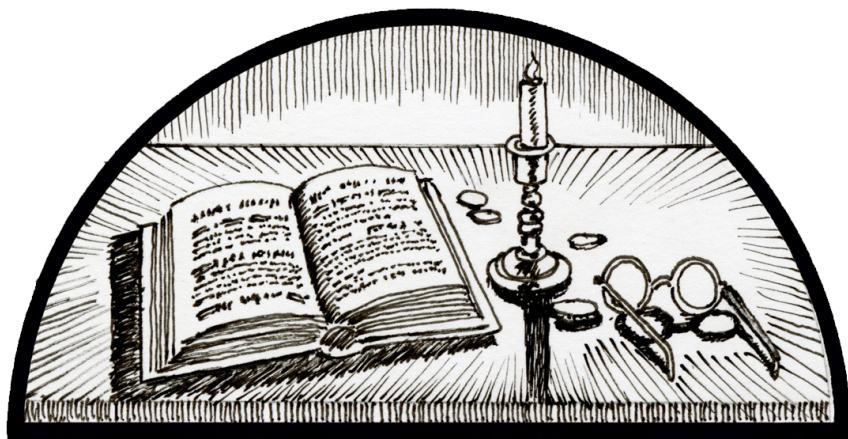


## FOLK SECRETS



### Chapter 1 The Codex

*Circa 1963*

*Oklahoma*

Standing in his front yard, Jonathan Quill looked up at the evening sky. It was a strange shade of green, swirling like a frothy brew in a witch's cauldron. He was only ten years old, but this wasn't the first time he'd seen a storm like this in the making. He watched the churning clouds with trepidation.

Wind from the north picked up, mixing with warm air from the Gulf of Mexico. The atmospheric volatility made his arm hairs stand straight up, just as his father called to him from the driveway.

"Get in the car, Jonathan! Tornado's brewing. We gotta go!"

Jonathan's father quickly opened the passenger door of their gigantic Plymouth Station Wagon and ushered him inside.

"Shouldn't we head to our cellar?" asked Jonathan.

"We darn well should, but we're not. P.R. is on his deathbed, and we hafta go see him first. He needs to talk to you."

Jonathan gulped. "To *me*?"

## **Brent Wheelbarger**

“Yes, to you!” His father glanced up at the sky. “Whatever he has to say, it better be quick.”

The engine roared, and the car pulled out as rain spattered the windshield.

Too much was happening at once. His old mentor, P.R. Simms, was dying. A tornado was coming. And the car was barreling down the road at crazy speed. Time, space, and everything Jonathan had ever known flew by as the car sprayed dirt from the road. It added to a swirling wall cloud forming in the distance behind them. And up ahead, a stark white farmhouse came into view. For Jonathan Quill, this moment would forever change the future... *and* the past.

Jonathan entered P.R.’s bedroom on the second floor. “Come closer, boy,” sputtered P.R.. “And tell all those other people to get outta here. Thomas, that means you too!”

This was the first time Jonathan had heard anyone call his dad something other than Tom. And he’d never seen Mr. Simms this agitated.

“Let us move you to the basement with the others,” pleaded Tom. “It’s not safe up here.”

“By no means will you do that! I’m as good as dead anyway.”

“But P.R.!”

“Thomas, I’m not leaving this room! I’ll only keep the boy for a moment. Now stop wasting time. Get on outta here!”

Tom gave Jonathan an exasperated look. “Just make it quick,” he said and turned to run back down the stairs.

The shutters outside slammed back and forth as the magnitude of the storm increased. Jonathan glanced out the window in time to see a few shingles peel off the barn next door. Some smaller trees near the driveway bent sideways in the wind.

“Jonathan, come closer!” wheezed P.R.

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He moved in a bit, but P.R. pulled him closer still. Uncomfortably close. He tried to concentrate on the old man's words while the storm intensified.

"All my years I've lived in this town, and now my years are coming to an end. But I cannot let my secret die with me. And you, my boy, I trust completely. Can you keep a secret?"

The lights flickered several times and then went dark.

"Jonathan!" yelled his father from the first floor of the house. "We've lost power. You gotta get downstairs now!"

P.R. struggled to sit up in his bed.

"Will you keep that racket down! The boy and I are talking. I told you, I'll just be a minute!" P.R. slumped back down. "Jonathan, on the wall across the room is a portrait of Henry Applegate and his family, God rest their souls. Behind the portrait is a small lever that opens a secret compartment. Bring me what you find."

Jonathan jumped up and ran to the portrait. A wooden frame surrounded the image of a man with a thin white beard, curled at the bottom. Sitting next to the man was a woman with perfect posture. And between them, a little girl about Jonathan's age. They all looked so proper in their antiquated clothing.

The portrait was high on the wall, and Jonathan strained to reach it. With the tips of his fingers, he lifted it just enough to reveal a rusty old lever, inset within the wall and attached to a metal hatch. But it was too high for him to reach.

"I'll get my dad to open it," Jonathan said, ready for a dash to the door.

"No!" wheezed P.R. A hacking cough overcame him as he pointed to a wooden stool across the room.

Jonathan pulled it over to the portrait. He climbed on the stool, lifted the portrait off the wall, and set it on the floor. He

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then pulled on the lever. It clearly hadn't been opened in a very long time and resisted his efforts.

"Pull it hard, boy!"

Jonathan yanked again on the lever, and it creaked loudly as rust flakes fell to the floor. He opened the metal hatch to reveal a dark space—too dark to see inside.

"Get the book!" yelled P.R. in between coughs. "Bring it here! Hurry!"

Jonathan reached into the compartment and felt the leather cover of a book. He carefully removed it, disturbing a layer of cobwebs and dust. The book released a musty smell. Despite seeming ancient, it was sturdy in his hands.

He stepped down from the stool and reverently brought the item to P.R.'s bedside.

"My boy, this book contains secrets beyond your wildest imagination," said P.R. as he reached out and ran his bony fingers across its cover. "Nothing more can be gained from this moment unless you fully believe that."

The realization settled in that his mentor was breathing his last. "Mr. Simms, you're really dying, aren't you?" asked Jonathan. "I don't want you to die."

"Hush up!" P.R. leaned forward. "This book is precious; guard it with your life. Study it. Learn its secrets. And never let *Them* find it. Ever."

He started coughing again and struggled to continue speaking in garbled, stilted words.

"Hide it in your coat, Jonathan! Don't let anyone see it. Don't ever let *Them* find it!"

Jonathan put the book inside his corduroy jacket just as Tom rushed into the room.

"Jonathan, we gotta go now!"

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P.R. fell back into the bed and gave Jonathan a wink. Then he breathed his last.

“Mr. Simms, don’t go,” said Jonathan in disbelief. He had never witnessed anyone die before, especially someone he knew. “I’ll watch it forever.”

He attempted to hug the now-lifeless P.R. as his father picked him up and carried him out of the room.

The storm was breaking windows and rattling the old house to its core. But Jonathan didn’t seem to notice, lost in his own world of pain and confusion. His father carried him down to the first floor and through a small basement door. People had been paying their respects to P.R. that day, anticipating his passing. Now they were huddled in the basement to wait out the storm. As Tom carried Jonathan down the rickety stairs, tears streamed down the boy’s cheeks, making one thing painfully clear to everyone—P.R. had died, his spirit taking up with the storm as it moved over the farmhouse and off into the countryside. He left behind a legacy that would be long remembered in the little town. And to a ten-year-old boy, he left a book unlike any other.

Jonathan came home exhausted but unable to sleep. Thunder could still be heard from the retreating storm, and his brain swirled like the tornado he’d just experienced. He was glad to be tucked in bed, covered in a handmade quilt made by his great-great-grandmother. The tattered patchwork was always on his bed, even on hot nights. It made him feel safe.

He became curious about the book P.R. had given him. With a flashlight in hand, he opened the mysterious tome. Not at the beginning, but right in the middle, where P.R. had placed a bookmark. The essence of those pages revealed a complex pattern of travels and mysteries from a great, but troubling adventure.