

The ST's first colony is hosting the event. Their destination is a grand resort located on the Gulf of Mexico.

SLINGSHOT 8: COLONY

by Danny Creasy

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Book Three in the
Spared Territory Series

SLINGSHOT 8: COLONY

by Danny Creasy



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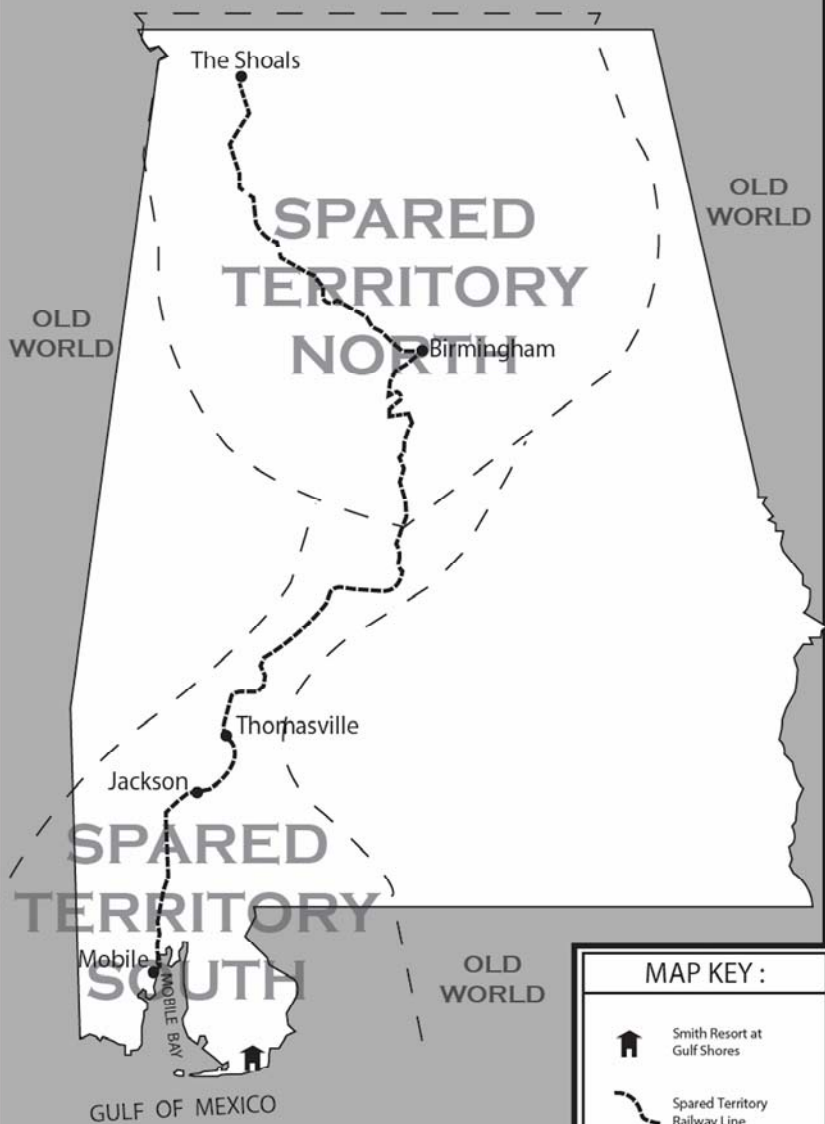
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SPARED TERRITORY - JUNE, ST YEAR 75



DAY ONE

Spared Territory Railroad engineer, Gary Morgan, entered his Wilson Lake residence at just after nine on a sunny Saturday morning. He couldn't wait to crawl in bed. Gary had slept little in the past two days. His most recent run from Muscle Shoals to Mobile only had a three-hour turnaround in the Spared Territory's only seaport.

Gary thought about how empty the house seemed with the absence of Sally, his ex-wife. Their three kids lived in various corners of the ST — married and gone with families of their own. The five-bedroom monstrosity seemed to echo with his footsteps especially since Sally took most of the furnishings. He didn't fight her on any of it. Gary knew he screwed up when he started an affair with a pretty young switchyard operator in Mobile. Surprisingly, Sally didn't want the house. She deeded her half to him in exchange for half his railroad check for the rest of his working life.

Sally took the dogs as well. Gary loved the pair of terriers but he had no way to care for them given his long, frequent trips to the Gulf. This accentuated his sense of loneliness. He couldn't draw on any virtual comfort from his relationship with Cindy Madison either. In yesterday's short layover, she took another hammer-swing at his broken heart. A young stud from Mobile's Slingshot 5 team wooed her away.

Gary opened a couple of windows and turned on the big attic fan to pull what remained of the cool morning air into the house and the warm, stale air out. Everyone was griping about how hot June had been. Gary shook off thoughts of what the cab of his *Colony Special* would be like in July and August.

Gary wasn't hungry. A sausage biscuit and coffee from the Muscle Shoals yard's cafeteria sat in his uneasy gut like the road-killed armadillo he passed in Killen. After glancing at the stack of mail snagged as he entered his drive, he tossed the envelopes on the kitchen counter and plodded down the hall to his master bedroom. As a jab, Sally left their bedroom suite in toto.

Caleb Harrison put three hollow points into Gary as the railroad engineer entered the bedroom, two to the chest and one to the forehead. Caleb had a suppressor on his 9mm, so Gary heard the first two 9mm cases bounce off his chest of drawers but not the third.

Oiled and brown, Jenny Hart reveled in the sun. At its mid-day position over the Gulf of Mexico, a few wispy clouds gave little competition. She reclined on one of Smith Resort's poolside loungers. Jenny opened her eyes at the sound of sandaled footsteps approaching from her left.

"Captain Hart, I just had to come over and tell you how much I love your swim suit."

"Oh, why thank you, Curtis. And please, call me Jenny."

"You didn't get that from Pierce's."

"No. Actually, Harry had it made for me. He can be such a sweetie sometimes. He walked in last week with a one piece and three of these bikinis."

"Made?"

"Yes, and that's the funny part. His old tailor, Aldo Becker, made them."

"You've got to be kidding," said Curtis as she reached out, "do you mind?"

Jenny chuckled, "No, not at all," and she slightly elevated her hip to offer the garment for the inquisitive fashion model's touch.

Curtis slipped her fingers under the narrow strip of cloth and rubbed the surface with her thumb. She giggled, "Damn, Jenny, that's marvelous. Wonder where he got that fabric?"

"I have no idea. Its great though, huh?"

"And the color! Was the red bikini you had on yesterday one of them?"

"Yes."

"That was gorgeous. But this jade just might have it beat. What color are the others?"

"The other bikini is white and the one piece is pink."

"Pink? No shit? What shade?"

"I guess you'd call it hot pink."

"Wow! Honey, you've got to wear that tomorrow."

"Oh, I don't know Curtis. I've got this tan working just right for these two-pieces and I hate to mess with the lines."

"I hear ya, girl. They certainly are sharp."

“Thank God! We older gals need somethin’ to try and keep up with you. Curtis, you’re killin’ us.”

Curtis only slightly smiled, trying to ignore the compliment.

Jenny asked, “Are you wearing suits from Pierce’s latest line?”

“Of course. Ep laughed at me. He couldn’t imagine a girl having an entire suitcase of swim suits.”

“Well, you’re always working, huh? I mean... really.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Well, darlin’, you’re very good at it.”

Curtis grinned and patted Jenny’s forearm in thanks. She glanced up and exclaimed, “Well, hello Mr. President!”

Joy came to Harry’s heart as he saw Jenny engaged in “girl talk” with Curtis Downs Ragland. It seemed his troubled lover was finally beginning to enjoy life.

Curtis asked, “And how is Little Mort on this beautiful day?”

Harry glanced at the smiling 22-month old riding in the crook of his arm, and answered for him, “Well, I’m just fine, Miss Curtis!”

Jenny sat up and rotated her feet to the concrete surface. She reached up to receive her son. His outstretched arms left no doubt as to his eagerness to embrace his “Mommy.”

Curtis laughed with joy at the scene. A bit of sadness slipped into the back of her mind as she considered the clouded relations of the First Family. Catherine and Harry’s two children resided with their mother in Tuscumbia where Catherine ran the Spared Territory North. Harry ran the Spared Territory South. Splitting his working days between Mobile and Gulf Shores, he openly enjoyed evenings and most weekends with his mistress, Jenny Hart, and their son, Mortimer Court Hart. Curtis and her husband, Epperson Ragland, had lunched with Catherine before departing Tuscumbia in May. Curtis saw through the North President’s cheerful veil of managerial engagement, and without mentioning it, mourned for Catherine’s broken heart and loneliness.

An airplane engine droned overhead and grabbed the attention of the scores of vacationers and resort employees occupying the pool and beach.

Harry exclaimed, “Well. I’ll be damned if they aren’t puttin’ it out at the new refinery... aviation fuel!”

Jenny asked, “Is that Ned?”

“Oh, hell yeah!” answered Harry.

The little monoplane sputtered overhead with a long banner trailing from behind.

Curtis read, “Esteemed ST council members, welcome to the First Annual Gulf Conference!”

Everyone cheered and waived at the little blue and white aircraft.

Ned wagged his wings. The plane seemed to slip and falter for a moment. A gasp from the crowd quickly turned to sighs of relief as stability returned to the plane’s flight.

“That crazy fucker.”

Jenny scolded, “Harry, little pitchers!”

“Oh, sorry,” murmured Harry, and he ruffled Mort’s sandy hair.

Jenny and Curtis laughed at the little boy’s infectious smile, the mirror image of his father’s.

Curtis noticed her husband standing on the far side of the pool. He was pulling on his shirt. She announced, “I guess Ep’s stomach is growling. I best go help him pack up and go in for lunch.”

Jenny asked, “Are y’all coming back out, Curtis?”

“I am, but he is going deep sea fishing. Gee, Harry, I meant to thank you for getting that male distraction going.”

Harry smirked, and sarcastically replied, “You’re welcome Mrs. Ragland. ‘Boys and their toys,’ right?”

Curtis tickled Mort’s nose with the tip of her finger, “Bye-bye, sweetie. Jenny, I’ll see ya in a few. Harry, this place is fantastic. Good job, Prez!”

She turned and walked away.

Jenny caught Harry’s glance at the departing beauty queen and model. She whispered, “Nice ass, huh, Harry?”

He quipped in defense, “Are you trying to tell me that you weren’t checking out Ep’s banana hammock this morning.”

She looked at the power couple once more, and observed, “Well, those two are somethin’ else.”

Harry grabbed and lifted his son high in the air, “I got your ‘somethin’ else’ right here!”

Donna and Annie Flurry entered Pirogue's, handed their invitation to one of the hostesses, and were shown to their table. Two waiters seated the ladies. After one slipped away, the other stepped up with a water pitcher and menus.

"Major, Sergeant, my name is Steven and I will be serving you tonight."

Donna asked, "We've met, Steven?"

"No, ma'am. Miss Gandy saw you arrive and asked me to take especially good care of you tonight."

Annie asked, "How nice. Is she upstairs?"

"Yes, Sergeant, she promised to be down shortly to say hello."

"Good," said Annie.

Donna asked, "Who are your people, Steven?"

"The Culvers from here in Sheffield, ma'am."

"Is your Daddy, former Knight Second Class Robert Culver?"

"He is. You've met him?"

"Yes, he helped me with the Force Unification in 71. He is a fine man. Is he well?"

"Thank you. Yes, ma'am, he and Momma built a secondary residence in the OW. They and a group of friends are farming a couple of thousand acres south of Birmingham: cotton, beans, and corn."

"Not your thing, Steven?"

He chuckled, "No, ma'am. I tried it and didn't care for it, so I came back and enrolled at Florence College. I was looking for a part time job, and Miss Gandy hired me."

"You seem to know the job. You've worked in restaurants before?"

"Yes, ma'am... last summer, at Smith Resort."

Annie interjected, "Really, we're headed there tomorrow for the conference. What's it like?"

"Well, last summer they were still working the kinks out, but it was pretty nice. A friend of mine is still down there. She wrote me last week and said they have really got things in order this summer."

Donna commented, "That's what we've heard as well. We can't wait to see for ourselves."

“May I bring you ladies an appetizer... perhaps some fresh oysters?”

Donna exclaimed, “Oysters? My goodness! Fresh?”

“Yes, Major. They arrived in a refrigerated railcar this morning.”

“Whatcha think, Annie?”

“I don’t know. You’re talkin’ about on the half shell?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

Earlier, Donna had said hello to Professor Seymour Dern as she and Annie were being seated. He was at a table behind her. She, turned and raised an open hand to catch his attention, then asked, “Dr. Dern, what’s the deal with pregnancy and eating shell fish? I recall OW literature warning against it.”

The old scholar responded, “It was known to carry Hepatitis A in the OW. Our Florence College science teams have carried out extensive testing of the gulf creatures, ocean waters, and beach core samples. Once again, that environment has cleansed itself. Miraculously so! Give us time... I’m sure we’ll screw it up again. But for now, ladies, you should be quite safe partaking of a few oysters.”

Annie laughed, “Oh, what the heck. Let’s try ‘em, Donna.”

Donna declared, “Oysters it will be, Steven!”

“And to drink, ladies?” Given their query to the professor and their maternity dresses, he quickly suggested, “We have some non-alcoholic delights. Mr. Bob’s Virgin Mary Mimosa is to die for.”

The couple laughed and Annie asked, “What’s in it, darlin’?”

“Berries, oranges, and sparkling grape juice.”

They nodded.

“Very well, I’ll be back in a snap with your drinks and oysters. And ladies, please, don’t hesitate to ask for anything.” He left them to peruse their menus.

“What a nice young man, huh, Donna?”

“He is, and he has his daddy’s eyes.”

Annie caught Donna’s attention with a clearing of her throat. Donna glanced at her to find raised eyebrows and Annie’s eyes shifting to her right. Donna subtly turned her head in that direction.

Both women respectfully stood. Donna extended her hand and greeted, "Hello, Madam President. It has been too long. How are you doing?"

Catherine Smith shook Donna's hand with a sincere smile. "I'm fine, Major, and how are the good Sergeant and you doing?" After releasing Donna's hand, she quickly took Annie's.

"We are well. Very well!" exclaimed Donna with a spreading of her arms to emphasize her swollen midsection.

They all laughed. Then Catherine asked, "May I join you for a moment?"

Further surprised, Donna responded, "Of course, Catherine, please."

Catherine's daunting bodyguard appeared instantly and seated his president.

"Thank you, Marcus."

He smoothly exited earshot to blend into the busy restaurant staff near the kitchen.

Annie observed, "He certainly seems 'the real deal' and what, six-three?"

Catherine smirked, "Six-four and 230 pounds, Annie."

"Oh! Geez. What's his last name?"

"Lovett."

"Lovett, hmm, they're usually from Florence?"

"That's right. What, Annie, you figured I would only trust a Colbert with that job?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. I was jus—"

"Oh, I'm just teasin', girl. He was a Knight Corporal... born and raised in Leighton. He was on one of Danny's .50 caliber sniper teams. He probably shot at one or both of you when you were dodging bullets in Sheffield back in 70."

Donna and Annie halfheartedly smiled.

Catherine sarcastically grinned, "Alice Boyd noted in his file that he was the best CQB student she had ever trained."

Now apprehensive countenances appeared on the Slingshot women's faces.

Catherine turned off the meanness, and asked, “How is Hope? What is she now, five? Six?”

Annie replied, “Very good. She’ll be six in September.”

Donna said, “I read the article in the social section of the paper the other day. It mentioned that Henry will be five in September and Clementine... three?”

“Yes, you’re correct. That was a nice piece by Martha wasn’t it?”

“It was,” smiled Annie.

“Lovely,” added Donna.

“Martha Quaine will be traveling with us to Gulf Shores tomorrow. She and a photographer, Joey Lazo de la Vega, are covering the conference.”

Donna asked, “Really? Not one of the *Gazette’s* usual political writers?”

“That’s right. She’ll be doing double duty.”

Donna commented, “It’s about time she got a break. She is an excellent journalist.”

Catherine nodded, “I agree. I’m going to talk to Harry about having her sit in on the council meetings.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Donna.

They awkwardly glanced about to note the who’s who in attendance.

Donna and Annie were startled after Catherine clasped their respective hands. Catherine softly spoke, “Look, I want to apologize. I know you two were in a difficult spot back in 72... up on the Trace. Mixed loyalties and all ...”

Donna whispered, “No, no. We understand. We were as guilty... we tried, tried to...”

Catherine rescued, “It came to me the other day just how much I missed you both. And I want Hope to be friends with Henry and Clementine.”

Donna brought her other hand over on top Catherine’s, “That would be wonderful, Catherine.”

Catherine beamed, “Let’s get these birthday parties on our calendars, okay?”

“Absolutely, Madam President,” said Annie.

“That’s Catherine, Annie.”

With a smile and a chuckle, Catherine released their hands and stretched out her arms, “Is this place marvelous or what?”

“First class, Catherine,” agreed Annie.

Steven returned with the Flurry’s colorful libations.

Catherine stood and exclaimed, “Damn, those look fun! Alcohol-free I assume?”

The two pregnant women enthusiastically nodded and laughed as everyone noticed them patting their unborn children at the same time.

Loud enough for those in attendance to hear, Catherine continued, “Yep, there’s more to my FLRI than just getting pregnant. I want strong, healthy, and smart little citizens for the Spared Territory. We have jobs to fill from A to Z and here to there.”

Donna and Annie laughingly chimed, “Yes, ma’am!”

Many of the Colberts and Lauderdale’s clapped and laughed at the good-humored demonstration of healing territorial wounds. They loved the beautiful ST North President. If ST South President Harry Smith was the heart of the ST, then Catherine was the soul.

“I’ll leave you to enjoy your meal, ladies. And seriously, we must spend some time together in Gulf Shores.”

Donna assured, “Just call us and let us know when, Catherine.”

“I will. Hey, I’ll see ya on the train tomorrow.”

“We’ll be there.”

Just as Steven finished placing the drinks on the table, the oysters arrived with another waiter.

They sat down and Annie chortled, “I remember these from an old movie.”

While Donna apprehensively watched, Annie gently and methodically swirled the shellfish with the little accompanying fork to make sure they were detached. She then squeezed a half lemon over the entire dozen nasty gray blobs. Annie lifted one of the shells gingerly between her pointer finger and thumb tilting it to slide into her mouth. After a couple of chews, she swallowed.

Donna asked, “You okay, Honey?”

With watering eyes, Annie grinned, and said, “I guess it’s an acquired taste. But yeah, it’s pretty good.”

Donna gingerly selected one, "Here goes!"

Harry took Mort for one final play in the surf before they called it a day. The sun was low on the horizon. Jenny smiled as she watched her two men. She heard sobbing to her left. It was Curtis. Curtis had joined them for the afternoon since Epperson chose to abandon her for sport fishing.

"Oh, Curtis Sweetie! What's wrong, darlin'?"

Jenny turned and sat upright on her lounger to face Curtis. Curtis had assumed the same position with her face in her hands. Jenny reached over and put her hand on Curtis's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Jenny. I didn't mean to go all to pieces in front of you. It's just seein' Harry and little Mort down there... It was more than I could handle."

"Why's that?"

"I haven't told this to anybody else other than my folks."

"It's okay, girl. I can keep a secret."

"Well, I guess you, like everyone else, has wondered why in the hell we haven't had a baby yet?"

"No, not really. Well, Harry and I noticed it, but we figured it was because of the modeling and how much you enjoy that."

"Oh, fuck the modeling. I want to be pregnant so bad I could scream. We haven't used any form of birth control ever. Not once. Even when we were screwing around before we got married."

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry, Curtis."

"Yeah, the doctors say I have "low ovarian reserve."

"Are y'all sure that none of the problem is in Ep's end of the court?"

"Oh, hell yeah, we're sure. Damn sure!"

"He's been to the doctors, too?"

"Jenny, you gotta keep this between us. Now I mean it. Okay?"

"Sure, darlin'. Mum's the word."

"Well, you know we're really close to Donna and Annie Flurry?"

"Yeah, y'all seem the best of friends. Hope spends weekends with you sometimes doesn't she? Y'all are like her Godparents."

“That’s right, Jenny. We are. Well, one weekend we were all drinking a little too much at my Daddy’s lake house. Hope had stayed with her grandparents in Lauderdale. Everybody just wanted to blow off some steam. We grilled out, played cards, and drank, and drank, and drank some more. Plus, Catherine Smith had just given that speech the weekend before about her Population Growth Initiative... the PGI. You were down here, so you missed it.”

“Yes, but she sent Harry a copy of it and I read it. Controversial objectives. Good objectives though. I mean we don’t have enough people to take advantage of the potential prosperity that lies before us. Every field of endeavor is short: farms, mills, factories, schools, hospitals, and the service industries.”

“Exactly, and here I am, barren.”

“Oh, don’t say that, shug. You’ll get there. I know it.”

“I hope you’re right, Jenny. I pray for it all the time, and Ep has been marvelous about it all. So patient and loving with me.”

“So what happened at the Lake House?”

“Well, as I said we were pretty sauced and everybody was letting their feelings out — I mean, heart to heart stuff. Donna and Annie expressed their burning desire to both give birth to a child. Donna’s late husband was shooting blanks evidently and Annie... well, Annie realized she was a lesbian back in her teens. They had considered the artificial insemination route, but the doctors are kinda struggling with those procedures right now.”

Curtis rubbed her brow, “After hearing them talk and thinking about Catherine’s speech. Shit, Jenny... you know what they are calling the PGI now?”

“Oh, yeah. I heard that the other day. What is it? The FLRI? Fucking Like Rabbits Initiative, right?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Curtis glanced at the orange sun for a second. She turned back and stared into Jenny’s eyes. “Anyway, in a crazy moment of self pity, I told Ep to sleep with them that night.”

“What? Oh, my!”

“Yeah, I told him to go “fuck the hell out of them” and come do me when he was done.”

“Damn.”

“They all said no at first and tried to talk me out of it. But I was insistent and made a big joke out of it. I kept bantering with them until they were all pretty turned on. I know everybody thinks I’m the hottest thing around, but those two soldier women are really sexy. Ep loves ‘em too ... not in a romantic way... well, not until I cajoled him into those kinds of feelings that night. And our boy was certainly up to the task. Did he deliver or what? I hate to admit it, but that was the best sex he and I ever had after he came to bed around two on that Sunday morning.”

“Wait a minute... Major and Sergeant Flurry are both carrying his babies now?”

“Damn straight!”

Curtis had quit crying. She looked at the beach, “Here comes Harry and Mort.”

Jenny felt she could slip in another question, “How are things between the four of you?”

“It’s different. Not bad. Just different.”

“They’re coming down on the train, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to join us for dinner this evening, Curtis? You and Ep?”

“No, I’ll just head on in. Ep still has hard feelings for Harry. I mean he’ll work with him on business and governmental issues, and he respects him greatly in some ways. But on a personal level, he still has trouble with how much Harry and you hurt Catherine. And frankly, there’s all that Colbert baggage too.”

“I understand.”

“Thank you, Jenny. You don’t know how much it means to talk about all this with another woman. I love ya, girl.”

“Love you too, sweetie,” whispered Jenny, and then she turned to her men, “Hey, Harry. Did y’all leave any sand on the beach or is it all in Mort’s trunks?”

Pirogue Gandy entered the restaurant to applause and cheers. The Muscle Shoals Five executed a deferential decrescendo as she began to

move among the tables. Dressed in a full-length red gown with white gold necklaces and bracelets she seemed to float from table to table as a cardinal in a shrub. She worked the room with a goal of finishing at Donna and Annie's table.

"Hey, Pirogue. It's your night, girl. This place is great."

"Thanks, Annie—" turning to Donna, she asked —"and how is the Major tonight?"

Donna replied, "Oh, I'm just fine, Pirogue. And, you?"

"Great! Nervous as hell but great!"

In a low voice, Pirogue said, "I can't believe both of you are expectin'. What did y'all do? Sleep with the devil?"

Embarrassed, Annie and Donna glanced at one another and chuckled.

Annie motioned for Pirogue to bring her ear close for a whisper.

"No, an angel."

Pirogue grinned and whispered, "An angel? Anybody I know?"

Annie tilted her head to the side, smiled, and shrugged her shoulders.

Pirogue looked at Annie's eyes and then Donna's. Still whispering, "Aw, hell naw. No way. Shit, that'll be the prettiest pair of babies that have ever been born."

The giddy pair beamed.

"Oysters? What'd ya think?"

Contemplating a response, Annie paused a moment.

Donna blurted, "Exhilarating!"

Pirogue and Annie laughed.

Donna asked, "Pirogue, will you join us for a moment?"

"Okay, Major, but only for a few minutes. Remember, ladies, I'm workin' here."

Steven had appeared and seated his employer.

"Thank you, Steven."

"Yes, ma'am. Something to drink, Miss Gandy?"

"No thank you, honey. Not at this time."

Steven darted away to the kitchen.

Annie asked, "Pirogue, we heard this palace isn't your only new endeavor... you bought out Nell Quickly-Johns. You changin' the name?"

"Oh, no. Best to keep it Miss Nell's Place. Continuity, you know?"

"I follow. What about the staff?"

"I'm keeping almost all of them... just Cold Zee is going with her to the Gulf."

"One of her girls?"

"Yep, the best one."

Donna interjected, "We heard Harry was behind that to some extent. Where does he want them to set up? Surely not near the resort."

"That's right, Major, he's arranged for her to build in Mobile... where the workers are."

"She can setup a hell of a place with what I paid her for her Lauderdale outfit."

"What's she gonna do for employees?"

"Well, she told me she was going to wait until all the construction was done and then start collecting a crew. Frankly, I don't think she will have any trouble. She has a great reputation of looking after her girls, and while she is tough on cooks, housekeepers, and clerks; she is fair and pays very well. They'll flock down there eventually. I just hope she don't take too many of my people. Hey, she's traveling with y'all tomorrow."

"Oh my God! Really?" gasped Donna.

Annie laughed at her partner and patted her arm comfortingly, "There, there, darlin', your aristocracy will survive. They won't catch cooties."

Donna pulled her arm away, feigning anger.

Annie and Pirogue cackled at her.

Donna surrendered to the moment, laughing at herself.

Pirogue said, "Well, ladies. I'm gonna check on some things. Y'all enjoy your meal and let me know if Steven doesn't take care of you."

Annie assured, "Oh, he's great. We'll be fine, Pirogue."

"If I don't talk to you again tonight, y'all have a safe trip."

Donna responded, "Thanks, Pirogue, and good luck with all of your ventures."

Pirogue stood and beckoned her floor manager to her side. They made their way to the kitchen.

Annie glanced at Donna and caught a worried expression. “What’s wrong, Donna?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I just have this bad feeling about the trip and the conference. I need to shake it off, huh, sweetie? I mean this is going to be like a dream. Fun, right?”

“That’s right, darlin’. It’s gonna be great!” exclaimed Annie with forced enthusiasm. She had an NCO’s respect for her former combat commander’s instincts. Those ‘feelings’ got them through some harrowing actions. Presenting a smiling, happy visage, Annie instinctively upgraded her internal alert status a notch or two.

President Catherine Smith, Security Chief ST North Gordon Ragland, and his secretary, Mia Harrison huddled along the railing of Pirogue’s elegant deck. Over a hundred feet above the Tennessee River, they enjoyed a balmy breeze. They had stepped away from the crowded restaurant and dance floor at a quarter to nine to speak in private. Now it was a quarter after, and Catherine was summing things up.

“Gordon, how about security tomorrow?”

“Well, there’ll be a veteran engineer, Gary Morgan, and his assistant, Joey Krantz, up in the cab, so I’m not worried about that. They are being paid twice the usual rate to work the entire trip, nonstop, as are the conductor and brakeman. As we discussed earlier, the train we have put together for this trip has the big 4-6-0 steam locomotive.”

“The new *Colony Special*?”

“Yes, and its large tender with wood and water. They’ll pull eight cars: two parlors, two passenger cars, one diner, two baggage cars, and a caboose... actually, nine, after Thomasville; some market hunters have a refrigerator car filled with game meat. We’ll couple it in from the siding. We plan to make the trip in just over fourteen hours with short stops in Birmingham and Thomasville for wood and water. Folks can eat in the diner in shifts.

“To avoid an ominous air, I’ve selected a relatively small team to handle security. They are four of my best Tuscombiana policemen: Sergeant Garth Holt, Officer Tommy Cable, Officer Johnny Jones, and Officer Angela Marks. I’ve stationed Garth in the diner and his three officers will be stationed in the second parlor and two passenger cars. Of course, you’ll have Lovett in your car along with Dub Urban, Mia, and me.”

“Dub’s your communication guy?”

“Yes.”

Catherine processed the list of names, and added, “At this point, Rick Starin will be riding in my car, but I may ask some other travelers to join us... I’m not sure.”

“It’s your call, Cate.”

“I requested King Smithers, Gordon. Is he going to be our conductor?”

“Sure enough, cuz. He has a little cubbyhole in the diner car, but he never gathers any moss; ‘The King’ constantly moves between his cars.”

Catherine and Mia chuckled at the visual of the nattily uniformed six and a half foot, rail-thin conductor working his passengers.

Gordon added, “Oh, Huey Johnson is the brakeman. He is the best.”

“He’ll be in the caboose when we’re moving, correct?”

“That’s right, Cate.”

Catherine turned to Gordon’s pretty ‘Girl Friday’ and requested, “Mia, will you be sure to check in with the engineers in the morning? Just a quick visual and howdy-do to make sure they are squared away?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll take care of it and give you and Chief Ragland a wink and a nod.”

“Thanks, darlin’.”

“Weapons, Gordon?”

“Well, you know this bunch of passengers will mostly be packin’; that arsenal will represent a plethora of side arms and, more than likely, a few long guns. I started to enforce a no-carry rule on this trip but quickly realized that was futile. As to my four security people, they will be wearing their personal choices of side arms. I did not want them brandishing rifles or shotguns on this joyous occasion. However, they

each have three long guns readily available in their respective train cars: a 5.56 M4, a 7.62 M14, and a tactical shotgun.”

“Now these folks can shoot, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Rest assured, Cate, I know all three of them. They are good soldiers, cops, and shooters. All of ‘em are smart, in-shape, well mannered, and frankly... attractive.”

“Good deal, Gordo. I think I will recognize all of them when I see them. Holt’s daddy was the Knight killed at the Palace by Alice Boyd?”

“That’s right, Cate.”

“How about you, Mia, you know any of them?”

“I do, Madam President. Angela Marks was a friend of mine in high school. We talk and catch up when we occasionally run into one another. I’ve never worked with Holt and Jones, but I actually dated Tommy Cable for a while — a nice guy but a little too intense for me.”

“Intense? Shit, girl, that sounds like the pot calling the kettle black.”

All three laughed and Mia replied, “I know, right?”

“But Angela and Tommy are good people? Solid?”

“Yes, ma’am, they are. You couldn’t do any better for this task.”

“Okay, Gordon. You done good, cuz. The train leaves at 8:00 a.m.?”

“Yep, I just hope some of these folks don’t party too much and too long tonight. We can’t leave without any of them. I’d hate to be delayed.”

“Don’t worry, darlin’, they’ll be on time. I subtly reminded several ‘click commanders’ earlier.”

They looked out over the magnificent river to the lights of Florence beyond. Traffic moved across the O’Neal Bridge to their left and the Singing River Bridge to their right.

Gordon remarked, “Hell of a difference, huh, Cate?”

“I was thinkin’ the same thing, Gordo.”

“I’ve been surprised by the growth in automobile usage.”

“Not me. I knew it would explode. We just needed to break out of these damn walls and embrace the challenges.”

Mia chimed, “Madam President, I just want to thank you again for signing off on the request for my car.”

“Oh, no problem, sweetie. We couldn’t have you beggin’ rides when Gordon was out running around. Got to keep you happy. You might be tempted to go work for those high paying SOBs in the ST South.”

Changing the subject, Mia asked, “I guess this kinda hurts, ma’am? I mean this was the sight of your father’s building, back before...”

“Yes, it does hurt, Mia... quite painful. We all have to move on though.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Gordon asked, “If there is nothing else, Cate, do you mind if Mia and I head out. We need to check on some things back at the office.”

“Oh, no... more work, tonight? Well, I understand. No, I think we’re good to go. Y’all be careful and I’ll see ya bright and early at the Muscle Shoals Station.”

Gordon and Mia nodded goodbye and turned to reenter the busy restaurant. They said goodnight to Marcus as he approached the President.

“Did it go well, Madam President?”

“Yes, Marcus. Everything is on track”— she chuckled —“no pun intended.”

Marcus subtly checked for threats then followed Catherine’s eyes as they stared intensely at the departing pair.

She kept staring after they had mingled into the crowd of partiers. “I wonder if Gwen knows he’s fucking that little whore.”

Marcus smirked, “Probably, but it’s ‘not my circus, not my monkeys,’ ma’am.”

Catherine looked up at his eyes. She found no recrimination, just nonjudgmental, abject loyalty.

She turned back to the railing and took another glance at her “kingdom” then closed her eyes. Catherine tilted her head back and took several slow, deep, and calming breaths. “I’m going to go back in and start saying my goodbyes.”

“So early, ma’am?”

“Yep, it’s a big day tomorrow, and it’ll be a long one.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll tell Buddy to bring the car around. What do you think, ma’am, about a half hour?”

“Sounds about right, Marcus.”

Harry Smith eased his son’s bedroom door closed after checking in on the exhausted little man. He moved towards the master bedroom and flipped off lights as he went. He expected to find Jenny Hart sound asleep already, but she was not in their bed.

Their bathroom door opened. Jenny emerged, still in her makeup and updo from dinner. She was wearing a white negligee. It contrasted beautifully with her tanned skin and dark hair. Harry’s heart pounded and a lump rose in his throat. He had purchased the garment months ago, but she had never worn it. He knew when he bought it that Jenny was not really a ‘negligee kind of girl.’ He tried to utter some semblance of an appropriate remark, but she had closed the distance between them and pressed her pointer finger to his lips.

They had not had sex in a few days. Harry was heavily distracted lately with ST business and the absence of his ST North children from his life. Jenny was also sure that Harry still loved and missed Catherine at some level. This all fed her own considerable insecurities.

They dove into each other’s arms with a passion as strong as the first time they made love at her river cabin in the spring of 72. The lovely transparent garment was soon cast aside as was Harry’s pajama shorts and T-shirt. Jenny had purposefully left the bathroom light on. It provided an indirect, dim light for their lovemaking. They kissed, thrust, and pounded away their worries until well after midnight.

Buddy Tucker drove the presidential limousine up to the front door of Ragland Palace. Marcus exited the front passenger seat and opened Catherine’s door. He courteously offered his hand to assist her as she emerged from the vehicle. A guard opened one of the big front doors for them and they stepped into the Grand Foyer. Buddy had already pulled away, headed for the Palace’s garage.

“Will there be anything else, tonight, Madam President?”

“No, Marcus”— then she paused —“wait, I want to leave early in the morning. I need to see Momma and Daddy before we leave town.”

“Of course, ma’am. We should have first light by six. When would you like to leave... about six-thirty?”

“That will work. That’ll still get us up to the Muscle Shoals train station well before departure.”

They both glanced around to find themselves alone in the enormous space; the guard had stepped outside and closed the entrance door.

Quietly, Marcus said, “Ma’am. May I say that you look exceptionally hot tonight.”

She smiled, paused a moment, then whispered with sparkling eyes, “Give me a half hour to check in on the kids and freshen up. I’ll leave the servant’s staircase door unlocked.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll see you shortly.”

Marcus hurriedly stepped off to exit the foyer and check on Buddy and the car.

Catherine made her way up the spiral staircase to the second floor and her children’s rooms. She found them sleeping peacefully. As she headed for her rooms at the other end of the second floor, she crossed over the Grand Foyer. She stopped to take in the view for a few seconds. Memories flooded in. Her eyes watered. It was all too much to process. She was tired of hurting. Constantly surrounded by people yet always lonely; she missed her parents, her brother, and her cousin Danny. *Hell, I even miss that asshole, Henry Wade Smith V. God! I miss him!*

The chiming of the big clock down in the foyer broke her melancholy and spurred her on to prepare for her rendezvous. It was just sex — hard, animalistic love making. But it would have to do for now.

Mia Harrison got Gordon Ragland off quickly. She could tell he didn’t mind the hurried encounter. His wife, Gwen Harland Ragland, would already be home from Pirogue’s and fretting about what her husband and his sexy subordinate were up to. Mia sat on the side of Gordon’s office sofa to slip back on her panties then stood and let her evening gown drop. A smooth here and there and she was good as new. Mia had been careful to avoid mussing her strawberry blonde hair.

She heard the toilet flush and out stepped Gordon. “My turn,” she said, and walked past him to the water closet.

Gordon gently grasped her arm, “Listen, hon. Do you mind if I head on?”

She bit her bottom lip to hold back a laugh, “No, sweetie. You run on home. I’ll just be a minute or two, and then I’ll lock up.”

“Are you sure, Mia? I mean ... I feel kinda...”

“Yes, I got it, Mr. Ragland. I’ll be fine. Don’t you worry.”

He smiled and, after a cursory kiss, was on his way.

Mia watched him exit and thought, *Like you really give a shit, fuckhead!*

She went potty and then turned off the lights and locked the office door behind her. It was deathly quiet in the parking lot. Her car and a spare squad car were all that occupied the lot. She walked to her sedan, opened the driver’s door, and slid in behind the steering wheel. She closed and locked her door. Mia reached up to and adjusted the rear view mirror to reflect her “estranged” husband’s face.

“Hey, baby. Was it good?”

She laughed. “God help me, Caleb. You gotta fuck me before our meeting. I have to get that shit out of my head.”

“Well I can’t fuck you here. A late patrol might come by or somethin’. We can’t take a chance and blow this thing on a dumb ass move like that.”

“I know. Shit, we got plenty of time. I want to change outta this dress anyway. Let’s run by my apartment first.”

“Fine, but you better drive fast.”

She started the engine and backed up. She burned a little rubber as she accelerated.

“But not too fast! I don’t want to get pulled over. You’d have to give the militia cop a blowjob or something.”

“Fuck you, Caleb! Maybe I’ll just change at the apartment and forget about getting laid again by yet another stupid man... two shitheads in the same hour is a bit much.”

“Aw, Honey. Don’t be that way. I was just teasin’ yah.”

“Hmm.”

Donna cuddled up to Annie's back and held her tight. It was still warm in their bedroom in spite of the ceiling fan and open window. They had just a sheet for cover. Neatly folded at the foot of their bed, a blanket awaited the coolness of the wee hours.

Annie giggled as the baby in her womb moved.

Donna laughed, "Here they go again."

After a little while, Annie asked, "Donna, do you still have that uneasy feeling?"

Donna lied, "No, darlin', it passed."

"Your lying, but I love you for trying."

"Shut up and go to sleep, Annie. It'll all be fine."

"Hey, Donna?"

"What?"

"I bet Catherine's decision about dresses was a smart one. What are the restroom facilities like on these trains?"

"Hell, I don't know. Like I've been on any trains... at all!"

"I thought maybe you had been on one at some time or the other."

"In all my many years, right?"

"Well..."

Donna growled, "smart-ass," then released Annie to roll away and curl up on her other side.

Annie wasn't going to have it. She rolled over as well and pulled herself tightly up to Donna's back. She even rested her leg up over Donna's hip. They both giggled at their mutual discomfort.

They were oblivious to the fact that Hope had entered their room. The little girl loudly announced, "My room is hot. I can't sleep."

Donna softly said, "Oh, Hope Honey, it ain't much cooler in here, but you crawl up between your Mommas and tell us about your evening at Grand Paw's. You were asleep when we picked you up and never really woke up on the way home."

Hope crawled up between her parents and worked her way under the sheet. After a moment she said, "He mostly read to me."

"That's nice," whispered Donna. "What books?"

"One book... it's a chapter book."

"Really, what was it about?"

“Some kids playing in an old house at a dried up lake.”

“I know that one. I read it when I was a couple of years older than you. It’s a good story. Y’all didn’t finish it did you?”

“No, ma’am, we got about half done. Grand Paw said, ‘we can pick it up next time,’ and then he put an Old World dollar in the book to mark the page.”

The three females lay flat on their backs and stared at the spinning fan blades. Well lit by the moonlight, the flying shadows were mesmerizing. All three were soon fast asleep. About one o’clock, Little Hope woke up with a chill and reached down to grab the blanket at the foot of the bed. Annie and Donna numbly helped her. Once spread over them, the weight felt good; sleep quickly returned.



Background

Danny Creasy is a former community banker (thirty-eight year career) and lifetime resident of Florence, Alabama. He holds a BS in economics and history from the University of North Alabama (1979), a MBA from the same institution (1989), and graduated from the United States Air Force's Officer Training School in 1982. He retired from banking in 2014 to pursue his dream of becoming a successful author.

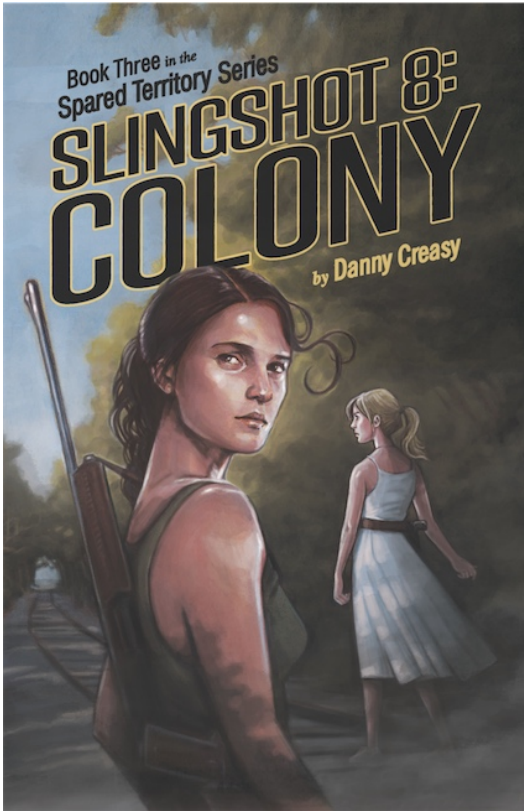
His writing ventures

After his short story, *White Flour*, was published in the *Savannah Anthology 2015*, Danny was inspired to self-publish his work of creative non-fiction, *Jim & Nancy: Two Paths Merged by War*. His

next books, *Slingshot 8*, *Slingshot 8: The Old World*, and *Slingshot 8: Colony* are works of fiction. Combined, he has sold just over a thousand copies of these four books. His goal is to complete at least four novels in the Spared Territory Series. Danny is ten thousand words in on book four, *Slingshot 8: ST Nation*.

His style

Danny's impassioned writing springs from a unique imagination and the haunts of his beloved South. His intriguing characters weather violence to find romance in troubled settings, both historical and fictional.



The ST's first colony is hosting the event. Their destination is a grand resort located on the Gulf of Mexico.

SLINGSHOT 8: COLONY

by Danny Creasy

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