apologized when he turned around and saw me.

"Jerry's just bothered because you're the only one our age who doesn't have their own car," Dave said.

I shrugged. I suspected I would have a car before I left for college next week, which was the reason Ted was working on Dad's car.

"You at least have a driver's license," Jerry said. "Right?"

I said nothing about it. I had my license, but if Jerry was going to give me attitude about it, then he could figure it out himself.

They looked at me, waiting for my reply. I looked at them and wondered if any of them was going to tell me they would miss having me around once I left for college. While we waited, a small breeze escaped from the overweight sky and cooled the sweat bubbling on my prickly skin. The coolness made me aware of how much I was sweating and how much I had come to hate our most humid time of year.

Jerry broke the moment by uttering, "Dammit, Nance, it makes no difference if you do or not."

I shrugged again.

"I didn't mean to piss you off."

"Let's just go," I said and sighed. "This muggy weather's getting to me."

“To us all,” Dave said. He glanced at his watch and added, “Are you guys ready to do this?”

Jerry and I nodded. I let him ride shotgun so I could sit alone in the back. Dave looked disappointed. I ignored him the entire drive as I basked in the cool air currents coming through the open windows.

### CHAPTER 3

A narrow little chasm above Ridgewood, called Widow’s Ravine, contains Myers Mansion the way a bed of thorny branches contains a wasp’s nest. Originally called Farrell’s Estate, Myer’s Mansion was built by a New York playwright named Edward Farrell who became even more popular writing blockbuster screenplays for Hollywood.

Farrell owned the mansion until his wife’s mysterious death there. Some say she committed suicide by leaping into the ravine. Others claim she was pushed into the ravine by either a jealous lover or husband. Whichever, on certain nights when the air stills, people claim you can hear the sound of her screams as she plunges to her death. (For the record, the three of us had never heard anyone screaming from Widow’s Ravine before that night.)

The other urban legend here is of Benjamin Myers, a cranky recluse who bought Edward Farrell’s mansion after Farrell left. Myers lived with a couple dozen hunting dogs inside the place. Except during the winter when the snow fell high and the steep roads grew impassable, he drove his truck to town on Fridays to buy groceries and a cheap bottle of bourbon. He talked to no one except the cashiers and bartender, and the Salvation Army Santa Claus during Christmas.

One humid August Friday, Ben Myers did not come into town. When he stayed away again the following week, the town’s chief of police and a deputy went out to see if all was okay. Upon finding his truck on the premises, and after knocking at the open door and calling his name for several minutes, the officers entered the house. Everything seemed in order until they came upon Myers’s bedroom. Inside, the dogs lay dead on the floor and Ben Myers’s corpse sat at the foot of his bed. He and his twenty-four dogs had frozen to death during the hottest month of the year.

The legend goes on that the restless spirits of Ben Myers’s dogs now haunt the place, patrolling the grounds as vicious guardian hellhounds. My brother’s best friend insists that when he was driving the stretch of road in front of the house one night last summer, he saw a pack of dogs trotting through the front yard. When he aimed his flashlight at them, they vanished. As he was driving away, he felt the weight of animals jumping onto the hood and roof of his car. Before he could roll up his window, something grabbed and ripped his shirtsleeve. He sped away and when he returned home, he discovered something had scratched the car’s paint and dented the hood and roof.

“Probably raccoons,” Dave had said when we first heard the story. “Freaking big raccoons.”

At last we were settled atop Myers Ridge, our camp overlooking the crumbling mansion alongside the wild grasses and trees growing thick over the length of Widow’s Ravine. I nudged Jerry and said, “Remember when you thought the Widow Farrell grabbed your shoulder?”

Jerry sat in front of his tent and smiled. I grinned and he and Dave chuckled. Then the two of them fondly recalled the time four years ago when Jerry had slipped out of his tent to go pee. A branch fell on his shoulder, and for a moment he thought the skeletal hand of Widow Farrell had grabbed him. And for a moment, his shriek had convinced me she had.

They laughed and teased each other and my mind was whisked away for a moment to how much fun we had when things were simpler. Now we were out of school and I was getting ready to move away and attend college, crossing a barrier into sudden independence without parents or siblings or dear friends at my side. And of my dearest friends, this would likely be the last time the three of us would ever do this again.

I thought about how I had become to hate change—that melancholic act of giving up the familiar and cherished for the new and unknown. I swiped away a tear, swallowed the hardness in my throat, and unrolled my sleeping bag to use as a seat in front of my tent.

Jerry pestered Dave to start the campfire. “Before this blasted heat melts my candy bars,” he cried. It was his ritual to devour four or five s’mores before eating any hotdogs.

The tinder caught fire and soon our campfire was ablaze. An hour later, my stomach was stretched tight from hotdogs, potato chips, s’mores and root beer. I watched the sun drop behind the western end of Myers Ridge and the sky turn an over-ripened blue, then purple, and finally a star-filled velvet vastness. A harvest moon sat over Ridgewood to the east, and I stared at its face as if waiting for it to speak and tell me things would be all right.

The moon stayed silent. Dave stoked the fire and Jerry toasted and ate the remaining marshmallows. I stretched out and gazed into the heavens. Dave played his harmonica. Jerry fetched his guitar and played along. It was beautiful and sad and I fought away the tears.

Then the sharp sound of a stick snapping behind my tent caused my back to go rigid. I bolted upright and faced the direction of someone or some “thing” coming toward us.

## CHAPTER 4

A human figure appeared silhouetted by the night sky. I scooted toward Jerry until I bumped into his guitar.

“Who’s there?” Dave asked. He sounded angry.

For a moment, there was uncomfortable silence. Then a stunning woman stepped from the shadows and stood in our midst. Fiery hues of our campfire glinted from long black hair, a bronze face, and a long, sweeping black dress tied off at the waist. A white lace collar hung around her neck, and pearl buttons sparkled in a row between her ample breasts. Tall and curvy, she looked at me with mesmerizing and penetrating eyes—blacker than either her hair or dress. She seemed to be waiting for my reply. I choked at the dread lodged in my throat.



She looked at Dave and said, “I walk up here whenever I can’t sleep. When I saw the fire through the trees, I became concerned.” She looked at Jerry. “We don’t need a grassfire burning down the neighborhood.”

Jerry sounded speechless as he slowly formed the words. “You ... you live around here?”

“Only in the summertime.” She looked at me and lingered with a bewitching gaze. “What brings you up here on such a beautiful night?”

“Who’s asking?” Dave’s rudeness surprised me.

The woman ignored him and said to me, “May I sit? The journey here has tired me.”

I offered the mysterious and bewitching woman a place on my sleeping bag. She seemed to float to it as she gracefully sat down. She delicately tucked her legs beside herself and covered her bare feet beneath her dress.

I introduced myself, despite the glare from Dave. Jerry followed and Dave remained silent.

“Nance,” the woman said, and she said my name several times as though she were trying to either make sense of it or commit it to memory.

“Short for Nancy,” I said. “Nancy Louise.”

She smiled at me with a motherly look—the sort of look a parent has when their child does something wonderful beyond their expectations.

“My true name is Ademia Petrakis,” she said. “I disliked my married name, so I rid myself of it.” She looked at me and curled her lips into a smile. “Have you ever hated something so much you wanted to be rid of it?”

I became locked on her gaze as I struggled to say no. I ended up nodding my head. Then she looked at Jerry.

“And why do you mistake me for a gypsy witch?”

Jerry shifted suddenly and the neck of his guitar struck my mouth. I cried out in pain and Ademia put a finger to her lips. I immediately quieted, although I wanted to curse aloud because of the pain. Ademia shook her head at me and turned her attention back to Jerry. She said, “I suppose I do look like a gypsy. My mother was Brazilian. My father was Greek. But I am no witch.”

“No one said you’re a witch,” David said.

“Not by voice. But our faces speak just as loud, if you but look and listen.”

“Really?” Dave said. He sat with his arms crossed and his elbows resting on his knees. “No offence, lady, but that sound like a load of crap.”

I cringed, but Ademia seemed untroubled by the comment.

“Everything has a voice, young man. When I was a child, I once witnessed my papa engaged in conversation with the dead. When I questioned him, he said all I had to do was dare to listen and I would hear too.” Using her long and slender hands, she gestured at the field behind us. I looked into the blackness and saw fireflies blinking in the air.

“When I listened,” Ademia said, “the will-o-wisp brought me here and the phantom told me to stay.”

“Ph-phantom,” Jerry said. “What phantom?”

“The one who screams in the night.”

“Y-you’ve heard her? The banshee? Screaming?”

Ademia nodded. “She only speaks to those who dare listen.”

“We don’t believe in ghosts,” Dave said, “especially talking ones.”

“Then why are you here? Don’t you come every year looking for that elusive apparition known as Ben Myers?”

My surprise erupted and I said, “How did you know that?”

“I see you every summer. You camp here with the others and laugh during the night. None of you ever really look for ghosts because none of you really want to believe that they exist.”

“They *don’t* exist,” Dave said. Then he snorted. “You’re a grown woman. You should know that.”

“But still you come year after year.” Ademia’s gaze fixed upon Jerry. “Why?”

“Tradition,” Jerry said.

“And because we’re friends,” Daryl added. “We come because we have fun telling ghost stories around a campfire and scaring one another. If ghosts like Ben Myers and his dogs were real, we wouldn’t be here.”

“I would,” Jerry said. “If ghosts are real, then I want to know. All my life I’ve been waiting to see a real ghost.”

Ademia drew her eyebrows into a frown and looked at me. “And what about you, Nance? How do you believe?”

I glanced at the others. Each one seemed waiting for her answer.

“Probably not,” I said. “I’ve never seen proof, only old photographs that could be fake.”

Ademia looked past me and out at the field. She said, “You who talk about ghosts and say you don’t believe have faces loud with belief.” She looked at me again and our eyes seemed to lock. “And one of you is deathly terrified. You know genuine terror.”

My head swam with chilling memories of a terrible time when someone fired a shot from a pistol while my father the police officer answered a domestic disturbance call. The bullet struck him in the head and lodged in his brain. He stopped breathing on the way to the hospital, but the EMTs brought him back. He stopped breathing during surgery. And he stopped breathing while he lay in a coma for several weeks.

“Be careful the ground you tread on,” Ademia said. She stood then, as easily and gracefully as she had sat. “Goodnight young sirs and lady. Be sure to tend your fire before you sleep tonight. If you sleep.”

The three of us were silent as Ademia slipped into the darkness. When several moments passed, Dave said, “What a freaking nut job.”

Before I could scold him for poking fun, a woman screamed from the ravine.

## CHAPTER 5

I jumped because of the frightful sound. As I turned toward the ravine, Jerry pointed down at the house. “It’s Ben Myers’s ghost.”

I started to stand to get a better look when one of Jerry’s beefy hands clutched my shirt and whisked me to my feet. The force snapped the front clasp of my bra and my breasts tumbled against my shirt. For a moment, I remembered Dave’s soft caresses while we embraced on the mattress in his clubhouse. For a moment, I remembered being in love.

I turned away and struggled without success to fix the undone clasp.

Jerry shouted. “You guys see it?”

“No,” Dave said. He sounded excited but also unconvinced.

I looked down at the burned remains of the house and saw Ben Myers’s ghost walking across the ash and grasses that had once been a floor. The ghost looked real, as solid as the foursome standing on the ridge above. Then the ghostly image wavered and disappeared.

“Did you see that?” Jerry said. He looked happy for a moment. Then fear contorted his face into an image of shocked realization. His breathing became forced. “It’s real. Ben Myers’s ghost is really real.” He trembled.

The wailing in the ravine stopped and the sound of barking dogs took its place. Jerry pushed away from me. He looked deathly white in the orange moonlight.

“H-hellhounds,” he said. “I hear them.” He stumbled backwards, tripped over his guitar and fell hard on his butt.

“I hear them, too,” I said as I drew closer to Dave. I reached out to him, then stopped. The confused look on his face made it clear that he didn’t hear the hellhounds. I turned back. The vicious barking below us had grown louder. As it drew closer, so did the brutal pounding of invisible paws against the ground.

“Run,” Jerry said. “They’re coming to get us.” He used his guitar to force himself up. Then he staggered away across brushy ground illuminated by moonlight.

“Jerry! What the hell. Where are you going?” Dave hollered before the surging howl of hounds drowned out his voice.

“This isn’t good,” I said. I tried to control the fear gripping me like a winter chill. “Dave, you’re the only one who doesn’t hear the hellhounds. But Jerry and I do and he’s scared. We need to calm him. I think Ademia warned us not to be afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” Dave sputtered. “First it was Ben Myers’s ghost. Now it’s hellhounds. You’re both crazy.” He pointed at the empty hillside. “There’s nothing there.” He started toward his tent. The barking grew louder. I saw a cluster of tiny blue-green blinking will-o-wisps swarming toward us. Behind the creatures of light, the pack of hellhounds now visible to me, came fast. They barked and growled and in their midst I saw their red eyes of death. I turned, perhaps screamed when I did, and ran.

When I ran past Dave, a hand tugged at my right shoulder. Fingers dug into the flesh and he brought me to a painful halt. I struggled to break free.

“Let me go,” I screamed.

“Calm down,” Dave said. He spun me around and slapped my face.

Tears stung my eyes and anger burned my cheeks. The moment stretched as I pondered why I had ever loved him. Then I slapped his face hard and was back in the moment. Dave reached for his quick-flaming cheek and I bolted and ran after Jerry.

I glanced back once to see the will-o-wisps fly through Dave’s body. The dogs came next, several of them passing through Dave who stood in their path.

*He doesn't believe, so he's not afraid. They're only after the ones who fear them.*

I wanted so much not to be afraid, but fear coursed through me all the same and hurried me to quicken my pace. I ran blindly into an angry black sea of brambles and thorny weeds that slapped and poked and grabbed at me, scratched my face and forearms, tore away long strands of hair, and scarred my jeans and tennis shoes.

The hellhounds came fast on my heels. The blinking lights were at my back. Ademia had called them will-o-wisps, but I knew they were beacons for the evil hellhounds coming after me, zeroing in on my fear of them. But more importantly, my fear of death.

My pounding heart pushed at my chest as I fought through the briars. My fear of death climbed into my throat and was blocked by the hard scream lodged there. I gasped to breathe; my inhaled and exhaled sounded like whimpers.

Then I was free from the briars. Jerry stood against the starry night sky, his back to me. He had reached the edge of Myers Ridge; there was nowhere else to go.

I ran toward my friend, afraid for him, terrified of what would happen when the horrible creatures behind me caught up to us. I told him not to be afraid. I knew the creatures were feeding from our fear.

As I put out my arms to embrace him, to smother him with love, to take away the fear I knew we shared, I tripped. Jerry turned and I missed him, stumbled past him and went over the edge of Myers Ridge.

## CHAPTER 6

For a moment, as I seemed suspended above the rocky ravine below, I knew I wanted to live.

A reflexive hand shot out and found Jerry's sweaty shirt. I clutched his shirt and the skin beneath it while my legs swung wide and I hovered for a moment in midair. Behind Jerry, the swarm of will-o-wisps glowed and the pack of hellhounds charged quick and hard at him.

"Save me," I said before my lower body crashed into the side of the cliff and the force knocked loose my grip of Jerry. Gravity pulled me away, and I began my descent to death on the rocky ground below.

In a flash, I thought about our lives: Dave's and Jerry's and mine. Like Dave, death had robbed Jerry of a father. And like Dave, all he ever wanted was a feeling of closeness, an intimacy, a powerful friendship to fill his emptiness. And that's what we were to each other: friends filling each other's emptiness.

I didn't want to die feeling empty.

I reached out for Jerry, one last gesture to find the way to fulfillment.

A pair of hands lunged at me and caught my extended forearms. Jerry yelled for Dave to help.

*Dave?*

Yes. He was there at Jerry's side.

Four sweaty hands grabbed my arms and pulled. They grabbed my armpits and shoulders and pulled harder. They grabbed the back of my pants and pulled harder still. I grabbed their feet and ankles, used their legs as lifelines, and hauled myself closer to them until our heaving bodies lay exhausted on the ground, arms and legs entwined, the three of us hugging and kissing and crying.

Above us, the growling and barking that had stormed from the briars ceased. The lights of the will-o-wisps twinkled out until only the stars looked down on us.

While we rested, Dave held me in his arms. I kissed him like I had always wanted to, but was so afraid. The spark I felt in my heart grew into a flame. As I looked at his face, at his eyes, his entire being glowed with a newness in the moonlight. But it wasn't he who was new.

I struggled my arms from my sleeves and took off my broken brassiere. Putting my arms back through my sleeves, Dave lifted an eyebrow and glanced at the white garment in my hand. I tossed it aside and took his face and kissed him again.

"I love you," I said.

He said it back. His voice trembled. Mine did too.

Jerry coughed and brought back our awareness of where we were, so we rose, headed back to camp, the three of us hand in hand. At the camp, we looked down at Myers Mansion where Ben and his hounds would never haunt the place again for us. No screams came from Widow's Ravine while we sat around the fire, told no ghost stories, and watched the sun come up on a new day.

That morning, I left Myers Ridge no longer feeling empty and afraid, and rode home with my two best friends, one step closer to finding fulfillment among the people who love me most.

~ *THE END* ~