

THE HOUSE WITH THE HOLE IN THE ROOF

by

Gene Tague

CHAPTER ONE

My eyes flew open and I sat straight up in bed. The room was as black as a drug dealer's heart. I could live with that, but the unearthly wailing that had yanked me up out of a sound sleep was something else. It sounded like the hounds of hell in hot pursuit of a lost soul. Shivers raced down my spine. I shook my head, trying to clear the cobwebs. The baying died away, then started up again.

I fumbled in the dark until I found the lamp. In the dim light I saw the problem.

Big Guy had his head thrown back, nose pointed toward the heavens, howling with all his might. And let me tell you, a hundred fifty pounds of black Great Dane has considerable might.

My pulse slowed as the cobwebs cleared. I rubbed my eyes, and frowned at Big Guy. "What's wrong fella?"

The ungodly sound tapered off. Big Guy turned and looked right through me, at something only he could see. He looked sad. Real sad. I'd never seen him look that way before. It didn't help my nerves. Then his eyes brightened as he focused on the here and now. He leaned over the edge of the bed, lay his head in my lap, and wagged his tail.

I'd never heard Big Guy howl before, either. Concerned that he might be sick, I rubbed his ears and said, "You got a belly ache or something?" Big Guy and I have a special relationship. No master, loyal doggie thing here. In my mind, we're friends, and equals. I'm kind of a loner so I don't have many friends. I consider the ones I do have special. Big Guy is more than special.

Speaking of friends, my name is Hackney Smith. My friends call me Hack. My enemies call me all sorts of unspeakable things. Big Guy calls me, woof.

Still concerned, I climbed out of bed and checked him over. I couldn't find any places that seemed tender to the touch. Enjoying the attention, he leaned against me, effectively pinning me against the side of the bed. I decided he was okay. Of course by now I was wide awake. I glanced at the clock. 3:00 a.m. I'd only been asleep for half an hour.

Big Guy curled up next to the bed, stretched his long legs, sighed mightily, and closed his eyes. Obviously, he wasn't concerned about whatever had set him off. I wished I could say the same. I live on the central California coast, between Big Sur and Carmel. It's a pretty remote area. Over the past several years I'd made a few enemies. The last one came to mind, an armed robber named Sid Collins. Six months ago a judge had sentenced Big Sid to twenty years in the slammer. As they'd led him away, Sidney had turned back, looked me straight in the eye, and mouthed. "I'm gonna kill you." Even with the early-outs so common today, I knew he couldn't possibly have been released from prison yet, but he could have escaped. That thought brought the hair on the back of my neck to attention.

A few years back, a sniper had shown me the consequences of making one's self an easy target. I have an ugly scar to help me remember. I don't want another. I turned off the lamp, and sat still until my night vision returned. Not that it did any good. With the blackout drapes closed, my small house is as dark as a tomb, but living in a one room house has an advantage. After you've lived there for awhile you know it like the back of your hand. I slipped out of bed, silently made my way to the front of the house which is all glass and overlooks the Pacific Ocean, and peeked around the edge of the heavy drapes. The fog lay offshore a few miles and a big yellow balloon of a moon cast an eerie twilight glow over the landscape. The front deck looked deserted. I eased open the sliding glass door, and stepped out onto the damp two by sixes.

Something cold and wet touched the back of my leg. I jumped, spun around, and let out a deep breath. "You trying to scare the crap out of me?" Big Guy's tail

thumped against the door jamb.

We inspected the front of the house, Big Guy pressed against my leg the whole time. My thirty-five foot square house sits cockeyed to the world. The front corner, a stone fireplace, points toward the ocean. Floor to ceiling glass make up the two walls that angle away on either side. It gives me a beautiful view of the Pacific. I gingerly stepped past the hot tub at the far end of the deck and looked around the corner. I could see most of the gently sloping ridge that ran behind the house. A tangle of dense vegetation dotted with huge granite boulders made it impenetrable to anything larger than a jack rabbit. I stood there awhile, watching and listening. Nothing moved, and the only sound came from the surf at my back. Big Guy sniffed the air and turned back toward the ocean. If anyone was lurking out there I figured he would have let me know. I checked the other side of the house with the same results. By the time I'd finished, I wished I'd slipped on a robe. My skivvies didn't afford much protection from the cool ocean breeze. My arms and legs had sprouted an acre of goose bumps.

Back in the house I doubled checked the doors. I even latched Big Guy's doggie door. Doggie door? What a laugh. Horse door would have better described it. Satisfied that I'd secured my little corner of the world, I crawled back under the covers. Big Guy curled up alongside the bed and began snoring softly. I wished I could do the same.

I know it sounds crazy. Hell, it is crazy, and I don't really believe it, but I swear, sometimes Big Guy knows things that he shouldn't. I told you it sounded crazy. I've tried to think of a logical explanation, but I must have a mental block or something. I'm

still trying to find a rational explanation for whatever wakes him up from a sound sleep and makes him look at the telephone just before it rings. If you have any ideas, I'd sure like to hear them. Keep in mind, he only does it when the caller is someone he knows, and likes. Or what about when he ambles to the front door and wags his tail long before he could have heard the approaching car? Again only when it's someone he knows and likes. And how about this? My house sits on a rocky point a quarter mile from the highway. The ridge behind the house hides it from view until you round the last curve in my drive. I usually work at home, and don't keep regular hours. Now this is what gets me. Whenever I come home I stop at the far end of the drive. Before I can push the button on the remote control to open the gate and let myself in, Big Guy trots up to meet me. No matter if I've been gone a few minutes, hours, or even days. I know he doesn't stand there waiting the whole time I'm gone. Most of the time I don't lose any sleep over his strange antics, but tonight had me on edge. I'd never heard Big Guy howl before, and I'm not ashamed to admit, the eerie sound and his strange foreboding look had me spooked. I couldn't help wondering if he knew something else that I didn't know.

I lay in bed for a long, long time, listening for bumps in the night while I ran Big Guy's weird behavior around in my mind, trying to figure out if it meant anything. My gut told me it did, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out what. I glanced at the clock on the night stand. The numbers glowed softly. 7:30. It had been a long night. I decided to hell with it, and like the not-so-smart bird that hides from its enemies by burying its head in the sand, I tugged the blanket over my head and went to sleep.