

Blessings for the Living

I never mistrusted authority until my father sent a man back to prison for something he didn't do. It started one October afternoon when an inmate named Ulysses Puente brought in the plants from our family garden back to the farm's flower shed. Mom never liked performing inspections on the prisoner's work and usually had my father do them, but he was attending a meeting at the central prison about closing all the state prison farms. Everything had gone well until she passed the table filled with annuals brought in for protection over winter. She always had the inmates plant lots of maroon and gold marigolds because they lasted well into the fall and reminded her of Minnesota where she grew up. The heads of all these potted marigolds had been cut off. "Wh-who ordered you to do this?" she asked in a voice quivering with fear and rage.

"Nobody, Senora," Ulysses replied. "They were already that way this morning when I came to put them in the shed."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Non, perhaps not," Ulysses admitted. "But it is the truth."

"We-ll, o-okay," Mother spluttered. "Y-you can bet my husband is going to hear about this."

Dad promised to investigate, but I doubt that he ever did. Who cared that much about flowers, anyway? More disturbing events occurred soon after.

A week later my five-year-old sister's rabbit, Ginger, huddled in the afternoon sun against the chicken wire mesh that enclosed the open end of her hutch. When Jennifer reached in to pick Ginger up, the rabbit's head plopped onto the ground between Jennifer's shoes.

Ohmigosh! You could see the spinal cord slide out from under the skull. The sight made me want to throw up. But I didn't 'cause Jennifer shrieked so hard that I swallowed my own vomit. E-e-yechh! It felt like a lump of bleach sliding down my throat. Mom finally pried Ginger's body out of Jennifer's arms and buried both parts in the garden.

Another week went by. Mom helped Jennifer and I make costumes for our school Halloween party the following Friday. My father, Hank Furst, the Prison Farm Director, had questioned all the men who had been on duty the previous weekend and filed reports with the state Bureau of Corrections. But he had no idea who was responsible. He told Mom at dinner that the six inmates scheduled to work at the farm were model prisoners. That meant they had six months or less on their sentences. With so little time left until their release dates, none of them dared risk more prison time.

The four guards assigned that day told my father that working the two daytime shifts was "easy duty" compared to guarding inmates inside "the joint," the maximum security building located in the middle of town. I guess they were right. Dad took me along one time to get his paycheck, and we had to pass through eight locked doors before we reached the pay master. The slam of each steel door locking behind us buried us further and further inside this concrete tomb. Who'd want to return to a place where there was no fresh air and nothing to do?

At night, the farm inmates stayed at the prison bunkhouse a half mile away on the other side of the barn. Two groups of six eligible prisoners rotated through every two weeks to reward their good behavior and to ready them for the responsibilities of living outside the joint. On the two nights in question the actions of all the prisoners and all the guards had been accounted for.

My father reported this seated at the supper table. "I just got off the phone with the corrections people in Madison. 'They' say I'm over-reacting." He raised his spectacles onto his

forehead and pinched the bridge of his nose like he did whenever he was tired or upset. “The flower incident could have been a miscommunication, I guess. The second an encounter with some wild animal—like a badger.” He cupped his hands behind his head and gazed at the ceiling. “We never should have put Ginger’s hutch outside.”

“I don’t like these things happening so close to our house,” Mom replied, wringing her hands. “Out in the flower shed is one thing, but—“ She covered her face. ”If anything should happen to the children, Henry, I’d--”

“There, there, Maddie.” The bitter lines around Dad’s mouth deepened. He pulled her head against his shoulder. “Nothing like that’s going to happen. I promise.”

Maybe Dad couldn’t figure it out, but it couldn’t be coincidence these events were happening before Halloween. We weren’t a religious family, especially when compared to the people who lived in town a mile away, but we attended church on Christmas and Easter. Dad’s views about the afterlife were well known within the family. “There’s no such thing as heaven, Maddie,” he said during one of their arguments. “Only the hell we make for ourselves here on Earth.”

So, I never brought up the image of the devil with his warning finger outlined in the grain of my closet door. Or mentioned the green balls of fire that floated over the abandoned quarry in the nearby woods the past month. Dad considered all that stuff “voodoo rubbish.”

Killing Ginger had to be an inside job. Once the officer of the day closed the main gate at ten, nobody could enter the property until the next morning. Besides, my 10-year-old schnauzer, Monte, would have barked his head off if anybody from outside had killed Ginger. But he didn’t. That left only ghosts or goblins or something more sinister

Monte started barking outside. “Damn that dog!” Dad cried. “What’s he barking about now?”

He got up to let Monte in when someone knocked on our back porch door. “Mr. Furst,” Radatz, the Officer on Duty, asked in a voice muffled by the screen door. “Could you step out here for a moment, please?”

Dad slipped around Monte out onto the porch. Radatz pointed at the floor beside his left shoe. Between their feet lay three neatly spaced, plucked chickens with their heads twisted off. “*BEWARE!*” was scrawled in blood above the carcasses.

“I was just going to the barn to write my evening report,” Radatz said, gruffly. “Then I heard your dog and thought I’d investigate.”

“Why?” Dad asked.

“He was barking so loud, I thought maybe he’d trapped a fox or something.”

“He always does that—inside the house or out.” Dad shrugged in resignation. “You saw nobody in the area?”

“Not another living soul.”

“What about the inmates?”

“They’re all in the barn finishing up their chores.”

“You’re sure about that?”

Radatz blinked as if he’d been slapped. “No-o-o,” he said in a small voice and turned on his heel toward the barn. “I’ll double-check with Steemsma and make sure.”

“You do that.” Dad called. “And lock down everything until I get there.” He grabbed his officer’s jacket off the hook by the door. “I’ve got to go over there, Maddie.”

“Right while we were eating, Henry!” Mom sat down and covered her face with her hands. “Next time they’ll attack us in our house.”

“No they won’t.” Dad’s hand quivered as he patted Mom’s head. “I’ll figure who’s doing this. Once I do there’ll be hell to pay, whoever it is.”

Who could be so mad at us? All the inmates had been in the barn; the other guard had been there with them. Was it something me or Jennifer did? Mom told us again and again she never wanted us down by the barn. “We’d just get in the way,” she said.

But she was worried about what some of the inmates might do. Most of them seemed to like having Jennifer and me around. One time Ulysses told me I reminded him of his sister’s kid in Chihuahua. “About your age, 12 or 13,” he said with a crooked smile. “Always gettin’ into stuff, always thinkin’.” His sinewy, hairless hand reached out from under the cow he was milking and mussed my red hair. “That’s good,” he advised. “Never stop.”

When Dad came back from the barn, the lines in his face were deeper than ever. He grabbed a cup of coffee and returned to his place at the head of the kitchen table. Mom asked if he’d found out anything. “No, nothing. Everybody was where they were supposed to be.”

“What about Radatz?” Mom suggested.

“It was his turn to lock the front gate,” Dad replied. “He was on his way back to the barn.”

“He was the one who found the dead chickens, too.”

“I know.” Dad sighed. “I hate to think it’s one of the guards. Or a prisoner, either. But who else could it be?”

“What’re you going to do?”

Dad shrugged. "I can't accuse anybody without proof. If I find out it's one of the guards, Radatz said the union will take the charges to court." He pinched his nose. "I've already been told by the Bureau that this stays inside the system no matter what."

"Wh-what does that mean?"

"It means I'm responsible!" Dad stood up so fast he knocked over his chair. "It means I won't be able to apply for the transfer that gets us out of this hole to someplace decent."

He righted his chair and noticed me watching them from the living room doorway. "What are you looking at?"

"You," I said. My father's bloodshot eyes looked like the veins in two of my cat's eye marbles. Couldn't he sleep, either? My knees knocked. "I want to help."

"Just stay out of the way," Dad barked. He hesitated, then knelt on one knee beside me. "Vic, I didn't mean that how it sounded." He glanced at Mom and lowered his voice. "Keep an eye on her and your sister, OK?"

My chest swelled. The assignment meant he knew I was growing up. *Tell him. He needs all the facts.* "Father, I saw lights out in the woods—"

"Not now," Dad advised and stood up. "Tell me when I get back."

He was gone for over an hour at the barn. Mom had put Jennifer to bed by the time he returned. He set the coffee pot on the burner, grabbed his cup from the sink, and plopped into his chair at the kitchen table.

"Wh-what'd you f-find out, Henry?" Mom asked.

"Same as usual—nothing." He ran a hand through his dark, thinning hair. "Everybody has an alibi. All the men love it here. They don't know how this stuff happens." He eyed me. "What'd you want to tell me before?"

“I saw lights out in the woods the week before Ginger was killed.”

“What kind of lights?”

“Flashing lights.” Father’s question surprised me. Usually, he was too busy for questions. His gaze made calling up more details difficult. “They weren’t steady like beams from a flashlight. More of a flicker.” *Concentrate harder.* “Like fire light.”

“Could’ve been campers. Or mushroom hunters.” Father got up, poured the reheated coffee in his cup, and eyed me over the rim. “There’s a blueberry patch along the crick that runs into the quarry. Where were you?”

“In my room.”

“Oh.” Dad smiled. “Nowhere close, really. Anything else?”

“The last time the lights were green.”

“And still flickering?” He sipped his coffee. The lines in his face deepened. “Sounds like marsh gas. That’s often green.”

“It’s pr-pretty spooky down there.” My voice croaked. Couldn’t he understand? “That’s where two of the quarry workers had an accident. Ulysses said that’s why they shut it down.”

“Victor!” Mom said. “What have I told you about talking to the prisoners?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s not ghosts,” Dad said and dumped out his cup in the sink. “But it is probably somebody working inside the farm.” He entered the living room and picked up the phone. When Mom asked who he was calling, Dad replied, “Somebody from outside yet who knows the inmates as well as I do.”

That somebody turned out to be Marvin Fulscap, the father of one of my middle school friends. A squat, friendly, and athletic man, Mom disapproved as soon as she saw him in his blue

guard's uniform coming up the walk. "What's he doing here?" she muttered while setting a dish in the drying tray.

When the doorbell rang, Mom called out that Mr. Fulscap was at the door. Dad hustled out of the old storage room he used for his study. "Aren't you going to let him in?" Dad asked. He opened the door and shook Fulscap's hand. "Thanks for coming."

Dad steered Fulscap through the kitchen and into his study. When the door closed, Mom resumed washing dishes faster than I could dry them.

Placing a dried cup in the wicker basket, I wondered what to do. Mom clearly was upset but learning the cause meant running through an emotional mine field. "Why don't you like Mr. Fulscap?"

Mom glanced toward the study and pressed her index finger against her lips. Then she cupped her hand around an imaginary bottle and tilted her head back. "Glug, glug, glug."

That drinking gesture was her mark of greatest disapproval. In Wisconsin, everybody drank beer, including my father and mom's father, my grandfather. Fulscap might not have been one of those funny, TV drunks like Red Skelton or Lucille Ball. But his son, Jeff, was my best friend. "Is he really so bad?"

"That's why he didn't make lieutenant." Mom dried her hands with a fresh dishtowel. "Didn't even take the test." She shrugged. "Who knows what a man like that is likely to do?"

Fulscap would have been one of the people under investigation if Mom had her way. But outside of working the morning shift the following two days, he did nothing Mom could complain about. Then he switched over to the afternoon shift where he locked up the farm every night at ten. On Friday afternoon, Dad called Fulscap into his study before he went out to keep an eye on the inmates.

Mom had laid down with Jennifer for her afternoon nap. Out of school early that afternoon because of the school Halloween party, I turned on the television, crept into the kitchen, opened our refrigerator, and pretended to examine the contents. Repainted many times, the study door met the jamb unevenly. Hearing the conversation inside was easy.

“I think two men must be involved,” Fulscap declared in his reedy voice.

“Why two?” Dad asked.

“One man could kill the animals, but two would make it easier to place the bodies on your porch. One could arrange the parts and write the warning, while the other served as a lookout.”

“You have anybody in mind?”

“I’ve had my eye on all of them these past few days, but Mitchell and Puente stand out in particular.”

“Puente?” Dad’s voice sounded surprised. “He has only three weeks left on his sentence. Why him?”

“Ordinarily, I wouldn’t suspect him,” Fulscap replied. “But Mitchell can get Puente to do almost anything. Tuesday, they both were in the milk room, and Mitchell kept talking to Puente while they were milking.”

“So?”

“When I told them to knock it off, they started giggling. So I told them to report to the Officer of the Day to work off their energy with some field work the rest of the day. After they left, Puente’s cow started bawling. When it wouldn’t stop, I checked on the animal and found this.” Fulscap’s chair squeaked as he leaned forward.

I closed one eye and peered through the crack in the doorway. Fulscap held a three-inch penny nail between his thumb and index finger. “Somebody filed off the head and stuck it in the cow’s neck.”

“Anybody could have done that,” Dad replied.

“Yes, but the cow started bawling only after I ordered both men outside.”

“Why would Puente do that?”

“I don’t think he would, ordinarily.” Fulscap put the nail in his pocket. “He’s not smart or mean enough. But Mitchell’s finishing up five to ten for burglary and assault.”

“That’s not much evidence.” Dad shook his head. “We need more than our suspicions to put them back in the joint.”

“That’s why we need to search their belongings at the bunkhouse. How long since the last contraband search?”

“Two weeks.”

“Time for another one, given the circumstances.” He stood up. “Wouldn’t you say?”

I returned to the refrigerator, pulled out some bread and salami, and slapped them together. Dad and Fulscap passed me as if I wasn’t there, exited onto the porch and headed toward the barn. Contraband meant the guards were going to search through the prisoner’s possessions. Anything out of the ordinary—razors, knives, even personal letters—could be confiscated. Ulysses was a good guy; Mitchell more sullen and ornery—like a penned bull. Neither of them seemed the type to kill farm animals just to scare kids. At least, I hoped not. Why would they?

The reason became clear that evening when Fulscap knocked on our porch door. Dad let him in and asked in a low voice. “What’d you find?”

Fulscap patted the right pocket of his jacket. “Something very interesting.” He spotted me wiping dishes and headed into Dad’s study. “I can show you better in here.”

A chair scraped across the floor in Dad’s office. Why was Fulscap acting so mysteriously? If he had found anything out about Ulysses and Mitchell, they’d have been sent back to the prison already.

I wiped two more cups and checked on Mom and Jennifer. Jen was reading “Hop on Pop” aloud in the living room. I crept back to the study door and peered through the crack.

Fulscap laid an eight-ounce Mason jar beside another on the edge of Dad’s desk. The one on the left was three-quarters full with a milky liquid that turned tan toward the bottom. The other jar contained a pale, blue-green powder.

“What’s the big deal?” Dad asked.

Fulscap grinned. With a sweep of his hand like a magician he pulled two large paperclips out of his coat pocket. He bent them at a 90 degree angle and placed them across from each other on the rim of the jar. Then he pulled out a third paperclip, straightened the prongs, and fastened it to the rim of the jar equidistant from the other two clips.

“I still don’t see—“

Fulscap shook the jar until the tan residue at the bottom mixed with the milky liquid, then tilted the jar forward. A tiny blue flame enveloped the third paperclip. Fulscap shook some of the powder from the other jar onto the desk blotter and dipped the flame into it. Poof! A brilliant blue-green flash preceded a rising puff of green smoke that sparkled and disappeared.

“What is that stuff?” Dad asked, eyes wide with surprise. “Where’d you find the lighter?”

“Just paperclips and insecticide.” Fulscap grinned. “The flame results when two toxic salts are mixed together. The flash comes from lighting a mixture of arsenic and copper acetate, components found in certain fertilizers. Ingenious, really, but all contraband. And dangerous.”

“Where’d you find them?”

“In Mitchell’s foot locker.”

“What do those have to do with the dead animals on our porch?” Dad asked.

“Maybe nothing. But they’re like tools that safecrackers use.” Fulscap reached inside his other coat pocket. “I also found these in Puente’s locker.” He pulled out an envelope, grasped something between his thumb and index finger, and spread it out on the blotter.

“Red hair!” Dad gasped.

My scalp tingled like a snake was crawling through it. Was that why Ulysses had rubbed my head those times? My stomach knotted. Was I next?

“There’s more.” Fulscap reached inside his pocket again and pulled out another 3 x 5 envelope and poured its contents onto the blotter.

“What are those?” Dad asked.

“Animal whiskers,” Fulscap said. “You lost a rabbit recently?”

“Jennifer’s rab—“ Dad clapped a hand against his forehead. “Don’t tell my wife, OK? She’d flip out.”

“We’d better get those boys out tonight,” Fulscap warned and gathered his evidence. “It’ll be easier if they don’t suspect anything.”

“Just leave that stuff here. I’ll need it for the report.” Dad leaned back. His fingers quivered as he pinched his nose. “Their group’s farm assignment ends tomorrow evening. Keep

it quiet 'til tomorrow morning. I'll inform the warden. He can decide how much to discipline them once they're back inside the joint."

Was I dreaming? My scalp crawled where Puente had run his thick fingers through my hair. Now I knew why. My legs felt fluttery like they always did before taking a big test, and I bumped against the sideboard on my way back into the living room. Mom glanced up from Jennifer's book. "Are you OK, Victor?"

"Just a cramp," I lied. Mom would freak out if she knew what Dad and Mr. Fulscap had discovered. "A bath will help relax it."

Upstairs, the tub of warm, soapy water relaxed me. What was I worrying about? Tomorrow both inmates would be gone, never to return. Ulysses had always acted as though he liked me. But if he was using me to blow up our house, who cared what happened to him? Or Mitchell?

Towelng off, I put on my pajamas, and fell asleep. But, my dreams were vague and exhausting, filled with monsters that couldn't be seen but were always chasing after me. One's chilly breath brushed my cheek as he grabbed one of my arms.

He was pulling me toward his enormous, gnashing teeth when my eyes popped open. The right side of my face lay in a pool of drool, the bed sheet was wrapped around my left arm. The sash of the bedroom window was open, set after my bath when I wanted to cool off. Wiping the spittle from my mouth, I crawled across the bed and closed the sash.

The grass in our backyard glistened with the first frost. The top-most branches of the bare apple trees clawed at the waning moon that drifted through the clouds. Beyond the orchard, three blue-green globes floated into the sky, popped, and disappeared.

More marsh gas? Or berry pickers? In the dark—hardly. Were Ulysses and Mitchell sacrificing another animal? Why? My fingers shook as I reached for my pants. If it was Ulysses, why take a chance? He'd be gone in the morning.

Something thumped against the back porch. Not a sound came from my parents' room downstairs. More blue-green globes drifted above the orchard and popped out of existence. Where was Monte? Why wasn't he barking? Why was no one else up?

I pulled on some clothes and glided down the stairs to the back porch. The blast of frosty outside air when I opened the door made me reach for my jacket. Zipping up, I reopened the door and stepped into a warm pile of mush. My feet squished and slipped and slid across the wood floor. I regained my balance, but my toes were entangled in a mesh of spaghetti.

"Yew! Ick!" A furry ball bounced against the cement step. "Omigod! Mon—mphf."

A gloved hand covered my mouth. "Quiet" Dad hissed. "You'll give everything away."

Two unmarked cars crunched to a stop in the driveway. Four men in trench coats got out. "Over there!" Dad whispered and pointed toward the orchard. "On the other side of the woods."

The four guards fanned out and disappeared among the trees. Dad released his grip over my mouth. "Stay here. Don't go down to the quarry."

Dad crept off into the orchard. His low, small silhouette appeared on the other side of the orchard and disappeared.

I shuffled my feet toward a drier part of the floor. Blood pooled onto the floor from under Monte's eye socket. I vomited, dropped to the floor on all fours, and vomited again.

My stomach finally stopped churning. When nothing else came up, I wiped my mouth, pondered the butchery, and almost retched again. Monte wasn't much of a guard dog, but besides Ulysses he was the only friend Jennifer and I had out there. Who could do this to him?

Those two inmates deserved everything that was coming to them. I was going to make sure they got it. Following Dad through the orchard, I found an opening cut through the bottom two wires of the back fence. A foot-worn path stretched through the high grass toward the creek beyond. The moonlight made it easy to follow. Male voices emerged from the quarry pit ahead.

“We got ‘em!” Fulscap cried as Dad parted the semi-circle of guards who standing in front of a tiny altar hidden in the bushes. The green flame from a headlight cover on the top stone revealed a small skull surrounded by flowers on the shelf underneath. “They were performing another ritual, Hank, just like you said they would.”

Two pairs of guards held the arms of two men, their heads bowed forward, hands handcuffed behind their backs—Mitchell and Ulysses.

“We weren’t doing anything,” Ulysses whined. “Just a ceremony in honor of Dia de los Muertos.”

“Shut up,” Mitchell growled. “They don’t care.”

“What should we do with ‘em?” Fulscap asked.

“Haul them back to prison,” Dad replied.

“Don’t do that,” Ulysses pleaded. He spotted me and his eyes lit up. “It was just an ofrenda, an offering.” He wrestled free of the guard’s grasp and knelt on one knee before me.

“Everyone in Mexico does it to protect their loved ones.”

“Sacrifices animals?” Fulscap hooted. “Or molests children?”

“I molested nobody,” Ulysses replied. “I just took a bit of his hair.”

“And what about this here?” Fulscap asked and pointed toward a small skull surrounded by maroon and gold marigolds. “What were you going to do with that?”

“That was for the little girl. What harm was there in digging it up for the ceremony.”

“And the chickens?” Dad asked.

“That was Mitchell’s doing.” Ulysses struggled to his feet. “He said it was a warning. A great calamity would befall the house of Furst. I had nothing to do with that. Tell them!”

“Shut up!” Mitchell barked. “It’s over.”

Ulysses rushed headlong and planted his shoulder into Mitchell’s stomach. Two guards grabbed Ulysses’ arms and hauled him toward the farm. The other two forced Mitchell to follow in the first pair. “I swear by the Virgin Mary, Victor,” Ulysses bawled. “It was meant to bless you and everyone in your house.”

Dad squeezed the flame between his thumb and index finger, grabbed the headlight cover, and followed the guards back toward the fence. I fell in behind my father and wrestled with the sight of Ginger’s severed head nestled among the marigolds, a more fitting resting place than behind the flower shed.

We didn’t speak until we reached our back yard. One guard jammed Ulysses’ head under the car roof and sat alongside him. The other rounded the car, slapped the roof, and ducked inside. When Mitchell was secure inside the other car, both vehicles spun gravel and sped down the driveway to the county road.

Then every light in our house came on. Jenny stood in the doorway. Mom appeared in the doorway and scanned the floor. “Omigod, Henry! Is that Monte?”

“What do you think?” Dad said. “For Crissakes, Maddie.” He pointed at Jennifer. “Keep her inside. She doesn’t need to see this!”

Mom covered Jenny’s eyes and pulled her inside. “It’s a blessing we weren’t killed, Henry,” Mom declared, shaking in the doorway. “I don’t want to stay here, not tonight, not ever.”

“There, there, Maddie,” Dad coaxed. “It’s over now. You won’t have to if you don’t want to.” He turned to Fulscap. “Can you and Victor clean up this mess out here? I’ll be out in a little while.”

“Take your time.” Fulscap winked at me. “We’ll handle it.” After my parents and Jennifer entered the living room, he sighed. “You know where your dad keeps his bourbon?”

When I shook my head, he grimaced, entered the kitchen and rummaged through the cupboards. “Ah!” Finding a half-full bottle of Jim Beam, he filled two water glasses and opened the refrigerator.

Plundering Dad’s liquor—no wonder Mom didn’t trust him. “Shouldn’t we be cleaning the porch?”

“What’s the hurry? Your dog’s not going anywhere.” Fulscap plopped ice cubes into both glasses and extended one toward me. “Want some?” He chuckled. “No, probably not.” He entered the study, pulled up a chair, placed his feet on Dad’s desk, took a swallow and grinned. “To a job well done.”

“H-how can you be drinking?” My voice and hands trembled. “It’s not yours. This is not your house, and you’re not doing what you’re supposed to do.”

“Whoa, buddy boy,” Fulscap took another sip. “I’ve done everything I was asked.”

“By sending two men back to prison?”

“Yes, a little celebration seems to be in order.” He peered at me and his face sobered. “Look, we found three more chickens and a goat ready for sacrifice just beyond your apple orchard.”

“Ulysses said they were for protecting us.”

“Just having a mirror is enough to send them back to prison, let alone an altar.” Fulscap took another swallow. “We also found a barrel of fertilizer hid out there. That’s contraband, too.”

“So?”

“They were going to use to blow up your house and every other building on the farm.”

“Are you certain of that?” Still shaking, I crossed my arms to hide it. “It also can be used to make fireworks.”

“How do—?” Fulscap grimaced. “Oh, you heard that? Smart kid.” He finished the rest of his glass. “Look. Ulysses believed that because Mitchell wanted him to. I shouldn’t tell you this, but Mitchell has a history of blowing things up.”

“You said he was a safecracker.”

“That’s what they got him on. The Feds could never prove the other stuff, so his state sentence was light enough for him wangle his way out here to the farm.” Fulscap drained his glass. “Now he’ll do some real time.”

“You still don’t have any real proof.”

“Look!” Fulscap slammed his glass on the desktop. “A con has the right to play by the rules. If he does, he gets out. If he doesn’t, he goes back. Simple. Both of them knew that. Mitchell’s just smart enough to accept it, that’s all.”

“But none of that explains why Monte was killed or how he got on our front porch.”

Fulscap contemplated his empty glass. “It doesn’t, does it?” He stood up and wobbled toward the kitchen. “Think I’m ready for another.”

“You’re sending men back to prison for things they didn’t do.”

“Maybe so.” Fulscap halted in the doorway. “Maybe it was bound to happen. All I know is that right or wrong, both of those cons are back in the joint where they belong. That makes me

happy. That makes the Corrections Bureau happy. And that'll make your mother happy which makes your father happy."

"Mom and Dad did not want this to happen."

"Oh, no?" Fulscap flashed a sloppy grin. "Think about it. They hate it here, don't they? But they needed him get things under control before your Dad could put in for transfer. Now he's got enough for a promotion."

I nodded reluctantly. Foolschap was right. My legs trembled again. Was it anger or dread? "Dad would never take advantage of someone like that."

"Really?" Fulscap grinned. "Who found you in all those dog guts on the porch?"

"Dad did."

"And before that?"

I shook my head. Dad's hand had covered my mouth after Fulscap and his men had gone to the quarry. "He must have been checking the grounds."

"Maybe so," Fulscap admitted. "And maybe that's why your dog didn't bark when we went back behind the orchard."

"Ulysses said Mitchell had done it."

"Maybe." Fulscap considered the possibility. "But when did he have the time?"

Monte was already dead by the time Dad covered my mouth. Omigod! Why?

Dad stuck his head in the doorway. "Finally got everyone to bed."

"How are they?" Fulscap asked.

"Jennifer's fine. Maddie'll be better once we're out of here." Dad grinned. "How's everyone here?"

“Great,” I said. The lines in his face seemed to have disappeared. “How can you be so happy after what you did to Monte?”

“What I did?” Dad glared at Fulscap. “Just what crap have you been feedin’ him?”

Fulscap stared into the bottom of his glass.

“I don’t know what Marv’s been telling you,” Dad said, “but—“

“Did you?” I asked.

“Did I what?”

“Did you kill Monte?”

“Of course not.” Dad knelt and wrapped his hand around my shoulder. “How can you think such a thing?”

“Ulysses was just trying to protect us.”

“From what?” Dad replied. “Their depravity? He and Mitchell started all this uproar. They severed Ginger’s head!”

“And Monte?”

“They didn’t want any warning of what they intended to do.” He glanced at Fulscap.

“They’d planted boxes of explosives planted on both sides of the house, right, Marv?”

Fulscap’s eyes never left his empty glass. “If you say so.”

“Ulysses was my friend.”

“I know.” Dad grimaced and stood up. “It’s hard, but we better go out and take care of that mess out on the porch.” He squeezed my shoulder. “Don’t you think?”

“Don’t you touch him!” Twisting free of his grasp, I grabbed some rags from under the sink, marched onto the porch, squatted beside what was left of Monte, and bawled. The mess hasn’t been cleaned up yet.