



Safehaven

Ken Barnes



Three people flee into the mountains after a major terrorist attack brings the country to its knees, but are shocked when strange things begin happening to one of their dogs.

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by Ken Barnes

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ISBN 978-1-60145-793-6

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Printed in the United States of America.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2009

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Dedication

For my son Cory with all the love I have . . .

Chapter One

Garth Manatee slowly opened his eyes, and then quickly shut them again. *Hell no! Just roll over and don't think about it.*

The world had ended last night. Not just his world—everyone's.

In an infantile way, he just wanted to turn back over and shut his eyes, wishing that what he'd seen on the TV down at Jimmy's the night before would turn out to be just a weird and crazy nightmare. Becoming aware of the growing pressure in his bladder, Garth remembered the pitcher of beer that he'd downed immediately after hearing the reporter's incredible news. "Just deal with it," he moaned weakly, using one of Rhoda's favorite expressions. His new girlfriend's blunt perspective on life was refreshing compared to his own low-key approach.

No. Don't start thinking about her right now, Garth thought. An erection and full bladder is a bad combination. Now is not the time for erections. Now is the time for dynamic action!

Rolling over, he tried to ignore the wave of nausea that swept over him. *What the hell was I thinking? I don't drink anymore! I might as well forget trying to meditate this morning! Not with this hangover!*

Closing his eyes, Garth tried to ignore the ultimatum that his bladder was giving him when he heard the familiar flapping sound of the oversized pet door being pushed open. Lucy, his black Chow, came trotting into the room and was soon followed by Rhoda's huge Bull Mastiff, Jake.

"Not now, Lucy. I'll feed you guys later," Garth snapped. But he knew that until he got up and fed them, he would have no peace.

"Okay! You win!" Garth said, looking down at the two large dogs patiently sitting at the foot of his bed. "But soon you might have to start finding your own breakfasts!"

After feeding the dogs, Garth lit up one of his favorite aromatherapy candles, Mango Heaven, then took an extra-long shower. As he stepped out of the shower, Garth saw himself in his full-length mirror. What he saw was a very hung-over-looking man with long brown shoulder-length hair, high cheekbones that came from his Native

American heritage, and large brown eyes. His friends kidded him that he wouldn't have a problem getting work as Johnny Depp's body double. From all of the years of stretching and daily workouts, Garth appeared much younger than his thirty-one years.

After making a pot of New Guinea French Roast coffee, Garth carried his steaming cup out onto the tiny balcony that overlooked the slow-moving Tennessee River. It was the middle of October and the leaves had just started turning different colors, which always reminded Garth of why he loved living in the mountains of Tennessee so much.

Leaning against the iron railing of the balcony, Garth finally allowed himself to begin thinking about the surreal events of the previous evening. It had begun with him taking Rhoda out on the town to celebrate her twenty-first birthday. Like most young people who turn twenty-one, she'd wanted to order her first alcoholic beverage and then gleefully display her driver's license when being carded without having to worry about it anymore. So off they'd gone, hitting one bar after another until they'd finally staggered their way across Walnut Street bridge back to the cozy little neighborhood of North Chattanooga.

Rhoda had surprised him. She'd easily outdrank him all night long. But finally it had caught up with her, so Garth had led her up the hill from Frazier Avenue to her own apartment, tucked her in bed, and then stumbled back down the hill to his favorite club, Jimmy's Lounge.

In the past, before Garth had begun seriously practicing yoga, it had been his most frequented watering hole. But as he had walked through the familiar red doors and into the dimly lit bar, he immediately sensed that something was wrong. There wasn't any music playing. Walking further into the club, he saw a large group of customers standing like statues, looking up at the TV in total silence.

Slowly walking up to the rear of the crowd, Garth asked, "What's going on?"

No one responded as they continued to stare silently up at the TV.

Finally the grim words of the news reporter reached him. "We are expecting to hear from the President any minute now, and as we earlier reported, the president was rushed aboard Air Force One, en route to an undisclosed location."

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Garth couldn't stand the suspense any longer and without taking his eyes off of the screen he blurted, "What's going on?"

Still no one answered. Their pale and shocked expressions made Garth feel very sober, as if he had not had a single drink all night. Suddenly the newscaster's face took on a look of disbelief as he said, "We are just now being informed that Air Force One has been destroyed by a shoulder-fired missile. There is no word yet of any survivors. I repeat: Air Force One has just been shot down by a shoulder-fired missile."

Another reporter who was struggling to maintain his composure joined in. "Yes, Bob, and we can only assume that it was the same group of terrorists that detonated the huge nuclear device in our nation's capital only minutes before the downing of Air Force One."

Now the crowd of statues standing next to Garth came to life with loud gasps and cries.

Garth couldn't believe his ears. The announcer continued, "For those of you who are just now joining our broadcast, there is breaking news of what is now believed to have been a massive dirty bomb that was detonated in our nation's capital, and as the President was being evacuated aboard Air Force One, the plane was brought down by what is now being reported as a shoulder-fired missile."

The other announcer broke in and in a shaky voice said, "Bill, we are now being informed that downtown Manhattan has also been hit with a dirty bomb." There was a long pause, and then he continued: "Along with the following cities: Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Miami. And on the West Coast—Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. All of these cities were simultaneously hit by nuclear dirty bombs."

Having lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee for most of his life, Garth had not involved himself too much with the worries of the war on terror that had been initiated on that September day in 2001. It had all seemed so far away and distant to him. But it wasn't distant now! Atlanta was only two hours away! *Could the radiation from their dirty bomb reach us here?* he wondered. *I need to go tell Rhoda! What a birthday present,* he thought.

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As the room full of people began loudly talking amongst themselves, Garth stepped up to the bar and quickly downed a pitcher of beer, then as if in a dream, he stumbled through the large red doors and out onto Frazier Avenue.

Slowly trudging up the hill, Garth wondered if he'd be able to wake Rhoda in her drunken condition. *What good will it do? Even if I can rouse her, how will I be able to be tell her the horrible news that I've just heard? The world that we knew is gone!*

Reaching the flight of stairs that led up to Rhoda's apartment, Garth thought, *I can't do it! It's just too horrible!* As Garth walked past the stairway and continued on up the hill to his own apartment, he shook his head and mumbled, "You wuss!"

* * *

Rhoda blearily stared at her clock radio as it blinked 12:00 on and off, on and off. *What time is it?* she wondered. She'd been rudely awakened by the sound of sirens. Not just *one* siren, surely every goddamn siren that had ever been manufactured! The last thing that she remembered was Garth warning her that she should slow down on the shots of Cuervo.

Gently rising, she switched on the radio, and began staggering off towards the bathroom. As she stood before the sink brushing her teeth, she looked in the mirror and thought, *Thank god you're only twenty-one once in life!* Studying herself in the mirror, much like Garth had done, Rhoda saw a girl who stood five-foot-seven, with short blond hair and pale gray eyes. She looked like she should've been born in Sweden instead of the mountains of Tennessee.

The radio announcer's unusually somber voice caught Rhoda's attention. "This morning our nation is waking up to the horrific news of major nuclear attacks by terrorist cells that took place late last night in every major city in America. And it is now finally being confirmed that the President is dead. As he was being evacuated in Air Force One, a shoulder-fired missile brought it down. I repeat: the President of the United States has been assassinated."

“Oh, hell no!” Rhoda screamed, dropping her toothbrush and running back into her bedroom.

Turning the volume up on the small radio, she heard the announcer continue, “It has now been confirmed that nuclear dirty bombs were exploded in the majority of our state capitals at exactly 1:45 a.m. eastern standard time today. Due to the dangerous radiation levels now being detected here in Manhattan, it is not certain how much longer we’ll be able to continue broadcasting.”

“Those dirty mother fuckers!” Rhoda sobbed. “So it’s finally happened! Just as Dad said it would!”

Springing into action, Rhoda ignored her splitting headache, and ran over to her bedroom closet. Pushing back her clothes, she reached in and grabbed the Mossberg pump shotgun. It had been her father’s favorite gun, and now it was hers. *I wonder if Garth knows yet?* Rhoda thought as she pushed the fat round shells into the gun.

The birth of Rhoda Abigail Jennings had been a shock to all of the so-called fortune tellers of the small mountain community where she had been born. They had assured her parents that the child would be a boy. And since no one in Hell’s Holler ever left their remote village, traveling down to a modern hospital to get an ultrasound just to check the sex of a child was totally absurd to them. The fact that she had been born female hadn’t deterred her father from raising her with every survivalist trick he knew. Just as he’d been raised by his father in the skills of hunting and fishing, he passed on to Rhoda his complete knowledge of how to survive in the deep woods of the rugged mountains of Eastern Tennessee.

After loading the shotgun, Rhoda checked her Glock nine millimeter automatic pistol. She saw that it was still fully loaded with the shells that had been in it when she had first come down to Chattanooga six months before. After her father had passed away, she found the lonely solitude of the mountains too much for her and, much like her mother, who had left them when Rhoda was only two years old, Rhoda came down from the mountains and joined modern society.

The apartment she lived in was mostly empty except for her bed and a few personal items that she had brought with her. Walking through the apartment with the Glock still in her hand, Rhoda opened

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the front door and stepped outside. The pale light of dawn was breaking over the city below with the scenic Lookout Mountain shrouded in fog rising up behind it.

The quiet before the storm, Rhoda thought grimly. Holding her fingers to her mouth, Rhoda whistled loudly up the hill towards Garth's apartment. "Jake! Come!" Rhoda yelled loudly. She went back in to her bedroom and picked up her cell phone.

She dialed Garth's number and waited for him to pick up. Soon she heard the phone click and heard the familiar sound of Garth's answering machine. With the sound of an East Indian Tambura stringed instrument droning in the background, she heard Garth's message. "Namaste! I welcome you my beloved caller to peacefully leave your message at the sound of the beep."

The first time that Rhoda had heard it she'd laughed so hard that she wasn't able to leave her message. But thankfully Garth had recognized her laugh and had brought himself out of meditation and picked up the phone. This time she wasn't laughing as she said, "Garth! Pick up! It's important!" When he didn't answer she realized that he must still be sleeping.

Guess I'll have to go up there! Rhoda thought as she jammed the cell phone and the pistol down into her purse.

* * *

As Garth trudged down the hill towards Rhoda's apartment, he watched the dogs playfully chasing each other in and out of the different yards in front of him and envied them their carefree state.

He had first met Rhoda six months earlier at a sporting goods store down on Frazier Avenue while looking for a backpack. He'd decided to take up hiking, to the amusement of all his friends, since they all knew that he was a serious homebody. While walking down one of the aisles in the store, he heard a group of men on the next aisle over laughing and carrying on in the way that many men do when they are feeling self-conscious around a pretty woman.

Hearing a female voice respond, Garth's curiosity was piqued.

Walking up the aisle where all of the men were congregated, Garth finally spotted a young woman standing in the middle of them. Her blond hair was cut short and she wore a pair of tan shorts. As Garth drew closer to the group of men that were standing in a circle around the girl, he finally got a good look at her.

She was stunning! Her pale gray eyes sparkled with an intensity he'd never seen before in such a young woman. She also had an air of self-confidence about her that he found very sexy.

As Garth squeezed past them, he noticed that every muscle in her body was perfectly defined. She looked much like a fine-tuned Olympic athlete. For one brief instant they exchanged looks and Garth felt his heart skip a beat. *No wonder these guys are tongue tied!* he thought. Stopping and pretending to look at an item in front of him, Garth continued his eavesdropping.

"Let me tell you boys something!" one of the men boasted. "I thought she was going to kill us on that trip up Sand Mountain! She had us huffing and puffing like a bunch of old men!"

"Yeah, Harry, and you paid her a pretty penny for it, too, didn't you?"

Shaking his head and with a big grin, Harry said, "I must be a glutton for punishment because I just signed up for her next survival course!"

So that's what she does, Garth thought in surprise. *She's a survival skills instructor! How cool is that?*

As Garth covertly glanced at the young woman again, he was surprised to see that she was looking at him. They exchanged smiles, and then Garth walked to the front of the store and asked the person behind the counter about the survival course.

"Well, let's see..." the young bearded man said with a knowing grin. He opened a manila folder and said, "I'm sorry, but it appears that Rhoda doesn't have any openings until the new year."

Rhoda, so that's her name, Garth thought. *The name fits her. It's unique and so is she.* "Oh well," Garth said out loud. "Guess it wasn't meant to be."

"What wasn't meant to be?" a young female voice said behind him.

Garth turned and saw the young woman standing behind him with a mischievous smile on her face. Again Garth's heart skipped a beat as he looked into Rhoda's beautiful gray eyes.

"He was wanting to sign up for your course, but you don't have any openings," the clerk replied.

"Hello. My name is Rhoda Jennings," the young woman said, holding out her hand.

Reaching out and shaking her hand, Garth said, "My name's Garth Manatee. It's nice to meet you, Rhoda."

As their hands touched, Garth instantly felt a powerful intuition flood through him. *This young woman and I are going to spend some serious time together!*

Rhoda's face flushed red as she stammered, "Uh, nice to meet you too, Mr. Manatee."

Garth wondered about the insight that he'd just had, and he saw Rhoda's flushed face and wondered if she possibly could've experienced it too. "Just call me Garth. That Mr. thing makes me feel old."

"Okay, Garth. I'm sorry that I don't have any openings in my schedule."

"No problem. From what I overheard back there I don't think I'm at your level anyway," Garth replied.

Picking up a pen and post-it note from the counter, Rhoda began scribbling and said, "Here's my number, Garth. Give me a call sometime. Maybe we can work something out."

"Thanks!" Garth said with a huge smile on his face. "I'll give you a call then."

And that's how they had met, down in a sporting goods store on Frazier Avenue in North Chattanooga.

* * *

The expression "opposites attract" definitely applied to them. She was a rugged outdoors type, contrasting sharply with his indoor, bookworm, Metaphysical lifestyle.

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Garth made a decent living as a Yoga instructor, and recently had added Reiki to his practice. Reiki was a Japanese healing technique that most people in the South equated with devil worship. But the proof was in the pudding, because as Garth's Reiki clients began reaping the benefits from their treatments, they then shared their experiences with their friends, and now Garth was finding that he was spending more time performing Reiki than teaching yoga, though he loved both of them equally.

Garth still wasn't sure what Rhoda saw in him. She seemed oblivious to the difference in their ages. She said that he "mystified" her. And Garth had agreed that the feeling was mutual.

* * *

As Jake and Lucy reached the top of Rhoda's stairs, Garth wondered if she was awake yet.

Suddenly the door to her apartment flew open as Rhoda ran past the two dogs and then abruptly stopped when she saw Garth nearing the top of the stairs. "Garth, have you seen the news? Have you heard?" Rhoda stammered.

Nodding his head Garth said, "Yeah, hon. I know."

"When did you hear about it?"

Garth took her arm and said, "Let's go inside and talk about it."

The first thing Garth saw as he entered the apartment was a large backpack lying in the middle of the floor with boxes of ammunition stacked next to it. "What's this?" he asked, confused.

"We have to leave, Garth!" Rhoda exclaimed.

"What do you mean? Why would we want to leave?"

"It's happened, Garth! Don't you understand? We've got to get outta here!"

"Honey, you're beginning to scare me. What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's finally happened, Garth! The day that my father warned me about his entire life has finally come!"

"I know, I saw it all on the TV last night down at Jimmy's."

With a confused look on her face, Rhoda said, “Down at Jimmy’s? When did you go down there?”

“After I put you to bed, I went down to Jimmy’s to see who was playing. It’s been a long time since I’ve heard any good music. But when I got there it had just happened. I thought about coming back up here and telling you, but I decided that it wasn’t a good idea since you were so drunk.”

With an incredulous look on her face, Rhoda exclaimed, “Garth, I can’t believe you didn’t tell me! Don’t you understand how important this is? We’ve lost so much time now!”

“Listen, Rhoda, I know it’s bad. But remember how everything calmed down not too long after 9/11?”

“Garth this is not even close to 9/11! This is the end of the fucking world!” Rhoda yelled.

“Well, where are you planning on going?” Garth asked, looking down at the backpack and boxes of ammunition.

“Up to my cabin. It’s in the mountains near Tellico Plains. I’ve got plenty of food and supplies there.”

Garth realized that Rhoda had made up her mind to leave no matter what he said. He felt that her idea of fleeing up into the mountains was maybe a little too soon. Surely the government was already sending out the Red Cross and the National Guard. Plus, he had his Reiki patients to think of. They depended on him to help relieve their suffering. It would be irresponsible of him to just take off without at least contacting them first. As much as he’d grown attached to Rhoda over the last six months, he felt an obligation to stay and see it through.

Without warning an explosion rocked the apartment, and the dogs began barking loudly. Rhoda ran past Garth and yelled, “Look! Garth. It’s already started!”

“What?” Garth stammered, running up behind her and looking in the direction where she was pointing.

Down the hill on Frazier he saw a large black cloud swirling up into the air. “The looting and killing,” Rhoda said somberly. “It’s exactly as my father predicted.”

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Garth felt a shiver run down his spine. Rhoda's voice had a new edge to it that he'd never heard before. It was as if overnight she'd transformed into a complete stranger to him.

"Listen, Garth. I'm getting the hell out of here. And I really wish you'd come with me."

Finally they heard the sound of sirens heading towards the smoke billowing up in the sky high above them.

"Honey, I—"

"AK-47 on full auto!" Rhoda exclaimed as they heard rapid gunfire erupt from down on Frazier Avenue.

"Who would be firing a fully automatic AK-47?" Garth asked.

"Anyone that's lucky enough to own one," Rhoda answered. "And it sure as hell isn't the cops!"

Looking up and down the street in front of the apartment, Garth saw many of their neighbors huddled up in front of their houses with worried looks on their faces.

Maybe I should get the hell out of here, Garth thought.

"Let's go back inside," Rhoda said, turning and walking back inside the apartment. "I want to be out of here by noon."

"I just don't see the need to leave yet," Garth replied. "Maybe I could take a few days off and join you up at your cabin. But first I'll need to contact my patients and let them know."

"Suit yourself, then!" Rhoda said angrily. "But just don't say I didn't warn you!"

Garth watched as Rhoda hefted the large backpack onto her shoulders and walked quickly from the apartment. "Let me carry that for you," Garth said, running up behind her.

"Don't worry about me. Worry about yourself!" Rhoda snapped.

Garth watched her hurry down the stairs and across the parking lot to her four-wheel-drive truck. Turning and walking back inside the apartment, Garth picked up a canteen full of water and a small shoulder pack. As he walked up to the rear of the truck, he asked, "Where do you want these?"

Rhoda didn't answer as she snatched them from his hands and threw them into the cab of the truck.

The dogs appeared from around the corner of the apartment building and ran up to them with their tails wagging happily. “Go get your food, Jake!” Rhoda ordered.

The large Bull Mastiff turned and ran up the stairs into the apartment and soon could be seen dragging a heavy-looking duffel bag across the parking lot. Lucy nipped at Garth’s shoulders playfully as he pulled the bag of food up to the rear of the truck.

Reaching down and hefting the bag of food up into the back of the truck, Rhoda turned and quickly walked back towards the stairs.

As Garth watched her effortlessly run up the stairs, he looked down at Jake and said, “Your mother has to be the most stubborn woman in the world!”

Hearing the apartment door slam, Garth saw Rhoda run back down the stairs and quickly cross the parking lot. As she walked up to the rear of the truck, Jake jumped up inside the cab and, seeing Lucy preparing to jump up next to him, Garth grabbed her by the collar and said, “No girl, you’ve got to stay here.”

“She’s smarter than her master!” Rhoda replied as she slid in behind the steering wheel.

Reaching into her pocket, Rhoda handed Garth a Ziploc bag with a folded piece of paper inside it. “It’s a map up to my cabin. But if you wait too long, it won’t do you any good. There won’t be any gasoline left.”

With tears welling up in her eyes, Rhoda said, “Take care of my cosmic cowboy for me, Lucy!”

But before Garth could give her a kiss goodbye, Rhoda released the clutch on the truck, pulled out of the parking lot, and quickly made her way down the hill towards Frazier Avenue. When Garth finally lost sight of her, he turned and slowly began walking back up the hill to his own apartment, which for the very first time did not feel like a very inviting destination.

* * *

Nightmares plagued Garth’s sleep.

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After Rhoda left, Garth had decided to try and take a nap to block out the reality of her leaving him. But even in his sleep he could sense the growing danger looming outside his apartment door.

Abruptly Garth's eyes flew open as the sound of a loud siren screamed up the hill outside his apartment.

Seeing Lucy curled up at the foot of his bed, Garth said, "Come here, girl!" As the black furry dog scooted up next to him, Garth gently petted the top of her head and said, "I still have you, don't I, girl?" As Lucy licked his hand with her coal black tongue, Garth mumbled, "I wonder if she's made it up to her cabin yet?"

Garth knew that Rhoda had spent her entire life up in the mountains. Just her and her father, and of course Jake.

Suddenly Garth became aware of the complete silence within his apartment. He grabbed the remote control from his bedside table and pushed the power button. Nothing! Garth jumped out of bed and quickly walked over to his computer, and saw that the red light on his surge protector was off.

"That's not a good sign!" he said aloud as he ran to the laundry room. He opened the door to the fuse box and began flipping the breaker switches, but the eerie silence continued throughout the apartment. Running back into the kitchen, he quickly punched in the number of Rhoda's cell phone, but to his dismay even the phones were no longer working! "The bastards must've knocked out all of our power grids!" Garth yelled angrily.

A loud rumbling sound erupted from the parking lot, and Lucy began growling and jumped down from the bed. Garth immediately identified the sound. It was Tony, his biker patient, on his loud Harley Davidson.

As Lucy continued to growl, Garth walked over to the door and, opening it, he saw the tall, lanky young man ascending the stairs to his apartment.

Garth remembered how surprised he'd been the first time that he'd seen the young tattooed covered man standing in his doorway asking if Garth could heal his insomnia. Tony had tried every sleeping pill known to man, but none of them had helped his severe sleeping

disorder. After his first Reiki treatment Tony had been amazed when he'd actually slept four straight hours without waking!

"Hey, Garth," Tony said as he dropped a large duffel bag in front of him. "Pretty fucked up, eh?"

"Hello, Tony. Yes, it is. It's very fucked up!"

Tony had always made Garth feel a little uncomfortable, and Lucy definitely didn't like him.

Tony stood with his hands shoved down into the hip pockets of his jeans, and Garth became aware of how nervous the young man was, which was very unlike him. Finally Garth said, "What's in the bag?"

Looking down at the duffel bag lying at his feet, Tony answered, "Food."

Garth's stomach growled hearing the word, and it made him realize that living his bachelor lifestyle for so many years had caused him to totally rely on the many different restaurants and cafes down on Frazier Avenue, and because of it, he had kept very little food in his apartment. As Garth studied the duffel bag and wondered what kind of food was inside, Tony said, "On my way over here guess what I saw? All of the eating joints and grocery stores down on Frazier Avenue have been looted."

"All of them?" Garth asked incredulously.

"All of them! There's no food left!" Tony answered, shooting another glance back down at his duffel bag.

"Well, surely the government will send in the Red Cross with food and supplies!" Garth exclaimed.

"Yeah, they were a big help down in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina hit! Remember? They couldn't even get their act together to help those poor people after a storm! And now that the President has been shot the fuck out of the sky, do you really think the government's going to start hurrying to our rescue? And if a Red Cross truck did show up, it would only be hijacked by the gangs of looters anyway!"

With a sinking feeling Garth realized how stupid he'd been for not leaving with Rhoda when he had the chance. "Have you heard when they might get the power back on?" he asked.

Tony shook his head. "God only knows!"

"Have you seen any police around?" Garth asked.

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“No. All I’ve seen so far are gangs of looters,” Tony replied.

“I wonder where the cops are?” Garth asked.

“Hell, they’re probably just trying to guard their own families and what little food they might have put back. I got hit by some looters and barely had enough time to grab a few items and the duffel bag of food.” Tony replied.

Now I understand, Garth thought gloomily. He’s hoping to crash here.

“I know what you’re thinking, Garth,” Tony said. “You’re not crazy about the dirty biker showing up at your door without an appointment.”

When Garth remained silent Tony continued, “It’s only a matter of time before those bastards make their way up here to your neck of the woods, and I figure if we stick together we might have a better chance of fighting them off.”

I’m not a fighter, Garth thought. I’m a Reiki Master and Yoga instructor for god’s sake! But Tony made a good point. I sure as hell don’t like the idea of facing a gang of looters by myself. Not to mention the fact that I don’t have any food.

Again, as if reading his mind, Tony said, “If you let me stay up here with you for a couple of days, I’ll share my food with you. What do you say, Garth?”

Garth thought for a moment and finally said, “I guess we could try it one day at a time. Maybe the government will surprise us and deliver us some food. And once the power comes back on, things should start returning to normal.”

“Good!” Tony said with a big grin. “Now what do you say? Let’s break out some of this grub—I’m starving!”

Garth smiled and said, “Me too!”

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Chapter Two

A cool mountain breeze caressed Rhoda's face as she pulled up in front of the small log cabin that she and her father had built many years ago. To her great relief, it looked exactly the way that she had left it when she had moved down to the city of Chattanooga six months ago. Stepping from the truck, she thought, *Has it really only been six months?*

Jake barked loudly and jumped down from the rear of the truck, and Rhoda watched him chase a fat squirrel up one of the many hickory nut trees that provided much welcome shade during the long hot Tennessee summers.

The trip up to the cabin had been thankfully uneventful as most of the population had yet to awaken to the horrible shock of what was yet to come. But Rhoda knew that it wouldn't be long before the panic would set in, and then the civilized world that everyone had always taken for granted would abruptly come to an end.

Fighting feelings of guilt over leaving Garth behind, Rhoda continued to rack her brain for any signs of a misstep that she might've made in trying to convince him to leave with her, but she knew deep inside herself that Garth was just as stubborn as she was and any attempt to try and change his mind would've only been a waste of valuable time.

Opening her cell phone, Rhoda tried Garth's number again, but just as her father had so accurately predicted, the cell phones would probably no longer work. Tossing it onto the seat, Rhoda reached down into the bed of the truck and, hefting the duffel bag up over her shoulder, she walked to the front porch and dropped it with a heavy thud onto the wooden boards beneath her.

She unlocked the front door and peered inside. The old familiar smells greeted her as she began opening the wooden shutters that covered all of the windows, letting in not only the fresh mountain air but the bright afternoon sunlight as well.

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After she'd finished carrying in the rest of her bags, Rhoda whistled for Jake, and once she had fed him his supper, she stretched out on her old comfortable couch and quickly fell asleep.

An hour later she awoke feeling refreshed and hungry. Walking into the kitchen, she opened the door to the pantry and saw the strips of venison jerky that she had hung to dry before she had left. Yanking down on one of the strips of meat, Rhoda bit off a large piece, and as she began chewing it, she saw Jake staring up at her with that familiar look in his eye. Quickly using the silent hand signals that she'd been teaching him ever since he was a pup, she told him that he could only have one piece.

Jake quickly shoved his large paws out in front of him in a way that signified, "More."

"No!" Rhoda signed back to him with her fingers. "You already had your supper."

She tossed him a chunk of the meat and as the big dog caught it in midair, Rhoda thought, *We've been slacking off for way too long and tomorrow I'll start his lessons again.*

Rhoda's mother had left when she was only two years old, and with only her father, her dogs, and an occasional visit from her Uncle Abe who lived over in Hell's Holler, Rhoda had had plenty of time to develop her innate talent for dog training.

Her father had never shown any interest in learning the silent hand signal language that Rhoda had cleverly invented for communicating with her dogs, and not all of Rhoda's dogs were capable of learning it, but Jake had been her star pupil, and he loved it when she taught him a new word.

As Rhoda closed the pantry door behind her, she wondered if Garth would decide to leave Chattanooga and come stay with her. She was surprised at how much she was already beginning to miss him. The thought of living alone in the small mountain cabin with only Jake for company left her feeling depressed. Sitting heavily down onto the couch next to Jake, Rhoda couldn't stop herself from thinking about the strange and mystifying man that she had left behind.

From the first moment that she had seen Garth Manatee in the sporting goods store, she had known that there was something uniquely

special about him. It wasn't just his amazing good looks; Garth had an aura of power about him that she had never seen in another person before. Rhoda smiled as she realized that she'd just used one of Garth's favorite words, *aura*.

Having lived in isolation her entire life with only her father to educate her, Rhoda had been amazed at all of the new things that she'd learned while dating Garth. At first she thought he was just making up weird and crazy stuff to try and impress her, but after seeing the dramatic changes in Garth's Reiki patients, she began to realize that he wasn't a flake at all! He had proved to her on more than one occasion that the strange things he'd been sharing with her were for real.

In fact, Garth had been trying to teach her how to meditate, which he said was the basis for most of the Metaphysical powers that he'd obtained. But Rhoda quickly discovered that she just didn't have the patience that was required to do it, no matter how many times Garth had encouraged her to keep trying.

Not only was Garth a Reiki healer and Yoga instructor, his intuitive powers were incredible! Many times Rhoda felt like he was reading not only her own mind, but the other people's minds around him. This ability was what had made Garth such a great lover—not that Rhoda had much experience in that department—having only made love once before with an inexperienced teenage boy from down in the small mountain town of Tellico Plains. But because of Garth's powerful intuition, she never had to say a word about what she wanted him to do next. He just did it automatically, which was very stimulating to her indeed!

The fact that Garth was ten years older never really made any difference to her at all. In fact she appreciated his maturity and experience.

The only flaw that Rhoda could find with Garth was his naïve attitude towards his own personal safety. Although he had never said a word about the guns that she had lying around her apartment, she could tell that he had an aversion towards them. More than once she had invited Garth to accompany her to the local firing range, but he always had a convenient excuse ready not to go.

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Rhoda slowly shook her head and thought, *And now that attitude may cost him his life.*

* * *

“Good boy!” Rhoda said as she watched the big dog jump up and begin wagging his tail furiously back and forth.

They had spent the first half of the day practicing their inter-species language and now it was time for their lunch. As she watched Jake run through the dense woods in front of her, Rhoda grimaced as she remembered the choices that they had for their mid-day meal.

“Let’s see,” she said aloud. “We have jerky...and then, of course... we have more jerky!”

When she had told Garth that her cabin was stocked with food and supplies, she had stretched the truth. Yes, while there was a meager amount of dried meat and a few other items stored inside the cabin, Rhoda had not revealed to Garth the secret that she and her father had so fiercely protected their entire lives.

Until Rhoda’s tenth birthday, the old man from Hell’s Holler that she and her father affectionately referred to as “Uncle Abe” had cared for her during the daytime hours while her father was at work. She never had a reason not to believe that her father was nothing more than an auto mechanic who worked in a small garage down in Tellico Plains, but on the morning of her tenth birthday, instead of finding Uncle Abe cooking breakfast for her as he usually did, she saw her father standing in front of the wood stove with a big smile on his face.

Seeing the confused look on her face, he had said, “Come sit down, Rho. I have something very important to tell you.”

Sitting down at the table, Rhoda watched as her father placed before her a plate of steaming scrambled eggs and a large stack of pancakes, dripping in butter and hot maple syrup.

“Rho, today is a very special day in your life. Not only do you turn ten years old, but you are now old enough for me to share with you what I really do, and the important plans that I have for the two of us.”

As Rhoda tore into the stack of pancakes, her father sat down next to her and after taking a careful sip of his coffee, he explained to her

that he was not an auto mechanic, and that in fact he had never worked for anyone in his entire life.

He went on to tell her that before he had ever met Rhoda's mother he had invented a device used in the carpet manufacturing industry and it had made him a very wealthy man. As he had grown more and more conscious of the deteriorating and dangerous state of the world that they lived in, he had decided to find a safe place high up in the mountains to live and raise a family, a place that would protect them during what he felt was a horrible eventuality that was sure to come.

Setting his coffee cup down onto the table, Rhoda's father had looked her in the eye and said, "Rho, if I tell you something that is very important and very secret, can you promise me that you will never tell anyone, not even your Uncle Abe?"

Nodding her head, Rhoda had continued chewing her food but her father had waited until she had swallowed and then said, "Say the words aloud, Rhoda—that you promise never to tell anyone about our secret."

"I promise, father. I will never tell anyone our secret. Not even Uncle Abe."

Rhoda's father had smiled and nodded his head. As Rhoda continued eating her breakfast, her father began telling her how one day while deer hunting he had discovered a large mountain made out of solid granite. After finding a narrow ledge that lead up to the top of the steep mountain, he had found an opening into what appeared to be a single cave. But after entering the cave, he had found an extensive network of tunnels and huge caverns, and to his utter amazement there was even an underground lake that was full of albino trout!

As Rhoda tried to imagine what an albino trout looked like, her father continued, "I knew that I had finally found the perfect place for me and my family to flee to when the horrible days arrived. Do you want to know what I've named it?"

"Yes," she had answered.

"The name of our secret home is... Safehaven!"

What an auspicious birthday breakfast it had been, and learning about her father's incredible secret of Safehaven had only been part of the life-changing things that were yet to be revealed to her that fateful

Safehaven

morning as she had devoured the stack of pancakes. Her father had explained to her that while Safehaven would provide them a safe environment while living inside it, he was concerned about their safety if and when they ever had to travel outside.

And that was when Rhoda's father revealed to her his plans and extensive training program on survival fitness and personal combat fighting techniques for the both of them.

From that day forward, Rhoda and her father spent every afternoon training with a retinue of retired Navy Seals and other professionals that her father had hired to teach them the many different forms of fighting and survival techniques. During the times that they weren't training, they were busy hauling loads of food and supplies up the steep granite face of Safehaven. It was grueling work because her father refused to allow anyone else to know about their secret hideaway, so all of the work fell solely on the two of them.

Rhoda's father had been blessed with an incredible mechanical aptitude and he used this innate talent to build an elaborate pulley system within the cave entrance that thankfully allowed them to easily haul heavy loads of supplies up the face of the mountain. For ten straight years they filled Safehaven with tons of freeze-dried food and a large assortment of guns and ammunition.

On Rhoda's twentieth birthday, her father cooked for her what had become their ceremonial breakfast of scrambled eggs and pancakes.

After ten years of training, the two of them had become very proficient in not only survival skills but also in different fighting techniques, and Rhoda's father felt that Safehaven was now stocked with enough food and supplies to see them through the disaster that was surely to come. Little did they know that it would be their last birthday breakfast together, since Rhoda's father would die of a congenital heart defect only six months later, leaving her the sole heir of the well-kept secret of Safehaven.

Ken Barnes

Chapter Three

“Damn it!” Garth exclaimed. Again he’d been awakened by the sounds of gunfire outside his apartment.

With a loud groan, he slid out of bed and padded through the darkness into the living room. He saw Tony peering through a crack in the curtains down onto the street below.

Without turning Tony said, “Yeah, it woke me up too.”

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Garth asked, “See anyone?”

“Naw, it’s too dark,” Tony answered.

It had been a week now since the Disaster and not only were the looters drawing closer to them, but what was left of Tony’s food was nearly gone.

How foolish I was! Garth thought. With the power still off and the phones not working, he’d not heard one word from his Reiki patients...his main reason for not having left with Rhoda. And thinking of Rhoda, Garth wondered why he hadn’t mentioned anything about her to Tony yet. *I can’t take off up to Rhoda’s cabin and just leave him behind, not after eating his food for an entire week!* Garth thought as he glanced over at the lanky biker. “Tony, have you ever met my girlfriend, Rhoda?”

Shaking his head, Tony said, “No, but I’ve seen her down at the sporting goods store a couple of times. Cute little blonde, right?”

Garth nodded his head. Tony said, “How’d you hook up with a young filly like that?”

“Good karma, I guess,” Garth replied as he began having second thoughts about inviting Tony to come with him.

The sound of a gunshot rang out on the street below as Garth jumped back from the window.

“Fuck! That was close!” Tony exclaimed, as he continued to peer through the crack in the curtain.

Coming to a sudden decision, Garth said, “Tony, we need to talk.”

“Yeah, what’s up?” Tony said as he turned away from the window and walked over in front of Garth.

“It’s obvious that the looters are making their way up the street one house at a time, and from the proximity of that gunshot they might even try and hit us tonight.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself, Garth, so what’s your point?”

Garth walked over to the couch, sat down, and said, “Tony, we are nearly out of food as you well know, and since our government apparently isn’t going to come to our rescue, it looks like we’re going to have to get the hell out of here!”

“Yeah! But, where?” Tony said as he joined Garth on the couch. “Those assholes stole the gas out of my bike and I barely had enough fumes to make it up here to your place!”

“Well, thankfully I have a full tank, and as far as where we will go, I already have a place in mind for that too,” Garth replied.

“Oh yeah?”

Shaking his head, Garth looked down at the floor and said, “Right after it happened, Rhoda invited me to leave with her and go up to the mountains. She said that she had a cabin and that it was stocked with plenty of food, but like a dumb-ass I turned her down and trusted our government to take care of us instead!”

“Damn! Garth, You really did screw up!” Tony laughed as he reached over and slapped Garth on the shoulder.

Nodding his head, Garth said, “Well, Tony, since you’ve been feeding me for a week, it wouldn’t be right for me to just take off and leave you behind.”

“And don’t forget I have a few more of those MRE’s in my duffel bag that we haven’t finished off yet!” Tony laughed. “But do you think Rhoda will be okay with it when she finds out that you’ve invited a dirty biker up to her place?”

“Well, after I explain to her how the dirty biker kept me fed all of this time, she’ll probably be okay with it,” Garth replied.

“Do you know how to get up to her cabin?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, she drew me a map,” Garth said as Lucy jumped up onto the couch next to him.

“When do you want to leave?” Tony asked.

Garth stood up and said, “I don’t feel safe here anymore. I’m thinking the sooner we leave the better. How about you?”

“Hey, man, I’m just along for the ride!” Tony exclaimed. “But I agree. Those looters are getting too close for comfort.”

“Well, then let’s leave at daybreak,” Garth said. “I’m going to go down and put my sleeping bag and Lucy’s food in the car, but then I’d like to try and catch a little more sleep before we take off.”

“Sounds good to me!” Tony replied.

After Garth had loaded the car Tony, tossed in his duffel bag with the remaining freeze-dried food, and once back up inside the apartment, Garth returned to his bed and Tony collapsed down onto the couch.

* * *

“Garth! Wake up!”

“What?” Garth mumbled sleepily. He had finally dropped off to sleep and now as Tony shook him awake he felt confused and disoriented.

“Shhh!” Tony whispered. “I think there’s someone in the kitchen!”

A scraping sound coming from the kitchen, and Garth said, “It’s only Lucy coming through the pet door.”

“Think again, Hoss!” Tony whispered as he pointed down at the foot of the bed where Lucy was sleeping soundly.

As Garth jumped out of bed, Lucy awoke with a growl and, seeing Tony, she snarled at him, but then, sniffing the air, she jumped down from the bed and dashed headlong towards the kitchen. Garth and Tony ran from the bedroom, but just as they neared the kitchen they heard a loud noise coming from down in the garage.

Whipping out a large pistol, Tony said, “They’re trying to steal the car!”

Loud growling sounds came from the kitchen, and Tony said, “Go check on that and I’ll go down to the garage!”

With his heart racing, Garth ran towards the kitchen and as he shone the beam of light down towards the pet door, he couldn’t believe his eyes! A large hairy man was stuck halfway through the pet door. Lucy stood over him growling and barking furiously! The intruder quickly raised his hand and Garth saw what appeared to be a small .22 caliber pistol aimed directly at him.

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As the man prepared to pull the trigger, Lucy leapt forward and snapped her powerful jaws down onto the man's wrist, causing the man to scream loudly. Garth quickly kicked the pistol from his hand.

Sounds of gunfire erupted from down inside the garage as Garth looked down at Lucy and, seeing that she still had a firm lock on the intruder's wrist, he said, "Good girl! Watch him!"

Running quickly towards the door that lead down into the garage, Garth was fearful of what he might find. The first thing he saw as he shone his flashlight into the garage was a small rat-faced man sitting behind the wheel of his CRX and Tony pointing his pistol at him and shouting, "Drop your fucking gun!"

A loud boom sounded from inside the car as Tony dove down onto the floor and, aiming his pistol, he fired the weapon, and Garth saw the rat-faced man's head explode in a shower of bright red blood. With his pistol still aimed inside the car, Tony stood up and yelled, "Damn! I can't believe that little fucker missed me!"

Garth stood speechless as he watched streams of blood dripping down the dead man's face, but suddenly a loud piercing scream came from upstairs in the kitchen. Garth yelled, "Lucy!" and he ran back up the stairs.

Shinning the flashlight down at the pet door, he was amazed at what he saw. Lucy, with her jaws dripping blood, stood over the intruder, and Garth saw a large jagged tear in the man's throat. As if in a bad dream, Garth slowly walked over to Lucy and said, "Are you okay, girl?"

Tony walked over and, picking up the dead man's pistol, said, "Well, Butter Buns, I guess you won't be needing this anymore, will you?"

Taking Lucy by her collar, Garth slowly walked the dog over to the sink and began washing the blood from her face.

"Here, Garth," Tony said as he pushed the small pistol towards him.

Shaking his head, Garth mumbled, "I don't want it."

"Suit yourself!" Tony said, shoving the pistol down into his hip pocket.

It was nearly light by the time they pulled the body of the rat-faced man out of the car and cleaned up the blood. With the rear hatch door open, Lucy jumped inside and quickly lay down on top of Garth's sleeping bag as her master started up the Honda's powerful four-cylinder engine.

Closing the hatch door, Tony slid in next to Garth and as the small car pulled out of the garage and slowly began making its way down the hill towards Frazier Avenue, Garth slowly shook his head and thought what an auspicious way to begin a new life. Turning left onto Frazier, Garth noticed the boarded-up shops and cafes, but at the same time he saw that each one of the buildings had at least one door or window that had been smashed open by the gangs of looters.

As Garth guided the small car up onto the Veteran's Bridge that spanned the Tennessee River, he said, "I'm not stopping until we get clear of the city."

But halfway across the bridge, they saw a small group of men loitering about in the distance as the morning sun made its first appearance of the day.

"That looks like trouble," Tony said, pulling out both his pistols.

Fearfully Garth drove the car towards the end of the bridge where the group of men stood watching their approach.

One of the men began walking forward with his hands held up in the air and began motioning for Garth to stop the car, but to the man's surprise the car leapt forward as Garth slammed down hard onto the accelerator.

Suddenly a pistol appeared in the man's hand. He aimed the gun at them and began waving frantically for them to stop, but Garth shifted into the next gear. They heard a pain-filled cry as the front bumper clipped the man's leg and they sped past him.

Laughing loudly, Tony began rapidly firing through his open window at the scattering men in front of them as Garth guided the small CRX towards the end of the bridge. A shot rang out and shattered Garth's side mirror only inches from his head.

Downshifting, Garth whipped the steering wheel to the left as they roared down Third Street and then up onto Amnicola Highway.

"Shit!" Tony laughed loudly. "That was fucking close!"

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Garth looked over at his traveling companion and said, “How can you laugh? I was scared to death!”

“I don’t know, man!” Tony grinned. “It was like something out of a movie!”

Shaking his head, Garth said, “Well, I hope we don’t have to go through many more of those!”

Lucy poked her black furry head between the seats and nervously licked the side of her master’s face while Tony slowly began reloading his pistol.

By the time they reached Interstate I-75 they saw a sea of traffic ahead of them. Both sides of the Interstate were clogged with abandoned vehicles of all types- from tractor trailers and RVs to gas-guzzling Sport Utility Vehicles. Looking at the tags of the stranded vehicles, Garth noticed that most of them were from Georgia and Florida. *They all ran out of gas*, he thought as he allowed himself a moment of satisfaction at not only having a full tank, but also owning a car that was famous for getting good gas mileage.

Seeing only empty vehicles, Garth wondered where all the people were when suddenly he saw a large black pillar of smoke rising high up into the air in front of him.

“What’s on fire?” Tony asked as he rolled his window down.

The car filled with the smell of meat cooking as Garth slowed down and, looking through Tony’s open window, he saw a large group of people standing with their backs to him. In horror Garth finally saw what was being burned—human bodies! They were being tossed like logs up and into a roaring fire!

“Holy shit!” Tony exclaimed. “Do you see this, Garth?”

Noticing a teenage boy walking towards them, Garth called out to him, “Hey! Why are they burning those bodies over there?”

As if waking from a dream, the boy looked at Garth and said, “What planet have you been living on? Those are the people that were living down in Atlanta when the dirty bombs went off. This is as far as they made it.”

“Shit!” Tony exclaimed.

Walking up to Garth’s window, the young man looked inside the car and said, “Hey! You’re the first moving car I’ve seen in a couple of

days! How about letting me catch a ride with you guys? I'm trying to get up to Knoxville where my brother lives."

Before Garth could answer, Tony said, "Hell no!"

The boy's face turned dark as he looked over at the crowd of people and shouted, "Hey! There's a car over here with gas in it!"

A number of the people's heads turned and looked back at the boy as he began frantically pointing down at the little red car in front of him.

Garth slammed his foot down on the accelerator. The young man jumped out of the way and, glancing quickly up into the rearview mirror, Garth saw a group of men breaking free from the rear of the crowd but, realizing that they would never catch up with the speeding car, they stopped and slowly turned back to the grisly scene in front of them.

An hour later after they had pulled off of Interstate 75 North and were traveling on two-lane highways, they saw fewer abandoned vehicles, and on rare occasions they would actually see another car moving down the highway. Garth felt as if he had been driving for days as he pulled the small car off onto the side of the road and said, "Let's take a short break. I need to stretch my legs."

"Sounds good to me," Tony replied as he opened his door and with a loud groan walked over to a clump of bushes.

Lucy jumped from the car, and Garth watched her run off into the nearby woods.

"Don't go far, girl."

Feeling some of the tension in his shoulders loosen, Garth stared up at the beautiful range of green mountains in front of him and, taking a deep breath of the fresh mountain air, he wondered how Rhoda would receive him and his traveling companion. *I hope her offer of sanctuary still stands*, Garth thought as he reached into the car and pulled out the map that Rhoda had drawn for him. He hoped that with any luck that they might just reach her cabin by nightfall.

Calling for Lucy, Garth watched the black Chow run obediently from the woods and jump into the open door of the car. Not long after, they were winding their way up into the foothills of the beautiful Cherokee National Forest.

“Where the hell is it?” Tony complained as he studied Rhoda’s hand-drawn map.

“We’re getting close,” Garth answered as he downshifted into the hairpin curve in front of them. They had made good time on the small mountain road and had not seen any other cars as they drew close to the small mountain town of Tellico Plains.

Laying the map down next to him, Tony said, “Is it just me or does it seem strange that we haven’t seen any people for a while now?”

“Well, I guess they are—”

“Watch out!” Tony yelled, and Garth slammed his foot down onto the brake.

Standing in the middle of the road—only inches in front of their bumper—stood a young blonde-haired woman wearing a bloodstained dress. With a shocked expression on her face, she stared at them for a brief moment, and then collapsed down onto the pavement.

As Garth quickly opened his door, Tony yelled, “Wait! It might be an ambush!”

Garth froze as Tony opened his door, and with both pistols pointing out in front of him, he jumped from the car. Quickly scanning the woods around them, he said, “I don’t see anyone else.”

Garth quickly ran to the front of the car with Lucy following close behind him. The first thing he saw was dried streaks of blood covering the young woman’s thighs and just as he bent down over her, the girl moaned and, opening her eyes, she jerked back away from Garth. He quickly said, “I’m not going to hurt you, but we need to get you out of the middle of the road, okay?”

“Hurry up, Garth. I don’t like the looks of this!” Tony said as he continued to scan the woods around them.

Carefully lifting the girl up into his arms, Garth carried her over to the side of the road and laid her down on the grass. “What happened to you?” Garth asked in a gentle voice.

Abruptly the girl’s eyes flew open and she cried, “We’ve got to get out of here!”

“It’s okay, you’re safe now,” Garth said, but the girl pushed his hand away and staggering up to her feet, she cried, “They’ll be here any minute!”

“Who will be here any minute?” Tony asked harshly.

Looking over at Tony, the young woman said, “Those bastards from Tellico! The ones who raped me!”

In unison they all spun around as they heard an angry buzzing sound approaching from the sharp curve in front of them.

“Let’s go!” Tony yelled, aiming his pistols out in front of him.

As Garth began helping the girl towards the car, Tony shouted, “Leave her, man, and let’s go!”

“I’m not leaving her behind, Tony. She needs our help!”

“There’s not enough room, Garth!”

“We’ll make room!” Garth yelled as he quickly opened the hatch door and helped the girl climb into the back of the car. He quickly covered her up with his sleeping bag and said, “Don’t worry, it’s going to be okay!”

The angry buzzing sound grew louder as Garth called out, “Get in, Lucy!”

Lucy jumped into the rear of the car. Garth slammed the door and quickly jumped behind the wheel.

As Tony slid into his seat, he yelled, “Step on it, man! They’re almost here!”

Garth quickly began turning the car around in the middle of the road as a bright yellow four-wheeler with two scruffy-looking men riding on the back of it spun up in front of them. Out of the corner of his eye Garth saw Tony preparing to raise his pistols. “Wait!” Garth exclaimed.

In a slurred voice the driver of the four-wheeler said, “Where do you turkeys think you’re going?”

Trying to hide his fear, Garth stammered, “Fishing.”

“Yeah, right!” The man laughed. “You boys ain’t seen a little blonde chick, have you?”

Before Garth could answer, the man riding behind the driver of the four-wheeler jumped off and said, “Let’s see what you got in the back of that little rice-burner.”

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A deep rumbling growl erupted from Lucy as the man began walking towards the rear of the car.

“Hey, look, Jim! They got one of them Chow dogs!”

“Fuck the dog! Just hurry up and see if she’s in there!”

Sticking his head into Garth’s window, the man said, “Open up the back, Jack.”

“His name isn’t Jack!” Tony said as he pulled the trigger on one of his pistols.

The man was jerked backwards as the bullet made contact with his forehead, sending a spray of bright red blood onto the side of Garth’s face.

Jamming the gas pedal down to the floor, Garth saw the man on the back of the four-wheeler reach down, and as the little car leapt forward, Garth heard the sounds of gunshots ringing out behind him.

Pushing a pistol out the window, Tony fired back at the man and to Garth’s relief he saw the yellow four-wheeler turn and roar off in the direction of Tellico Plains.

Finally, when Garth thought it safe, he pulled the car off onto the side of the road and, seeing the girl raise her head up in his rear view mirror, he asked, “Who were those guys?”

Brushing a strand of blonde hair from her eyes, the girl said, “They were two of the escaped prisoners that have taken over Tellico.”

“Taken over Tellico?” Tony asked turning in his seat and staring at the girl.

Nodding her head, she said, “There’s a gang of them, and their leader is a big black guy they call Boss.”

“Where did they escape from?” Garth asked.

“No one knows for sure, but we think they might have escaped from Brushy Mountain State Prison.”

Shaking his head, Tony said, “How did they take over a whole town? Where were the cops?”

“They killed the sheriff and his two deputies,” the girl answered. “And after that, everyone left that could.”

Turning in his seat, Garth asked, “How bad did they hurt you?”

Dropping her head, the girl began crying and said, “I work at the hardware store—or at least I used to, and I was busy in the back of the

store when they came in, but by the time I saw them they'd already killed the owner, and well, the one they call Boss—he and a couple of his men held me down and took turns raping me.”

“Sorry sons of bitches!” Tony snarled.

“What’s your name?” Garth asked softly.

“Casey,” the girl replied.

“Well, Casey, my name’s Garth and this is Tony.”

The girl nodded her head and said, “Thanks for helping me.”

“Casey, have they blocked the road into Tellico?” Garth asked.

“Yes, in both directions”

“Shit!” Tony exclaimed as he began reloading his pistol.

“I wonder how we’ll be able to get up to Rhoda’s cabin now?”

Garth muttered.

“Rhoda? Dog-Girl Rhoda?” Casey asked in a surprised tone of voice. “How do you know her?”

“Dog-Girl Rhoda.” Tony chuckled.

“Do you know her?” Garth asked.

“Not really,” the girl answered. “But everybody in Tellico knows about her.”

“Knows *what* about her?” Garth asked in a confused tone of voice.

“Well, they say that she always travels with dogs and that she’s a real bad-ass!”

“Yeah, right!” Tony laughed. “She has a bad ass, I’ll give her that!”

Quickly smiling at Garth, Tony said, “Sorry, man.” But Garth heard the insincerity in Tony’s voice as he continued loading his pistol.

“Oh yeah, I’ve also heard that she can somehow communicate with her dogs without ever saying a word,” Casey replied.

“I’ve seen her do that with Jake; she uses minute finger movements,” Garth said.

Waving a middle finger up in the air, Tony laughed and said, “Hey, I can communicate with my fingers too!”

Garth shook his head as he became aware that ever since Casey had joined them, Tony’s behavior had become much more aggressive.

“Listen, Casey. Do you happen to know where Rhoda’s cabin is?”

Safehaven

“No, but I heard Abe mention that he lives near her, and I know where he lives.”

“Who’s Abe?” Garth asked.

“He’s an old guy that comes down from the Holler now and then for supplies. I think he’s her uncle or something.”

“The Holler? What’s that?” Garth asked.

“Hell’s Holler is a small community of reclusive types that live up in the mountains. They don’t like strangers, and I’ve heard stories of people disappearing that strayed too close to their neck of the woods. They don’t have electricity up there and probably don’t even know about the Disaster yet. And I doubt they’d even care!”

“Do you know a way up there without having to go through Tellico Plains?” Garth asked.

Casey thought for a moment and said, “Yeah, but I can’t believe you’d still want to go up there after what I just told you!”

“We have to find Rhoda,” Garth replied.

“I don’t think this little car will make it up the Fire Road. You’d need a four wheel drive vehicle or maybe a wagon and mules like Abe uses to get up it.”

“We should’ve stayed in Chattanooga,” Tony mumbled.

“And done what? Starve to death?” Garth snapped.

Taking a calming breath, Garth asked, “Casey can you show us where this Fire Road is?”

Casey chewed on her lip for a moment, then said, “Only if you’ll let me come with you.”

“So now you’ve changed your mind about how dangerous it is up there?” Tony laughed.

“No. It’s plenty dangerous, believe me! It’s just that I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

Garth thought for a moment and said, “Okay. You’re coming with us then.”

Casey smiled and said, “Thanks, Garth!”

Frowning, Tony shook his head and remained silent as Garth said, “All right, Casey, lead us to the Fire Road.”

Seeing the girl point behind her, Garth exclaimed, “Back towards Tellico?”

“Yes, but it’s not far,” Casey answered as she reached over and began petting Lucy on top of her head. A mile back down the winding country road, Casey pointed to a small dirt road and said, “There it is!”

Garth guided the car onto the narrow road and immediately began to ascend the mountain. Soon they were surrounded by the dense woods of the Cherokee National Forest.

“Next stop, Hillbilly Heaven!” Tony exclaimed with a big grin on his face.

Without taking his eyes off of the narrowing road in front of him, Garth asked, “Casey, have you ever been up this road before?”

“Nope.”

“The blind leading the blind!” Tony laughed.

With an exasperated look, Garth glanced over at Tony and said, “If you can’t say anything positive, I’d appreciate it if you’d just keep it to yourself!”

“Positive?” Tony laughed and shook his head. “Well, you might not hear from me for a while then.”

As the shadows grew darker around them, Garth flipped on the headlights and realized that he’d not seen any tire marks on the small dirt road since they’d pulled onto it. Surprisingly they were able to make it halfway up the steep mountain before they finally came to a major obstacle blocking the road in front of them.

“Shit!” Tony exclaimed. “Anybody got an axe hidden up their sleeve?”

A large tree lay across the road in front of them and Garth realized that from here on out it would be on foot, and he was definitely not looking forward to that.

“I saw a place where I can pull the car off into the woods a little ways back, so let’s go ahead and unload everything here first,” Garth said.

“Okay, Boss, whatever you say!” Tony quipped as he opened his door and jumped from the car.

After Garth had pulled the small car off into the woods, he piled brush on top of it until it was well hidden. Directing the beam of his flashlight back onto the Fire Road, he made his way back up the hill until he spotted the ghostly figures of Tony and Casey sitting on the

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fallen tree in the middle of the road. He felt sad at having to leave his dependable little car behind and wondered if he'd ever see it again.

"Well, I'm going to hit the hay," Tony said as he pulled an Army blanket from his duffel bag and spread it onto the ground in front of him.

"Casey, you can use my sleeping bag," Garth said as he untied the small rope that held it tightly together.

"I can't use your sleeping bag! What are you going to use?" Casey replied.

"Don't worry about it," Garth said. "I'm too wound up to sleep anyway."

With a loud sigh, Casey crawled inside the sleeping bag.

In a concerned voice, Garth asked, "Casey, are you in pain?"

Shaking her head, Casey said, "No, not much, but thanks for asking, Garth."

* * *

The sky above them was lit up with bright and shiny stars. As Garth sat down on the fallen tree and stared up at them, he wondered how Rhoda was doing and how she would feel about him and his two traveling companions showing up at her door.

"What are you thinking about, Garth?" Casey asked from the sleeping bag behind him.

Without turning around, Garth said, "Just wondering how Rhoda's doing."

"I'm sure she's fine," Casey replied. "From what I've heard, if there's anyone that's going to make it through this, it'll be her."

Chapter Four

Rhoda's whipcord muscles glistened in the morning sunlight as the heavy stream of icy water that flowed down from the water falls caused a colorful rainbow to materialize just over her shoulder.

"Okay, Jake! It's your turn!" she called out as the huge Bull Mastiff dove into the pool of water and splashed up next to her.

After eating jerky for an entire week, Rhoda had had enough and she and Jake had hiked through the dense mountains to Safehaven the day before. It had been easy for them to track and kill the deer and now, as she washed the blood from her hands, she watched Jake snap his powerful jaws at a horsefly that buzzed noisily around his head.

The waterfall was not far from Safehaven, and once they were finished, Rhoda said, "Come on, Jake! Let's go cook some of that venison!"

As they hiked through the woods back to Safehaven, Rhoda's thoughts returned once again to Garth and she wondered if she'd ever see her cosmic cowboy again. After they had feasted on venison steaks and freeze-dried vegetables, Rhoda looked down at Jake and said, "Want to go see your Uncle Abe?"

Barking loudly, Jake ran towards the door of the kitchen. Rhoda laughed and said, "So I take it that's a *yes*?"

After quickly packing some food and ammunition into her backpack, she lowered it and Jake down the mountain using the sturdy rope basket and pulley system that her father had made. As the basket touched the ground, Rhoda called out, "Take the pack out, Jake!"

The large dog clamped down on top of the backpack, easily pulled it from the basket, and dropped it down onto the ground next to him.

"Good boy!" Rhoda yelled as she pulled down on a lever next to her, which sent the basket snaking back up the face of the mountain. After she had secured the basket inside the cave opening, Rhoda carefully stepped out onto the narrow ledge that led down the face of the mountain and to the waiting dog below. Once at the bottom, she walked over and removed the shotgun from her backpack and laid it

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down onto the ground next to her. She then hefted the pack up over her strong shoulders.

Jake barked and then dashed off into the woods in front of them as Rhoda picked up the shotgun and called out, "Hold on, boy! I'm coming!"

As Rhoda stepped into the woods, she turned and looked back up at the top of the mountain and with a smile on her face she said, "Thanks, Dad!"

* * *

As they passed by the cabin, Rhoda's four-wheel pick-up was still the only vehicle present, and looking down at Jake, she said, "Well, it doesn't look like Garth and Lucy are coming, boy."

At the mention of his friend's name, Jake barked and began sniffing the air in front of him.

"Sorry, Jake. I didn't mean to get your hopes up," Rhoda replied as she continued walking down the hill. Looking back over her shoulder she called out, "Come on, boy! Let's go see what that old rascal Abe is up to!"

It was dark by the time they reached Hell's Holler, and that was exactly the way Rhoda had planned it. The Holler could be a very dangerous place and the only reason she ever visited it was to see her old and dear friend Abe.

Abe owned and operated a small general store that was the only establishment allowed in the Holler. The extremely reclusive people of the Holler prided themselves on their ability to be self-sufficient, and the few items that Abe brought up the mountain from Tellico Plains every few months were mostly for himself.

More than once he had mentioned to Rhoda that he was thinking about closing it down, but as she and Jake crept silently around to the rear entrance of the small building, Rhoda felt relieved to see Abe's small oil lamp burning inside.

Rhoda smiled as she quietly opened the unlocked door and remembered how Abe had once told her that he didn't have to worry

about locking his doors since most of the people didn't give a damn about what he had anyway!

Stepping inside the small storage area at the back of the store, Rhoda smelled apples and cinnamon and quietly chuckled as she remembered her Uncle Abe's fondness for homemade apple cider.

Peering into the interior of the store, Rhoda saw Abe sitting in his favorite chair. He sat reading a book by the dim light of an oil lamp that sat on a table nearby.

Flicking one of her fingers, Rhoda communicated to Jake to be quiet as the two of them silently made their way up behind the old man as he continued squinting at the book in front of him. With another flick of a finger, Rhoda stepped back into the shadows as Jake pushed his large black muzzle against Abe's shoulder, causing the old man to yell out, "Hey! What the hell?"

Jake playfully ran around in front of the startled old man and began barking excitedly as Rhoda laughed and said, "Kinda jumpy, aren't you?"

With a smile on his face, Abe held out his arms and said, "I swear, young lady, you and that big ugly mutt of yours are going to be the death of me one day!"

Rhoda rushed into his arms and said, "I'm so glad to see you, Abe!"

Abe pressed her to his chest and said, "Thank god you're safe back up in the mountains where you belong!"

After they had hugged, Rhoda pulled back and said, "Well, what kind of host are you?"

Seeing a puzzled look on his face, Rhoda said, "Where's my cup of cider?"

Laughing, Abe said, "I'm sorry my dear! It's on its way!"

Walking over to a small kitchen, Abe reached up and took a large ceramic mug down from a shelf and, removing a metal dipper from the pot of cider, he filled the mug full of the aromatic beverage.

Jake walked over and stared up at the man as Abe said, "Oh, so I guess you want a treat too, do you?"

Wagging his tail, Jake barked once and continued staring up at the old man as Rhoda took the steaming cup from Abe's hand.

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Reaching up above his head, Abe tore off a strip of jerky that had been looped over a wooden peg and tossed it in Jake's direction. He laughed as Jake effortlessly caught the piece of meat in mid-air.

"You always were a good catch!"

Rhoda blew steam from the top of her mug as Abe pulled a chair over next to his and said, "Take a load off of your feet and tell your old Uncle Abe all about it."

Sitting down in the offered chair, Rhoda carefully sipped at her drink and said, "It all happened just like Dad said it would."

Nodding his head, Abe sat down next to her and said, "Thank god your father, in his infinite wisdom, had the foresight to prepare for it."

As they sat listening to the popping and hissing sounds of Abe's small wood stove, Rhoda told the old man everything that had happened to her since she'd left the mountains for a life in the river city of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

"So, do you think your young man will make it up here, after all of this time?" Abe asked as he reached over and affectionately patted Rhoda's knee.

"I don't know, Abe." Rhoda sighed. "But it's not looking very hopeful."

"I guess you're staying up at your cabin?" Abe asked guardedly.

Nodding her head, Rhoda avoided the old man's searching look and knew that Abe had pretty much figured out for himself some of the details about Safehaven, although he'd never pressured her about it.

"Abe, when was your last trip down to Tellico?"

Scratching at the gray whiskers on his chin, Abe thought for a moment and said, "I guess it's been about two months now."

"Any news of how people are handling things down there?" Rhoda asked.

Shaking his head, Abe said, "No, but you know how they are up here, they won't tell you a damn thing even if they know something!"

Placing her hand affectionately on the old man's back, Rhoda asked, "Abe, when is your next trip down the mountain for supplies?"

Abe thought for a moment and said, "Well, by now there's probably not much left on the shelves, but I'm running short on coffee

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and a few other things. I guess if I'm going to go at all I should make it soon. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I was thinking maybe I could ride shotgun with you, if you don't mind?"

With a gruff laugh, Abe replied, "Are you kidding? I'd feel a hell of a lot safer with you watching my back!"

"Good!" Rhoda said. "So when do we leave?"

Chuckling, Abe stood up and said, "I'll start making a list and we can head out in the morning."

"Great!" Rhoda exclaimed as she jumped up from her chair and began helping Abe find his pencil and paper.

Chapter Five

The view from the top of the mountain was spectacular as Garth stared out over the panoramic view before him. They'd made good time hiking up the Fire Road, and even though they were totally exhausted, he began to feel excited that they were getting closer to their final destination. Seeing black columns of smoke rising up above what appeared to be a small mountain town below him, Garth asked, "Is that Tellico Plains?"

With a deep sigh, Casey said, "Yes."

Thank god we're not down there! Garth thought as he turned and said, "Let's take a little break before we head out again. I think we've earned it."

Dropping wearily down onto the ground, they watched as Lucy spotted a fat gray squirrel perching atop a nearby tree stump. With a loud bark she chased the small creature into a thicket of pine trees.

"Does she ever get tired?" Tony asked as he took a sip of water from his canteen.

"I wish I had some of that energy!" Casey sighed as she rubbed her sore legs.

After their short rest, Garth stood up and said, "It's getting late and I'd like to try and find Rhoda's cabin before it gets dark, so let's get moving."

"Sure thing, boss!" Tony replied as he stood up and swung his duffel bag up over his shoulder.

They made better time now that they were walking down the backside of the mountain, and as they walked single file around a sharp bend, they stopped as they saw a fork in the road in front of them.

"Uh oh, the infamous fork in the road," Tony said as he dropped his duffel bag down onto the ground next to him.

Turning around, Garth asked, "Do you know which one we should take, Casey?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Casey said, "Sorry, I've never made it this far."

“I say we bear to the right,” Tony replied. “It looks like it’s been used more than the one on the left.”

As Garth stared at the two different roads in front of him, he exclaimed, “I have an idea!” Pushing a hand down into the right front pocket of his jeans, Garth pulled out a small gold chain. Affixed to the end of it was a small piece of Rose Quartz in the shape of a small pyramid.

“What’s that?” Casey asked.

Garth didn’t answer. He held the end of the chain out in front of him and with the Rose Quartz pyramid pointing down at the ground in front of him; he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Soon the pendulum began swaying back and forth as Garth remained locked in utter stillness.

“What’s he doing?” Casey whispered as Tony stepped quietly up next to her.

“More of his Voodoo I guess,” Tony replied.

“Voodoo?” Casey exclaimed.

Tony laughed and said, “Don’t freak out, it’s probably just another one of his wacky New Age tricks.”

Finally, Garth slid the pendulum back into his pocket and said, “We’ll take the smaller road on the left.”

Shaking his head, Tony said, “Is that what your rock on a string told you, Garth?”

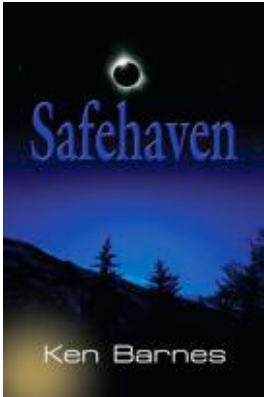
“It will take too long to explain how a pendulum works, and we need to hurry up and try and find Rhoda’s cabin before it gets dark, okay, Tony?”

“Whatever you say, oh wise one!” Tony quipped. “But just remember after we’ve wasted our precious daylight on your little road to the left, I chose the one on the right!”

“Okay, Tony, I’ll try and remember that,” Garth said as he quickly began walking down the small leaf-covered road.

Shrugging her shoulders, Casey glanced up at Tony and then set off down the road behind Garth.

Shaking his head in disgust, Tony hefted the duffel bag up over his shoulder and slowly began following the young woman in front of him.



Three people flee into the mountains after a major terrorist attack brings the country to its knees, but are shocked when strange things begin happening to one of their dogs.

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