

The Archer Kids Mystery Series

Book One

Mystery on Phantom Ridge

By

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Contents

Chapter 1: The Staring Eye!	Page 3
Chapter 2: Mysterious Danger!	Page 6
Chapter 3: The Secret Tunnel	Page 9
Chapter 4: No Way Out!	Page 13
Chapter 5: The beast!	Page 16
Chapter 6: The Rescue	Page 19
Chapter 7: The Mystery Unfolding	Page 21
Chapter 8: The Blessing	Page 24
Chapter 9: The Gift	Page 28

Chapter 1

The Staring Eye!

"Can you believe it, Ben? We're finally here!"

Anne was so excited about moving to Wisconsin from California. She, being sensitive, animal loving, and ten years old, had been looking forward to this move for a long time. She knew Wisconsin was a great place for all sorts of animals such as cows, dogs, horses, kittens ... -you name it!

Ben was her adventurous thirteen year old brother who loved to explore. His imagination was as big as the wide, open sky. Ben and Anne were two peas in a pod. They were inseparable!

Their mom and dad, John and Mary Archer, were asked to move closer to John's publishing company in Milwaukee. Mr. Archer was a writer of children's books. Their mom loved the idea of living in Wisconsin--the forests, hills, snow, lakes, and all the farms. She loved it all!

Changing schools for Anne and Ben was not a problem since their mom had decided to home-school them a few years ago. Their home, just off "Old H" county road, was nestled in the forest on the edge of the Kettle Moraine, a hilly area with many trees. Glacier movements from long ago formed the hills and valleys.

"Ben said, "Huh?"

Anne yelled, "I said can you believe we're finally here? Ya know... Wisconsin, the Kettle Moraine!"

Ben wasn't listening to his younger sister. Know way! His mind was far off on some dangerous adventure. He was a day dreamer.

"Oh... Yea... Great." Ben whispered almost as an after thought. "What do you say we go exploring, Anne?", Ben then blurted out. "You know as well as I do, Anne, the Kettle Moraine is plum full of tall trees, winding trails, cliffs, and animals. Today is the first day of our summer vacation from home school. Let's not waste it!"

Anne ran into their living room and asked, "Mom? Is it OK if Ben and I go exploring? We won't go far and, who knows, we might meet some friends. "

"That's fine, honey. But I want you both back home before 5:00 P. M. We're having a Family Night tonight--just us...a time to be together. OK?"

"OK Mom.", Ben and Anne said together.

As they walked along a winding road that led deep into the forest, they came upon a road side fruit stand. Apples, cherries, plums, and strawberries were for sale.

A few cars had stopped along the road and a handful of people were at the stand looking over the baskets filled with tempting fruits. Ben noticed him first. Off to the side of the fruit stand, a few yards back, in the woods, was an old man sitting on a decaying tree stump.

"Anne!", Ben whispered, "Don't look now but that old man over there... is...is staring at us!" Anne could wait only a second or two. Then she made a quick glance toward the mysterious man. She felt the hair on the back of her neck begin to stand straight out. The man had only one eye--One big, bloodshot eye. And it was staring right at her!

"Be-war," the old man suddenly mumbled.

"Ben," Anne poked her brother. "Ben, he's trying to say something to us."

"I think your right, Anne," Ben said. "Look!", Ben shouted. "He's waving us to come closer!"

Anne, full of fear, began to move slowly backward in the direction of their home. Ben grabbed her arm and began to approach that staring eye. They got within ten feet of him, trembling; half scared out of their minds.

The blood shot eye never blinked. It looked deep, long. It never broke its gaze.

For a brief second, Anne and Ben's eyes crawled down from the old man's eye to his slowly gaping mouth.

"No teeth!", Ben and Anne thought together. His muffled words of terror spilled out again.

"Beee-waaarrrrrr!"

Ben, scared, yet always impatient, squeaked out the word, "What?" The old man's eye continued its' searching stare.

He then mumbled, "Be-war O-da Fantom's Reedge!"

Anne, with a sense of caring boldness, quizzed the old man asking, "Did you say, 'Beware of the Phantom's Ridge'?" The staring eye then and only then blinked.

Chapter 2

Mysterious Danger

Ben and Anne got back home well before 5:00 P. M. Family Night went well--games, popcorn, story telling. At bed time, their dad told them a story about when he was their age, and then he joined them in saying prayers.

Just before lights out, Ben, who was lying on his bed asked his dad, "Do you know anything about Phantom Ridge?"

His dad, sitting on the side of the bed, smiled and told him, "Ben, it's just some silly legend about something spooky that supposedly lives up by the edge of Moaning Woods. Some of the folks from this area believe it's not a good idea to go up there. They say there is a big, old house...almost a castle up there on a high ridge or cliff. I wouldn't worry about it. There is no such thing as ghosts anyway." Ben smiled, hugged his dad, then his mom, and as they left the room, he turned out the light.

The next morning, Ben, full of excitement, peered over his cereal bowl. He looked at his sleepy-eyed sister, Anne, and said, "Want to go on a picnic with me in the forest today?"

Anne's face lit up. "Sure!" she said. "Sounds like fun!"

Ben then added, "I'm going up on the ridge at the edge of Moaning Woods to check out this so called phantom."

Anne's face grew pale. Her heart began to pound. "You...you are ga...going up there alone?"

Ben smiled and said, "No silly! You're coming with me--on *our* picnic."

Anne swallowed hard and said, "Well ... I guess it's sort of OK."

After their picnic basket was packed, they started on their journey to check out this Phantom Ridge mystery. Both felt it was just someone's over rated imagination anyway.

They walked about a mile on a winding path that led through many tall pine trees. Now and then the sun would sneak its rays down through the thick tree covering creating an eerie scene of bright, narrow light beams dancing in the shaded ground. The path they chose was seldom traveled since it was quite over grown in spots with weeds. Anne got the feeling that maybe nobody used this path ... anymore. As the forest became denser, Anne became more fearful.

After walking together for some time, Ben turned to his loyal sister and said, "Look, Anne! There it is!"

Anne gazed at him and yelled, "Look at what?"

Ben pointed and said, "At that big old mansion or whatever that run down grey building is over there overlooking that cliff."

Anne, scared half to death, blurted out, "Ah...let's go home now Ben. I...I've seen all I want to see."

He said, "Come on, Sis. Let's have our picnic over there on that small clearing."

Anne took a deep breath and thought to herself, "Oh! Here we go again!"

Soon after they sat, a strange wind began to rustle through the trees. It made a faint, groaning sound as if a small child were crying, lost and forgotten.

Ben spoke up, prompted by the sound, "Yup. Now I know why they call it the Moaning Woods. Sounds like somebody groaning or moaning."

Anne then quietly turned her head and for some unknown reason began looking up at the great, dark window on the third floor of that old, spooky mansion. Her blood ran cold! She gasped! Ben quickly turned and looked up.

"Ben!", she cried. "There are two large, piercing red eyes glowing down at us from that huge window!" Just then, something with sharp claws grabbed onto her shoulder!

Chapter 3

The Secret Tunnel

Anne, ready to faint, turned her head slightly to the right. She found herself eye to eye and nose to nose with a baby raccoon! This little guy almost seemed to crack a goofy grin. Then he licked Anne's nose with his tongue.

Ben thought he would die of laughter. He said, "Well, Anne, I guess you've found a friend." Anne scooped up her small visitor and held him in her lap. The little guy seemed to cuddle closer and closer almost as if they had been made for each other.

Anne's fear left her and her love for animals took over. Smiling, she nestled him under her chin and spoke tenderly, "You little rascal you! Why you almost scared the life right out of me!"

Just as she finished her sentence, the young raccoon eyed a half of a ham sandwich on the picnic blanket. His searching nose began to sniff and that was all he needed. In a split second, he was out of Anne's arms and onto the blanket helping himself to a tasty lunch. Anne and Ben couldn't help but chuckle.

After this funny varmint ate his fill, he then looked at Anne, then Ben. With the blink of an eye, he turned and began running toward the dark mansion.

Anne, without thinking, grabbed her brother's hand and said, "Come on! We've got to follow him. He's our new friend. I wouldn't want him to get hurt."

Ben then complained, "Anne! Let him go! We don't want to go near that mansion. Maybe its haunted or something. Don't forget those two red eyes."

Without even a glance his way and her mind made up, she said, "You dragged me along to this place. Now I'm dragging you!"

They were about fifteen feet behind their new, little, forest friend when he suddenly disappeared. About two hundred feet from the old house, the raccoon somehow crawled through some old rocks. He just disappeared right into the ground. Ben found the hole in the rocks into which the animal had climbed. With a queer look on his face that said "What in the world are we getting into?", he began to pull out rocks and dirt piece by piece.

Suddenly, to their surprise, they had uncovered a secret entrance to a damp, underground tunnel. Ben and Anne both swallowed hard and then proceeded down the forgotten, hidden passageway. He pulled out his trusty flashlight that he always carried in his back pocket and turned it on lighting their way in what was total darkness.

Anne and Ben were terrified! Anne held on tightly to Ben's arm. She whispered, "What if there is some kind of monster living in this tunnel?"

Ben, scared also but trying to reassure her said, "Come on Anne! No monster would want to live in this dark, musty place." Then as they proceeded, he mumbled quietly to himself, "At least I hope not."

The tunnel, about five feet underground, seemed very old. There were spiders, sticky webs, and knurled roots everywhere. As they kept walking, they both had to keep tearing at thick, dusty cobwebs. These gooey spider traps and all the dead bugs encased in them made Anne and Ben's flesh crawl.

Anne finally saw them. Two tiny, green eyes were peering out from the darkness. Anne whispered, "There he is! I'm going to call him Snoopy. Let's follow him, Ben."

Ben, amazed at his sister's new found bravery, said, "OK. OK. I guess so. If that raccoon is important to you."

After walking about five minutes in this frightful place, they reached a large puddle of murky water. It must have stretched on about twenty feet on the floor of tunnel.

Anne yelled, "Yuk! Why couldn't this tunnel be dry? I hate walking in this slimy water."

Ben then saw three sets of beady, orange eyes swimming toward them. He spoke to Anne with a chill in his voice. "Ah...Anne. If Snoopy's eyes are green, who or what belongs to those orange eyes coming right toward us?"

Within a split second, Anne screamed, "Rats!" They began to run kicking and splashing totally forgetting all of the horrible spider webs clinging to their bodies.

Somehow they got away from the rats and back on to dryer ground. Ben, trying to kick off some of the mud from his shoes, said, "Boy, that was a close one!"

Anne, not missing a beat, stared bug-eyed at Ben and said slowly, "Well Ben, You've got something on your left shoulder and its crawling right toward your neck!"

Ben's eyes widened as he carefully turned to look at his left shoulder. "Yikes!", he screamed. A huge, furry spider was crawling on his shirt toward his neck. In one second it would be on his neck, down inside his shirt biting away.

Ben quickly took his flash light and used it to brush off the spider. He then shuddered and squeaked out, "I hate spiders! I can't stand em! I can handle allot of things but I can't handle spiders!"

Anne looked in front of them where Ben's flashlight was now shining. There was Snoopy standing right in front of a huge wooden door. Ben looked up and said, "Wow! It must be eight feet tall...and the bottom of it is rotting. Look at all that mold."

The massive moss and mold covered door was open about four inches. Snoopy quickly slipped through the opening. Ben and Anne opened the door a little further. The door must not have turned on its rusty hinges for a hundred years. A heavy, loud creaking sound occurred as they pushed the massive door open. The two adventurers quickly snuck through the doorway.

Once the kids were inside the gloomy room, Snoopy, out of nowhere, jumped safely into Anne's arms. He did this so fast that she fell back against the old door. It slammed shut. Ben tried to open it. Locked!

Chapter 4

No Way Out!

"What are we going to do?", cried Anne.

"Well, gee--Ah ... I think we're stuck here.", Ben said slowly as his eyes searched around the ghastly, dusty, huge basement of the old mansion.

"Look over in that corner!", Ben snapped. There, in one corner, was a huge, iron cage, empty, with a large padlock hanging unlocked on the door. Without taking his eyes off the massive cage, Ben said quietly, "I bet the phantom imprisons the children it catches and locks them in there."

Anne, with a hopeless, frightened look on her face, then said, "We're in deep trouble now. I'm scared Ben."

The two explorers began to think this phantom mystery was more than they had bargained for. Ben led Anne and Snoopy. They tip toed carefully so as not to make noise. Snoopy crawled up on Anne's right shoulder. Maybe he felt he could get a better view from there.

They soon found themselves at the base of a long, stone stairway that led up to what must be the first floor. With great fear in their hearts, they began to slowly walk up the stairs. Ben carefully grabbed a hold of the tarnished, brass doorknob on the door. He turned the knob and gently opened the door.

There, looming over them on the other side of the door was the phantom! Tall, broad, very black! Even its head was veiled with a black hood. Ben, Anne, and Snoopy let out a terrifying scream!

As two long arms began to reach for them, Anne and Ben darted like jacket rabbits around the hideous specter. They ran through the kitchen, through the sitting room, and on into the vast library with 12 foot ceilings. They could hear the phantom's heavy footsteps coming closer and closer.

""We're trapped!", Ben yelled. "There's only one way out and that's through the door the phantom will come through any second!"

"We're goners Ben!", screamed Anne. Just then, Snoopy jumped from Anne's right shoulder up on to a nearby book shelf built into the wall. As the little critter knocked off a brown, leather book on to the floor, something strange happened.

To their shock, a small section of the book shelf turned half way, leaving a hidden exit into the wall. Anne darted into this secret passage way grabbing Snoopy as she went in. Ben followed her and then, just as suddenly, the book shelf returned to its original position.

Ben quickly turned on his flashlight and up the dark stairway they went. They could not believe how long and winding it was. The kids and Snoopy were scared--really scared! This strange stairway was covered with inch thick dust. Their footsteps left deep footprints. They finally made their way up to what must have been the third floor of the mansion.

Ben found a small door knob. He turned it and pushed. A dim shaft of light broke through the thick darkness of the stairway. He opened the door wider and then they all went through entering a large, heavily draped bedroom.

What they thought was a door leading into the bedroom was not a door at all. It was, instead, a five foot tall oil painting! Ben ran over to a very large window where he discovered a small key to this phantom mystery: Two large flashlights with bright red lens on each of them.

Ben called Anne and Snoopy over and said, "I'll bet these are the eyes of what we saw while looking up at this window during our picnic." Anne put her hand on his shoulder and said, "I think your right, Ben. But why would someone try to scare us into thinking these were the eyes of a . . .a monster?"

"I'm not sure, Anne," Ben said quietly, "but it seems that the person down stairs or whatever it is, does not want people to get close."

Ben stepped on an old braided rug and as he did, he started to fall down a long, slippery, metal shaft. He grabbed Anne and Snoopy. They all began to slide down together what must have been a fire escape slide. They slid down... all the way down and came tumbling out on to the grass outside.

They brushed themselves off, picked up Snoopy and ran into the forest. As they were running through the trees past the mansion, Anne sensed that something hiding in the forest was watching them.

As Anne, Snoopy, and Ben stopped to rest, they noticed it was nearly dark out. "We'd better get home soon," Ben whispered. Just as Ben was about to pet their little raccoon friend, he felt the hot, moist breath of something not human...something horrible...something savage breathing down his neck!

His heart began to pound as if it would soon explode! He slowly turned with horror in his soul. His eyes became big as saucers. He stood there face to face with the most hideous, fanged, four legged beast he'd ever seen! Drooling, powerful, ugly. He just knew his life would end now!

Chapter 5

The Beast!

One, two, three seconds past. Ben froze. He could not move. He sensed if he did, this huge beast would attack and devour him. Anne, though younger, had a special way with animals. She calmly walked over to this large, fierce looking creature and started speaking softly, "Hellooo big fella. Ben won't hurt you. We want to be your friends."

To Ben's amazement, the beast was moved by her kind voice. Why he was not a monster at all. He was an Irish Wolf Hound...one of the biggest and strongest dogs in the world. At 175 pounds, he possessed a commanding presence. His head was huge! His mouth was full of long white teeth. He truly looked like something out of a scary movie.

This Wolf Hound looked at Anne, turned his massive head to the left and lifted his ears. He began to whimper as if he were hurt. Anne placed her hand in front of his big, black nose and let him sniff it. "See boy. I won't hurt ya. I like you. You're friendly aren't you?"

As the dog listened to her soft, caring voice, Anne slowly placed her hand on his head and began to scratch behind his ears. His big, brown eyes began to droop and half close with each tender scratch. With assurance in her voice, Anne said to him, "There, there boy. That feels good, doesn't it? Say...what's your name?"

She slowly felt on his neck and found a leather collar with a name tag. "Buster. Your name is Buster!"

Ben, breathing easier now, said, "Well, Buster, you gave me a scare I'll never forget!"

Anne then noticed that Buster was holding up his right front paw a little. "Are you hurt boy?", Anne asked him gently. Ben started to pet and scratch him as well. Anne looked deep into Buster's eyes and asked, "Can I take a look at your paw?"

She reached down and held Buster's paw in her hand. Ben shined his flashlight on it so they could see what the problem was. Sure enough, Buster had stepped on a very large thorn and it was bleeding.

"Oh! That must hurt", Anne said tenderly.

Ben, wanting to help, said, "Keep on scratching his ears Anne and I'll try to pull it out."

Anne kept scratching and comforting him and Ben slowly picked up Buster's giant paw. His paw was much bigger than his own hand. Ben grabbed the large thorn and pulled it out. Buster whimpered a little but seemed relieved. He then lay down on the ground and began to lick and clean his wound.

Anne, feeling satisfied, said, "There! That's better. You'll be OK now Buster."

Ben looked at his watch. He yelled, "7:00 O'clock! Oh Man! Mom and dad are really going to be mad now! Come on Anne. We've got to head back home."

The two explorers had over a mile to walk through dark woods. The path was narrow and winding. Anne petted Buster one more time, then said good bye. She gently placed Snoopy on her shoulder. Then they began the long walk home. They left Buster lying on the ground still cleaning his wound.

"By now the sun had set. It was night and the night dripped with darkness. There was no moon tonight. Without Ben's flashlight, they would be totally lost.

As they walked briskly on the trail through the pine trees, Ben and Anne began to fear they were lost. The trails in the day time looked different at night. If they were lost, they would be forced to wonder through the forest all night.

Just as they were trying to fight back that sickening feeling that comes from the possibility of being lost, they both stopped dead in their tracks.

Out from a thick cluster of trees, a fierce coyote jumped onto the path about thirty feet in front of the kids. Its head was low. It was growling, teeth shining. Its eyes were glaring a hideous yellow. This forest hunter stalked slowly toward the frightened children!

Chapter 6

The Rescue

Snoopy closed his eyes! He was deathly afraid of coyotes. He knew they had a one track mind: Dinner! He nestled closer to Anne's neck as if he were trying to hide.

Anne screamed, "Help! Someone help!"

Ben's mind raced. He had to think fast. "Lord, help!", he thought to himself. As the hungry coyote approached his prey, Ben and Anne backed up step by step. Ben quickly reached up to an oak tree branch and broke off a sturdy six foot section. He handed the flashlight to Anne and then grabbed the branch with both hands like a baseball bat.

He boldly started to inch toward this wretched, growling animal. The large coyote crouched down, then lunged toward Ben. He swung the branch and hit the animal in the head. It fell to the ground but then sprang to its feet full of rage!

The coyote lunged again. This time, Ben thrust his branch out in front of him. The fierce animal grabbed on to it with its powerful teeth and jaws and he snapped off the end as if it were just a tooth pick.

Snoopy wined and squealed with fright. Anne, wanting to protect him, took him off her shoulder and then held him securely in her arms. She wasn't about to let anything hurt her little friend.

Ben began to swing at the coyote left then right. Each time the branch just seemed to miss. Each time their vicious enemy seemed to get stronger.

The coyote sprang from all four feet and landed right in front of Ben. He instantly swung with his oak branch, but the coyote, annoyed with it, simply grabbed the branch with its powerful jaws and plucked it out of Ben's hands. The raging animal whipped the useless branch into the darkness. He was merely toying with these children. And now it was time for the final attack. He was excited that he would not be hungry after the attack anymore. It looked like he even had an evil grin on his drooling face.

This ugly creature rolled up its lips so that his yellow, razor sharp teeth could be seen glistening! His beastly eyes glowed fire while more drool was dripping from its jowls. A hideous growl brewed up from its thick throat that sent chills up and down the children's backs.

It was almost like the coyote was saying, "Now I've got you. Your time is up. You are both mine now. There is no hope. No one to rescue you. Ha! No escape for you!"

It was within three feet of the children. He was ready to strike. Strange. For brief second, the coyote looked down at the trail. He heard something. The dirt and pine needles under all their feet began to shake as if something very large were running toward them on it.

Just then, at lightning speed, Buster bolted past the children, opened his huge mouth and in the blink of an eye, clamped his gigantic jaws around the coyote neck. With ease, Buster pinned the coyote to the ground until it started to whimper for mercy like a terrified mouse. Buster, being kind hearted, let the coyote go. It ran off whimpering into the woods.

Anne looked up and saw a dim light approaching them on the path.

Chapter 7

The Mystery Unfolding

"Anne! Ben! Is that you?", yelled the approaching voice.

"Dad!", Ben yelled. Anne's and Ben's mom and dad soon arrived upon the scene. The two frightened and weary kids quickly ran into their parent's loving arms. Anne and Ben were so grateful to see them!

"Are you two OK?", their Mom asked. Anne told them the whole story including how Buster saved their lives.

There dad said, "Wow! I guess we'd better say thanks to ... Buster!" The large, gentle hero heard this and came cheerfully prancing over to Anne's and Ben's parents. He seemed happy that he was able to help the kids when they were in trouble. Yet he seemed so humble. He was simply glad no one was hurt.

Anne and Ben both wrapped their arms around Buster's powerful neck. Anne whispered in his perked up ear, "Thank you, Buster. Thanks for saving our lives. You are our big hero."

Ben's dad then told them they needed to go back home now. It was getting late. Mrs. Archer went over to Buster, petted him and kindly asked him, "Who do you belong to, big boy?"

She felt for the name tag, saw the name, "Buster", then turned the name tag over. As their dad's flashlight lit up the tag, their mom read the print, "I belong to Mrs. Applegate, Applegate Manor, Applegate Ridge, Kettle Moraine."

Anne looked puzzled. She asked, "Who could that be?"

Her dad spoke saying, "I found out yesterday that Mrs. Applegate is the lady who lives up there all alone in that big mansion on what people call Phantom Ridge."

Ben's eyes widened as he said, "So maybe our hooded phantom isn't a phantom at all."

Anne then added, "Yea! And that big cage in the basement must be Buster's. "

Mr. Archer then said, "Well, tomorrow is Saturday. We'll go and return Buster then and we can also personally thank Mrs. Applegate for Buster's help tonight."

So they all started back on the path that led to their home. Buster, of course, followed close behind.

Mrs. Archer asked Anne more about her little raccoon friend, Snoopy. Anne shared with her what a spunky, yet cuddly little goof he is. Anne then asked her mom if she could keep him as a pet.

"Welt,", said her mom, "I guess we'll have to. You two have become quite attached through all of this."

"Oh thanks mom!", Anne shouted with joy. "I'll build a cage for him in our back yard."

When they got home, Ben's and Anne's parents let Buster sleep in the hall way in between Anne's and Ben's bedrooms. He was quite content since Mrs. Archer had fed him five left over cheeseburgers. Buster loved cheeseburgers! He was so comfortable and content. It was like he loved to protect his two children--and his belly was full too!

Ben, from his bed, whispered through the open doors to Anne in her bed. "Anne, why do you think Mrs. Applegate wore that black hood? And why would she use those red flashlights from the third floor window to scare the wits out of us?"

I don't know, Ben.", Anne answered. "What if Mrs. Applegate isn't the phantom? Maybe it captured her and took over the house. Hmm. Gee, this is getting confusing! I think tomorrow we shall have some answers!"

Chapter 8

The Blessing

Saturday morning was bright and sunny. Blue sky was every where. The Archer family was soon on their way back to Phantom Ridge to return Buster and meet Mrs. Applegate, the phantom, or whoever lives there!

"I like Buster, Ben, but I don't think I'll like Mrs. Applegate ... Appleghost or whatever her name is." said Anne. I'm angry that she tried to scare us into believing she was a phantom."

"Ben, walking beside Anne, looked at her with a few years extra wisdom and said, "Yea, but ya know, Anne, we don't know the whole story. We just don't have all of the facts yet."

Anne, looking down at the ground for a second, said, "I guess you're right, Ben...but I'm still mad anyway." With Snoopy on Anne's shoulder and big Buster trotting by their side, the Archer family soon reached the clearing in the forest where Ben and Anne had their fateful picnic yesterday.

""This place still gives me the creeps.", Anne said quietly feeling a chill in the air.

"Well, I guess this is as good a time as any." said Mr. Archer. We'd best go right up to that big front door at the mansion and see if anyone's home.

"O...OK, Dad." said Ben. "But would you lead the way?"

"Sure Ben! That's what dads are for." his dad said smiling.

Shortly after that, Ben, Anne, their mom and dad, Snoopy, and Buster were all on the massive stone front steps in front of the very wide and heavy front door. Anne and Ben swallowed hard. Mrs. Archer lifted the iron knocker and knocked once. Then two more times. Nothing happened. No answer.

Ben grew a faint smile and spoke up, "There! Nobody home. Well, let's go and have our picnic now. Sure am hungry!"

Just when he thought he might not have to face Mrs. Applegate, the big, oak door creaked open. Just an inch. Then two. Then another inch. "Mystery of mysteries! Why do doors like that have to be so spooky?", Anne thought to herself. Its hinges were rusty.

"Must not have been opened for a long time.", Ben pondered in his mind as he slowly began to move backwards away from the door. That old creaking sound made by the door was really creepy.

As the door slowly opened, Ben and Anne took small steps backward, afraid of what was lurking behind it. Instead of an ominous black, hooded phantom, there was a sad looking lady with gray hair somewhere in her mid-fifties. Her head was lowered, eyes constantly looking down as if she were ashamed ... really ashamed.

"Wha ... What do you want?", she said quietly.

Mrs. Archer spoke first. "We are the Archer family and we wanted to thank you. You see, Buster came to the rescue last night in the forest. He stopped a coyote from hurting Ben and Anne. Your Buster is a real hero."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Applegate. "I'm a--glad that everything worked out for you. Its good to know that someone had something good happen to them."

Mrs. Archer paused then asked softly, "Mrs. Applegate, you seem terribly sad. Is something wrong?"

With these words, Mrs. Applegate burst into tears. "I'm rotten!", she cried. "I'm no good. No one could ever like me. I'm so terrible!"

Anne, whose anger for this lady was being replaced by compassion gently said to her, "I don't believe it for a minute. Who says you're rotten?"

With that question, Mrs. Applegate shyly invited them all into the living room for a few minutes. She shared timidly at first, then more freely. She told the Archers that her husband used to beat her and tell her how awful a wife and person she was.

He was an alcoholic and would drink heavily especially on weekends. He would always blame her for all his problems. Mrs. Applegate shared that she must be so terrible to have caused her husband to drink liquor and beat her. She told them she probably deserved it.

As she continued pouring her heart out to the Archer family, something wonderful began to happen. A blessing began to unfold. The Archer family just loved her and listened. They did not judge her.

She went on to share that after her husband took off with another younger woman, she felt rotten and depressed. Feeling worthless and rejected, she spent most of her energy trying to discourage visitors, hikers, or anybody from coming close to the house. She even confessed that the two red flashlights shining like two eyes from the upstairs window were used to scare away people that wondered near to the mansion.

"But why?", asked Ben with confusion in his voice. Mrs. Applegate began to sob again as she lowered her head in shame. Her words came slowly. "Because my husband hurt me so, I just couldn't face the possibility of being hurt again. I didn't want to let anyone down ever again."

Right about then, Mrs. Archer and Anne went over to her and put their loving arms around her. Mrs. Archer held her tight and said, "You are not rotten. You are wonderful. God loves you. Your husband was wrong, totally wrong."

Just then, Mrs. Applegate's face lifted a little. A tiny smile began to form on her weary, tear stained face. A calming peace trickled into her heart. She actually laughed out loud. Snoopy, hiding deep inside the picnic basket under a blanket, suddenly popped his little, funny head out while munching on a cookie. Everyone joined in with laughter.

Chapter 9

The Gift

Mrs. Applegate was warmed by the kindness the Archer family was showing her. She was not used to this treatment.

On their way out the door of the mansion, Mrs. Archer asked Mrs. Applegate to please come to their home for dinner that night.

Her first thought was to turn down the invitation. After all, she felt she had been too rude to deserve such an offer...scaring the kids and all.

Mrs. Archer walked back to the doorway where Mrs. Applegate was standing and gently held her hand in both of hers. She then looked deep into her weary eyes and whispered, "We want you to come. It would be an honor. You're our neighbor now."

"Well", Mrs. Applegate said, "in that case, I guess I'd love to come!"

"Bring Buster with you. You're both always welcome." Mrs. Archer added. "We'll meet you half way on the trail--by that old pine tree by the clearing about 4:00 PM."

"OK. Thank you. Thank you so very much!", Mrs. Applegate said with renewed hope in her voice.

That evening was one that Ben and Anne would never forget. They learned, first hand, that things aren't always what they seem. These two young adventurers were convinced there was a phantom living in that mansion. And that it had two big, red eyes! They found out after the truth surfaced that this was simply not true. Instead, they found a really nice lady who was lonely, hurting, and in need of understanding and compassion.

That evening, Mrs. Archer had prepared a delicious roast chicken dinner with all of the trimmings: baked sweet potatoes, Indian creamed corn with bacon pieces, hot rolls, and cherry pie with ice cream. Mrs. Applegate sat at the dinner table and just marveled at the joy and closeness of this family. Their sincerity was what amazed her. She could not remember meeting even one sincere, loving person in her whole life.

From an abusive father and a stern step mother to a cruel alcoholic husband, she had felt up until now that she deserved to be treated bad.

The love of this family and their sincere hospitality began to heal some of those deep hurts from her past. Much time and tenderness would be needed to heal the rest.

Mrs. Applegate, over her pie and coffee, just looked at her new friends and smiled. She felt loved and accepted for the first time in her life!

She looked thankfully at each of them and said, "God bless you--God bless each of you! There will be no more phantoms, ghosts, or spooks where I live. They're all gone forever!"

Over the next few days and weeks the friendship between Mrs. Applegate and the Archer family grew. One day, while romping outside in the forest by the mansion with buster, Ben said, "Look Anne! Here comes Mrs. Applegate." Sure enough, she had brought out some cookies and lemonade for the kids.

"Ya know, Ben and Anne, I've been thinking. It's hard for me to keep up with this big dog everyday. You two would sure do me a great favor if you would take care of him from now on."

Anne's face lit up as she blurted out, "You mean it? You want us to have him?"

Mrs. Applegate holding her head high and straight with a large smile on her face said, "Yes, you are absolutely right!"

Ben and Anne ran into her arms and gave her a long and much to be remembered hug while Buster, huge as he was, rolled around on the grass like a little puppy.

Our Mission and Passion:

"To help marriages and families find lasting hope and a future in the Lord
Jesus Christ."

May God bless you!

Jim & Barbara

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