

Walk-About:
A Story of the Future

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For Ilene, who is not only one of those old Southern grandmas mentioned herein, but
the strongest woman I have ever known.

And for the wonderful folks at the Flying Monkey Arts Center, on the second floor of
Lowe Mill. <http://www.flyingmonkeyarts.org>

To Gabby, my irate, petulant, demanding, and all around wonderful Siamese, who
graciously agreed to let me write this, as long as she could sit on the monitor while I did
so.

Author's Note

This story takes place in northern Alabama and southern Tennessee, mostly in and around Huntsville, Alabama. Most of the locations are real. Those that are not or whose names have been changed are marked with an asterisk after the name the first time it is mentioned.

Part One –Runaways

Every story must have a beginning, and this one is no exception. I suppose the proper place to begin is with an introduction, but if the truth is to be told, I do not want to tell this story at all. Why? There seems to be no point. For posterity, Mary Ellen would tell me if she were here. But it seems to me that most of our “posterity” couldn’t give a rat’s ass about my life, or its story. It is their own lives, and their own stories, that they will be concerned with. But Mary Ellen is still nagging me to tell this story, so I guess I will. For her, if for no one else. Yes, she’s dead and has been these past twenty years and more, but she’s still nagging me. She nagged on me for fifty years in life and you would think that would be enough, but no. She still nags me even though she’s dead and gone. I may sound cross about it but I’m not. I’d give both my legs and my arms too if she could still be here to nag me. It never really bothered me, though I grouched about it enough at the time. Still do. Sometimes I think I hear her calling me, you know. Usually when I am about to drop off for a nap or when I’m trying to get to sleep at night. I’ll be almost asleep and then I will hear her voice and jerk awake. I look around, expecting to see her walk through the door, and only then do I remember she is long gone.

What was that? Oh, the story. Have some respect for your elders, young man. Kids these days. (Laughs.) No, sorry. I don’t mean that. Every generation from the cave men on down has railed against the younger. It’s the way of the world, I suppose. But at my age I’ve earned the right to ramble if I wish. I’ve outlived all of my contemporaries. Far outlived, in most cases. I guess I’m just too stubborn to die. When I was a kid my Grandpappy used to say I was as ornery as any mule ever born, and it’s true. Believe you me. I’ve known a lot of mules in my time.

But where was I? Oh, the story. I’ve got a lot of stories. Mary Ellen wanted me to tell them all, and have them written down. That’s your job, boy. I’ll do the talking and you do the writin’. I’m running out of time, I suppose, and I promised Mary Ellen on her deathbed that I would do this. It sure took me long enough to get around to it. (Laughs again.) I’ll start with the first one, I suppose, and I can work enough of the back story into that to give you the picture.

But first things first. In case anyone ever reads this who actually gives a boot, I am Edna Jean Davis, and I am a hundred and three years old, but back then I was still young...

Approximately 50 miles north and east of Huntsville, Alabama, near Elvis and Blackberry* Tennessee .*

“I want to see the ocean.”

The remark came out of the blue one warm, late spring day. It was hot, despite the fact that we were not yet into June. Every year it seemed like the heat came sooner and left later. We were on our grandparent’s land, planting sweet potatoes, my brother Tim and I, when he made this odd remark. Tim was always making odd remarks. He always had his nose buried in a book or his head up in the clouds instead of on the ground where it belonged. Had I known how much trouble that simple sounding remark would cause, I would probably have turned around and clocked him then and there. I should point out that Tim was my brother by blood and not just by raising. Not that it matters, but I still haven’t figured out how our parents managed to produce two children as different as the two of us.

“Ed?” Tim called when I didn’t answer after a moment. “Did you hear me? I said I want to see the ocean.”

I felt a surge of irritation towards the boy and choked it down. He was only sixteen –ten years younger than I –after all, and all boys are prone to make stupid remarks occasionally. Particularly when they are between fifteen and twenty. Not that I haven’t made plenty of stupid remarks in my time, but nothing like teenage boys are prone to do. That Tim was more prone to do it than most was just a function of his personality. Suddenly I realized that this one was probably my fault. How many times had I told him of the trips our family had taken to Gulf Shores and Panama Beach when I was little?

We were almost finished with the sweet potatoes. Tim had just finished putting the last starts in the last row, and I was close behind him with the hoe, which I used to fill in the trench. One person could have handled the job but it was easier and faster with two. You learned to minimize labor when you had to grow all your own food.

Finally I stopped working for a moment. I took my hat off with my free hand and transferred it awkwardly to the hand that held the hoe. Then I took my handkerchief out of my front pocket and wiped the sweat from my brow. After that I

took a long swig from the water bottle at my belt. I took my time, rolling the water around my mouth to wet my parched tongue before I finally swallowed.

Tim was still looking at me expectantly.

There was no help for it. “Yes.” I said finally. “I heard you.”

“Well?” He replied. “Do you have anything to say?”

“Like what?” I let a bit of my annoyance show as I resumed hoeing. “So you want to see the ocean. Great. I want to ride in an airplane. Both are about as likely to happen. And so what?”

“That’s not true. The ocean is still there, but no one has an airplane anymore. Or if they do they don’t have any fuel.”

He had me there, I had to admit. It had been at least five years since I had seen a contrail. Maybe six or seven. I tried to remember when the last time had been and gave up. It hardly mattered.

Tim was still talking. “We could still get to the beach. It’s not that far, maybe not as far as it used to be with the way sea level has been rising.”

“We’re hundreds of miles from the ocean, Tim. You’d have to *walk*. You don’t even like walkin’ to Elvis. And who knows what’s between here and there these days?” I was thinking of all the rumors about Huntsville and Birmingham, in particular, but did not say what I was thinking aloud. Maybe I should have. But then, Tim had always been the sort who thought no one would ever try to hurt him. I doubt he would have listened.

“So? We could do it in a summer. Me and Bobby were thinking-”

“Hold it right there,” I stopped hoeing again and gave him The Look. You know the kind a parent turns on a child who is in trouble. Tim was my son as much as my brother, as I had most of the raising of him. “Timothy Joseph Davis the Second, I don’t give a rat’s furry ass what you and Robert Earl have been thinkin’. Put it out of your mind right now.”

“But Eddie-”

“Don’t ‘But Eddie’ me. The last time you two got to thinking together you both got hurt and I got to drag your butt to Sharkey’s on a litter and then walk all the way to Elvis to get the Doc. No more ‘buts’. Stop thinkin’ whatever it is you’ve been thinkin’. Now get yerself over to that well and get the water to do the sweet potatoes. Ya hear?”

“Yes’m.” He muttered, almost too low to hear.

“What was that?”

“Yes ma’am.” Tim repeated, this time much louder.

“That’s better. Now get on with you.”

Tim turned and shuffled off, muttering rebelliously to himself. Only a teenager could manage to look that sulky. I finished planting the sweet potatoes and headed back to the house. Tim passed me on the way, a full watering can in each hand. He glared at me as I passed. “Aren’t you going to help?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“I’m going up to Sharkey’s. Water the tomatoes and beans when you’re done with the potatoes.”

The boy said some words as I moved off, none of them very nice. I chose to ignore them. He was still small enough for me to wash his mouth out with soap if I chose but he was getting close enough to being a man to speak his own piece. Sides, I knew it would help him to cool off and the sooner he cooled off the sooner he would get back to work and wear himself out enough to get the foolish notions out of his head.

Walk to the beach, indeed.

Maria and her daughters were in the strawberry patch picking the last of the berries. They waved and called “Hola!” as I neared. I took off my hat and waved back. “Hola! How are the berries?”

“Good, good!” Maria assured me, as her children chattered at me in a strange patois of English and Spanish that I had gradually gotten used to. She had seven girls, though only two were hers by birth. She and Miguel had had four of their own, counting the boy, until the fever that had also taken my parents. Miguel too had been carried off that winter, along with many others. Including the parents of her adopted girls. Like Sharkey she had taken in as many of the orphaned children as she could care for. Three of the girls weren’t even Hispanic, and the other two were Guatemalan instead of Mexican.

That hardly mattered, either. We were well past the time of the riots.

Twelve people shared my grandparent’s house back then. At one point we’d all been crammed into Sharkey and Mama Jo’s place like a basketful of puppies but as we’d all grown we’d felt the need to spread out. The day I turned eighteen Sharkey handed

me the deed to the land and house. “It’s yours now.” He said simply. “I took care of it like I promised but now it’s yours.”

I looked at it and back at him. “What the hell am I supposed to do with it?”

Sharkey shrugged. “Move over there with some of the folks? You won’t have to walk so far to tend the fields and we need the room.”

So we did.

Beth was sitting on the back porch, sewing. Her feet were propped up on an ottoman and she had a glass of peppermint tea at her elbow. Cold, since we had enough power from the solar panels to run the fridge and ceiling fans, if not the air conditioner. A fan was turning lazily overhead. She was so big with child she could hardly walk. Her two-year-old slept on the porch swing nearby. The boy had his thumb in his mouth. He was the spitting image of his papa, and I was glad for Beth’s sake. Joey had been killed by a stray bullet over the winter.

A supposedly stray bullet. He had been on his way back from visiting the Amish community and cut a little too close to Blackberry. Jeremiah and his crew knew Joey and Beth lived with me, and he might have been trying to send Sharkey and me a message. But I had no proof, and I wasn’t about to do anything without proof.

No matter how much I wanted to.

“You all right?” I asked as I came up the porch steps.

Beth nodded, smiling. “I’m fine. Sister Ruth is coming out to check on me this afternoon. She reckons to stay here until the baby is born. That all right with you?”

I nodded. The unassuming young Amish midwife was always welcome, and I certainly didn’t want to have to try and get the truck going or ride Sharkey’s damn horse pell-for-broke in the middle of the night to fetch her. The Amish didn’t have any of the shortwaves. One of our girls was her latest apprentice, just as another was apprenticing with the Doc. There were certain skills we daren’t lose. “The Doc’ll be on call, I take it?”

“He’s taught her fine how to do a Caesarean, Eddie.”

I jutted my chin out in my most stubborn manner. “I still want the Doc on call.”

“Fine. But I’ll be okay. I’ve done this before. What do you think?” She held up her work for my inspection. It was a tiny dress, just the right size for a newborn girl. I stared at it in bewilderment.

“Hell Beth, we have enough baby clothes for all of Tennessee and half of ‘Bama between what we’ve got here and the stockpile up at Elvis. What are you making more for?”

She shrugged, still smiling. “It’s a new baby. I figure she should have at least one new outfit.”

“Your call. Not mine. I’m going over to Sharkey’s. Keep an eye on Tim for me, would you?”

“Sure. What’s he up to now?”

“Jesus only knows. Not me.”

“Well, tomorrow’s Monday so he’ll be back in school and out of mischief then.”

Frankly, I thought having so much school was part of his problem. Sharkey may have taught me everything else he knew, but he somehow infected Tim with his love of books. I stopped inside long enough to have a glass of tea and then walked the quarter-mile over to Sharkey’s. There weren’t as many people packed into the house and the two trailers as there had once been but there was still plenty of people about, most of them around my age or even younger. Most of the household was out working before the heat really sat in for the day. Sharkey had gone into town for a trustee’s meeting and Mary Ellen had gone with him. But Todd, Mary Ellen’s husband, was there and I explained what Tim’s latest foolish notion was. He rolled his eyes.

“Those two! They’re the devil’s own children, I swear. We’ll keep an eye on Bobby, don’t worry, if ya’ll will keep an eye on Timmy. They’ll get it outta their heads soon enough.”

I nodded, and that was the last I thought of the incident, save for keeping a closer eye on Tim for a few days. Two weeks later I had forgotten about it completely. So when he asked to sleepover at Bobby’s I didn’t hesitate to say yes. School was out for the year and he’d been good all week, so I didn’t have any reason to say no.

The trouble was, he didn’t come back the next morning.

Part Two –Elvis

I slipped into the world quietly in Huntsville, Alabama about the time the first troubles began. Ah, who am I kidding? I've always been about as subtle as a forest fire and my birth was no different. My parents had planned a nice, quiet birth at a birthing center across the line in Tennessee. That was before my mother started hemorrhaging one afternoon three weeks before her due date. So I arrived by emergency C-section at the local hospital. Family legend has it that my normally mild, executive father, confronted with this unexpected emergency, completely freaked. Emergencies do that to people. They either bring out the best or the worst in everybody. In my father's case it was probably the best. He picked his wife up –somehow –put her in his sports car, and drove down Highway 53 and Jordan Lane like all the demons of hell were after him. A man who never broke the speed limit suddenly turned into a NASCAR driver.

When they arrived at the hospital they were searched, of course. A bleeding pregnant woman shows up and you search her before letting her into the ER. It wasn't like they needed to; Huntsville wasn't Detroit or L.A., or even Atlanta. It was one of those things they did because they could. Things were like that back then. I'm not supposed to know about that, of course, and I wouldn't if Grandpappy Thompson had not gone on about it every time I saw him until the day he died. He was an old coot, was Grandpappy. True southern born redneck. He didn't forgive his daughter for marrying a black man (even one who was mixed) until I was born. He served in 'Nam and to him anyone he didn't like was a 'damn commie'. He had more guns than God (not uncommon in our area) and was always worried 'someone from the gummat' was going to try and take them. It never happened, and even if it had, the only one of his that was registered was the one he carried in his waistband. He and Grandma had a huge fight in the parking lot of the hospital over whether or not he should leave that gun in the truck. She won, and it was a good thing since they (naturally) were searched too. Grandpappy nearly got arrested for talkin' back to the cops. I'm not supposed to know that, either.

I was healthy, despite being premature. I guess I was in a hurry to come into the world. My childhood was happy, I suppose. I don't remember much of it. We were sheltered from most of the dislocations that took place during that time period. My mother was a housewife who worked part-time once I started school but my father was a high-level executive at one of the defense contractors in town. I don't remember what his title was or which company he worked for, but he traveled a lot. He also made a lot

of money, which is what sheltered us as things began to deteriorate. We had a big house in Harvest that was always warm in winter and cool in summer. I had a giant bedroom and more toys than I could count.

I was a stubborn, strong-willed child who severely tried my parents. I was a tomboy from the time I could walk and resisted any and all efforts to turn me into a lady. I was my mother's sorrow. Grandma Davis thought it was funny and whenever I would come to her house she let me climb trees and run wild with the neighborhood boys. Grandpappy Thompson was as happy as he could be that he had a grandchild who liked to go fishing and camping with him. He took me fishing for the first time when I was two and camping when I was four. I was seven when he taught me to shoot. Whenever I was on their farm in Elvis I kept Grandma busy patching me up.

All through my childhood there were problems. There was war and rumors of war. The economy got worse and worse, with periods of stability in between dislocations. We were hardly affected but as I got older I couldn't help but notice them. Shortages started at some point and just kept happening but it never affected us at home. Papa could just pay more for whatever we needed. Including gas, when it started running short. I first noticed the problems at school when more and more kids showed up without some or all of their supplies. Mother would often take bags of school supplies and give them to my teachers and more'n once she rounded up clothing and even shoes for some of the kids who couldn't afford them or find them. When her part-time job ended (the business folded, I think) she devoted all her efforts to charity.

I was ten when the fever came through. It was the flu, I think. The public health system had been overstrained for years but it completely collapsed when that epidemic began. The stories are that it turned into a full-blown pandemic but I've no way of knowing if that's the case. When it began Papa drove Mother and me up to the farm in Elvis. Grandpappy had died the summer before in a car accident and Papa said Grandma could use the help. Mother was very pregnant with Tim. Papa dropped us off and went back to Huntsville, and to work.

That was the last time I ever saw him. One of his colleagues called when he passed away of the fever.

Mother gave birth to Tim two weeks later and he was about a month old when the fever made it to Elvis. It hit hard. Isolation helped some. When it reached Elvis a lot of people just stayed on their farms or in their homes until it was over. A lot of people did the same in the cities. It made it harder to get the fever but also harder to get treatment. About sixty percent of the people around our parts got the fever, and about half of those who got it died. Most of pneumonia. I've no way of knowing if it was that way everywhere or if it was worse in Elvis. We didn't have much healthcare to speak of and it was impossible to get to the hospital in Fayetteville, much less Huntsville.

I was the first to get sick in our family. While I was recovering Mother got sick and passed away. Grandma didn't tell me until I was well. Tim never got it. A few days after I was back on my feet Grandma passed away. Not of the fever; she never got sick. Her heart just gave out, I think. It had been bad for years and she'd been off her meds for weeks. The power was out for some reason but I managed to get the emergency radio going. Things were bad. They gave a lot of numbers I didn't understand and can't remember. I do remember they said the president had not gotten it and was still in charge. I remember wondering why I should care about someone I didn't even know

when my parents and Grandma were gone forever. For a couple of days I managed okay on my own with Tim. But everything in the fridge went bad, we ran out of formula and diapers, and I didn't know what to do about Grandma. So finally I bundled us up (it got really cold in winter at times, in those days) and walked down the road to Sharkey's and Mama Jo's. They'd always been really good friends with my grandparents but I hadn't seen them in days. Mama Jo opened the door, took one look at us, and sat about feeding both of us while Sharkey –missing a foot though he was –went and buried Grandma.

The power came back on a few weeks later. Several months after that it went off again and stayed off. Why I don't know.

But all of that was a long time before Tim decided he wanted to see the ocean.

When Tim didn't show up early that morning I assumed he and Bobby Earl had gone fishing. We were taking things easy for a few days since the planting was done and I had told him to just be back for evening chores. They even left a note on Sharkey's table that said that's where they were so no one would look for them.

I had business in Elvis that day. Part of it was ours and part of it was Sharkey's. He was feeling poorly and had asked me to go in his stead. He often had me run errands or attend to other business for him. I think he trusted me even more than Todd, who was his son-in-law. I know he taught me things he never taught Todd.

Beth and Maria were sitting on the porch drinking tea when I left. It was shortly after dawn. Beth was nursing the baby. Her daughter really had slipped quietly into the world, naturally and without any complications, only two days after Tim told me he wanted to go see the ocean. "Leaving all ready?" She called when I stepped out.

"Have to." I grunted in reply. My backpack was full of trade goods and I had a basket of eggs tied to my belt. "I want to back by supper."

"You be careful," Maria told me firmly. "Bring back some blackberries, no?"

"If there are any." It was early yet, but you never knew. "You have a gun handy?"

In response, Beth lifted the corner of the afghan on the porch swing next to her enough to reveal the butt of the rifle concealed there. I nodded. It had been some time since we'd had any trouble but I didn't want to risk anything happening to any of my family.

It was another clear, cloudless day. Nice enough for traveling, but worrisome since that made it a week since we'd had rain. We didn't need another drought. Elvis was three miles from the farm by the road and two-thirds of that cross-country. Blackberry was northwest of Elvis another five miles up the old road. Our Amish neighbors lived juxtaposed in between the two and slightly further west. I took the road but kept an eye out for trouble.

As I walked I scanned the sky for contrails. It was an old habit of mine, one I still haven't broken. I suppose my fascination with airplanes is due to Papa. When I was a small child he was always traveling and my mother and I would see him off or pick

him up at the airport whenever possible. I always wanted to go somewhere in a plane and never did. Suddenly I understood Tim's fascination with the ocean a little bit more.

Little did I know he and Bobby Earl were heading southwest at that very moment.

There were several other places on the way from ours to town. Some were occupied and some were not. I passed the Heckert place first. They were on my left. Their winter wheat was doing poorly. It didn't look like it was going to come to harvest and that was worrisome. Only two other families still grew wheat. Their garden was looking good at least, and they had a trial patch of corn this year. It was a different kind than I had seen before and I made a mental note to ask them where they had gotten the seed. I wondered how they made it on their own. There were only three of them, and they were too proud to ask for help. The McCrays were next. They grew the famous blackberries, some cattle, and lots of sweet potatoes as well as a huge garden. In the old days the big blackberry patch had been a pick-your-own farm and people came from all over, even as far as Huntsville and Chattanooga, to do just that. The entire extended family lived there now –what was left of it –as well as some others they had taken in. The blackberries were not in yet. The last really big plot was the old Smith place. Old man Smith and his wife had both died of the fever and none of their kids had ever shown up to claim it. The year after some of the Hispanic migrants had moved in. There was trouble over that at first, but Sharkey had handled it with his usual finesse. They were good neighbors and had brought lots of seed for peppers, corn, and other traditional vegetables. Without them a lot of people might have starved. When the state militia tried to evict them on one of their periodic run throughs the entire town swore they owned the place legitimately and had lived there for two generations. It had been years since that militia came through, and no one missed them much. The town militia handled trouble just fine, thank you very much.

Elvis had never been a big town. It had once had another name, before the King's time, but whatever it was I never found out or have long since forgotten. Suburbanization had never reached it from either Huntsville or Chattanooga, much less Nashville. There had been about five hundred people in the town when the flu came through, and by that point there were less than three. There might have been a thousand people in the whole region when all this happened. It may sound like a lot but there were more in the subdivision I lived in during my childhood.

My first stop was the medical clinic. Elvis had never rated more than a single doctor's office, but then it was basically a clinic. It was one of the few buildings that still had any power. Most of the solar panels we had scrounged up went to ensure that. Doctor 'the Doc' Hatcher used to practice up near Winchester way but now kept closer

to home. His wife had once been a chemistry prof but now she spent her time testing water and helping her husband make what few medicines we head.

Shekina, one of the apprentices, poked her dark head out of the clinic door as I neared.

“I thought that was you, Ms. Davis! How are you?”

“It’s Eddie, Shekina, I’ve told you.” I replied, laughing.

“My momma says to respect my elders, and that it’s Miss, Missus, and Mister when it’s not sir or ma’am.”

“You’re eighteen now, ‘Kina. That means you’re an adult. Call me Ed or Eddie.”

“Long as you won’t tell my momma.”

“Deal.” I entered the clinic as she held the door open for me. It was noticeably cooler inside. The building was brick, with a full basement and the best insulation in town. “The doc in?”

“Nah, Rory Cratchett broke his leg in a bad way and he and Bobby Joe went to fetch him. He asked me to stay in case anyone else came in. What do you need? Has your brother done something stupid again?”

“Not that I know of. I just came to deliver these.” I had a sack of sweet potatoes and assorted salad veggies slung over my shoulder. She accepted them graciously. The Doc always needed food. They didn’t have time to grow or raise much of their own.

Shekina insisted I have a cold glass of water before I left. “Why didn’t you radio ahead on the shortwave? I would have made you breakfast. I’m sure you haven’t eaten yet.”

“I didn’t want to waste the power. And I had some grits and eggs before I left.” I took my leave shortly after that before she had a chance to really start talking. Shekina could talk your ears off.

There were a lot of empty buildings in Elvis in those days. Some people had combined housing to make things easier. Others simply belonged to those who had passed away or left. One old building had been converted into the schoolhouse that was now closed for the summer. Widow Harrison was sitting on her front porch as I passed by, fanning herself and looking for gossip.

Some things never change.

“Mornin’ Ms. Davis! How are you?” She called.

“Good, Mrs. Harrison. And you?”

“I’m good. You found yourself a man yet?”

“No ma’am.”

“My boy’s still single.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, ma’am.”

“You’re not getting any younger, you know.”

“I know.”

“You have time to sit and talk?”

“Fraid not today, ma’am.”

“Pity.”

I moved on, trying not to mutter to myself in her sight. She was the biggest gossip in town. I dared not tell her I had no intention of ever ‘finding myself a man’. Now if I had been a man myself, and Mary Ellen had not married Todd –I pushed the thought away. Such things might have been possible once but not now. Things had changed.

Mary and her husband Jim Bo ran the grocery and dry goods store. Their old big box store had long been shut down but they operated out of an old convenience store next door. They had enough power for some refrigeration cases and a couple of fans. They sold all kinds of things out of their store, and the old one had been converted into a warehouse that held even more. You could buy just about anything you wanted if you had the credit but some things –paper, ink pens, ammo –had to be requested.

Jim Bo was behind the counter when I came in and greeted me enthusiastically. “What can I do for you, Ed?”

“You can give me a beer to start with, you old codger, and don’t bug me about the credits. You know I’m good for it.”

The old man laughed. “You’re the only woman I’ve ever known who likes a good brew.”

“I’m not an ordinary woman, Jim.”

“True.” Jim Bo took a beer out of the case behind him, unscrewed the cap, and handed it to me. It was an old twenty-ounce soda bottle. The once red label had

long since faded, but some of the letters were still visible. I took a long swig and let it go easy down my throat. "Good stuff. How does Mike do it?"

"I don't know and I don't care, as long as he keeps doing it."

We both laughed. "Where's Mary today?"

"Out and about. She went to see several friends. Said she reckoned I could handle the store on my own for one morning."

"I reckon she's right."

"Hope so, otherwise she'll be right pissed off. What can I do for you?"

"Eggs, to begin with." I set the egg basket on the counter. Jim Bo counted and examined the eggs with the eye of an expert. "Twenty-four, eh? That's quite a lot."

"We've got a lot of hens now. They're all fresh."

"I believe you. These are nice. This'll get you twelve credits."

"Done. I also have some of Maria's homemade cornbread."

Jim Bo perked up and he gazed longingly at the parcel I pulled from my backpack. "That'll get you six more. But I'm not going to sell *that*. I don't know how she does it."

"The jalapenos, I think."

"Hmm. Gary's still not remarried. Tell her that, would you? I wouldn't mind havin' her for a daughter-in-law. Anything else?"

"No, but I have a list."

"Hmm. Thought so."

We bargained through it. Mary was a stickler on prices but Jim Bo liked to haggle as much as I did. We had good credit, so a baby brush and some bottles was no problem. There were a few other things, including some butter, and when we were done we still had plenty of credits left. Jim Bo tallied up the purchases and marked them in the book. "Pick them up on your way out?"

"Sure. I got things to do." While I was nursing my beer and looking around the store I couldn't help but notice some pretty red ribbon he had on a shelf. Jim Bo noticed my gaze. "You should get that for her. She likes red."

"Who?" I asked innocently.

"You know."

"Fraid not."

He gave me a look. "Half the town knows, Eddie. And most don't care. Those that do ain't gonna say anything. Not to you."

"Oh shut up."

I bought the ribbon.

Pastor Smith was entering the shop as I left. He gave me a semi-dirty look. I returned it. "Haven't seen you at church lately, Edna Jean."

"Nope."

"We gonna see you soon?"

"Nope."

"Mama Jo would like you to come to church."

"Mama Jo is dead."

"She's in heaven with Jesus. Don't you want ta join her one day?"

"Not any time soon."

"Jesus loves you too."

"If you say so, Pastor."

Pastor Joe was the only pastor left in Elvis in those days. There had once been three. He was annoying as all hell. Not as annoying as the Mormon missionaries who came through from time to time, but still. The last time the latter showed up I nearly ran them off at gunpoint. I still haven't decided which annoys me more: dead guys comin' back to life or salamanders holdin' the keys to heaven.

Both are about equally likely.

The Saddleback was my next stop. The bar was still under the same old bar keep. Sallie had never shut down for long, even during the flu. When the trucks stopped coming she just bought moonshine. Every Saturday some of the locals played and people gathered to dance and drink.

The bar was as much a general hangout as anything in those days. It was bright enough in the day with all the windows open and at night there were lanterns. There was a town militia meeting there that day. Sharkey was Captain and I was his chief deputy. The militia was formed a few years after the fever to help keep order. It had been Sharkey's idea, of course. Well, him and some others who had military experience. Service was about as voluntary as you could get but most of the men and quite a few of the women were in it. I joined as soon as I could, on my sixteenth birthday. It was a loose structure, more along the lines of the old National Guard than regular service. We

communicated by shortwave most of the time and got together once a month to exchange reports.

The meeting was short. All had been quiet lately. Even Jeremiah had been lying low, and that worried me some. The people of Blackberry didn't like him anymore than we did but they weren't as well organized and if he decided to take full control over there he could.

"He's too busy trading that rot gut and pot to cause any trouble right now," Joe Cratchett, Rory's son, said.

"Trading where?" I asked.

Joe shrugged. "Outside the area, somewhere."

"What is he trading it *for*?" I pressed him.

"Does it matter?"

"If it's ammo and guns, then yeah, I'd say it matters."

Joe grinned. "Eddie, from all we can tell he's trading it for *food*. Lazy sum a bitch won't grow 'is own!"

There was general laughter at that. The meeting over, we all had a beer. As I was leaving Joe caught up to me and whispered in my ear. "Thought you'd like to know, ole Tulu is back."

"He is?"

"Yep. Saw 'im yesterday. We traded for some spices. He had some cinnamon from somewhere or other."

"Same spot as usual?"

"Yep. Thought you'd like to know."

"Thanks." I had other things to do, but that couldn't be put off. If Tulu was there, then I needed to see him right away. I put my backpack on and headed down to the creek.

Part Three –Tulu and Mary Ellen

Tulu was a drifter. There were a lot of drifters in those days. The troubles put a lot of people on the move. We had people come through from as far north as New York City and as far south as Colombia. Most of those who came through our area were men. Some young, some not. There were some women and a few families. Most of them were harmless but some stole, or worse. Most all of them begged. If we had the food to spare we'd give them a meal. One. After that, if they were willing to work we would trade food for work. Some of them stayed and became members of the community. Most moved on.

Tulu was different. He came back two, sometimes three times a year. He wasn't looking for a place to settle down. The old marine liked to wander. It was the war, Sharkey said. It did that to some people. Back in the old days they might've been able to treat him for PTSD and make him 'normal' again, but even then he would've probably been just another homeless person. He had been in Sharkey's unit at some point and Sharkey still felt responsible for his boys even all those years later.

The old drifter always camped in the same spot, under an overhanging bank down by the creek that ran by Elvis. He only came into town to trade with Jim Bo and hardly spoke to anyone. He didn't much care for people. He never begged, never stole, and almost didn't drink. He was also the best source of information we had found for what was going on outside the area.

"Hail the camp!" I shouted loudly as I made my way down the bank. Tulu was generally harmless but if you startled him he was likely to shoot.

"Is that you, Ed?" Tulu called back in his damn refined Yankee accent. He was a Chicago native, though his parents originally came from somewhere in Asia. "I knew you or Sharkey would be around soon."

By this time I was close enough to see him squatting by his campfire, working on some soup. "It's me, Tulu. How goes it?"

"Better, if you brought something for the pot."

I grinned and tossed a package of beef from Jim Bo's at him. He caught it deftly, smiling. "Knew you wouldn't let me down. Not Sharkey's girl."

That Sharkey was not my birth father had never seemed to register with Tulu. I finished climbing down the bank and joined him at the fire while he began cutting up the raw meat. "Where you been, Tulu?"

"Here and there. On walk-about."

"Got any news?"

"Yes."

He was silent for a while. You didn't press Tulu. He would tell you what you needed to know in his own good time. Well, maybe not everyone. But he would tell us.

"Where's Sharkey?"

"Sick. He'll come round to see you in a day or two if yer still here and he's better."

Tulu grunted in reply. Finally he finished with the beef and got it into the soup pot. He went to the creek to wash his hands. When he came back he dug a bottle out of his pack and tossed it in my direction. "For Sharkey. His birthday present. Sorry it's late."

I turned the bottle around to read the label and nearly dropped it in shock. Whiskey, ol' Jack. And not the cheap Jack either; this was the premium stuff. "Hell's bells, Tulu, where'd you find this?"

"I came down from Lynchburg."

"I thought it'd all be gone by now."

"There's some left, if you know where to look."

That was a damn valuable gift. In those days liquor was money. Especially good liquor. But Tulu knew that. I put the bottle in my backpack. "Thanks, Tulu. I know he'll be happy. He's always liked Jack."

Tulu's only reply was another grunt. He picked up a stick and began poking at the dirt with it. Finally he spoke. "I headed west this time. I wanted to see the old river again. The Mississippi, that is. I worked on tugboats over that way a long time ago before I joined up. The river's still dirty but it's cleaner than I've ever seen it. Maybe all

that's happened has been good for something. There's still trade going up and down, too. I hitched a ride on an old paddleboat that's been put back in service. A few things are going up and down. Mostly food, paper, that kind of thing. There's some man in Louisiana calling himself their Governor, but of what I don't know. Not with Orleans gone and Baton Rouge next. There's tolls at every town on the river and on quite a few of the roads as well.

"Memphis is a mess. No one's in charge there these days. Not even pretending. There's no power and no running water. They've got sewage in the streets. It's the damn eighteenth century, there. Malaria is back, too. You should know that."

I sucked in my breath. If it had reached Memphis —coming up the river, no doubt —how long would it be before it reached our neck of the woods? I would have to stop back by the Doc's.

"Anything else?" I asked finally.

He shrugged. "I made it upriver almost to St. Louie. Word came down that there was a cholera epidemic in that old burg and I cut back east. Cut back by Nashville."

He was silent again. "How are things otherwise? The camps still there?" Labor camps, refugee camps, or 'displaced person' camps, call 'em what you would, they were no place to be.

Tulu started. "Oh yeah. They're still there. I skirted the ones around Nashville. They're holding together up there but the city's been split in two or three. Some places have held together and some have fallen apart, like Memphis. Some are ruled by gangs and some aren't ruled at all. I ran into a guy who said he'd walked east from L.A., trying to reach family in Georgia. He said the black and Latino gangs are still fighting out there. Over a piece of desert with no water!" He laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Whoever wins that fight is going to get the worst booby prize in history. This guy said he left after the third time a mayor got killed for trying to stop the gangs fighting. I've heard some places still have power but I haven't seen it. Of course, I skirt around most of the cities. It's bad in the smaller places but not that bad." Suddenly he grinned. "I stopped in this one river town in Missouri. The one in charge there is this little old black woman. She's got the strongest personality of anyone I've ever met, bar none. She keeps those people in line, believe me!"

"Oh, I believe it. I know southern—"

"-women" We finished together, and laughed, for real this time. Especially the grannies, I thought to myself. Don't fuck with them, and they won't beat you to death

with the nearest stick. Tulu pulled another bottle of whiskey, this one much cheaper, out of his pack and took a swig. He offered it to me.

“No thanks.” I didn’t think he had anything but there was no since taking chances.

He shrugged and put it back in his pack. “I keep meeting people who say there’s a man in D.C. —or what’s left of it —calling himself President, but I certainly didn’t vote for him and I doubt he rules over much more than Virginia and Maryland. Maybe part of Carolina. I think I’ll head that way next and see what’s up. Maybe there is something left of this country. God knows enough of us gave enough of ourselves defending it.” His voice was bitter. His eyes stared into his fire, far away.

“You be careful.”

“I will. Wait, I almost forgot.” He pulled an old baggie out of his shirt pocket and handed it to me. “For the doc.”

It was filled with seeds. “What are these?”

“Poppy seeds.”

“Why would the Doc want to grow flowers?”

“They’re opium poppies, you nitwit. After all the time I spent in ‘Stan I’d recognize them anywhere. I expect he’ll have some use for them. You know where I got them?”

“Where?”

“Jeremiah Rhoades’ land. He’s growing them. I don’t know why, but it can’t be good.”

I cursed. “He gave them to you?”

“Hell no. I stole them. That man is terrified of you, by the way. He has been ever since that fight at the Saddleback.”

I was surprised that Tulu knew about that, but I shouldn’t have been. It was a local legend. “He shouldn’t have killed my dog.”

“Worst mistake he ever made.” Tulu agreed.

I pocketed the seeds and thanked him, then took my leave. I had a few other stops to make, mostly minor trades, and it was nearly suppertime when I made it home. Well before I made it to the house two of the dogs came running out to meet me, barking joyously rather than in warning. Nothing larger than a squirrel came on our

property without the dogs knowing about it, and letting us know. They were better security than any human could be.

There was an unholy banging noise coming from the open windows of the house. The smaller kids were in the yard playing and Maria and the older ones were in the summer kitchen making dinner. I didn't see Tim anywhere. Maria pushed open one of the screens and leaned out. "Careful, Eddie, Beth lost her mind." She tapped the side of her head. "The baby sickness."

I stopped, and blinked. "Okay." I wondered what that was (not morning sickness, surely) and decided against trying to find out. Maria's English wasn't good enough and my Spanish wasn't either. We'd both end up confused. The kids might know. They were fluent in both languages.

Little Andrea was sleeping peacefully on the back porch when I got there, oblivious to all the hubbub. The first thing I noticed was that all of the ceiling fans were off and the fridge in the kitchen was unplugged. Secondly I noticed a hose running across the kitchen floor, out the door, and down towards the pond. The banging sound became much louder when I stepped inside. It was coming from the laundry room off the kitchen. I found Beth inside, crying and beating the side of the old washer with a wrench. Her little boy stood in the doorway, watching with wide eyes.

"Beth?" I called uncertainly. "What's wrong?"

Beth stopped in mid-swing and looked up at me. Her eyes were red from crying. "I don't miss the radio," she told me. "I don't miss the tv or the lights. I don't even miss the air conditioning or the microwave much. But. I. Just. Want. A. Working. Washer." With each word she hit the washer again. It was collecting an impressive array of dents.

"Beth? We don't have running water-"

"I carried water in from the well."

That stopped me for a moment. Carrying water would still be less work than washing the clothes by hand. We'd had it so easy, once. Push a button and an hour later you had clean clothing. "What were you going to do with the dirty water?"

"We have a pond, Eddie. That's what the hose is for. But it won't work. It won't work!" Her voice scaled up higher and approached outright hysteria.

"The washer up at Sharkey's still works-"

Right away I knew I'd stepped in it. She brandished the wrench at me. "I don't want to have to walk a quarter-mile to wash my clothes! I just want clean clothes." She burst into tears again.

I sighed. Clearly this fell under the heading of "Things Eddie Must Fix Because She Is The "Man" Of The House'. I would have to find someway to get it working. Keeping Beth happy was too important. My heart ached again for Joey, who'd been as much a brother to me as a friend. He could have gotten it working as easily as me and he would know just how to calm Beth down. There were ways to run the washer without taking juice from the panels. Pedal power, maybe. That would give the kids a way to burn off some energy. Especially Tim.

Where *was* that boy?

I hugged Beth and gently took the wrench out of her hand. "I'll fix it. I promise. Tomorrow, when the light's better. Okay?"

Beth nodded and wiped her eyes.

The screen door banged and Callie, one of the kids who lived at Sharkey's, came running in. "Eddie! Mary Ellen wants you. She said come quick. Tim's done somethin' again."

Dear Jesus, what foolish thing had the boy up and done now?

It was still light when I got down the road to Sharkey's. It was June, after all. Sharkey's damn horse was grazing contentedly in a pasture near the road. She was still the only horse we had. The Amish and the Cory's were breeding them as fast as they could but things like that take time. Their stock had been hit by the fever too, which is another reason I think it was the flu.

Having only one horse was fine with me. I didn't trust anything that big with a mind of its own.

Jane was in the field by the road, sitting on a blanket under a parasol and reading. She was dressed in what I think was a fair approximation of a Victorian lady's outfit, gloves and all. I had long since eased being surprised at anything she wore. As long as she did her fair share of the work no one cared.

She was different, was Jane. She had been born Mary Ellen's little brother Bobby Joe. But Bobby Joe hated being a boy the way most folks would hate being turned into a monkey. He spent half his childhood in tears and the other half angry. Finally one day when he was about ten (I was thirteen or fourteen, then, I think), he went crying to his father because he wanted to wear a dress and Mama Jo wouldn't let him. Sharkey, at his most pragmatic, shrugged and gave the boy a dress. It didn't matter

to him what the kid wore or what he wanted to call himself. There were too many more important things. Thus Bobby Joe became Jane and to my knowledge never wore pants again. Joey and me only had to fight two kids in school before they stopped bothering her about it. Mama Jo, good Christian woman that she was, threw a fit at first but it soon became obvious even to her that her precious grandson was a lot happier being a girl.

Today Jane had a poultice wrapped around her cheek. I winced. “Bad tooth?”

She looked up from the book and nodded. “Doc says I need to go see the dentist in Blackberry.” She sounded scared and I didn’t blame her. Not only was seeing the dentist no cake walk, but Jeremiah tried to make trouble the last time she went over there.

“I’ll go with you.”

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

Jane’s relief was obvious. “Thank you. Be careful. Mary Ellen’s in one of her moods again.”

She picked up the book again as I moved on. *Little Women*. I shook my head. How had any of us managed to survive this long?

Sharkey was pretending to sleep in a hammock by the garden. He was pale and had lost more weight. I tried not to worry about that. If he was very sick surely the Doc would’ve been up. He opened one eye and winked at me. I felt myself relax. Whatever it was it couldn’t be too bad if Sharkey wasn’t upset about it.

Mary Ellen and Todd lived with their kids and Bobby Earl in one of the trailers. She must have been watching for me from the kitchen for as soon as my feet hit the porch she came flying out the back door, braids bouncing. Mary Ellen was a small woman with a big personality. Her features were too strong to be called pretty but she was the most beautiful woman I ever knew. She had deep black hair that she loved to braid with ribbons. That night they were braided with ribbons the same emerald green as her eyes. She still had quite the figure, despite having had three children (including a set of twins), and the red dress she was wearing showed enough of it to thoroughly distract me from the reason I had came.

“About time you got here!” She snapped. “What took you so long? I tell you we have an emergency and what do you do? Stroll up here like you’re taking a walk?”

“Now Mary Ellen—”

“Don’t you patronize me, Eddie! I’m no little girl you can pat on the head and send on her way. Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

Oh hell. She really was in one of her moods. When she got like that anything I said was going to get me in trouble. It took forever for me to figure out how Todd stayed out of trouble when she was like that. He did it by simply keeping his mouth shut.

That’s a skill I’ve never managed to master.

“Callie never said it was an emergency!” I protested desperately. “She said Tim had done something stupid and I figured if it was bad, she’d ‘ve said. ‘Sides, Beth was hormonal-”

“Beth was *hormonal*? Like you’ve never had that particular problem. You pretending to be a man now? As far as that fool brother of yours is concerned, yes it’s bad. Worse’n it’s ever been before. Come in.” She opened the screen door. I moved to go in and she stopped me and then held her hand out.

I stared at her blankly. “What?”

“Your gun. You know I don’t let guns in my house. Give it.”

“Mary Ellen-”

“Give it, Edna Jean.”

Hell, she really was pissed if she called me Edna, much less Edna Jean. Reluctantly I handed over the handgun I kept tucked in my waistband. She sat it on a table just inside the door. Todd’s shotgun and rifle were there as well. Then she held out her hand again. “I want the other one too.”

I managed not to roll my eyes as I gave her the gun I carried in my boot.

“That’s it?”

“That’s all my guns.” I decided mentioning my knives would not be a good idea.

“How’d you get so paranoid, Eddie?” She sounded exasperated.

“Ask your father. He made me that way.”

Mary Ellen leaned out the door and yelled loud enough for Sharkey to hear. “Daddy! Me and you are going to have a talking-to later.”

Sharkey raised a hand in a friendly acknowledgment. He looked like he was trying not to laugh.

I expected to see Tim and possibly Bobby sitting at the kitchen table, looking sheepish. It was a surprise when they weren't there. Todd was there though, looking slightly grim but also as if he too was trying not to laugh. On the table in front of him was a mapbook –the large kind that would fill your lap –and a note. He shoved them at me. “We found this on Bobby’s bed. The note was sticking out of the top.”

The mapbook was open to Alabama. Someone had taken a pink highlighter and traced a route from our region in Tennessee all the way to the coast near Panama City. The note was in Tim’s handwriting and addressed to me.

Sis, Bobby and me decided to take a walk. We want to see the ocean while we still can. We'll be back in time for school to start. I promise. See you soon. Love, Tim.

P.S. Please don't be too mad.

“Well?” Mary Ellen demanded when I’d had time to read the note. “I told you it was bad. What are you going to do?”

I stood staring at the note for a moment. It took some time for it to sink in just how stupid my little brother had been this time. Anger started welling up and then abruptly it changed to humor. I laughed.

Mary Ellen was taken aback. “Why are you laughing? This is serious!”

I looked at Todd. A smile was playing around his lips and he was clearly trying not to laugh too. “How much food they take, Todd?”

“About four days worth.”

“Guns?”

“Nope.”

“What else?”

“A couple of knives, some camping gear, water bottles, some rope. A tent. That’s about it. And my polaroid and most of the film.” He sounded disgusted and well he should have been. Todd had a passion for archaic machines and had kept that camera going far longer than it should have.

Of course they had taken a camera. To take pictures of the beach, no doubt.

Stupid gits. No guns, no trading supplies, and only a few days worth of food. Yep, they were going to get real far like that. And the idiots were planning to take the road the entire way. The road, in those days!

“Well?” Mary Ellen repeated. “Aren’t you going after them?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

This was clearly not the answer she expected. “Well why in Jesus’ name not? You know those boys can’t take care of themselves out there.”

“I know, but there’s no need to go after ‘em. They’ll be back.” Todd nodded his agreement.

Mary Ellen opened her mouth and before she could get going I rushed on. “Think, Mary Ellen. Those two ain’t never spent a night away from home before. Remember when they tried camping? They didn’t even last the full night, and that was in the field!” Less than half the night, if the full truth were told. I’d sat up with Sharkey that night, drinking and waiting on them.

“They were younger then—”

“Mary Ellen, it was *LAST YEAR*. Look, they’ll probably come draggin’ in ‘bout supper time tomorrow, or even later tonight, tails between their legs. And no harm done.”

Mary Ellen glared at me. “You- You are just as bad as Daddy! That’s what he said. And here I thought you, at least, would have the sense to go after them!”

That stung some but I pushed it aside. “I will if they’re not back in a day or two.”

“You had better.” She looked at me with those flashing green eyes. “I don’t want to lose my cousin or Tim.”

“Neither do I. I promise I’ll go after ‘em if need be and fetch them back.” I would’ve promised a lot more to her than to track down a couple of idiot boys I’d go after anyway. Looking back, she was clearly right and I was wrong. I should have saddled the horse and went after them then and there. I could have brought them home in the middle of the night and been done with it. Except the stupid pups probably would’ve tried again. And I really did think they would be back.

They didn’t come back the next day. One day stretched into two, and then three, and on the fourth day it became obvious I was going to have to go after them.

Part Four –Headin’ Out

Sharkey.

Before I go on I should say a few words about Sharkey. He was more my father than Papa. Not that Papa wasn’t a good man. He was. But he was gone more than he was home and he never spent much time with me. And both my parents were mild people who had no idea what to do with the little hellion they’d spawned. The first time I started a fight at school (started, mind, not got into) Papa simply sat me down and asked me why. What he should have done was what Sharkey did when the same thing happened: turned me over his knee, gave me two hard swats, and then set me down for a severe talking-to.

“We don’t start fights,” He told me firmly. “We finish ‘em but we don’t start them. You hear me, Edna Jean?”

I never started a fight again.

No, I didn’t start that fight at the Saddleback. Jeremiah did that when he beat my dog so bad I had to put ‘im down. Toby was so old at the time he was half blind and arthritic as hell, but that don’t matter one whit. You don’t do that and get away with it, not with me around.

Sharkey was waiting for me on the porch when I got home, but he wasn’t angry. Nope. He had his last bottle of good whiskey beside him and two glasses. That was the first time I ever got drunk.

Sharkey’s family had lived on that farm for at least three generations. But Sharkey didn’t want to be a farmer. No, he wanted to be –of all things –a vet. But college was expensive and his family didn’t have the money. Scholarships were hard to get and he wasn’t a good enough ball player to go that way. The only other way to do it was to go so deep into hock he’d never’ve seen the light of day. Sharkey, being Sharkey, he took the only other route available: he joined up. I don’t know if he was ever infected with the kind of hyper-patriotism that a lot of those in our area had, or if it was sheer practicality, but he went and joined the marines after high school. A lot of kids did that.

It turned out that Sharkey was good at being a marine and he actually liked it. But war makes you question a lot of things and Sharkey did a lot of thinkin’ in the marines. He went in a garden variety Baptist and came out a card-carrying atheist. He joined up to become a vet and came out an entirely different kind of vet. He lost his

right foot far from home in a place called Iraq on his third tour of duty there. They drummed him out and he came home to help Mama Jo.

By that time it had become obvious to anyone with eyes to see that there was some serious shit hittin' the fan in our country and the world. Sharkey could read the writing on the wall and knew that most of the dogs we had weren't going to hunt much longer. So he sat about changing some things. Mama Jo had always kept a garden. He expanded it and started planting wheat and corn in some of the old fields. He planted an orchard. Then he upgraded all the appliances and insulation in the house, reduced the power load, and converted it all to solar power. I don't know where he got the money for the last, because that was expensive as all hell, but he did it. Somewhere in those years he married and Mary Ellen and Jane were born. His wife Kelsey died of cancer the year before the fever and his sister (Robert Earl's mama) was in New York when it happened and we never heard from her again.

Sharkey being Sharkey, he quickly realized helping himself get through hard times wasn't gonna be enough if his neighbors were hurting. They would come to him for help and he would either have to help them (and he would; he was a teddy bear inside) or be an asshole. So he started helping people around town do things to help themselves. He helped Grandpappy and several others plant orchards or even single trees. He helped insulate a lot of houses. And so on and so forth. He also bought a buttload of shortwave radios with solar batteries in case things ever got really bad. Sharkey was not exactly a survivalist; we'd one of those around, before the fever. Jed Hudson was his name. He lived in a bunker and expected world war three to happen any day, but it was the fever that killed him. Sharkey was just practical and determined to keep going no matter what happened.

After the fever it was Sharkey and a few others who got us organized and kept things together. Sharkey was elected Mayor of Elvis. It hardly mattered that he lived outside of town. His father and grandfather had both been mayor at one point or another. It was easier to get things done when it became obvious things weren't going back the way they had been. Someone came up with the idea of apprenticing kids to the doc and the midwife –Widow Harrison I think –and Sharkey seized on it, then expanded it to include just about anyone with any kind of practical knowledge. He even convinced the Amish to take some of the boys on as apprentices. When we started having trouble with drifters and bandits he formed the militia. Things like that.

Sharkey taught me just about everything I know. I'm not just talking about practical things like how to kill a deer or use a compass. He taught me the really important things: honor, justice, ethics. The kind of things more of us should have. He treated all of his adopted kids and his nephew like blood, and we grew up thinking of ourselves as one big family. Which is why we all hung together even after we were grown.

In the evening of the fourth day I walked up to see Sharkey. It was a perfect summer evening. The heat of the day had passed and there were fireflies twinkling everywhere. He was sitting on the back porch sipping a glass of ice tea. He didn't yet have the strength to do much more than hobble back and forth from his room to the porch or the hammock. I leaned against the porch railing and pillowed my head on my arms. "How you doin' tonight?"

“Better’n I was. I’d be better still if those two mother hens would leave me alone for an hour.”

I smiled. Mary Ellen and Jane fussed over their father constantly. “At least you haven’t spent half the day hoeing corn and the other half trying to figure out the guts of a washer.”

“There is that.”

We were silent for a while. “I reckon I need to go after the boys.”

“Ah reckon so. Someone has to. I can’t. Jim’s too young, Amanda’s with child and Todd doesn’t have the sense.”

Todd was a good man. But he was also a very big nerd, and the first time he saw some interesting doohickey he liked he’d forget all about the boys in his haste to get it home and get it working. Even as Sharkey and me were talking most of the family was inside watching a movie on an old VHS machine he’d fixed up.

“When you fixin’ to leave?” Sharkey asked after sipping some more tea.

“First light.”

“Things are bad out there.”

“I know.”

“There’s worse things in this world than death, Edna Jean, and if you go out there’s a bigger chance of them happenin’.”

“I know. Sir. They could happen to the boys too. Family takes care of family.”

Sharkey nodded. “You scared, girl?”

“Yessir.”

“Good. Fear’ll keep you alive out there. What are you planning to take?”

We sat and talked for a long while. When I left he asked me to stop back by on my way out. It was nearly midnight when I headed back to our house. Most of the family was sleeping on the back porch so I slipped in the front way. I stayed up late packing and when I finally lay down I couldn’t get to sleep.

A couple of hours before dawn I finally gave up. I dressed and had breakfast before preparing to head to Sharkey’s. I’d said my goodbyes to everyone before I went up there the night before. But to my surprise Maria appeared in the kitchen just before I stepped out the door.

“You leave now?” She asked. I nodded.

“Come with me first,” She said and beckoned.

Maria was Catholic, like most of the migrants from down south. Or at least she said she was. I never heard her praying to Jesus or his father, much less the Holy Ghost. She did an awful lot of praying to the Virgin Mary, though. Day and night. She wore a Virgin of Guadeloupe pendant that her mother had given her when she was a girl. It never left her neck. She clutched that pendant now as she led me through the house to a small room at the back. It was too big to be a closet and too small to be much of anything else, and Maria and her girls had converted it into a shrine to Mary. The walls were lined with purple velvet, there was a nice rug on the floor, and there was

an altar with a large statue of Mary taken from some defunct church or other. Some of Maria's homemade incense was burning on the altar. The cat lay next to the statue, giving me one of those looks cats can give, the kind that make your hair stand on end.

"I pray to her," Maria told me as she looked at the statue. "I pray to her all night to bring you and the boys home safe. And she say —she say," Maria clutched at the pendant. "She say I should give you this. It will keep you safe, she says."

Before I had time to realize what she was about, she took the pendant off and fastened it around my neck. "Maria, I can't—"

"Hush," she said and patted the pendant. "See you soon." She hugged me.

Oh great. What if I didn't make it back?

I managed to get out of the house before anyone else was up but as I walked off I heard the baby crying. The dogs followed me all the way to the property line and then Sharkey's dogs took over as my informal escort. When I got to Sharkey's it was still dark. There was a light on in his study. That alone was unusual. We tried not to use the electric lights. They drained the batteries too much. Sharkey's study had once been his father's and his grandfather's before that, and their imprint was still all over everything. Civil War crap filled half the room. Books, statutes, flags, even the uniforms his ancestors had worn in the war. One for the North and one for the South.

Sharkey's family never did anything by halves.

His imprint was all over the study too, 'course. He had solar power blueprints tacked on the walls and detailed maps of the entire area. Memorabilia from the marines was scattered about here and there. He looked up and grunted when I slipped in. "Bout time you got here."

"Maria wanted to pray over me."

"She think Jesus is going to keep you safe?"

"Not Jesus. Mary."

Suddenly Sharkey grinned. "A mother is more likely to do that, isn't she? Have a seat. I got some things for you."

I took a seat across from the old man. He wasn't looking too good. He was nearly gaunt. What *was* wrong with him? And why hadn't the Doc been to see him? He gave me a bunch of things, mostly trade goods. There were several bottles of liquor, including the one Tulu had given him. We'd both agreed that one was too valuable to drink. There was a carton of old smokes and some old jewelry. He also gave me a thick roll of greenbacks and some gold and silver coins.

"Lord only knows what they're usin' for money out there, but hopefully these will help. Take these too." He handed me one of the two pairs of night-vision goggles we had. "They'll be more use out there than here. And I want you to have this."

It was then that he gave me his prized knife, a real Jim Bowie type that had never to my knowledge left his side. I stared at it. "Sharkey—"

"It's yours now. I don't want it back. I was gonna give it to one of mine but they clearly don't want it. And as far as I am concerned you ARE one of mine."

Wordlessly I slipped the sheath onto my belt. Sharkey looked at me for a long moment. "You've grown up, Edna Jean. I'm proud of you. You should know that."

I felt my ears burn. "Thank you. Sir."

"Don't 'sir' me anymore. You're not a child, now." He was a silent for a long moment. "You know something may have all ready happened to those idiot boys."

"Yes."

"And it might not be an accident."

"I know that, too."

"There won't be any proper way to bring the ones who done it to justice if that happens. What do you plan to do?"

"Take care of it."

Sharkey nodded. "Good."

I tucked the last of the trade goods into my backpack. "That it?"

"Except for one more thing. Be careful. I'd kind of like to see you again."

I grinned. "What makes you think I wanna see you again, you old coot?"

"I'm not a coot, you nitwit."

"Then you're a codger instead."

"Lunkhead."

"Jarhead."

He grinned. "You better make it back. I'll miss you."

To my surprise most of the family was waiting outside when I came out. Mary Ellen put her hands on her hips and glared at me. "You didn't think we'd let you sneak off like the boys did you?" Before I could reply she threw her arms about me and kissed my cheek. "Be careful," She told me. "I want y'all back safe. Okay?"

"I'll do my best."

"You better. Todd wanted to go too but he doesn't have the sense God gave a goose. You do."

My ears burned again.

Finally I got away, with Sharkey's help. I headed north by northwest, cutting cross-country to reach the road that eventually would hit old highway 64. The road turned southwest to meet the highway. The boys would have reached Huntsville by that point if nothing had happened. By the crow's route that was only fifty miles or so away, but I wasn't following the crow. I was following two idiot boys who couldn't read a compass if their lives depended on it and I had to follow their tracks if I had any hope of finding them. Anything could have happened to them in between home and there.

Tim and Bobby Earl had planned the simplest route. They cut across familiar country to the old road and highway 64, then skirting Fayetteville (more 'cause it was out of the way than anything, I was sure) by going down 275 'til it met up with 231, and

taking that south to Huntsville, where they could join the interstate. I was sure they were walking on the road, too, instead of paralleling it, which is what I did.

It was another hot day and we had still had no rain. I drank as little water as I could and only stopped twice. Mary Ellen and Maria had given me some of their bread and cornbread, respectively, and I ate a piece each of that by lunch. In the late afternoon I found their first campsite, sited just off the road. It showed all the signs of being built by someone who'd had their training in fire prevention and was in the right spot. The boys were taking their time, walking leisurely on their little vacation, while what I was doing was more of a forced march. It started raining towards evening, a light sprinkling that nevertheless made sleeping outside an unpleasant prospect, so I holed up in an old pharmacy at a crossroads on the highway. All day I had been watching but had seen no one. The few tiny towns I had passed through had been deserted and I had seen no sign of the boys.

The pharmacy had been looted, of course. They all had. Some of them by us, of course. But I still took the time to search. All the good drugs were long gone but I found a few bottles of aspirin and some first aid supplies and stuffed them in my pack.

The second day was similar. I found their second campsite in the morning and kept on going. Today I actually ran into some people. There were a few living on farms or old homesteads just off the highway. They were friendly, as long as I kept my distance. One old man swore he had seen the boys. I showed him the most recent polaroid of the two and he confirmed it. I gave him the last of the cornbread as a thank-you and thanked God I'd brought that picture.

Todd's passion for electronics actually had some use. Who knew?

As it drew near to evening again I came across an old, broken down farmhouse just off the side of the road. There was a large patch of corn growing out back and a fence around what I assumed was a garden. I decided to approach the house and as I got close an old woman came out of the screen door, a shotgun in her hands. A very young boy peeked out behind her.

"That's far enough, drifter," she said, leveling the gun at me.

I stopped. "I'm no drifter, ma'am. I'm just passing through."

"Whatcha want?"

"I'm lookin' for two idiot boys who up and ran away from home."

The shotgun lowered just a bit. "Two, you said? What'd they look like?"

"I have a picture." I took it out of my breast pocket and held it up. The old woman squinted. "I can't see that. They 'round sixteen?"

"Yes'm."

"Hmm, they spent the night with me a few days ago. Had some fool notion about going to the ocean."

"Yes'm, I reckon they did. I'm on my way to fetch 'em home."

"Hmm. Reckon someone needs to before they get hurt. You'll not get much farther today, boy." She looked at me closely. "You been washed in the Blood?"

"Yes'm."

It was perfectly true. Mama Jo wanted me to be baptized, so I did. It made her happy, so what did I care?

She lowered the gun. "Come on in. I'm Etsell."

"Ed." She let me come in and have dinner with them. They had plenty, she said. But I still insisted on paying them with some of the smokes. She wouldn't take any of the liquor and a bit later I found out why. I don't think she ever realized I was a woman. Which was fine, since I was trying to pass. It wasn't hard. Not for me. I'm as tall as most men and about as flat-chested and even then I was only a bit more pretty than the average mule.

The boy was two. He was her great-grandson. They'd lived there alone since her granddaughter died in childbirth. The place wasn't hers. They had found it while wandering after the fever. They made out pretty good, she said, and I wondered how until she showed me the still after her boy was asleep.

"My Grandpappy made moonshine durin' Prohibition." She told me. "Never stopped. His still kept the family fed durin' the Depression. The first one, that is. He taught me how to run it when I 'twasn't much older than my boy and I 'elped 'im with it 'til he died. We were in West Virginia in those days. My Daddy was a coal miner. Then the bastard evil coal company decided to blow up our mountain aways back. 'Etsell,' my Grandpappy told me. 'When times get hard, liquor is money. Anyone who can make it is gonna make out just fine. Times have been good since you wer born, but they'll get bad again. Mark my words. You remember how to make this and you'll do just fine.' I never forgot, and when times got hard, I made myself a still. Folks come from as far as Fayetteville for my whiskey."

It was good whiskey, I had to admit. She let me have a glass. "Haven't you had any trouble?"

"Oh some. They always let me alone when they try my whiskey. No one wants to kill the goose that lays the golden egg. Or even harass her much. I might poison their next jug, after all." She laughed.

The next morning before I left she looked at me critically. "You mixed, ain't you, boy?"

There was only one thing that question could mean and there was no sense denying it. "Yes'm. My father was half black."

"Hmm. Well, yer light enough to pass. It don't bother me, mind. One of my girls married a colored boy. Nicest of the lot. But you be careful, ya hear? The white sheets are in charge over 'round Fayetteville and they've taken to stringin' up colored folk. I told your brother too, but I don't think he believed me."

That would be just like Tim. It didn't surprise me that the Klan was back, only that they'd taken so long. I wondered how long it would take them to realize they were outnumbered now that we'd had so many Hispanic refugees from Mexico's collapse move in.

The old woman and little Neil (after Neil Armstrong, she told me, so that someone would be alive for a while to remember we once went to the moon) hugged me before I left. I went on, trying not to worry about them. Etsell had to be nearly ninety, and the odds of her living until Neil grew up were slim. I'd offered for them to

come live with us and she said she'd think about it. It was more mouths to feed, sure, but as she said, liquor is money. Neither of them should be alive, and yet they were.

That's the thing about survival. You can't always tell who is going to make it when something goes down. Sharkey told me that for years before the troubles people had been predicting it and some of them took outright glee in predicting all the people who were going to die. Survival of the fittest, and all that. Only to them 'fittest' meant 'strongest' and they were wrong. Dead wrong.

Oh, they were right about a lot of people. Insulin dependent diabetics, people who'd had organ transplants, others who were drug dependent all started dying as drugs became less and less available. But there were plenty who died who anyone would think should live. A lot of strong young men and others. The fever got some of them but a lot of people just seemed to give up. Something in them snapped, and they laid down and died. Or killed themselves, fast or slow with drink or drugs. Or got themselves killed.

There were also a lot of people who lived who should have died. Like Widow Harrison. When the troubles started she was two hundred pounds overweight and borderline diabetic. After the fever she managed to lose weight and get healthy. In her case it might have been sheer spite and a desire not to miss any gossip.

Or Lucius Hatchett. He was put in a wheelchair by a carnival ride when he was a teenager. His wife died of the fever and they lived so far out no one thought to check on them. Two years later I was hiking over by their farm and stumbled upon him, thin as a rail but alive, dragging himself down the rows of his garden weeding it. 'Course, once I found him people started helping out and by the time Tim and Bobby ran off he was not only healthy but remarried to one of the migrants and had two kids.

Sometimes survival just boils down to what Mama Jo would call the soul and I would call the human spirit. How strong you are often has nothing to do with your body. It has to do with your spirit and your know-how, and a bit of luck. We had an advantage down our way much of the country lacked. In the South most of us were only two generations or less off the land. That meant the knowledge of how to do it was still in living memory. It also meant some of us fought the changes tooth and nail for a while, but we got through it.

It was the grannies, mainly. Old southern women who'd been through everything and lived to tell the tale. They'd seen hard times before and when things started getting bad they did what needed to be done. They went out and started or expanded their gardens. When times got worse they expanded them again. They began to organize, first amongst each other and then reaching out. They held canning bees and quilting bees and cooking classes. They roped the grandpas in, and young mothers desperate for any way to feed their kids. Then they reached out to the kids. Grandkids really, their own or someone else's. It's a lot easier to train a ten year old than a thirty year old. Nothin' against the older person, but that's the way it is. It was those old grannies who got a lot of us through.

Mama Jo was one of them. She took care of all of us kids and Sharkey too, though he'd deny it. When the Doc told her she had cancer she looked him in the eye and said "I ain't got time to die right now. I got kids to feed." He gave her six months and she lasted nearly three years, and took care of us right up to the end. Etsell was another one. A man might have the luxury of giving up, but as long as there are kids to feed and diapers to change most women will keep on going. Especially the old women.

There is something about the quiet strength of an old woman who's outlived her husband and some of her children that no young man can ever hope to match, no matter how strong his back.

Part Five –Gettin’ to Huntsville

I reached Highway 231 on the third day of my journey without incident. Shortly thereafter I crossed the imaginary line that divided Tennessee and Alabama. I tried to maintain my practice of moving parallel to the road but it became harder as the region I was entering was more populated. I had seen no sign of Tim and Bobby for quite a while and I was worried.

Then, just as I was entering a local store to ask for information, I had a breakthrough. A man was leaving as I started to go in –and he had Tim’s water bottle slung across his shoulder. I knew it was Tim’s because his name was embroidered on the carrying strap. Even without the strap I would have been suspicious; those water bottles –stainless steel with a very good filter –had not been exactly common before the troubles and by this point were very rare.

A short time later I left the man in the woods by the highway, alive but tied up. I left his knife within reach so that he could eventually cut himself loose. If he tried hard enough. He swore himself blue that while he and his buddies had ambushed and robbed the boys, they had let them go alive and unharmed. I believed him. There is something about being questioned at knifepoint that makes most folks sing like a canary.

I took the water bottle, of course.

It was just as I had feared. Tim and Bobby had looked like easy prey, and the first people they saw who were inclined to thievery took advantage of that. The most part of avoiding being robbed is to not look like an easy target. Bandits, generally speaking, are lazy sons of bitches. That’s why they’re bandits. The best way to avoid them is to look like a harder target than the next guy.

There was no sign of Tim and Bobby having turned back, so I assumed they’d went on. Without gear and probably out of food. I figured it was pride that made them keep going. Young men are like that. They have more pride than sense. And Tim was worse than most. He’d never had much sense. Take the day we found the tiger. We came in from working to find it lying on the porch under the ceiling fan. A real tiger. It looked at us like it thought we might be good to eat but it wasn’t hungry enough to go to the trouble just yet. Who knows where it came from. There were plenty of zoos, circuses, and animal sanctuaries in our country when the troubles began. Surely some of the animals escaped. I know some of the elephants did. I’ve seen ‘em. Tim wanted to examine the thing and try to make it a pet.

That would have been understandable if he had been five, or maybe even ten. But he was *thirteen!*

By the time I reached Hazel Green I had moved firmly into Huntsville's suburbs. Fifty years before my birth Huntsville had been a small cotton town surrounded by farms and small towns. But by the time I came along the city had sprawled over the landscape like a cancer, sucking everything in. Vast tracts of former farms and forests had been turned into urban wastelands of identical tract houses in little subdivisions, disconnected from everything else and so badly built most of them were all ready falling to pieces.

Many of them were deserted. But a surprising number had managed to hang together and form little communities. Some of these had small towns at their core. Others had converted empty houses into needed buildings. Schools, shops, and so forth. The people I met were friendly but wary. And every one I spoke with warned me of trying to get closer to Huntsville.

"They still tax us pretty heavily," one woman told me. "We won't see them for a while, and then an army patrol will come through and take anything they want or need. We hide the youngsters if we can. They sometimes take the boys as recruits and the girls for worse things. The time was when our men had honor, but not anymore."

"The army and police have the city sewn up tight," a man said. "You can get in if you pay the toll but they're under martial law. Be careful not to get caught by the army or they'll conscript you."

And this was what my brother and his friend were walking into. The lunkheads hadn't had the sense to turn back. I swore that when I found them the first thing I'd do was box their ears. I paid for the info with small trade goods and went on.

It was sometime that morning when I heard the train. At first I didn't know what it was. It had been so long since I had actually heard a train that the sound was completely foreign. Then I thought the low rumbling might be an earthquake. When it finally got through my thick head that it was a train I ran towards the sound as fast I could. I got to the tracks just in time to see some of the last cars go by. It was a small train, compared to the ones I had seen as a child, and it went much slower. But it was a train. A train!

The incident left me severely shaken for a while. A train. There were still trains! Where did it come from? Where was it going? And what was it carrying? After a while I decided it didn't much matter. At least as long as the army didn't show up in Elvis and declare martial law or the IRS didn't come and demand twenty years worth of back taxes.

As I got closer I made a detour. Our house when I was a child had technically been in Harvest, but it had been fairly close to 231 and was easy to get to from the highway. Tim knew where it was and Tim being Tim, I was sure he would have stopped there if he had the chance.

The closer I got the more surreal things became. Here were things I had known as a child, streets I had traveled when they were busy and full of people and cars. Now they were practically deserted. There were a few cars on the side of the road, but they were dead and had obviously been there for some time. The yards were all overgrown. A young forest had already begun to spread into the neighborhood. The

houses here were all big, executive style dwellings and no one appeared to live there now. A couple of the houses had fallen or burned down. Others were obviously in bad shape. The roof of one had caved in.

It was still there. The front door was closed, surprisingly, and a few of the windows had been smashed. There were some shingles missing from the roof. The grass was nearly up to my waist and there were saplings and weeds all over the yard. As I looked at it I had a strange moment of double-vision where I saw the house as it had once been, superimposed over what was here now. I could do nothing but stare for a long moment.

After watching the house and the surrounding area for a while I finally went inside. The house had been looted during and after the fever, of course. All the electronics and such were gone. Decay had set in. There was mold in one room and a rodent had obviously made the couch a home. The table in the breakfast nook had been broken and it lay on its side. I stared at it for a long while, remembering all the mornings I had eaten breakfast at that table with my parents. I could even see the sunlight shining in my mother's hair.

After a while I climbed the stairs. My room had been the first one on the left. EDNA JEAN was written on the door in pink letters. I opened the door and slipped inside, hands shaking. It was much as I remembered it. The roof had not started leaking yet and the window was unbroken. The tv was gone and there was dust over everything. The green paint had faded, as had the butterfly bedspread my mother had given me. All my stuffed animals were lined up on the bed, as if waiting for me to come back. Including the white bear with a red ribbon I had slept with every night of my life until it had been forgotten in the rush to get out of town.

It was too much. I left and shut the door behind me. The next door down had been meant to be Tim's. The nursery had been ready for him, save for his name on the door. And there, carved into the wood with a knife in uppercase letters, was one word. TIM.

Relief flooded through me. They had been here.

It was getting late by this point so I stayed the night and when I left the next morning I took several family pictures that had been untouched by looters or the elements. And that damn white bear. I still don't know why.

Now I was just a few miles outside the old city limits of Huntsville and I became more cautious as I worked my way south. I stayed away from all the main roads and kept to cover as much as I could. The people I had spoken with might or might not have exaggerated what was going on but I wasn't going to take any chances. I could not be more than a day behind the boys, two at most, and I hoped to catch up to them before disaster struck. There was one more place I knew they'd stop and if Grandma was still alive she might have been able to talk some sense into them, or at least convince them to skirt the city. They might even still be there.

Grandma Davis had lived in the far north of Huntsville, just a few miles from 231 in a neighborhood that had still been mostly black even during my childhood. I saw some people as I came into the city but damn few. There was no sign of the army or cops and certainly no one who demanded a payment for entry. I cut through back yards and empty lots as much as I could and even went through a couple of drainage ditches. Things looked different but I could not get lost. A map of that area had been stamped

into my brain when I was young, and some things don't get lost. Particularly when a lot is riding on them.

I had skirted around a couple of neighborhoods that had barricades built around them so I wasn't too surprised when Blue Heights* turned out to be the same. As I approached a gate on one of the old entrance roads a couple of young black men appeared at the top and aimed their rifles at me. I stopped within shoutin' distance but far enough that I had a decent chance of running if they tried to shoot.

"That's far enough, stranger," the oldest one, about my age, called. "What're you doin' here?"

"I got business," I replied.

"Not with us, you don't," The other one yelled back. "Get on with you." He gestured with his rifle.

"I'm here to see Mrs. Davis, if she's here and alive," I responded.

Both had obviously heard the name. "Which one?" The eldest asked.

"Gina Davis."

They looked at each other and then back at me. "What kind of business?" That was the eldest.

My grandmother was alive? I could hardly believe it.

"That's 'tween her and me, and not you. Would ya tell her I'm here?"

"Who're you?" The oldest asked.

"Her granddaughter."

Both did a double take. "You're a *girl*?" The youngest asked.

I ground my teeth. "Sure 'nough am, and I may be a girl but come down here and I'll show you I can still kick your ass."

"None of that." The oldest snapped. "Go ask Ms. Davis, Junior."

Junior ducked off. For a long time I stood there under the guard's watchful eye, sweat trickling down the back of my neck in the hot June sun.

Finally the younger man came back. "She sez what's yer name?"

"Edna Jean Davis."

He nodded. "She said to let her in, bro."

"Not armed, I won't. Will you leave your rifle with us?"

"Like hell."

"Then you can't come in."

His friend tugged on his arm. "You want to piss off Ms. Davis? She said let her in or else."

They argued for a moment and then finally let me in. "You're the third visitor she's had this week," Junior told me. "Her grandson and a friend were here before."

Hope rose in me. The guards wanted to escort me to her house but I shrugged them off. I knew the way, after all. It wasn't far. She was waiting on me on her front porch, dressed in one of her old grey dresses. Her white hair was done up in a bun. She had a cane now, and more wrinkles, but there was no mistaking Gina Davis. Not for the grandchild who had once adored her.

How oh how had she survived? And why had I never thought to come and check?

When she saw me the cane slipped from her fingers and she clasped her mouth with her hands. "Lord have mercy!" She exclaimed. "It *is* you!"

"Grandma?" I said finally, tears slipping down my cheeks. I rushed up the steps and embraced her.

A short time later we sat together on her back porch with some tea. I held her hand, almost afraid to let go in case she disappeared. "I never thought to see you again Edna Jean," she told me. "I was afraid you were long dead. And I never knew you had a brother. Least ways not till he showed up at our gates. I would've known him anywhere. He's the spittin' image of your poor daddy. Oh, I wish you had gotten here sooner!"

"I came as fast as I could," I told her, all the while wishing I had moved faster or kept goin' after dark. "When were they here? When'd they leave?"

"They were here for a day or two and left early yesterday. We tried to talk 'em out of it, but they wouldn't listen. You know how young men are. We couldn't even convince 'em to skip the city. They wanted to see it, they said."

"You're not a part of the city anymore?"

Grandma shook her head. "No one outside the walls is a part of Huntsville anymore. We get taxed but we don't get any services. Water, sometimes, but that's about it."

"How do they tax you?"

"By takin' food, mostly. We all have gardens and we grow a lot of corn on the other side of the neighborhood. They take it at gunpoint without regard for how it affects us. Protection fees, they call it. But who protects us against 'em? A time or two they've taken so much food we've nearly starved. Not that they care, mind."

"They take anything else?"

"Some of the young men, sometimes. As recruits. We never see 'em again when that happens. I'm afraid that's what's happened to your poor brother and his friend." She withdrew her hand and began to wring both of them together.

My stupid brother and his equally stupid friend, she meant. "What's ya mean, Grandma? You know something?"

She bit her lip, as if considering whether to tell me or not. I touched her hand. "I need ta know, Grandma."

"Matt and Yasmin followed 'em. At a safe distance, mind. They went right up to the gate and asked to go in. Instead they got themselves arrested. Matt and Yas couldn't tell if it was the cops or the army, but either way it's bad news, Edna Jean."

Well, damn. I had expected it but still. Now I'd have to find a way to get into the city. Without getting arrested myself. I nodded. "I have to go after them, Grandma."

"No ya don't, child. You go up there you'll get arrested or worse. Just like the two of 'em."

I jutted my chin out. "Yes I do. And I'm not goin' to walk up to the gate, Grandma. I'm not that stupid."

She insisted I wait until after lunch, and that I eat with her and some of the kids she looked after. I argued about sharing their food but she wouldn't listen. I did insist on giving her a couple of packs of smokes as payment. I tried to talk her into lettin' me come back and take her to Elvis but she refused. She had kids to take care of there, just like I had ones to care for at home. She told me she'd see me again somehow, either in this life or at the Pearly Gates.

Matt and Yasmin showed me to the wall. Matt was the elder of the two gate guards and Yasmin was a quiet girl of about seventeen. "They walked right down the Parkway to the gate at Sparkman," Matt said, his voice full of disgust. "We weren't close enough to see who arrested them but either way its bad. We're lucky nothing over this way is mined." He added as an afterthought as we scrambled out of a ditch.

"There are mines?"

"Oh yeah, everything round by the Arsenal is mined. They don't want anyone comin' near. Some of the minefields aren't even posted. That's how Yaz lost her brother. Isn't it?"

"Yes." The girl replied. It was the only word she spoke during the whole trip.

We went cross-country towards the wall, of course, keeping to cover as much as we could. Most of those areas were deserted and everything was overgrown. Mostly with tree of heaven and kudzu. Both were rampant invasives and I'm sure the latter is the reason goats were invented. "A lot of people moved inside the walls," Matt explained. "It's safer, but you end up either livin' under an overpass or working in the camps. And there's some of the fields there."

In the distance was an irregular shaped field. While the others waited impatiently I took out my binoculars. The field was full of corn, and the hands were working under the watchful eye of guards armed with rifles. Most of the workers were Hispanic but there were a few black and a few white faces in the group. An overseer walked up and down, yelling. None of them looked happy, and they obviously weren't there willingly. If it wasn't slavery than it was the closest thing to it.

Well, that didn't take long. What, ten, fifteen years? Those in power would want a way to keep their privileges, after all, and the easiest way to do that would be to exploit others.

We passed two more fields as we worked our way east. Matt explained that there were small fields all around and in the city, wherever there was room. Most of food, but they also grew tobacco and cotton for trading.

At last we came within sightin' distance of the wall with binoculars. It was a massive structure, ten to twelve feet tall and wide enough for a man to walk on. I saw a man doing just that as I watched. It was here that Matt and Yasmin abruptly took their leave. They would go no further.

“Good luck,” Matt told me as they slipped off. “You’re gonna need it.”

I cursed my idiot brother as I made my way closer to 231, which in Huntsville was known as the Parkway. At last I made it near the old intersection of the Parkway and Sparkman.

The Wally World I remembered from childhood was gone as if it had never been, as was the shopping center across the road. Even the parking lots had been torn up. That certainly explained where much of the material for the wall had come from. The resulting cleared land had been turned into huge fields, currently being worked by more laborers. There was a large gate with a well-guarded gatehouse at the intersection with the Parkway. The wall ran straight down Sparkman, following the old road. Huntsville had indeed contracted significantly, for the wall ran down Sparkman before cutting across to enclose the old university and then hitting the Arsenal. At the south end it came out of the Arsenal by Whitesburg, ran up to Jones Valley, and then cut across open fields to skirt the foot of Monte Sano Mountain and surround Five Points before coming back to end at the gate I was currently looking at. Miles and miles of the old city were left outside.

For the rest of the afternoon I lay under cover and watched the gate. Twice people were admitted. The first time it was clearly someone on official business. They had a truck—an actual running truck!—and were let in after only saying a few words to the guard on duty. The second time was an old man and a young boy. Both were searched and had to hand over a form of payment—it looked like booze to me—before they were let in.

As the sun sank into the west the fieldhands were herded inside under the watchful eyes of their guards. When darkness came I switched to the night vision goggles and kept watching. What was I going to do? I could certainly pay my way in. But then what? And they quite clearly had a no-weapons policy. I had the feeling I might need those.

On the other hand, there was no barbed wire on top of the wall. And while there were patrols, I had seen no sign of stationary sentries. The wall was hardly too high to climb, and it was rough enough to have plenty of handholds. I had climbed rock walls that were worse.

After watching for a while longer, I made my way westward until I was out of sight of the gate. Then I carefully worked my way closer to the wall. I had to stop several times to hide from the sentries. Finally I was close enough. I waited until there was no sign of a sentry anywhere before making my run.

A few moments later I was up and over the wall. I hit the ground runnin’ and didn’t stop until I had found some cover. I ducked behind the big bulk of an old dump truck and waited, heart pounding. There was no hue and cry, no shouts of alarm.

Now what? I needed information, and fast. Sharkey had given me the names and last known addresses of three of his old buddies who had lived in Huntsville. What were the odds that they had survived? But they were my best bet. One of them had once ran a bar in Five Points. He was the closest and if any place was open at this time of the night, it would be a bar. I felt driven by a sense of urgency I couldn’t explain.

It was more difficult than I thought it would be to move about the city. The streets were deserted and there were checkpoints every few blocks. Some police, some

army. I detoured around all of them. There were no streetlights but there were a few lights here and there and I stared until I realized what they were. Electric lights! So Tulu had been right. There were places that still had power, and Huntsville was one of 'em.

The bar was still there, just off Pratt a mile or so from where I crossed the wall, down by the railroad tracks. It was clearly closed but there was a lantern burning within. There was enough light for me to see that the sign still read Fred's. I hid my rifle and pack and crept up to the back door. To my surprise, it opened at my touch.

"We're closed. It's after curfew." A grouchy voice called. An older man was wiping down the bar. He was missing two of the fingers on his right hand. That fit Sharkey's description of Fred. He looked up as I came in. "Don't cha listen? I said we're closed."

"I'm here to trade."

"Not interested in tradin' with any cops."

"I'm no cop."

"Whatcha doing out after curfew then?"

"Lookin' for information. And I can pay." I approached the bar and laid down a pack of smokes. I had another and a bottle of rum in my jacket.

He looked at them warily. "What kind of information?"

"I need to find a man by the name of Fred Lancaster. Have you ever heard of 'em?" He was Fred, I knew, but he was good; his expression didn't change.

"I might have. What do you want with him?"

"Andrew Sharkovich-Stewart said he could help me." I took the shark pin Fred had given Sharkey out of my pocket and laid it on the counter.

Now the old man's expression did change. Shock flooded his face. "Sharkey's alive? I'll be." He looked at me closely. "You his son?"

I fought down the urge to tell him I was no man's son. By this time I was getting really tired of pretending to be a man. 'Course, at the time I was cranky for a reason no man ever was. "By adoption."

"A lot of that, these days. What are you doing here, son? This is no place to be."

We had a drink while I explained. Sharkey had said Fred was trustworthy and I hoped he was right. Fred shook his head. "That's bad news. Real bad. Do you know if it was the army or the cops that nabbed 'em?"

I shook my head. "Does it matter?"

"Oh, it matters. If it was the Army they'll have taken 'em out to the base and you might as well go home as try to get on post. If it was the cops you have a chance."

"How can I find out?"

"Go to City Hall tomorrow. You can stay upstairs with me tonight."

Part Six –Huntsville

The next day I went to City Hall. When I got up I was surprised to find the power was on and Fred was cooking on an old electric stove. They had power for a few hours each day, he told me. I was even able to take a hot shower, though Fred warned me about not drinking the water. It was a warning I didn't need, having lived with the dangers of untreated water most of my life. The power went off just before I left, causing Fred to curse a blue streak.

City Hall was in the same spot, down on Fountain Circle just a couple of miles from Fred's bar. I couldn't help but notice the state of the city as I walked down there. Huntsville had always been a pretty city. It was surrounded by mountains and rolling hills. The city had been kept clean before the troubles but now the cleaners and the annoying zoning commission that had sent many (my parents included) to the suburbs were long gone. There was litter and garbage in the streets. Most of the yards were terribly overgrown and many of the buildings were slowly falling into disrepair. There were dead cars and trucks in driveways and on the side roads. Occasionally I would see one actually driving down the street and I could not help but stare. What were they using for fuel? Gas? Alcohol? Biodiesel? All of them had the City of Huntsville decal on the side, so whatever it was wasn't available to private citizens. There were packs of feral dogs roaming, seemingly at will, and lots of stray cats. I saw a lot of gardens and one cow, munching on the grass in an overgrown yard.

There were a lot of police checkpoints on the way. I was beginning to think the police were the biggest employer in town. I was able to go around most of them. The others I got through by following Fred's advice. I told them I was a visitor on my way to City Hall to register and they let me right through. Most of my gear I had left at Fred's, including all my weapons, so I had nothing on me that was suspicious. I was glad Grandpappy was long dead. The sight of what amounted to jackboots on the streets of an American city would have given him a fit of apoplexy. Right before he went home to fetch his guns and start an insurrection, all the while quoting Thomas Jefferson.

Pigeons were pecking at bugs on the steps of City Hall and the stones were covered in bird poo. The AC was on inside, as were the lights. Clearly the two or three hours of power did not apply to the almighty masters of the city. There was a heavy police presence all over the area. I was frisked as I came through the door and then they passed me on to the registration desk.

“Registration” was simple: name, hometown, reason for and length of stay. I told them I was Kevin Phillips from Fayetteville, I was here to see friends, and I would only be a day or two. The clerk handed me a blue card with all of that on it.

“Keep this with you, son,” He told me. “It shows you’re legit and not homeless. Show it to the cops if they ask. We hate to be this way, but it’s the price we pay to maintain order in the city. You have no idea how much trouble the homeless cause. Be sure to register with the police captain in your district and don’t forget you’ll need to pay your tax again if you’re to stay beyond the day after tomorrow.” When I asked him who I needed to see about someone who’d been picked up, he passed me upstairs to one of the police chief’s deputies. That too was different; I don’t think the police chief was located in City Hall before the troubles began.

After a long wait I was ushered into the deputy’s office. He was a pudgy, middle-aged white man with a receding hairline. Instead of a uniform he was dressed in an old white suit. He had a crucifix around his neck and good ol’ boy redneck was written all over him.

Somehow I wasn’t surprised.

“What can I do for ya today, son?” He asked after shaking my hand. I explained and he nodded. “It happens, it happens. How long ago?”

“A couple of days.”

“Ah. Let’s see.” He took down a record book and began paging through it. Apparently computers were long gone; there wasn’t even one in his office. His finger stopped after just a moment. “Ah. Here ‘tis. Day before yesterday. Two boys matchin’ yore description were arrested for vagrancy outside the gate at Sparkman. They gave their names as Tim and Bobby Phillips of Fayetteville. That sound ‘bout right?”

I felt a surge of pride; Tim had not only remembered the lie I had told him to use in such a situation, he had *used* it. “Yes sir. But they aren’t vagrants, sir.”

“I understand that right ‘nough, son, but you must understand our position. They had little with them and had nothin’ to pay the tax to enter the city. That screams vagrancy these days and our boys were just doing their job by pickin’ em up. You understand that?”

“Yessir. What do I need to do to get ‘em out?”

He gave me a look of mock sorrow. “‘Fraid it’s too late for that, son.”

“Pardon?”

“They all ready been tried and convicted. Yesterday morning, in Judge Cotton’s court downstairs. I’m ‘fraid they’ve been sentenced to six months in a work camp.”

I tried not to show any reaction. Inside I was seething. “Is there anything I can do ‘bout that, sir?”

He rubbed his chin, looking thoughtful. “Well, let’s see. If they behave we might let ‘em out early on account of good behavior. That’d get ‘em out thirty, maybe sixty days early. Or you could take their place. One of ‘em, anyway. You look like a strong young man. That’d get one of ‘em out. Other than that –well.” He leaned back in

his chair and laced his fingers together across his belly –“maybe we could make a deal. You know what I mean, son?”

“Yessir.” I knew the thinly veiled request for a bribe for what it was. “Maybe we could. I’ll have to get back ta you.”

“Of course, of course. I’m here all day every day.”

The bastard walked me to the door of the outer office and shook my hand again before letting me out. “Where you stayin’, son?”

“With some friends.”

“Understood, son. Just be sure you register with the district cap’n wherever you stay. And keep your tax current. We wouldn’t want you to get arrested for vagrancy too, now would we? Also be sure to get your card signed at whatever church you take service at tomorrow night. Skippin’ service is good for two days in the pokey.”

As I left I fought down the urge to wait for him after work and beat the shit out of him. Either that or burn down the building.

Preferably both.

Here was power absolute and absolutely corrupted, and completely unchecked by any sort of checks and balances, much less the fear of pitchforks and torches which should constantly plague any government. As my Grandpappy used to say, if a government is afraid of the people then it has a problem if it acts like that. If the people are afraid of the government, then the people are the one with the problem.

I was on my way back to Fred’s when I found the dog. There were plenty of stray dogs around, but this one was different. He was hiding in a culvert and watching me warily. I couldn’t help but take a second look. It was a young German Shepherd – maybe two or three years old –and he had the same markings as Toby. He was so thin I could count his ribs and see his hips from yards away. There was intelligence in those dark eyes as he regarded me.

For a moment I hesitated. It was stupid I know, but there’s no accoutin’ for the ways of a person’s heart. I had brought some cornbread with me for my lunch if things took too long. I put it on the ground and walked off. When I looked back he had slunk out of the culvert and was gulping the bread like there was no tomorrow. He really did look just like Toby, save for his tail. It was black and Toby’s had been brown. When I looked back again he was following me.

Oh great. Feed them once and they’re yours forever.

“What the hell is goin’ on here, Fred?” I asked when I got back. “Is this a theocracy, a dictatorship, or what?”

We were having lunch. “Well,” Fred said slowly. “It’s not a theocracy. But it’s not a democracy either. We’ve had the same mayor for ten years and he’s never even pretended to be elected. Sure, we have ta go to church but there are ways around that. I’ve got an exemption.”

“What if you ain’t Christian?”

“Dodn’t matter. Only Christians can be residents. Most of the ones who weren’t left before the walls went up, converted or pretended to and the rest are homeless.”

I shook my head and took a bite of squash. Fred went on. “At least you know it’s not the army that has ‘em. That means you got a chance. You need to find out where they are, now.”

“Any ideas on how I can do that?” The idea of bribing that pudgy bastard was repulsive. I doubted I could come up with a sufficient bribe, anyway.

“You need a better source of info than me. I have to open the bar soon, anyway. I’d say yore best bet would be Jason’s son.”

“Jason Cummings?”

“Aye, that’s the one. He on yore list?”

I nodded.

“He’s a good egg. Served with Sharkey too. Who else?”

“Pat Callahan.”

“He’s dead. The fever. But it’s Jason’s son-”

There was a scratching sound at the downstairs door. Fred motioned to me to keep my seat and went downstairs. I reached for one of my guns.

Fred opened the door. “What the-”

There was a scrabbling sound of claws on wood and the dog I had fed came barreling up the stairs. He looked around, saw me, and turned in a happy circle. Then he hopped up on the couch, sat down, and looked at me, tail wagging. Oh, lovely.

Fred walked slowly back up the stairs. “That yours?”

“Apparently.” I put my fork down and took my plate over and sat it on the end of the couch. As soon as I was at a safe distance he pounced on it. He never took his eyes off Fred and me as he wolfed the food down and then licked the plate. Oh well. Missing one meal wasn’t going to kill me, and he certainly couldn’t afford to miss many more.

Fred and the dog were looking at each other warily. “That’s a cop dog. Or was, at any rate.”

“How can you tell?”

“I know the signs.”

“Then how come he’s stray?”

Fred shrugged. “Sometimes they dump the ones that flunk out, these days. No one wants ‘em for pets anymore. He’s been on his own for a while. Haven’t you, boy?”

The dog looked up and growled. Fred backed against the wall. “Down,” I told him firmly, and to my surprise, he laid down.

“Told you. He’s definitely been trained somewhere. And he’s definitely yore dog. Or thinks he is. Anyway, it’s Jason’s son you want. Jonathan. He’s the best source of info around.”

“Where can I find ‘im?”

Fred rubbed his chin. “What’s today? Tuesday? Probably over at the old Lowe Mill. He goes by Limpy over there. He’s blonde and blue-eyed normally but I don’t know what his hair looks like there. That boy has half a dozen different names and as many appearances.” He gave me a brown rock inscribed with some sort of Chinese character. “Give ‘im that, and he’ll know I sent you.”

I left most of my gear and the rifle, but took everything else.

The damn dog followed me when I left.

Lowe Mill was about two and half miles southwest of Fred’s bar. It had been many things throughout its life, from a cotton mill to a shoe factory. In my childhood it had been an arts center and a general hangout for misfits, rebels, and dissidents. The latter hadn’t changed much. The Mill was now a community for people who were otherwise homeless. It was filled with people who had taken up residence in the old shops and businesses. Many of these were open, selling everything from junk to clothes. There were people outside hawking food and other items. I wondered how they managed to avoid harassment by the apes with badges that ran the city.

Everyone knew Limpy and I soon found him, limping along out back behind a shopping cart filled with trade goods. He was a young man, about my age, but with a bad limp. He was dressed in rags and was so dirty it was impossible to tell what color his hair was but he had vivid blue eyes that seemed to take everything in.

I approached him cautiously. The dog had slunk off before I entered the gates outside. “Limpy?”

“That be me,” he replied in a way that would make one think he was slightly slow. “Want to trade?”

“Depends on what you got to trade.”

“Got everything.” He showed me all the goods in his cart, and some of them were pretty good.

“I’m looking for something a lot more portable,” I told him as I pretended to look at a bottle of vodka and showed him the rock I had concealed in one hand. His expression didn’t change but he gave a slight jerk of his head, indicating I should follow. I did so at a safe distance and found him waiting for me not too far from the mill.

“Who gave you that?” He demanded. The appearance of slowness was gone.

“Fred.”

“Who are you?”

“Ed, one of Sharkey’s kids. You know who that is?”

“My dad’s old sergeant from the marines.”

“Who’s your dad?”

“Jason Cummings. I’m supposed to be vetting *you*, not the other way around.”

We looked at each other warily for a long moment, like two alpha dogs who both wanted the same bone. Finally I spoke up. “You can’t be too cautious in this burg.”

“True. How’d you twig on Fred?”

“Sharkey. I need some information and Fred said you’re the best.”

“It won’t be free.”

“I can pay.”

“You don’t need to pay me –Dad would have a fit if I charged one of Sharkey’s kids –but I might need to grease some pigs. Walk with me.”

We walked south and east towards the Parkway. As soon as we were out of easy sight of the mill Jonathan straightened up and his limp completely disappeared. I explained what I was doing here. Jonathan nodded as I talked. “I can find ‘em. You’ll need to stay out of sight while I do. I’ll need to go alone.”

“I can go back to Fred’s.”

“It might be better if you wait at my Dad’s. That’s where we’re going now. He’ll want to meet you, anyway.”

I nodded. “Where does he live?”

“The mall.”

“The mall?”

“We’re homeless. Technically, but a lot of us have moved in there.”

“Why are there so many homeless here? There are plenty of empty houses.”

He shrugged. “You have to be a legit resident to live in housing. That means you got to sign a loyalty oath to the mayor and the army. There’s also a lot of taxes on housing. Most of us homeless can’t or won’t sign the oath, and or can’t afford the taxes. I hope you brought enough goods, by the way. You’ll have to pay tax to get out, too. Otherwise they stick you in the camps. That’s how they get a lot of folks.” His voice was matter-of-fact though he was clearly disgusted.

I reminded myself firmly that I was not here to light torches and that there was an army on the other side of the city. “I didn’t pay the tax to get in. I got no intention of payin’ it to get out.”

Jonathan grinned. “You come over the wall?”

“Yep.”

He laughed. “I like you. I’ll probably go over that wall one day, after the old man passes on. Assumin’ they haven’t got barbed wire around all of it by then, that is.”

“They been doing that?”

“Yeah. Mostly on the south side, so far, but they’re workin’ their way around.”

We walked in silence for a while. There were few people on the streets and he seemed to know how to avoid the checkpoints. “That dog yours?” He asked, and jerked his head towards the dog, who was following us.

“Seems that way.”

“Don’t bring ‘im in when we get there or he might get ate.”

“People that hungry?”

“Yep. Some of us. We got no place to grow food and there ain’t enough work to go around, so most folks have to steal or forage for most of what we get. The city hands out some, but not enough.”

Jonathan really did live at the old mall at Drake and the Parkway, not even a mile from the Mill. Him and several thousand other homeless folk. When we arrived I couldn’t help but stare. The mall as I had known it as a child had been full of lights and sound and the parking lot had been filled with cars. It had been a fairly upscale mall with lots of expensive stores and wealthy people constantly going in and out. Now it was a homeless camp. Go figure.

There were still a few cars in the lot but it was obvious none of them had gone anywhere for some time. There were cooking fires going and clothes drying on makeshift lines. There were a few people around but most had taken refuge from the heat of the late afternoon sun in either the parking garage or the mall itself. Jonathan opened the door and the stench of filth and unwashed bodies hit me like a punch to the face.

The lights were off, of course. There was no power. But windows and skylights let in some light and there were lanterns here and there. It was hot inside, but better than outside on the pavement. People were everywhere, crowding into both the old shops and the concourses. There were sleeping mats laid out right on the walkways. Some of the stores apparently ‘belonged’ to someone, for there were metal grates over the entrances. We passed two rowdy games of cards and several sleeping people.

What surprised me most was that there was still merchandise in some of the stores. Not much, but some. There were mannequins in windows dressed in the fashions of a now bygone era. One shoe store had shoes on the wall racks despite the fact that several families now lived in the store. One shoe that caught my eye as we passed was a five-inch stiletto heel, gold, with bling all over it. No wonder that was still there. What possible use could someone have for *that*? And why would someone have ever paid the \$89.99 it was listed at?

I shook my head. Some things had definitely changed for the better.

Mid-way through the mall there was a loud hum and suddenly the power came on. Old fluorescent lights flickered to life. A cheer rose from the residents. One little girl ran to a tv and turned it on. To my shock a news report appeared on the screen and Jonathan muttered something about ‘the mayor’s daily address’.

To our right was the old fountain. It had been empty when we entered but now as the power came on it bubbled to life. Several women came running from out of nowhere, arms full of clothes, and there was much jostling as they struggled to be the first to do laundry.

I blinked, remembering a day long ago when I had tried to play in that fountain. A security guard had appeared out of nowhere, even before mother could grab me, and yelled at both of us.

Yes, things had definitely changed.

Finally we stopped outside an old bath and beauty store, one of the kind that used to sell expensive lotions and such. My mother had shopped there often. Suddenly I had that odd double vision again, and I saw myself at eight years old, holding my

mother's hand as we entered the shop with its shelves and displays of pretty scented products all gleaming under the fluorescent lights, and a perky young saleswoman was coming forward to see if she could help us with anything.

The saleswoman was long gone, as were the displays and the lotions. A few lights were on inside. The shelves were filled with various pieces of junk and items for trade. Metal grates were down over the windows and the door. The one over the latter was not shut entirely. Jonathan rapped on it with his fist. "Dad! You home?"

"I'm here Johnny," an old, gravelly voice called out. "Come on in."

"I brought a friend." Jonathan raised the grate enough for us to enter and gestured for me to precede him. He shut it behind us and locked it. An old man shuffled out of the back room, wiping his hands on an apron. He matched Sharkey's description of Jason, only older of course. He embraced his son. "You free, Dad?"

"No one's here. Who's your friend?"

"One of Sharkey's kids. Ed, this is my dad. Dad, this is Ed."

Jason did a double take. "Sharkey's kids? What in the blazes are you doing here? And I thought his son was Bobby Joe, not Ed."

"I'm adopted."

We went into the back room and sat around a table dragged in from somewhere. Jason wasn't surprised Sharkey was alive. He'd 've been more surprised if he was dead, he said. When I asked if Fred really was trustworthy, Jason laughed.

"Oh, for the most part. If he could make more profit by turning you in he'd consider it, but he owes his life to Sharkey and he knows it. He pays his debts, Fred does. And he doesn't like the mayor or his goons anymore than the rest of us."

Jonathan left and I chafed at the reins while he was gone. I gave him some of my trade goods, what was left of them. I wandered the mall some but there wasn't much to see and I couldn't get over the strangeness of it all. So I went back to the shop and spent the time talking and playing poker with Jason. Several people came to the door of his shop and he went out front to trade. The power went out and Jason lit lanterns. He cooked dinner on an old propane stove. I insisted on paying him for the food. He clearly didn't have any to spare.

Along about bedtime I was looking around the back room and found a bottle of lotion from the original store in one of the storage bins. It had never been opened. Cucumber melon, the label read.

Why, I wondered, would anyone want to smell like cucumbers or melons? At best, you'd smell like a fruity salad; at worst, you might smell like the flowers and have the bees after you. I broke the seal and smelled the lotion. It wasn't bad, but it smelled nothing like either cucumbers or melons. Jason said I could have it so I stuffed it in my backpack. Mary Ellen would like it.

About midnight we got woke by the cops. They came through the mall like a hurricane, blaring on bullhorns and with dogs barking. They yelled for people to get up and move to the sides of the aisles for 'inspection' and enforced the order with cuffs and kicks. I woke up and reached for my gun. Jason saw me and shook his head.

"What do they want?" I whispered.

"To harass us, mostly. But they're also looking for contraband and recruits."

"They do this often?"

"Couple of times a week. Whenever they get bored."

Spotlights approached the store. Someone banged on the grate. "You there! Why is this grate closed? Come out now!"

Jason put a finger to his lips and slipped out of the back room, a flashlight in hand. "Jonas! What's all the hubbub about?"

"That you, Jason? You ol' coot, I'd forgot you set up shop here."

"Been here two years. You need to inspect the place?"

"Naw, we know you." The cop lowered his voice. "You got any smokes?"

"Not now. Come back later."

"Sure thing."

The cops moved on, and Jason came back. "It helps to trade with 'em. Good thing you gave me them smokes. That'll keep 'em happy."

Jonathan came back a few hours later. "We're in luck. I found 'em. And they're not in the city jail anymore, thank Jesus. You could have gotten to them in there, but you'd probably need a squad of marines and a few M-16s. They've been assigned to camp five and got moved there yesterday afternoon. That's not a field camp; it's the one dedicated to takin' down old buildings and clearing land. It's hard work that, and most people don't last long. Not that they'd let them out after six months anyhow, but still. And we won't wait that long to spring 'em." He showed me the location on a map. It was in a park not much more than a mile away. And, I was glad to note, less than a mile from the eastern wall.

“How many guards are there?”

“Too many for us to handle, during the night. But in the day when most of the hands are gone there’s only four. And the ‘nice’ thing about this camp is that they throw new folks in their hole for a few days to starve ‘em into submission.”

If that was their game, they would have a long wait with Tim. He had more of Grandpappy in ‘im than it looked like. Grandpappy Thompson spent two years in the Hanoi Hilton and was still givin’ his captors the finger when he was released.

Not that Tim would be there that long, if I had anything to say about it.

I tapped the map with one finger. “You know the best way into this camp?”

Jonathan grinned. “Yep.”

Part Seven –Getting OUT of Huntsville

The camp was simple, really. It looked like a smallish tent city surrounded by a pretty tall chain link fence topped with barbed wire. The inmates lived six to a tent. Some wore old prison jumpsuits but most did not. Everyone in that camp was male. There was a building at the front of the camp that served as a barracks for the guards. At the back of the camp was a group of open-air latrines. Near them was a small concrete shed that served as their ‘hole’, whatever the hell that was supposed to mean. Did they think it was some kind of sick joke? There were regular patrols around the perimeter even during the day when most of the inmates were out at work.

It was early evening and I was hidden in a copse of trees on a bluff overlooking the camp. I had been there since just before dawn with Jonathan and watched through the binoculars as the guards marched the inmates off. Tim and Bobby had not been among them. But no one had approached the shed all day, so if they were in there the guards had no intention of giving them any food or water. I ground my teeth in anger and frustration. Once more I had to remind myself I was not here to cause trouble; I was just here to get my brother and Bobby out.

Jonathan had left a short time ago to put his part of the plan in motion. I just hoped it worked. If not I’d have no choice but to shoot the guards. There were only four of them and I could probably do it before they called for help but I wanted to avoid bloodshed if I could. ‘Sides, the shots could draw unwanted attention.

Just then Jonathan appeared, comin’ up the gravel road with a shopping cart full of goodies. He didn’t have the limp today but he’d done himself up to look like an old man: gray hair, wrinkles, and all. If I hadn’t recognized the goods in his cart I’d have thought he was a legitimate trader.

One of the guards saw him coming and came out to open the gate, a wide smile on his face. Jonathan was right; even the cops loved to trade. The two guards

patrolling the perimeter came running, and soon the man in the barracks came out as well. I watched as Jonathan went through his now familiar trading routine. The guards seized on the liquor and smokes and when they asked what he wanted he rubbed his belly and said something I couldn't catch, but the meaning was clear. One of the guards brought him a sandwich and some cornbread. He ate and talked to them while they lit up the cigarettes and began passing the bottle of rum back and forth. I held my breath, hoping the spiked alcohol would work.

It didn't take long. In just a few minutes one of the guards put a hand to his head. He abruptly sat down on the grass. The others began teasing him, but then a second one keeled over. Soon they were all passed out on the grass. Jonathan looked up in my direction and waved. I started to move and felt something grab my jacket. The dog had followed me again and now had my jacket in his teeth. What in Jesus' name was wrong with him?

I carefully worked my jacket loose. "Sorry pup. I have to. Follow if you want." To my surprise he did, but he stopped at the gate and sat there whining.

By the time I got there Jonathan had all ready checked the barracks for more guards and had opened the gate. He was looking over the unconscious guards and taking anything of value. "We may have killed them," he said as I came through the gate. "Those trunks were *old*."

Well cry me a river. I didn't much care. He tossed me the keys as I tore past him and ran to the shed. No sooner did I unlock the door than a whirlwind shot out, fist cocked. I neatly tumbled him and Bobby Earl went rolling onto the grass. When he stopped he looked up at me in amazement. "Eddie? Watcha doin' here?"

"Saving your worthless hide, of course. Where's Tim?"

"Inside. He's in a bad way."

I was all ready moving.

The shed was so hot it felt like walking into an oven. Tim was curled on his side on the floor, seemingly unconscious. Completely panicked now, I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, hard. "Tim! Tim! You better be okay, damnit. Tim!"

His eyes fluttered open. "Sis?" he rasped. "What're you doing here?" His face was swollen and bruised. He'd definitely been beaten at some point. His lips were parched and dry. It was a wonder he could speak at all. I pulled my water bottle out and held him while he swigged it down. When he had drank as much as he could I tossed the bottle to Bobby and helped Tim up. He was weak, but alive and right then that was

all that mattered. Later I could be angry; later I could cuff his ears and yell. But all I felt then was relief that they were both okay.

Tim leaned on me while I helped him out of the shed, clutching me with the same fierce intensity he had shown as a small child. "I've got you, baby brother. We're going to get you home." I shut the door and locked it behind us. Let them wonder.

Jonathan was helping Bobby up. "We have to hurry," He told me. "It'll be an hour or less till the other inmates and guards come back."

We headed for the entrance, Tim still leaning on me. Both boys seemed to be in shock. At least one of the guards was still breathing, I saw. Apparently they weren't all dead.

"They'll be looking for you," I told Jonathan.

"I can take care of myself," he replied as he grabbed the shopping cart. "This isn't the first time I've done this. 'Sides, they'll be looking for this guy." He touched his face. "I won't use 'im anymore. I'll stay close and if they come round or anyone shows up afore you've reached the wall I'll make a diversion."

"Thanks. If you ever get out of this burg, come to Elvis and look me up."

"I will, Ed. Take care."

"You too."

We headed back up the slope as Jonathan disappeared. The dog joined us. Great. What was I going to do about him when we got to the wall? I didn't need yet another mouth to kept fed. Tim was strong enough to walk and his strength increased as he sucked down water from the other bottle I had stuffed in my pack. Which happened to be his. Bobby Earl tried to ask a question and I brusquely told him to shut up and *move*. Both boys wisely kept their mouths shut after that. The camp was less than a mile from the eastern wall and just outside the southern edge of the Historic District and Five Points. We headed towards that wall, going north by north east to stay under cover. Jonathan said it was a good place to jump the wall anyway because the trees came almost up to it on either side in several places where it skirted Monte Sano.

I moved them as fast I could get them to go, practically dragging Tim. Every time we had to cross a street or venture into the open I felt myself tense up, expecting to hear a cop yell at us at any moment. It seemed to take forever to cover that mile. Twice we had to skirt around police checkpoints. When we reached old Maple Hill Cemetery we cut across it.

At last we got near the wall. I made the boys hide while I scoped it out. The trees really did come almost to the wall on both sides. The mountain rose on the other side, old and immutable. I used the binoculars to check that no one was in sight in any direction. The long shadows of evening would help cover us. Then I whistled and they came running. The damn dog trailed after them, looking uncertain.

“Up and over, quickly.” I told them. They looked at me like I was crazy. I sighed, and gave Bobby a boost to the top of the wall. He stayed there and helped Tim up and over after I boosted him. Then I climbed up myself. Behind me the dog started barking. “Sorry pooch,” I called back. “It’s been fun but I have to go, and I really don’t need another mouth to feed.”

Then I stopped and looked back. He was sitting there, barking, and looking at me expectantly. It was the same look Toby’d given me when I found him after Jeremiah had finished with ‘im, as if he expected me to fix it. I had fixed it, just not the way he thought I would.

If I left him there he’d be dead all too soon. I sighed and beckoned. “Come on.” The dog made a running leap for the wall. He hit it about two-thirds of the way up and sat about trying to scramble the rest of the way. “What the hell?” Bobby exclaimed. Before he slipped I reached down and grabbed him. Bobby helped, and together we lifted him to the top. No sooner did his paws touch the concrete then he sprang down on the other side and ran into the woods. Bobby and me hopped off and joined Tim. We melted into the woods in the gathering twilight.

It took us six days to get home. That first night I pushed hard. I wanted to get as far away from that cursed city as I could before the alarm went up. Monte Sano wasn’t a big mountain, more like a large hill, and there were hiking trails all over it. We soon struck upon one that headed up. In just a few hours we were up and over the mountain. I only let them stop once to rest while I refilled both water bottles at a stream. There had been several subdivisions on the other side of the mountain and we cut south a bit to avoid them. A few hours before dawn it became obvious both boys weren’t going to go much farther without rest. There had been no sign of pursuit, so I found a good place for us to hole up. The boys dropped to the ground and were immediately asleep.

Quite clearly, I was going to be on first watch. We needed food. Who knew how long it had been since the boys had eaten. All I had left was one old MRE, some freeze-dried veggies and a bit of cornmeal. I quickly hunted up a couple of young rabbits from nearby and got them into my stewpot with the veggies. The dog slunk out of the underbrush and I gave him the offal. He ate it gratefully.

I sighed. He wasn't going away anytime soon. "I guess I'll call you Toby. That was my last dog's name and it's as good as any other, I suppose. That suit ya?" He looked up and whuffed. Stupid dog.

As soon as the stew was on I took out that damn blue card and burned it. If that was the price of "order" and "security", they could have it. I'd rather sleep with my rifle by my side, thank you very much.

When the stew was almost done I made some corncakes with the last of the cornmeal and then woke 'em. They ate, taking turns with the one spoon I'd brought, and then immediately went back to sleep.

A couple of hours later Bobby got up and stumbled off to empty his bladder. When he came back and saw me awake he blinked in surprise. "You're up. Have you slept at all?"

"No. Someone has to stay on watch."

"I'll do it for a while, if you want to sleep."

"Think you can stay awake?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Wake me at noon." I pulled my pack around to use as a pillow and lay down.

"Ed?"

"Huh?"

"If somethin' had happened to Tim –I mean, if he'd 've died –would you still have gotten me out?"

"Course. You're family." What a stupid question. Family takes care of family. I closed my eyes.

Bobby was as good as his word. He woke me right around noon. The sky was clouding over and by the time we got moving again a light rain was falling. It was hot as hell and even more humid. We headed east by northeast. I hoped that if anyone was looking for us they'd try the north gate first. Unless they brought out the dogs, and then the rain should wipe out the scent.

Before long we found an old blueberry farm and the first of the berries were in. No one was around and the place seemed uninhabited. We spent a couple of hours picking and eating the berries before moving on. Tim was looking better and the food had perked him up enough to sass me some. His face was still swollen and puffy and he

had bruises and lacerations elsewhere. I treated them with poultices the next time we stopped.

It rained for two days. It had to be the outer bands of a hurricane from the gulf comin' through. That was the only time we got rain like that in those days. It made traveling miserable but we needed the rain so bad I couldn't hold a grudge towards it. Both of those nights we holed up in abandoned buildings to get out of the weather. The first night while I was on watch Tim curled up against me and lay his head in my lap, like he had done when he was little.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

"You oughta be. You caused a lot of trouble, Timothy Joseph, and you could've been killed. You know that?"

"Yes. You mad?"

"As hornets, and ah reckon I'm gonna be for a while. They do worse than beat you?"

"No."

"Would ya tell me if they had?"

"Yeh, though I think you'd go back and do somethin' stupid."

"Not 'til I have you home safe, I wouldn't. Then yeah, I probably would."

He curled up against me. "I'm sorry, sis."

"You said that all ready."

"Not about that –well, I am, but–"

"What?"

"All this time, I guess I've thought you aren't very smart and don't know nothing. But I was wrong. I'm the one who's stupid."

I laughed. "You are not. Neither of us is. We're just different, that's all. You've got the book smarts and I've got the wood smarts. Ain't nothin' wrong with either of them and I reckon they're both needed to make the world go around."

"I'm not so sure book learnin' is needed anymore, Ed. It seems like people like you are needed a lot more."

"You're wrong, Tim. People like you are needed more than ever."

"Why?"

I waved a hand at the abandoned house around us. “‘Cause of all this, of course. This didn’t just happen. This was done.”

“What do ya mean? No one flipped a switch and did this.”

“Naw, ‘course not. It was greed, and short-sightedness, and arrogance that did this. Someone has to remember that. It’s a lot more likely to be people like you than people like me.”

“People like me can’t take care of themselves.”

“I reckon that’s were I come in. No one hurts my baby brother.”

He smiled. “I love you, Sis.”

I ran my fingers through his thick hair. “I love you, too.”

“You do?”

“Course.”

“How come you never say it?”

“‘Cause I’m as big a lunkhead as you, I suppose.”

That was one of the last times I ever held him like that. My baby boy went and grew into a man while I wasn’t looking.

I wasn’t lyin’ when I said I was mad. I was, and I did have the right. But I was just glad they were alive and safe. And something good had come out of the adventure. They had learned some lessons and I had gotten Toby. He was turning out to be every bit as good a dog as his namesake. I hadn’t had a dog that was “mine” since the first Toby and I’d forgotten how nice it was.

On the third day we ran into trouble. No. We didn’t run into it. We stumbled on it and could have gone around it but I deliberately waded in. There’s some things I just can’t cotton to or walk away from. Like that fight at the Saddleback. Some things just need to be done. Or stopped. Like I said, I’m about as subtle as a forest fire.

We were cutting across an old farm when we heard shoutin’ and hollerin’ in the distance. We could’ve gone on but some instinct told me to check it out, so I made the boys take cover—over their objections, mind—and worked my way closer. As I got near I could see about thirty people gathered around an old barn. A man in preacher’s clothing stood on a platform, a bible in one hand. The people wore old-fashioned clothing. Not Amish style, but long-sleeves and bonnets nonetheless.

I don’t know what denomination they were. It could have been anything in those days, from Baptist to Holiness to Pentecostal. It could’ve even been something

new. A lot of new religions sprang up during the troubles, most more or less crazy. The people in this one quite clearly had bats in their attics. The preacher was on a roll, going on and on about sin and heresy and abominations in the eyes of the Lord.

“And what do we do with heretics?” He asked finally. “What do we do with those who are abominable in the eyes of the one true God?”

“We get rid of ‘em!” One old woman shouted and there was a loud chorus of agreement.

The preacher made a signal, and two men emerged from the barn. They were dragging a kicking, screaming girl on a leash behind them. Literally. They had fastened a collar about her neck. She had a dark bruise across one cheek. Her strawberry blonde hair had been shorn, badly, and her hands were bound in front of her. They dragged her to a pole that had been planted near the platform and tied her to it. The preacher walked over and looked at her with scorn. “You’ve been brought afore this here body of true believers accused of witchcraft, girl. What do you have to say for yourself?”

The girl spit in his face. Good for her, I thought. There was a chorus of boos and hisses from the watching crowd, but the preacher waved his hand for silence. “She has the right to speak her piece. She’s a witch, sure enough, just like her parents afore her. What does the bible say about witches?” It was obviously a rhetorical question, for he went on. “‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!’ That is the word of our Lord. Do I hear any disagreement?”

No. They weren’t. It took a moment to sink into my thick head just what they were doing. Two men were piling brush around the pole. A third stood nearby with a can of oil in his hands. And a fourth was lighting a torch.

Oh great. Back to serfdom *and* witch burnings in less than twenty years. The veneer of civilization is very thin indeed.

Oh, fuck that. Most people are about as civilized as a pet chimp. They’re just waiting for a chance to show it.

My hands were all ready reaching for my rifle even as my eyes scanned the crowd. None of them were openly armed. The preacher was still looking at the girl, the bible held in front of him. He began to pray. “Our Lord, thou art in heaven-”

If his God is real, he met him before he finished that sentence. And I hope he got a welcome that was less warm than he’d hoped for. Or more warm, if ya get my meaning. I don’t think he ever heard the rifle crack. The bullet tore right through his bible and into his heart. He keeled over, his expression unchanged.

I hated to do it like that. Now, don't get me wrong. I got no problem killin' someone who needs killin'. That preacher certainly did. But when it's done like that there ain't no justice. He didn't have to answer for what he done. But under the circumstances that was the only way and it had to be done.

Some people are just too dangerous to let live.

There were screams from the watchers. I fired three more shots in quick succession. The first went into the hand of the torch wielder. He dropped it, screaming. The second landed at the feet of the young man—a boy, really—holding the can of oil. He dropped it and went running. The third went over the heads of the crowd.

It was too much for them. Screaming, they all began to run towards the road and the buildings in the distance. As soon as it was clear I ran for the girl and cut her free with my knife. “W—who are y-you?” She asked through chattering teeth.

“Eddie. Come on, they’ll be back soon. And armed, I bet.”

“Huh?”

“What? You’d rather stay here?”

Her name was Daffodil Centre. That alone told me a lot about her, and her parents. What kind of crazy names their daughter Daffodil? It just invites ridicule and bullying, and she was quite incapable of fightin’. She was fifteen, and she really was a witch. Or the modern equivalent. She was fourth-generation Wiccan. Her parents hadn’t had the sense to go underground or leave when the crazies took over their neighborhood and, good liberal progressives that they were, they hated guns and didn’t have any. When the preacher got his flock fired up against them they had no means to defend themselves. Daffodil had been hiking when it happened, but they quickly hunted her down.

Tim and Bobby jumped up when we came back. “We heard shots—” Tim began and then stopped, his eyes fixed on Daffodil.

I knew that look. It was the same one I had given Mary Ellen the first time I met her. We were more alike than I once thought, my brother and me.

“Come on. *Move*.”

I don’t know if they even tried to follow, but they certainly never caught up. I wasn’t too happy ‘bout bringing home yet another mouth to feed but there was no help for it. She was too young—and too green—to fend for herself. “Sides, I wanted to see the look on Pastor Joe’s face when he learned I’d brought back a real *witch*. It would be highly amusing.

It was a perfect late June evening when we got home. The heat had passed and the crickets were stirring. The mosquitoes were not yet active, which made things all the better. We had kept going through the afternoon heat to get home by supper. We came at Sharkey's from the southwest, having gone cross-country to get there sooner. The dogs came running out to meet us. They were stirred up about something. Instead of greeting us joyously they crowded around us, whining.

Toby growled at them once. I cuffed him firmly behind the ears. "That's enough," I told him, and that was the end of that.

Something was clearly wrong. I found out just how wrong when we got to the main house and Mary Ellen came out to meet us, a shotgun in her hands.

Part Eight –Home

Just because Mary Ellen hated guns didn't mean she didn't know how to use one. We all did, startin' as soon as we were big enough to learn how. Some of us were better at it than others (poor Jane and Tim had trouble hittin' a barn at point blank range) but we all knew how. Mary Ellen was one of the best shots in the family. Better'n me, if the truth be told. The kids all knew better'n to touch a gun without permission; it was one of the few things that would get'm a whooping, and well they knew it.

It had been so long since I'd seen Mary Ellen with a weapon in her hands that for a moment I just stared. "Mary Ellen? What the hell?"

She set the gun aside, rushed down the steps, and threw her arms 'round me. "Thank God you're back. I was afraid you were dead, or worse. Or that anyways you wouldn't be back in time."

She was crying. I had never, ever seen Mary Ellen cry. I took her hand gently. "What's goin' on? Where is everyone?"

"Over at your place. Everyone but me and Daddy, that is. I figured if there's goin' to be trouble, it's here they'll come first. Your place is more defensible, on that hill."

"You're not making any sense, Mary Ellen. What trouble? Why is Sharkey here if there's trouble?" And where was Todd, I wondered, when he should be between Mary Ellen and whatever caused her to pick up a gun?

"He's too sick to go anywhere."

"He's sick again?"

"Not again. Still. He's dyin', Eddie."

My stomach did a strange kind of flip-flop and ended up somewhere around my knees. No. Sharkey couldn't die. We needed him too much. Just then Mary Ellen

saw the boys, or noticed ‘em anyhow, and lickety-split she rounded on them. She cuffed Bobby and then grabbed him by one of his ears. “Robert Earl, do you have any idea how much trouble you’ve caused? And you, Timothy Joseph, runnin’ off to see the ocean! You ain’t got a lick of sense between you. I should turn you both over my knee – But I’ll do that later. There’s no time, now. Come in, all of you. And who is that?” Daffodil had been standing back, looking shy.

The house was pleasantly cool. The ac was running, which was strange enough. Mary Ellen explained quickly and coolly, in that matter-of-fact way she had, though she was obviously hurtin’ inside. “It started two days ago. Jane’s tooth finally got so bad she couldn’t put off goin’ to see the dentist anymore. She wouldn’t let anyone go with ‘er. Except for you, and you weren’t back yet. She’d be fine, she said. But she wasn’t. On the way home Jeremiah –curse the man; he’d better hope I never get my hands on him –ambushed her. They beat her pretty bad, Eddie, and did worse’n that to her.”

I winced, thinking of the things someone like Jeremiah would think would be fun to do to a person like Jane. “Is she all right?”

“I don’t know about all right, but she’ll heal. She’s at the clinic, and the Doc says she needs to stay there awhile. She’ll live, which is more’n can be said for some others.” Her voice caught on a sob. I put my hand on her arm. “What happened, Mary Ellen?”

“We couldn’t let that go, and the militia couldn’t either. They decided to arrest Jeremiah and hold ‘im on charges. Todd and a couple of others went up yesterday to fetch ‘im. But there was trouble and Jeremiah-” Her voice broke again. “He killed Todd. Shot him dead. They beat Joe Cratchett bloody but let ‘im go. Now the whole militia’s gathering at Jim Bo’s and they’re going to go after ‘im. It ain’t going to be pretty, Eddie. Jeremiah has almost as many in his crew as the militia. A lot of people are goin’ to die tonight. And if the militia loses Jeremiah’s boys will be sure to start trouble with the rest of us.”

“I’ll see what I can do to stop that. I’ll have to go, Mary Ellen.”

“I know.”

I fired up the shortwave and called Jim Bo’s. “Ed?” He asked in disbelief. “Yore back?”

“Right ‘nough. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Thank Jesus.”

On my way back down the hall I passed Sharkey's room. A familiar voice called from inside. "Ed? That you?"

Sharkey was so thin now he looked like a living skeleton. He was lying in bed, propped up by numerous pillows. "It's me, Sharkey. How you doin'?"

"Not so good. Would you turn up that thermostat? We don't need to be wastin' the juice."

When I didn't move he rolled his eyes. "No one listens to me anymore. How was yore trip?"

"Awful. But I got the boys back. And I had an insane desire to burn down the City Hall over in Huntsville."

"Did ya do it?"

"No."

"Pity. The world needs less useless bureaucrats."

"I need to go, Sharkey."

"I know. Eddie —make sure it's justice. Not a lynch mob. You're Cap'n of the militia now. I'm resigning, as of now. That makes it your responsibility."

"I know. I'll make sure it's done right. Sir."

"I told you not to 'sir' me anymore."

"You deserve it."

Before I left I made sure both the boys were armed and knew they had to listen to Mary Ellen. She had more sense in one finger than the two of them put together. I made Toby stay too. If worse came to worse he'd be a good guard dog. Mary Ellen hugged me 'fore I left and buried her head against my shoulder for a long moment. "You'd better come back." She whispered. "I couldn't stand to lose you too."

"I will."

The entire militia was at Jim Bo's warehouse when I got there, all fifty of 'em, including Joe Cratchett. He had a busted lip, a black eye, and a lot of bruises. I glared at him as I came up. "What the hell were you two thinkin', going up there like that?"

He shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

I had no intention of just walking up and takin' the Captaincy. For one thing, it was an elected position. For another, I didn't really want it and wasn't sure I should have it. But it got taken out of my hands. 'Fore I'd even got out of sight of the house,

Sharkey had hobbled out of his room and radioed ahead. By the time I got there I was all ready elected. I wasn't happy about it, but there wasn't much I could do at that point and we had work to do anyhow.

The Mayor was there too (Sharkey had resigned several years before this) and she was nervous that we were going to have a lynch mob. Several of our boys and girls were of a mind to do just that and I had to put my foot down. "There'll be no lynch mobs on my watch," I told 'em. "If that's what you want, get yerself another Cap'n. You hear?"

Jeremiah had thirty-seven men on his side and that was too close for my likin' if it came to an open shoot-out and they had the advantage of knowing the land over that way better. I wanted to avoid that if possible. I sent our two best woodsmen over to Blackberry as scouts. One of them was Jim, and I hated to send him since he was only nineteen, but we had no choice. We had a couple of advantages Jeremiah didn't; they didn't have any power over there, and so no shortwaves or the walkie-talkies I sent with the scouts. When they were gone I turned to Jim Bo. He was in charge of the inventory. "What else we got that they don't? We still have that tear gas we liberated from the trooper station?"

In the end it was almost anti-climatic. Jeremiah had no intention of causing anyone any trouble that night. With me gone, Sharkey dyin' and Todd dead, he assumed he had us pretty well licked. He left about a dozen people at his mama's farm to mind the still and took the rest into Blackberry for a party at Janey's Pub. We went and rounded up the men at the farm first. I had no intention of lettin' anyone responsible get away and the only way to make sure that didn't happen was to hold 'em all until we could sort it out. Jeremiah's mother was there, of course, and she insisted on talkin' to me.

"What do you want with my boy?" She demanded.

"He's wanted for assault and battery, murder, and attempted murder. Ma'am." I added the last as an afterthought, for she didn't much deserve the title.

"My boy wouldn't do that. There must be some sort of an explanation."

"No ma'am. That's about it."

I left some of our people at the farm to guard the prisoners and headed to Blackberry with the rest.

It was well after dark before we got there, but the moon was almost full and that gave us more'n enough light to see by. The bar was in an old run down building on the main street. It only had two ways in or out, both visible from the roof of the old

warehouse across the street. I sent Sammy up there with her high-powered rifle. At sixteen she was the youngest member of the militia and also the most unlikely. She was short and slim, not the sort you'd want with you in a close fight, but she was a crack shot. Before the troubles she would've had a good career as a sharpshooter. Her papa had been an Olympic-class shooter. I hoped we wouldn't need her but I wasn't taking any chances.

Jeremiah wasn't entirely stupid; he had a guy on guard outside each door. We shot them with some tranquilizer darts Jim Bo had found as we surrounded the building. Then Joe shot a canister of tear gas through one of the windows. Clouds of smoke came billowing out, followed shortly by almost two dozen people, all coughing and gagging.

"Hold it right there, all of you," I shouted. "Hands in the air if you don't want to get yoreself shot."

I sounded so much like a cop I felt like gaggin' myself.

"Ed?" An all too familiar voice called, fear in his voice as he fought not to gag. "What the hell? I thought you were gone."

"Obviously not. You're under arrest, Jeremiah Rhoades, for the murder of Todd Stephenson and the assault on Jane Stewart."

It was then that Jeremiah grew a backbone for the first and only time in his life. He reached for his gun. There was a loud *crack* and a bullet hit the dirt less than an inch from his big toe. His hands shot into the air.

That was the end of that. We hanged 'im, of course, after the trial. We didn't have much choice. We no longer had the spare resources to waste on keeping someone in prison and you don't let a mad dog go loose. It didn't take months or years like it would've taken 'fore the troubles, either. Just a couple of days. It took some work to find a jury that could be considered at all impartial. Jeremiah had pissed off a lot of people. But in the end we did a fairly good job of it, considerin' the circumstances. There were a lot of witnesses, both to the murder and to Jane's assault. Several of Jeremiah's buddies sang like canaries to keep themselves from swinging too.

I did it, in the end. It was my responsibility and I've never been the sort to ask anyone else to do my dirty work. It was private; no public spectacle for us. Only a few members of the militia, the mayors of both towns, Pastor Joe, and Jeremiah's mama. Mary Ellen was invited but she declined, sayin' it was enough that justice was being done. As for Jeremiah's buddies, the ones that were directly involved we exiled and the others we let go and told 'em to stay out of trouble. Most of 'em did.

That was the most eventful month we'd had in a long time. When it was all over I went up to see Sharkey. He was clinging to life with the same fierce tenacity that had kept him alive after the explosion that had taken his foot.

"Mary Ellen and the Doc both say yore dyin'," I told him after we had set in silence for a few moments.

"I reckon they're right," He said after a pause. "It happens to all of us, eventually."

"Yeah, but you're too young. Mama Jo was nearly eighty."

"Mama Jo didn't spend several years being exposed to DU, either."

"There is that."

After a few moments of silence I pulled his bottle of birthday whiskey out of my pack. "I reckon you should enjoy this before you go, don't you?"

He glared at me. "I told you to trade that."

"I would've if I'd 've needed to." I'd held it back in the hope of brining it home so he could enjoy it. Now I broke the seal before he could object and poured him a glass.

"You have some too."

"Deal."

It was good whiskey. Better'n anything Jeremiah had ever made. Etsell's was about as good. We sat like that in silence for some time, sippin' on the whiskey. Finally Sharkey spoke up. "I'm glad you came to see me, Edna Jean. I've got some things I want to say to you."

"I'm listenin'. Sir."

"How many times I 'ave to tell you not to 'sir' me?"

"Not many more, sir."

"Hmm. Listen, with me gone you're going to be in charge of this crazy lot."

"I don't want to be."

"It doesn't matter what you want. You're it, like it or not. Someone has to make the hard decisions. There's been plenty of 'em in the past years and there'll be more in the years ahead. You're the best one for it and I've made that clear to the rest of 'em. They all agree. I'm kinda glad Todd's not around to have his feeling's hurt. He

was a good man but he couldn't 've done it. I've got a bit of advice for you, if you want it."

"Course I want it."

"Yer a bright girl, Eddie. Always have been. A woman, I should say. You grew out of girlhood some time ago. The first thing is, just do the best you can and don't worry 'bout it, you hear? That's all anyone can do. It's a heavy responsibility but someone has to do it. Just do it with honor. And last, start trainin' some of the others to take over right away. You can't be sure you'll live to old age or that they'll outlive you either."

"Hell Sharkey, I'm plannin' to live to be at least a hundred. But I'll do it. We need more of us able to lead, anyhow."

"Yep. You can see that, which is another reason I want you in charge. I should never have been more than a non-comm, certainly not a CO."

We set and talked for a long time. I told him all about the trip and gave him the letters Fred and Jason had sent.

The rest of that summer was quiet, thank God. We had three more hurricanes come through. By the time they reached us they were no more than heavy rainstorms and didn't do much in the way of damage. But all the reservoirs, wells, and ponds were full for the first time in years.

Jane hid at the clinic for over a month. She was afraid to come home, especially with her face as scarred as it was and her hair all cut. She had some silly notion that we didn't want her anymore, and nothin' we said made any difference. Finally we'd all had 'nough of waitin'. I borrowed a buggy from the Amish (along with one of their boys to drive it) and went to fetch her, along with Mary Ellen. We both dressed up in our best clothes and took a new dress Beth and Amanda had made just for her. The combination of the gift and the romance of the buggy ride finally did the trick. She came home, and none too soon, for Sharkey was declining fast. As he did so people came to me more and more often for help or advice. They'd come to me for a long while when Sharkey wasn't available. But now they were comin' to me by preference, and that bothered me. I really didn't want Sharkey's job, no way no how. But it seemed I was stuck with it. He was right; someone had to do it if we were all goin' to hang together as a family.

Tim and Bobby spent the summer doin' the hardest, dirtiest jobs on both homesteads. They were banned from fishin' all that season. They also spent a LOT of time on the new pedal-powered washer. It turned out Beth had a whole list of things

she wanted laundered that hadn't been washed in a while. Mary Ellen too. And some of the neighbors.

Our colt came from the Corys. I spent a lot of time workin' with him. He was a sweet horse and by the end of the summer I had decided horses weren't so bad. Toby settled right in. He went with me everywhere, on and off the farm. He was incredibly gentle with all the kids and left the stock alone. Daffodil settled right in as well and quickly became one of the family. She missed her parents but having people around who cared about her helped.

'Bout the end of July I sent Jim and Amanda down to Etsell's place to try and convince her to come live with us. She finally agreed, and they moved up, lock, stock and still. She said she did it more for Neil than anything, so that he would have kids to play with and a chance to go to school. She certainly wasn't plannin' to die anytime soon. She intended to dance at his weddin', she said. (She did, too. She died in her sleep at one hundred and five, three weeks after the wedding.)

Sharkey lasted longer than anyone thought he would, him included, I think. But one evenin' in early August I got the call I'd been dreadin' and we all headed up there. I was the first to say goodbye, even 'fore Mary Ellen and Jane. He had some things he wanted to say to me, he said.

The old man was thin as a skeleton and looked about as gaunt. I sat next to the bed and slipped my hand into his. He squeezed it. "Don't worry 'bout me, Eddie. I'm not afraid to die. You've been doin' a good job with the family."

"You mean that?"

"Sure 'nough. Everyone thanks so, not just me."

"I'll miss you, you old codger."

"Hothead."

"Redneck."

"Pup." He coughed, causing Mary Ellen to come runnin' from the next room. "I'm all right, I'm all right," he told her and when she was gone he turned back to me. "I got something important to talk to you about, Edna Jean."

"I'm listenin' sir."

He coughed again and this spell left him weak and shaking.

"You should sleep."

"Ah reckon I'll sleep soon enough. Longer than I want to."

"I love you, old man."

"I love you, too. But I don't have much time. This is personal. What's honor, Edna Jean?"

"Doin' what's right no matter what it costs."

"And what's the right thing to do when you love someone?"

"Take care of 'em and treat 'em right."

"What if they don't know? What's the right thing to do then?"

"Tell 'em. Generally," I added, thinkin' of Mary Ellen.

"So why haven't you told Mary Ellen how you feel about her?"

I was so startled I fell off my chair and had to pick myself up. "I, uh, how do you know about that?"

"Most of us know. Even Todd knew."

"Then how come he never said nothin'?"

"He trusted you, 'course. Well?"

I thought about it. "She was married--"

"Not always, she wasn't. You loved her long 'fore she and Todd got hitched."

That was true enough. My feelings for her went back considerably farther, to the first day we met. I was eight and she was ten. She caught me filchin' apples from one of their trees. "What do you think you're doin'?" She demanded that day, hands on her hips. I looked down, met those emerald eyes, and nearly fell out of the tree. "She doesn't feel the same way."

"How do you know if you ain't asked?"

"There's the not so small matter of my gender--"

"So?"

"I got 'bout as much chance with her as --as Jane has of findin' a man, 'round here."

"Jane doesn't want a man. She wants a woman. And she's got one, too. She and Jim Bo's youngest girl are gonna get hitched. She told me last night. Mary ain't happy 'bout it, but I reckon she'll get over it." He grinned. "I might end up with grandkids out of that one, after all. Who knew?"

I felt flummoxed. Jane was, well, Jane. Unpredictable. Herself.

Sharkey was looking at me expectantly. "Well?"

"She'd never speak to me again."

"You really believe that?"

I shook my head.

"So tell her."

"Her husband's not been in the ground even two months--"

"Well, wait a decent time. Then do it. Even if she doesn't feel the same at least it'll be out in the open and you won't be walkin' on eggshells 'round her anymore. I want you to promise me, Edna Jean. I won't have you twisted up like this for the rest of yore life."

Tears sprang to my eyes. Somehow he wrung the promise out of me. I went back out into the living room to let everyone else have a turn. When we were finished Sharkey slipped into a deep sleep. Somehow he'd been holdin' on just long enough to say his goodbyes. His breathing quickly became irregular. All night we waited, keeping the old, old, death watch, all crowded into the house so tight we couldn't move. Nearly three dozen of us, counting the kids. We put the kids to bed. Someone brought out some bottles and we passed them around. An hour before dawn Mary Ellen came to the door. "He's gone," she said, tears in her eyes.

We buried him in the woods, like he'd asked, and planted a pine tree on top. He loved pines. Then we went home and got back to work. No matter what, life goes on. Even when yore hurtin'.

And that was the end of that summer.

I turned twenty-six that summer. It seems like a lifetime ago. Oh, that's right. It 'twas
(Laughs.)

What? You want ta hear more? You're insatiable, son. I've been talkin' all day. It's the middle of the night. Come back tomorrow. I need some sleep. I can't stay up all night like you youngsters. Not anymore, anyhow.

Did Tim ever see the ocean? You should know that. 'Course he did. His grandson did so, too. Different oceans, but still. That don't make no difference. That'd be your papa, wasn't it? Good. I was 'fraid I'd missed a generation. That happens sometime when you get to be my age. You're the spittin' image of your great-grandfather, Tim.

What happened with me and Mary Ellen? Ah, you know that too. But it's another story, for another time. Let me sleep now. We'll talk more later.

Epilogue

Present day, on the shores of the Great Lakes

Timothy Joseph Davis the fifth slipped out of the cottage and closed the door as quietly as he could. Old Ed slept fitfully most times and tended to wake at the slightest noise. Ed lived in the woods, away from most of the village. She preferred trees to people, these days. Ever since Mary Ellen died she'd become more and more reclusive.

The High Priestess had been right. Ed opened up to a relative where she wouldn't anyone else. His resemblance to his great-grandfather didn't hurt, either. He clutched the precious notes to his chest as he made his way down the path. There was so much he still needed to know. What must it have been like, to live in the old days? To ride in a car? To know electric lights? To flip a switch and light up an entire house – one as big as the old ones were –or push a button and clean your clothes? To ride in an airplane? What must that have been like? What must it have been like to watch it all begin to unravel, to live through the troubles (the first ones, since they were still ongoing, of course)? What had it been like to take part in the harrowing migration across the continent during the worst years of the Great Drought? Ed knew. She was the only one left in the family, the only one in a hundred mile radius, probably the only one left in the world, who did.

It was indeed the middle of the night, and the Davert clan was sleeping. Save the ever-watchful sentries, of course. There was not a single light to be seen in the village. He was startled when he saw someone waiting for him at the foot of the path that led to Ed's cottage, a lantern in hand. Then he recognized his wife. They spoke English, though both were equally fluent in Spanglish and old Spanish.

"Did you get it?" Clover asked as she slipped her free hand into his.

"Yes." He sighed. "Heavily edited, I'm sure, but I got it. I'll need to go back tomorrow."

"What for?"

"To get the rest, of course. What happened next. How we got here." He waved his hand at the forest around them.

"You know that."

"Not from her, I don't. I need it from her."

"If you say so." Clover squeezed his hand, a smile on her face. She was teasing, he knew. She was as eager to get Ed's story as he. The only reason she'd stayed behind was her resemblance to Mary Ellen, her own great-grandmother, sometimes put Ed off. The two lines had met at last in the two of them. "You'd better hurry. The healers say she doesn't have long."

"I think she might surprise them. She mentioned wanting to outlive someone who lived to be a hundred and five."

"She'll be a hundred and four next month."

"True."

"Marden and Windsong are back. They came in this afternoon."

"They are?" Tim felt relief surge through him. His brother and sister-in-law had been overdue, and they had been about to send out a search party. Risky, yes, but family took care of family. Ed had taught them that. "Did they make it to California?"

"No, the desert was too bad. But they made it to Las Vegas. There's not much there these days. They brought back some old casino chips as souvenirs."

"They did?" Tim would have gone off to find them then if Clover had not clasped his hand, laughing. "It's the middle of the night, my love. They'll be sleeping. Tomorrow's soon enough."

"I suppose. I've been thinking. I want to have kids someday. I don't want to be the last Tim in my line."

"And I don't want you to be, my love. But not yet."

"No. Not yet. If we ever have any daughters, I think we should name them Edna and Mary Ellen. After them."

"People would laugh if we gave our children such old-fashioned names."

“It’s a lot better than Radish Sprout.” Even the High Priestess had winced when Blueberry announced her baby’s name. Ed’s comments had been much more colorful. The girl would probably change it herself as soon as she was old enough. “And anyway, everyone knows I’m a historian.”

“That’s funny. I thought you were a priest.”

“You know very well I’m both.”

“Well, I was kind of hoping that tonight you wouldn’t mind being a husband.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him thoroughly.

“Yes. Oh, yes. But I have to go back first thing in the morning.”

“Very well.”

They reached their little house and went inside. And the world turned on.

About the author: Rebecca Smith is a writer, activist and small-scale organic farmer who lives on the outskirts of Huntsville, Alabama. Her previously published works include the novella *Crossroads*, published last year in *Fantasy Gazetteer*.

