

The
Healer's
Touch

LORI
COPELAND



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*But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities:
the chastisement of our peace was upon him;
and with his stripes we are healed.*

ISALAH 53:5

Introduction

Missouri. Fertile rolling hills, craggy caves, and early morning mist slowly lifting in deep hollows. That's the beautiful setting where I grew up.

The Ozark Mountain scenery is hauntingly exquisite in the spring. One of the reasons I'm thankful God made me a Missourian is because of the state's four distinctive seasons—all with their own drawbacks, but lovely indeed. Today, as I'm writing this, winter is showing off its finery in melting snow-packed trails and in sparkling icicles hanging from ice-covered bluffs.

When spring finally comes, those same riverbanks and steep cliffs come alive with redbuds, dogwoods, reddish pink tall thistle, the proud and purple Beggar's Lice, showy white blackberry bush, and wild Sweet William.

Long summer nights are lit by fireflies, sweet scented yellow honeysuckle, and window-rattling thunderstorms.

Fall shimmers with the yellow and orange of Tickseed Sunflower and Sheep Sorrel. The vast array of trees produces radiant reds supplied by sugar maples and showy oaks.

Among the Ozark's beauty lie deep secrets, old wives' tales, and superstitions. Some tales are sworn to be factual, but others are rather dubious. Some are out-and-out unbelievable. But the story you're about to read—the story of the “Spooklight”—is true.

Or so it is said.

I have seen this mysterious light. I have witnessed it roaming the small stretch of gravel road near Joplin, Missouri, where it still lurks today. It's a country road tucked away from sight. Cars have been noted to sit bumper to bumper there, waiting to see the “Spooklight.”

This isn't a small light. It's sometimes as large as a house. To this day, when it appears cars scatter and gravel flies. The faint of heart don't dare to linger. But those who live in the area say the light is getting dimmer now and appears with less regularity. Others say it's getting old and cranky.

In the 1980s a graying, stooped man by the name of Garland Middleton established a Spooklight museum. Folks stopped by the tiny building located alongside the gravel road within easy viewing distance of where the spectacle was likely to appear. The short intersecting road wasn't much to look at, but all eyes were trained on the spot where the light was likely to emerge when darkness gathered. Garland (later dubbed “Spooky”) was always delighted to talk to you about the light. He'd tell eye-widening stories and legends about its source. Old Garland would sell you a cold bottle of soda pop—and maybe some potato munchies and a candy bar. A bare ceiling bulb held by a frayed cord illuminated the frayed magazine and newspaper clippings tacked to the wall.

What most fascinates me—a born romantic—about this

spectacle: The light appears to respond best to love. And children. It is thought to feel love and if possible tries to return it.

Over the past hundred years, area residents have hired their share of “supernatural” folks to tell them what this strange phenomenon is and why it’s there. The first recorded sighting is said to have taken place in 1886, but some say it was noted long before that.

The elusive light keeps a respectful distance these days. And if the circus-like atmosphere gets too loud, it chooses not to show itself at all.

Numerous legends exist about its origin. A few are written about in *Ozark Spooklight*, by Foster Young. I’ve loosely utilized these tales in the following storyline. Certified investigations have resulted in numerous explanations for the light, but none that satisfy. One man said it was coming from car lights on busy Route 66. This could be true, but the first sighting was in the late nineteenth century when there were no cars, or highway, or Route 66.

The light’s brightness varies. Sometimes it’s dim, like a small, blinking flashlight. Other times the light is bright enough to reflect off cars. Sometimes the light is a solitary radiance that frequently divides itself into as many as a dozen floating colored lights, moving and dancing. On rare occasions it has been captured by time-lapse cameras.

The phenomenon drew NBC’s attention in the 1980s. They sent a crew to see if the light would appear, and it did. Later the segment aired and the moderator, John Barbour, confessed he thought the light was real.

To suggest that the light exists only in the imagination of some is to say that it exists in the camera’s eye.

When I witnessed the light, it wasn’t bouncing or coming up to the car window. It was in the distance, moving, almost shy. Hesitant.

During the writing of this book, I invited a few old friends from our teenage years over to talk about the Spooklight. Everyone had their recollections of the first time they saw it. One lady said she was

on the floorboard covering her head with her arms, begging her boyfriend to drive away from it. Others said they got out of their cars and walked the lane, getting as close as they could. When I saw it I can't recall much more than thinking, *Huh. There really is a light.*

My husband and I drove back to the area last week. He remembered the Spooklight route; I didn't. The museum is gone, fallen to ruins in thick winter undergrowth. The gravel road is still there. I counted two mobile homes and a house along the isolated four-mile gravel strip that is mostly farm and cattle land, tall oaks, and red clay. I so wanted to knock on doors and ask questions, but my husband restrained me.

By now you're either interested in the light or you're dubiously shaking your head. I have done both during my lifetime. If you're ever near Joplin, Missouri, take time to drive to the gravel "Spooklight Road." There aren't any public signs—none that I could find, anyway—but ask most anyone in the area and they'll point the way.

What is the light's source? Is it burning out after all these years? Has it lost heart? I have no idea. I am certain the source is explainable, but to date nobody knows why it's there or what it wants. I have used many of the numerous legends and "for real" stories told about the light in this book, so you decide.

Lori


1


Four miles south of Joplin, Missouri, 1887

Give it up, Cummins! Don't make me shoot you!" U.S. Marshal Ian Cawley let his horse have his head. Towering sycamores flashed by in the deepening Missouri twilight. Darkness threatened to overtake him, but that was no excuse for giving up the chase. He had this scruffy little thief this time. The back of the outlaw's dirty bowler drew closer. Ian could smell the stench of unwashed body and filthy shirt. Hunching lower in the saddle, he urged the horse. "Come on, Norman. Let's get this over with and head home."

Home being Kansas City, one hundred fifty miles to the west.

The whimpering outlaw wasn't getting away from him this time. Twice Jim Cummins had slipped Ian's net, and the fact rubbed the

marshal raw. There wouldn't be much of a bounty—when the outlaw robbed banks the take was always small—but the man was a huge thorn in his side. He was tired of this game. Jim was *his* this time. He gripped the reins, urging his horse to a painful stretch. A few feet more and he would make the leap from his horse to Cummins'.

The scummy little criminal had the reputation of being meek, but Cummins was acting anything but docile right now. He wasn't highly thought of as criminals went. His own gang viewed him as a sniveler and crybaby, but he was adept when avoiding the law.

Ian's buckskin pulled closer.

Hunching lower in the saddle, the outlaw whipped his animal to a frenzy.

Sighing, Ian prepared for the pain. The little runt wasn't going down without a fight. No one ever did. Half a mile out of town he'd tackled Jim off the horse. The two men had scuffled on the roadway, and Cummins had thrown a hard right that left Ian reeling. The lapse allowed the outlaw time to mount up and take off, but in the process he'd dropped a Liberty Bank bag which was now in Ian's possession. Somewhere during the brawl Ian had lost his wallet with his badge and papers, but he'd have to go back for them later. He couldn't let Cummins gain any more distance.

This time Ian had him.

Preparing for the jump, he braced for the jolt. Last time he'd done this he'd broken two ribs and shattered his pelvis, but he'd brought in Hobbs Kerry alive. Ten thousand wasn't bad for a day's work, overlooking the soreness. The money had bought Grandpa a new plow and Grandma one of those fancy Home Comfort cookstoves. She'd baked cinnamon rolls and fruit pies for everyone in the county there for a while.

But Ian was getting too old for this line of work. He ought to hang it up and settle down. Live a normal life.

A brilliant light suddenly appeared in front of the racing horses.

Momentarily distracted, the marshal focused on the strange object. What in the blazes? It hadn't been there a second ago. Involuntarily slowing, he threw up a forearm to shield his eyes.

Cummins reacted to the strange sight, swiftly hauling back on the reins. Both horses spooked, going crazy. Ian spoke in a low, even tone to Norman. "Don't bolt on me." Ian wouldn't put it past the animal to pitch his rider over his head. If the ill-tempered, contrary beast hadn't been such a fine piece of horse flesh Ian would have sold him five years earlier. Cummins' mare danced over the rutted road as the outlaw shrieked, shielding his eyes with a lifted shoulder from the light's dazzling brilliance.

Bouncing closer, the light hovered between the two men.

Norman blew and stepped backward, but Ian's eyes were glued to the strange light. What was it? He'd never seen anything like it. He'd read newspaper accounts of folks making claims that they had seen strange glowing objects in the sky, but he'd not heard of a bouncing light.

The object shifted, jauntily moving to perch on Cummins' saddle horn.

Screaming, the outlaw spurred his mare and the animal took off in a gallop, Cummins batting at the bizarre object that hovered around his head.

Ian sat frozen in place, eyes trained on the spectacle. He'd help, but he'd never fought a...a light. The outlaw's screams filled the impinging darkness as the bobbing light ballooned and then deflated but never moved from Cummins' saddle horn. The astounding sight suddenly zipped off and disappeared over a rise and Ian sat, transfixed.

Back over the rise the light came, heading in his direction.

Stuffing the bank bag in his saddle roll, he urged Norman forward and took off like a hen with singed feathers, as Grannie would say. Galloping back the way he'd come, he risked a couple of glances over his shoulder and saw that the light was gone. Automatically

slowing, he turned and then started when he saw the light was perched on his horse's rump, round as a water barrel now.

Stumbling out of the saddle, he stepped a distance away to see what the thing would do. It split into five bouncing balls, frolicking about like a spring colt.

"What do you want?" Ian shouted. Not only had he let Cummins get away, he was trying to initiate a conversation with a light.

The light skipped about, rolling to a nearby plowed pasture and tumbling like a child at play. When Ian stepped to his horse the light returned, forming a halo above his head.

He fixed in place. He had a hunch that if he ran the thing would stay right beside—or ahead—of him.

Calmer now, he said, "What do you want?"

The light hovered. Ian could have sworn it tilted slightly as if to say, "What?"

"Who are you? What do you want?" More to the point, where was Cummins now? Three miles down the road and still screaming, probably. He had escaped him again. Norman snorted, staring at the sight.

The light steadied, grew dimmer, then radiant. Minutes stretched as he watched the strange ball cycle. It appeared it wasn't going to move until Ian did. By now he had worked up a heavy sweat in the mild spring night. Perspiration trickled down his neck and he wiped moisture from his eyes. Wasn't this a fine mess? Nobody would believe this story. His gaze wandered down the desolate road. A man could go a long time in these hills and hollers and never see a soul. Tree frogs croaked in nearby ponds.

Suddenly the light shot away at breathtaking speed. It reached the top of the rise before Ian realized it was gone. Springing into action, he swung aboard Norman and spurred him into a full gallop. The horse obliged, racing down the uneven road at a perilous clip.

Peering over his shoulder, Ian suddenly drew up. The light was clinging to his shoulder now. He shoved it away but his hand only

moved through air. Squealing, Norman swerved back and forth on the road as Ian struggled to battle the light and hang on. The object tired of the battle, divided again, and became five pinging balls, skipping, dancing in front of the horse's path.

Wild now, Norman plunged through heavy thicket and galloped headlong into open pasture.

"Whoa! Steady, boy!" Ian grabbed for the reins that had escaped him when the horse veered off the road. For the first time in his life the marshal felt completely helpless. A thin moon slid out, illuminating his predicament.

Galloping at full speed now, the stallion headed straight for a barn in the distance. The light bounced in front of the animal, teasing, goading. "Thank You, God," Ian muttered. Norman would stop when he reached the barn.

The light hopped on top of Norman's head and a watery moon shone on the rutted pasture as Ian hung on. By now he heard hysterical screams and realized they were coming from him.

The barn door had been shut for the night. Norman's stride lengthened, his heavy muscles slick with sweat. The ball bounced up and down, back and forth, and from side to side. If the thing had hands, Ian sensed it would be clapping with glee over the merry flight.

And then he looked up, and understanding coursed through him like a bolt of lightning. Norman wasn't going to stop. Ian instantly recognized the horse was going through whatever stood in its path. "Whoa, boy! Whoaahhhhh!"

The sound of shattering lumber echoed throughout the holler as Norman, Ian, and the bouncing light entered the barn without benefit of an open passage.

As his body flew toward the barn floor and the sharp, broken shreds of lumber, Ian caught one last glimpse of Norman's rump as the horse pivoted and galloped away. Ian had one last coherent thought.

I'm going to sell that miserable horse if it's the last thing I do.



A boom shattered the kitchen's peaceful silence, and Lyric started and jerked her hands out of the pan of sudsy dishwater. She glanced over her shoulder at her sister. Lark was sitting at the table, reading. "Was that thunder?"

Lark had her head buried in a Charles Dickens novel, apparently oblivious to the clap that had shaken the timeworn two-story house. "I didn't hear anything."

Lyric's sweet but slightly inattentive sister wouldn't hear a tree felled beside the house if she was reading. Lifting the window over the sink to allow a hint of fresh night air into the kitchen, Lyric conceded that March was extremely warm in the holler this year, which usually meant a stifling summer ahead. The garden vegetables, newly planted, would be burned to a crisp by fall, no doubt. Tomatoes would blister on the vines and second-planting string beans would wither. Pausing, she listened for another clap, but all was silent. She shrugged and returned to the dishes.

The back door burst open and Lyric's hand flew to her heart until she saw Samantha—known to friends and family as "Boots"—standing in the doorway. "It is customary to knock," she gently reminded the fourteen-year-old.

"Sorry. Did you hear that blast?"

"I heard something. Is a storm brewing?"

"Not a cloud in the sky." Boots took a deep breath and continued. "Can't imagine what it was. Scared the waddin' out of me. Lark, you have got to hear this! You know how Caroline is sweet on Henry and they've been sort of, you know, courting? Well, tonight Henry came over early because he's not allowed to stay out much past dark and Caroline's mother said that she could go for a short ride in his father's new buggy...and of course you know where

Henry took her. Right straight down that creepy road, and lo and behold the light is acting up again. Why, they saw two poor men, each riding in opposite directions like the old devil himself was on their tail, trying to outrun the thing. But it was pestering them something awful.” She paused to draw another deep breath. “Henry said the light hadn’t shown itself in a while and he wanted to impress Caroline with his bravery, so he brought the buggy up here...”

Lyric glanced out the window. Darkness encroached and a light fog hung in the air.

“Anyway, he got Caroline all settled with a nice thick lap robe—which she didn’t need because it’s so mild outside, but you know Henry. He’s a real gentleman. Anyway, they settled down to watch for the light. Caroline said he put his arm around her. Don’t you think that’s a little forward, putting your arm around someone on your first—well, maybe second—outing? But he did, and they settled back to watch for the Spooklight.”

“Boots, I wish you wouldn’t refer to that...that thing as the *Spooklight*.” They had enough to worry about without concerning themselves with frightening legends. Life was difficult enough living in this holler, isolated from everyone by the strange spells her mother’s illness caused. She now lay in her bedroom, frail and weak, awaiting death.

Lyric had spent her life protecting Lark from folks’ cruel barbs and innuendos about how they were different than others, not worthy to be a part of the community. The entire town isolated themselves from Edwina Bolton, the strange woman with two young girls.

Boots’s excited voice droned on. “...and then just before dark, Henry suggested that they spread the lap robe on the ground and watch for the light from there. Moony-eyed Caroline agreed that was a grand idea, so they climbed out of the buggy and made themselves real comfortable.”

A simply grand idea, Lyric silently mocked, aware of how easily a

young woman like Caroline could be led astray. She just bet Henry was all for getting all comfortable. Caroline and Boots needed better adult supervision than their grandfather provided. Given no choice, Neville had assumed the care of Caroline and Boots when their mother passed a few years back. The father was never found...or known, if the scarce bit of information Lyric heard during her brief trips to town for supplies held true.

Those hurried excursions gave her goose bumps. Folks turned away as though she was scarlet fever on legs. That silly light that appeared in the holler often did so closest to the Bolton property line. Folks put two and two together and made four: surely the light had something to do with Edwina Bolton and her strange fits.

That was nonsense and Lyric knew it. That “spooklight” was just a trick of nature. But try convincing the townspeople of that! But it wouldn’t be much longer before her mother passed on, and then Lyric would take her sister and leave this place. Together they would build a new life hundreds of miles from this isolated holler hidden deep in the Missouri hills—somewhere far away, where no one knew about them. She remembered being a young girl and peering at the globe that sat in the parlor. The tiny spots on the paper had turned into exciting new adventures Lyric would experience someday.

“And then,” Boots continued, breathless, “Henry started sweet-talking her. Seems the horse spotted the light first. He reared and took off like someone lit a fire under his rear.”

“Boots,” Lyric cautioned. The girl’s language often tended to be highly improper, a trait she’d acquired from her salty-talking grandfather.

“Backside,” she emphasized. “The horse *dragged* Henry’s father’s new buggy that he’d just bought today. Caroline said the light came right up to them, bold as brass, and just hovered there like it was looking them over. She said she got goose bumps the size of cotton wads. Then it was gone...but so was the horse and buggy, and they had no way to get home. Caroline said Henry knew his pa would

be mad as hops when he discovered he'd let the horse and buggy get loose. After a bit they started walking. I bumped into them when I finished up milking. They were none too happy, either. Caroline was wearing her best patent leather slippers and they were all dusty and scuffed from the briars and dust."

Boots pulled a chair closer to the table. "And you know what else?"

"What?" Lark's eyes fixed on the book page, her voice bordering on monotone. Different as they were, the two girls were as tight as a cheap pair of shoes, even though Lyric was certain that Boots's grandfather didn't overly approve of the friendship.

"That wretched Jim Cummins was spotted earlier today. Walked right into the general store and was about to purchase chewing tobacco when this feller walked in—a stranger, Earl said. Nobody knew the outsider but he must have changed Cummins' mind about the tobacco. Earl said he took off out of there like a scalded cat and last he saw of him he was hightailing it out of town and the stranger was right behind him."

"Outlaws." Lyric shook her head. The hollers were full of them. Lowlifes who kept their families hidden from the law. Lyric listened to the girl's chatter as she dried a skillet and put it away. Boots's occasional bits and pieces of area information were all the news they had, and Lyric welcomed the diversion. No one in Bolton Holler ever ventured up to the house unless forced to. Stories abounded about the "evils" that lay within the walls of the old house, and even the strong of heart avoided the place.

A slow smile formed on her lips. She used to feel sorry for the townsfolk, even pitied them for their misbeliefs that a black cloud hung over the Bolton home—a sinister one, it was said. Most of the folks in town had decided the strange light that shown regularly in this holler was a direct product of Edwina Bolton. Lyric knew that to be nonsense, but the people in town were far more willing to trust in superstition than logic.

She lifted the curtain over the kitchen counter window and peered out. Funny, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. She could see every single star. If not thunder, what had she heard earlier?

She wiped off her hands on her apron. "Boots, don't stay long," she said. "It's well past dark and your grandfather will be alarmed if you're not home soon."

"I won't. Anyway, back to Henry. He is in so much trouble! I doubt that his father will let him take the buggy and horse again for some time and Caroline so looks forward to their rides home on Sunday night."

Slipping into a light sweater, Lyric stepped onto the back service porch. Milk cans and churning pots littered the small enclosure. Outside, she glanced up to see a beautifully rounded moon rising. The sight was so pretty she paused to enjoy the night.

Talk of beaus and courting often caused a stirring in her soul. She would never marry. There wasn't a man around who would dare to come courting for fear Edwina would have one of her mad fits. *Maybe I'll have to settle for one of the Younger brothers*, she thought with a grin. Although the Youngers were nothing to smile about. She'd seen the hoodlums around, shooting up the town and causing trouble. She had prayed the rowdy gang would disband but they hadn't; they'd grown even more worrisome. The whole lot was at their best when they banded together. The Younger brothers—Cole, Bob, Jim, and John—were a thorn in every decent side. Talk drifted to her when she visited the general store. Occasionally a Younger shot up the town and bullied folks something awful and the men in town didn't lift a hand. They were terrified of the hoodlums and gave them plenty of space.

Drawing the sweater closer around her shoulders, she set off toward the barn. That noise had to have come from somewhere. She had closed the door earlier and everything had been peaceful. Maybe ol' Rosie had spooked and kicked her stall down...but even that wouldn't have made such a thunderous sound. As she approached the dwelling, moonlight emphasized a gaping hole

where the barn door had once been. Gasping, she picked up speed, her eyes searching for the source of such destruction. Her barn door! What in the world...?

Now, where was she going to scrape up enough extra money to replace that door?

Drawing closer, she stared at the pile of ankle-deep rubble. The Youngers. How *dare* those thugs destroy her property! The town might have difficulty confronting those men, but she didn't. She'd march down there where they lived and give someone a good piece of her mind!

Leaning around the corner, she fumbled for one of the matches she kept in a box on the wall. A flame ignited and she lit the lantern wick. Light illuminated lumber strewn this way and that. The milk cow, Rosie, stood in her stall, eyes wide open. Lyric stepped deeper into the shadows and squinted, giving a quick intake of breath when she spotted a man's body spread haphazardly across the dirt floor.

A *Younger*. Her pulse quickened.

Creeping closer, she centered the light on his still form and realized that this *Younger* was dead.

A dead *Younger*. In her barn.

She whirled, searching for his horse. Only Rosie stood in the dimly lit structure, however. Maybe he'd walked in here...but it looked for the world like something enormous had been ridden though the door.

Her eyes darted to his chest, where she detected a slight rise and fall. He was still breathing? She set the lantern aside and knelt beside the still form. In a daring moment, she laid her head briefly on the wide span of chest and listened. A slow, faint beat met her ears.

Straightening, she took a deep breath. *Almost dead*, she mentally corrected. If she'd step back and show respect for the dying the good Lord would finish His job. The town would be rid of one of the *Younger* brothers and maybe, for once, they would show a Bolton a little respect for delivering them of such a nuisance.

Worrying her lower lip between her teeth, she mulled the dilemma over in her mind. If she could do anything to sustain his life, she must. It was nothing less than her Christian duty. She hadn't learned the healing arts for nothing. And besides...if he died who would pay for the new barn door?

But he was such a worthless man, causing Bolton Holler and every nearby community nothing but trouble.

Yet she was not to judge others.

Though this outlaw needed a good judging.

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

Bending close, she checked his breathing. The rise and fall of his chest was hardly detectable now. If she was going to act she'd have to do it quickly. Stripping off her apron, she hurriedly bound the deep slit oozing across his forehead. It took several moments to locate and staunch the flow of blood from multiple cuts and gashes. He must have been riding a horse when he burst into the barn. She clucked her tongue. He'd ridden a horse straight through a barn door and been thrown from his saddle. Wasn't that just like a Younger?

She sniffed for the stench of alcohol. Nothing met her attempt but a rather pleasant manly scent—not too strong like that of some men she passed in town.

The spring night had begun to cool and she shivered as the breeze blew straight into the barn. How was she going to get him to the house? Moving to the back of the barn, she rummaged around until she found the old Indian travois that had been there for as long as she could remember. The conveyance was in sad shape, its hide stretched thin with prior use.

In minutes she had hitched Rosie to the transporter and then stood staring at the unconscious man. How would she get him on the sled? He was twice—no, three times her size. “Well, Rosie? Any suggestions?”

The old milk cow chewed her cud.

Moving to the stranger's head, she grasped his shoulders and pulled. His lifeless bulk barely budged. After three attempts, she eased his upper torso onto the sled. Moving to his boots, she swung his legs onto the travois and then stood back, puffing.

She led Rosie out of the barn pulling the travois. Was Younger still breathing? She couldn't spare the time to check. She had to get him to the house and to her box of remedies...although it might already be too late. He was lying so still, as though waiting for death to snatch him away.

She paused long enough to prop a few boards against the barn opening, praying that the flimsy protection would guard her meager stock tonight. She relied on their few sitting hens for eggs, and couldn't afford to lose them to fox and coyote.

She glanced at the wounded man, resenting the intrusion. If she didn't need that barn door so badly she would gladly let him return to dust as quick as he could.