CHAPTER 3

My teaching buddy John retired the year before me. With his considerable skill, and with mine acquired after many years of picking his brain during our numerous remodeling jobs, we began the task of fixing up the old place. I found it curious that the old house had remained vacant for so many years, or so it seemed. Homes of this type were quite popular and commanded a good price. It was only after a title search and an inquiry by a real estate agent friend that I located the owner. I was thrilled that he was willing to sell the old place. The owner was actually the elderly great-great nephew of the man who built the house.

It was unusual for homes of this period to have expensive slate roofs, especially in this part of the country. Most homes of the time were roofed with cedar shakes since the trees were so abundant in western Washington. It was fortunate for this house since slate is virtually indestructible. Its waterproof nature preserved the old house during its long years of seeming neglect. The house was situated on a large lot at the top of one of the highest hills in town. This location commanded a lovely view of the surrounding town and the Cascade Mountains to the east.

An immigrant lumberman who was drawn to the area by the abundant timber stands and the proximity to the Snohomish River built it in the 1880s. Large stands of virgin timber were harvested around Snohomish. The logs were floated down the river to be milled in the neighboring town of Everett, located on Puget Sound.

Rumor had it that the home's original owner was a bit eccentric. He was married but had no children. The house was quite large for a family of two and would have been considered luxurious for its time. It was one of the

first homes in town to have the modern conveniences of electricity and central heating. What little I knew of the original owner indicated that he was financially pretty well off. I could find no record of any employment and found it curious that he never seemed to have worked past his first few years of moving to the area. How then did he ever manage to build such an expensive house?

The house was situated near the street on a very large lot, especially for the neighborhood. It was well over an acre and sloped gently down to a wooded area where there were a few very large Douglas Firs. These trees were hundreds of years old and some of the few remaining giants spared from the axe in pre-environmental conscious times of the late 1800s. Between two of these giant trees was a large shed. When built it would have been called a "carriage house." Since carriages haven't been used for over a hundred years, it most likely housed a variety of automobiles during its life. It also served as a handyman's shop, housing a large collection of old tools and furniture in various states of disrepair.

It was apparent that building had an addition added at some time that gave it an "L" shape. The structure had a set of large doors that swung out to allow egress for carriages or automobiles. On the side of the newer part of the building was an entry door with a window beside it. The key to the door was hidden under a rock beside the step. The real estate agent told me where the key was when he first showed me the place.

The back portion of the building, which appeared to be the first part built, had a wooden floor made of heavy timbers, unlike the newer part which had a concrete floor. At the back of the older section was another large set of wooden doors. The exterior of these doors faced a gravel alleyway, across from which was a wall of dense vegetation. This arrangement hid the doors from street view.

Off to one side of the older set of doors was an ancient kitchen chair; it had chrome legs and yellow plastic upholstery that had cracked in places revealing a thin layer of cotton padding. This type of chair was very popular in the 1950s. I noticed it still had its "Do Not Remove Under Penalty of Law" tag hanging under the seat. It brought back scary memories from my

youth of being incarcerated with the types of villains you used to see in "B" gangster movies. Needless to say, I never tempted fate by removing one of these tags.

On the chair's seat lay a pile of yellowed newspapers and some ancient, empty Prince Albert pipe tobacco cans. I had to laugh when I saw them. It reminded me of my grandfather who had smoked Prince Albert tobacco. Advertisements of the 1940s and '50s touted the advantage of purchasing Prince Albert tobacco in a can. It was argued that it kept the tobacco fresher. As youngsters my friends and I would phone the local drug store and ask if they had Prince Albert in a can. When the answer was yes, we would laughingly shout into the phone, "Then you'd better let him out!" We'd then hysterically slam down the receiver. I'm sure every other kid in town played that joke at least once. It seemed funny at the time, but now I'm not so sure.

The older set of doors were secured by a very stout, old-fashioned lock for which I didn't have a key. I hadn't bothered trying to open them. Needless to say, my priority was getting the house livable, the shed could wait until another day.

The first order of business dictated that the home's mechanical systems needed to be inspected and upgraded or repaired as needed. These included the plumbing, wiring, and the heating system. A cursory inspection indicated that the wiring was in good condition and posed no immediate danger. The local electric company was contacted to hook the power back up. With the electricity back on we were able to replace the burned-out light bulbs which gave us light to work. We were then able to string extension cords for power tools needed to do additional repairs.

The next order was to replace a few cracked windowpanes, and then on to the plumbing. It was intriguing that the plumbing was in remarkable condition for the home's age. Very high-quality materials had been used in its construction. There didn't seem to be much work needed other than replacing a few faucet washers and installing a new water heater. Since it was early summer, I felt the heating system could wait till fall. It was obvious that no shortcuts or inferior materials were used in the construction of this fine old home.

Meghan, my son Seth, and my youngest daughter Gracie showed up, as they had time for several weeks with their teenagers to help with the project. Their young muscle power helped with cleaning, painting, and other various jobs as needed. My good friends, John and Pat, seemed to be there as much as I was, helping, encouraging and providing drinks and sandwiches for a group of typically ravenous kids. With the help of family and friends I was able to move into the old place in early July. Though not totally done, the place was clean, livable, and looked better than it had in decades!

CHAPTER 4

Now that the house was inhabitable, and I had been working like a dog for what seemed months, I decided to take some time off and do some fishing and hiking with the grandkids. I guess it's no surprise when your teenage grandchildren no longer want to "hang out with grandpa", but it was a bit of a disappointment anyway. Fortunately, Meghan's youngest was a lively15 year-old who was more than happy to flee the confining restraints imposed by her mother. This sweet girl, named Emily, was often teased by her siblings and cousins as being grandpa's favorite. Though we both denied it, it was obviously true. She was so much like my Linda, full of curiosity, kidding, and laughter. My personality has always been jovial so the two of us had nothing but fun together.

After a week of hiking and fishing in the Cascades we returned home late one night. I dropped Emily off at Meghan's and drove home. The place looked fine. I parked in the driveway beside the house and entered though the side door by the kitchen. I stopped at the store on the way home and picked up a few groceries and a newspaper. I placed the paper on the table and then turned to put the eggs and milk in the fridge and glanced out the window at the back yard. I noticed a light on in the shed and it startled me. I didn't remember checking the power or seeing if there were any lights working in the old building. My first thought was that John must have been out there dropping off materials for our next project. He must have gotten the power figured out while I was away, I thought.

I grabbed a flashlight, walked outside and headed for the shed. I didn't see John's old pickup or any other vehicle for that matter. Strange I thought... I cautiously entered through the door at the side of the building. I heard movement in the back of the building. I shouted, "John!"

"I'm not John…" An old voice, I thought.

"Who's there?" I countered.

"It's me Henry."

"Henry who?"

"Henry Jorgansen," he answered as he walked out of the shadows and into the glow of an old hanging light bulb.

He looked to be about eighty years old or more and had a few wisps of snow-white hair ringing the sides of his balding head. He was quite thin and was wearing an old pair of bib overalls and a flannel shirt. On his feet were some old deck shoes. He had a few days' growth of beard and the largest, brightest blue eyes I had ever seen. He seemed neat and clean. He extended his hand as he walked toward me.

"Sorry to startle you!" he said as he firmly shook my hand, "You must be Pete. I was hoping to get my things and be gone before you got back. I had to meet you eventually, so I guess now's as good a time as any!"

"Got back?" I said.

"Yes, you were hiking with Emily weren't you?"

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"There's not much about what goes on in Snohomish that I don't know. I hope you like the place; I wouldn't have sold it just to anybody."

"That's why your name sounded familiar," I said. I'd only seen it once in writing and that was on the deed when I completed the purchase of the property. "But why are you here?"

"I needed to pick up my tools. If you remember, the purchase agreement stated that the property did not include my personal items. It's just that I've been away and finally got a chance to return and get them," he explained.

"I didn't think anyone had lived here for years, where have you been all this time?" As he answered I noticed the old set of doors behind him were unlocked and slightly ajar.

"Right here," he answered.

"Here?"

"Well yes and no. You see I sort of come and go, and when I return, I come through here."

"Through here you say? I don't understand."

"Oh yes, I see you've noticed the big doors are no longer locked. I go home through them too," he explained.

"Huh?"

"Yes, my home was here, but then that's not entirely true. I think you'd better come over here and sit down," he said. He led me to the old chair, tossed the papers on the floor and sat me down. He pulled up an old wooden apple box and sat on it a few feet in front of me.

"You see I owned this place for over forty-seven years. I inherited from my father who inherited from his father. It's been in the family ever since Uncle Sven Jorgansen built it. I, like my great-great Uncle Sven, never had any children. I am the last of the line...and as you can see, I'm getting along in years.

"I used to see you and your wife drive by this place with your kids after church on Sundays. You'd slow down and look it over. Year after year you seemed to take the long way home just to check it out. At first, it was

with the wife and kids. When the kids left it was just you and your wife. A few years ago I noticed you stopped coming by. I then heard your wife had died". He looked at me with a sad, kind, and knowing look. "I know she was a lovely lady."

Saddened, I answered, "Yes she was and I miss her greatly."

Henry's blue eyes saddened more and moistened a little as they met mine. "Yes, I know," he answered, "I lost my dear wife Violet nearly 20 years ago. Didn't know how I'd go on without her. I'm sure you were as grief stricken as anyone could be, I know I was. But I have come to learn that those who have passed are still nearby and that the separation is only temporary." He spoke softly as he continued, "This earth and our existence here just didn't happen. It's all part of an eternal plan. Linda and Violet are fine and happy; when we're united with them it will seem as if we were never parted."

I felt truth in the old man's words. He lifted my spirits and the hope I received from his words made my loss easier to take. It all made sense; his words felt familiar.

I thanked him for his counsel and told him it had always been our dream to buy this place and fix it up. "With Linda gone the dream died for a while. Finally, I had to do something; I just couldn't sit around feeling sorry for myself. It took some time tracking you down through a realtor friend to see if you'd sell the place."

"Yes, you and a considerable number of other people tried to "track me down." Some wanted it for "a bed and breakfast", others for an antique shop, one guy even wanted to make a photography studio out of it! I wouldn't sell it to any of them."

"Why not?"

"They all wanted it for the wrong reasons. You were different; your interests have always been in helping others. You see, I checked you out! You were an Eagle Scout. You were also in the top ten in your high school class, weren't you?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Yes, but how did you know, we've never met?"

"Just wait...I know much more about you. You had a chance for a full ride academic scholarship to Washington State University, but you joined the Army instead. Went to Vietnam in '64; I believe you served with the 82nd Airborne out of Ft. Bragg. You wanted to save the world from communism! You were shot in the leg while descending from a parachute. You received the bronze star for helping your buddies get to safety, all the while bleeding like a stuck pig. Isn't that right?"

"Hardly anyone knows these things. Vietnam is something I've spent the last forty-five years trying to forget. How in the world did you find out?"

"Oh, I know much more. You came back from 'Nam, went to WSU, met and married Linda at school and came here to teach. You were probably the most popular teacher in the school. You coached, tutored, mentored young teachers and volunteered for just about everything no one else would do. Why?" he asked.

"Why not?" I answered, feeling bewildered and rather uncomfortable, "How in the world do you know these things? I've never met you before. I don't even recall ever seeing you around town!"

"I have been checking on you ever since I first noticed you and Linda driving by this old place. I saw what you did in 'Nam. I then saw you at WSU. I remember you and Linda snuggled up on the steam grate outside the old bookstore on cold winter evenings, just to keep warm and be together."

I laughed at the memory. We both lived in dorms and members of the opposite sex were strictly forbidden to visit the others' living quarters in those days. WSU's main buildings were heated from a central steam plant with large pipes transporting steam through tunnels throughout the campus. At various locations were large grates where warm air exhausted from the steam pipes. These were favorite places to spend some time with the opposite sex. Especially on cold dark winter nights, kind of a precursor to modern day hot tubbing.

He continued, "I watched you graduate and then saw you drive off for your first job here in Snohomish with two little kids in a 1961 VW Beetle! I have followed you for years. I needed someone that could be trusted with the secrets of this property. My background check of you was something you never could have imagined!"

"Background check—but wait, how could you have seen me in Vietnam and at WSU if you never knew who I was until after I moved to Snohomish? You're nearly old enough to be my father. You'd have been too old for the Army! Your whole story doesn't make sense!"

He looked at me but now those bright blue eyes were laughing!