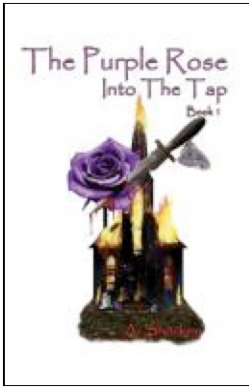


# ECHO OF SOULS



*A. Shockey*



*Five women are on a quest to survive a present that comes on the heels of a past that killed them all. Members of a sacred sisterhood, they are hunted for their gifts, and magical essence. Once again, their existence is threatened. This time by highly skilled seekers. To survive, they must uncover secrets hidden in their past. And put their trust in a bond that not even death can break.*

# **The Purple Rose**

## **Into the Tap**

### **Book One**

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ECHO  
OF  
SOULS

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Once she was back at the cabin, her good mood lingered. She bustled around the kitchen, unloading and putting away the supplies. Thinking how nice Ed Jarvis was. How sweet Ruby was. And how much better she felt for having met them. Both were upbeat and infectious.

What wasn't so pleasant was the stop she'd had to make at Four Points Station, for a fuel can and gas for the generator. Erve had been a bit stiff in doing business with her. But at least she'd been fortunate enough not to have to endure the sight of him with one of those disgusting pickled eggs stuffed between his jowls.

She was still wondering what he seemed to know about her grandmother but wasn't sharing. She didn't dare bring it up. Thinking perhaps if she gave him some time to get used to her presence in town, maybe he would come around to answering some of her questions. Instead of being so damned evasive. She planned on being here a couple of weeks. Depending on how long it took her to get things sorted out. If Erve maintained his unwillingness to divulge what he knew, she would seek her answers elsewhere. There must be *someone* willing to talk.

But that would have to wait. Her immediate priority was getting the generator going. Which she knew absolutely nothing about. But how hard could it be? Besides, she didn't have a choice. Some of the food items she had purchased required refrigerating. Namely, the wrapped cuts of pork and sections of chicken. There was also a carton of milk and a

dozen eggs. All of which she had iced down and stowed in the cooler for now.

Ready to apply herself to the task at hand, she grabbed the gas can and set off down the hall, to the door at the very end.

She hadn't anticipated that the cellar would be so dark. And of course, it was. Standing in the doorway, looking down the flight of narrow steps, she realized it was pointless to continue without something to light her way.

She left the gas can at the door and trekked back to the main room, where she lit one of the candles on the table. Carrying it, she went down the hall once more.

There was something a bit daunting about having the gas can in one hand and the candle with its open flame in the other. Alarm bells were going off inside her head as she started down the stairs. But again, what other choice did she have? The best she could do was to keep the two as far apart from each other as possible. Which was nowhere near far enough to suit her. Thanks to the narrow design of the stairwell. By the time she reached the bottom, she was a jittery bag of nerves. And dripping candle wax everywhere.

She set the gas can on the ground. Surprised by the absence of a cement floor. She steadied herself with a few deep breaths. Looked around. Trying to get her bearings, and a sense of the cellar's surroundings.

Shapes of objects wrapped in shadows came into view as her eyesight adjusted to the murky darkness. The candlelight was helpful. But not by much. Some things she recognized. Like boxes...An old trunk...To the right of the stairs, the hot water heater.

She inched forward. Holding the candle out in front of her. Squinting and blinking as dust swirled up from the dirt floor to dance and twirl before her face. She waved the tiny particles away with her free hand. Coughed the tickle out of her throat, and continued.

What she thought to be a large bookcase at first glance, built into the left wall, turned out to serve a different purpose. She raised the candle to the wooden shelves. Here, as she had seen on display at the drugstore, was an array of home-canned fruits, jellies, and vegetables. And in large supply. Enough to feed a small army for a solid month, if not longer. She was pleased to see that there were no pickled eggs. And none of the vegetables appeared pickled, either.

Immediately she thought of Jack. So thin and lacking. With his sunken cheeks, and those dark circles around his eyes. All from poor nutrition.

Well, she could do something about that. And meant to. He could benefit from some of these fruits and vegetables. She didn't know why he hadn't already helped himself to a few jars, at least. Surely he wanted to. But then she remembered, *I ain't no thief*, and here was proof of that. The dust on the shelves lay undisturbed. Not a single jar had been moved.

She didn't think he would accept anything from her if she tried to give it to him. He had made it clear, he did not take handouts. Perhaps she could come up with some chore or other for him to do in exchange, so his pride didn't overrule his common sense. The man needed to eat.

She could resort to throwing a few dozen jars into the river. Making sure he saw her do it. Like her grandmother had threatened to do in persuading him to take the boots she'd bought him for no other reason than because she knew he needed them. That ought to convince him.

Ronni was sure her grandmother would have agreed. She couldn't begin to imagine what Jack was surviving on. Whatever it was, it obviously wasn't much, from the looks of him

What she really wanted to do was cook the man a decent meal. If she could get him to sit still long enough to eat. And assuming she was able to get the generator working. First she had to locate it. She had yet to spot the cussed thing.

She started forward again. Brushed against a box she failed to notice ahead of time. It startled her. An alien thing in the murky darkness. She jumped and almost screamed. Cursing, with her heart stuck in her throat, she angled past it. Too worked up to care what might be inside.

She crossed the cellar to the opposite wall. Here was the stairwell leading upward, to the outside. To the door at ground level in back of the cabin. Jack's way of coming and going.

She sighed. Turned to the right. Saw more boxes. An end table with a broken leg. Leaning in the corner was a shovel, a gardening hoe, and an ax. On the floor sat a small metal toolbox with a hinged lid. Above, two fishing reels and a broken cane pole shared hanging space on the wall.

She turned. Felt a sting as hot candle wax dripped onto her hand. Causing her to bring in her next breath sharply between her teeth. But the pain lasted only a few seconds. Then she peeled the drop of wax from her skin and flicked it to the ground.

When she looked up again, she got another surprise. This time, a good one. There sat the generator. In the corner adjacent to the main stairwell.

Turning again, she wound a path around the boxes and clutter. Back to the base of the stairs, where she had left the gas can. She bent forward and picked it up by the handle. Dribbling more wax from the candle clutched in her other hand. The drippings rained to the earthen floor, where each one landed with a soft plumping sound.

She carried the gas can to the generator, and put it down again safely off to one side. So she would know exactly where it was, and didn't have to worry that she might trip over it. Holding the candle closer, she knelt in front of the generator and studied it earnestly.

It was an old thing. Coated with dust, and harnessed in cobwebs. It rested on a three-foot square of pre-formed concrete pad. Extruding from the back end of it was a braided



rope of wiring. Which in turn, she noted, led over to a junction box mounted on the nearby wall.

Well, that explained how it worked. Now she just needed to feed it the gas, and give the starting cord a tug or two. Simple, right?

“Okay, heap. You better work. And no funny business.”

She couldn't believe she was talking to it. Thankfully there was no one to hear.

She set her candle down on the ground. Hoping the gas fumes didn't reach it and start a fire blazing in the cellar. It was a fear that had her brain on full alert as she picked up the can of gas.

She fed the generator its fuel. Then replaced and tightened down the tank lid. She decided the best place for the gas can was ten feet away, and carried it back to the base of the stairs.

Returning to the generator, she leaned forward and took hold of the pull-cord's crossbar handle. Determined, she braced a foot against the edge of the concrete pad. Held her breath. And pulled.

She didn't know about the priming switch. And so spent the next several minutes yanking on the starting cord, and getting nothing from the generator but sputtering. Now winded, and with drops of sweat beading her forehead and beginning to trickle down the small of her back, in spite of the cellar's relatively cool atmosphere, she had to stop.

Glaring at the generator, she clawed her damp bangs out of her eyes. Squatted. And took a minute to catch her breath. With a heavy sigh, she put a hand on her forehead and closed her eyes. Wondering what she was doing wrong. Thinking surely there must be something.

She was still sitting there on her heels a few minutes later when she heard the sound of the outside cellar door open. Sunlight came spilling down the stairwell.

She shot straight up on her feet. Heart pounding. Eyes wide and staring toward the stairs. A long shadow momentarily blocked out the sun and slithered down the right wall. The sound of footsteps followed. Finally, a figure appeared.

“Jack!” she started. “You trying to give me a heart attack?”

Jack, who didn’t know she was in the cellar, was as startled by her as she was by him. He lost his footing on the stairs, and half-stumbled, half-rolled down the next three steps on the balls of his feet.

“Oh!” She started, and lunged forward. Having no idea what she was going to do. But Jack threw out his hand and braced himself against the wall. Warding off an otherwise painful tumble to the cellar’s hard-packed floor.

“Well,” Ronni said. “I guess now we’re even.”

He stared and blinked at her. As if still in a bit of shock at coming in and finding her down here.

“Well, come on if you’re coming,” she told him.

He did, but continued to look unsure. Uneasy. With her. So skittish, she thought. The most curious man she had ever met in her life. Why he seemed to feel the need to tiptoe around her was a complete bafflement.

“S-sorry,” he stammered. He descended the remaining steps to ground level. Stopped at the base of the stairwell. Stood looking at her.

Ronni waved a hand. Swept back her hair and sighed. “It’s okay.”

He inched forward. Stopped again. Glanced around the cellar. Saw the gas can. And the candle lighting up a small area around the generator.

“It won’t start,” she said, following his gaze.

Jack eased closer. Tentatively.

“I gave it the gas,” she added, in case he was wondering.

“Did you...?” He pointed. “The...primer switch...”

Ronni looked up. "There's a priming switch?"

Jack started toward the generator with his extended arm leading the way. "You have to..."

"Work the priming switch," she finished for him. No wonder the damned thing wouldn't start.

"Do you want me to--"

"Please, Jack, yes," she said. Nodding emphatically. "Thank you."

He knelt in front of the generator. Pointing with one finger at the switch she couldn't see from here. "I can show you. In case...you know, if you ever have to do it yourself."

"Oh. Good idea." She hurried over to join him. Hunkered down on her heels. And paid strict attention.

"S-see?" He put his finger on it. A small round rubbery thing.

"Okay."

He moved his hand away. Looked at her. Waited.

"Me? Oh." She put a fingertip to the rubbery ball. Pressed. Felt the tiny switch just behind the rubber. Heard it click faintly as she pushed it in. "I got it!"

Jack grinned. Amused by her look of discovery. "Again," he said.

She gave it another poke. Heard and felt the satisfactory *click*. "How many times am I supposed to do this?"

"Depends."

When he didn't continue, she looked at him. Propped her elbow on her knee. "On?"

"Oh. Well." He scratched his head. "Usually you want to prime her maybe two or three times. Like when she runs out of gas?"

"Uh-huh."

"But she's been sittin' up awhile. S-so you'll need to give her maybe five or six primes."

"Okay." She turned back to the generator. Pushed the priming switch five more times.

“Only, you have to be careful,” he added.

Ronnie stayed her hand. Looked at him again. Waited.

“Too much gas’ll choke her.”

*Why did temperamental machinery have to be female?*

“So how do I know if I’ve overdone it?”

“Over, under, same difference,” he told her.

“It won’t start,” Ronni concluded. And Jack nodded in affirmation. “Okay.” She stood. “Shall we give it a try?”

“You go,” he responded.

She shrugged. “Okay.”

She leaned forward. Wrapped both her hands around the handle at the end of the cord. Braced herself. But paused when she realized Jack hadn’t moved yet.

“Should you be sitting so close?” she asked him. When staring at him didn’t do the trick.

“I need to look,” he said. And when she hooked up an eyebrow in questioning, he added, “For leaks and such.”

“Oh. That makes sense. Okay.”

She turned back to the generator. When she pulled the starting cord this time, the motor rumbled to life. The sound of it filled the cellar. It vibrated deep in her ears. And trembled the earth beneath her feet.

“Good!” Jack called. She looked at him and he gave her a thumbs-up. She laughed and gave him one right back.

Momentarily, the motor’s loud rumbling dropped off. Leveled out. And quieted to a smooth, steady hum.

Jack proceeded with his careful inspection of it. Checking connectors. Running his hands along the fuel hose feeling for leaks. Then moving on to examine other components.

She wanted to invite him to stay for dinner. But suspected he would decline. Because he didn’t like being given anything. It was difficult for her to fully understand such pride in someone who possessed so very little. She did know one thing. She needed to find something in addition to the generator that required his seeing to it, if she hoped to have the

opportunity of talking with him more at length. There must be all sorts of things that needed attending to around this place...She would find something, surely.

Watching him, it was obvious to her that he was a man who cared about whatever it was he took to task. She got the sense that the generator could have been any number of other things, and he would have expended just as much time and energy on it. Seeing this firsthand led her to reason that he had treated her grandmother with the utmost respect and loyalty. No doubt giving his all when and where it had been needed. And now he was extending to her this same consideration. Which went well beyond ensuring that the generator was in proper working condition.

She imagined he must have ventured to the cabin daily in anticipation of her arrival. Because her grandmother had instructed him to watch for her, he'd said. And kindly he had carried out her wishes. Loyal to her then, and loyal to her now, even after her death. Perhaps he considered it one last means of repaying the late Ester Mae Whitley for the caring she had shown him from the very beginning.

Ronni thought he could stand more looking after. Whether he liked it or not. But she was going to have to camouflage it.

Now he was checking the wiring leading off the back of the generator. Probably to insure that there were no loose connections, but she could only guess. Truth was, she didn't have a clue.

She knelt beside him. "Jack?"

He did not look up. "Hmm?"

She didn't think she had his full attention, but continued anyway. "I really appreciate you coming by. Helping me with this thing."

He continued with his tinkering. "Just figured I'd check in on you is all," he said. "Ester Mae would want me to."

“Well, I never would have gotten this thing started on my own.”

No response.

“So...I owe you one.” She paused. Took a breath. “I was thinking maybe you’d like to drop back by a little later. For dinner.”

Oh, that got his attention. He paused. Looked at her. Considering.

“I thought maybe we could crack open a jar or two of those vegetables.” She hooked a thumb toward them. “To go with the country ham I bought at Ruby’s this morning.”

His mouth twitched. She was making progress.

“It’s on ice right now. In the cooler.” She tucked her fallen hair behind her ear.

Jack scratched his bearded chin. “One of Ruby’s hams, you say?”

“Yeah.” She brushed a spot of dirt off her jeans. “You’d be doing me another favor too. I haven’t checked out the stove yet. Do you suppose you could take a look at it for me?”

“Well, if--”

“I don’t know a thing about appliances,” she went on. “Except how to switch them on and off. If it turns out there’s a problem with the stove...”

“I reckon I could--”

“Oh, that would be great,” she squeezed his arm. “Thank you, Jack.”

“Okay.”

He stood. She followed him up. Wondering why he hadn’t so much as cracked a smile yet. On the contrary, he was frowning. He looked downright disturbed, as a matter of fact. He found something on the ground to study rather intensely.

“Jack? What--”

“Long as it don’t take too long,” he said finally. And suddenly she realized.

“We’ll start early,” she offered.

“Cause I don’t stay past--”

“Sundown, I know.”

He wasn’t kidding. And she knew just how serious he took this sundown business. She’d witnessed it the day before.

“It’s okay.” She said, when what she really wanted to do was ask him why. It was a struggle not to. But she tucked the nagging question away in the back of her mind for now. This wasn’t the right time for it. “How about early afternoon?”

“I reckon that’d be all right.”

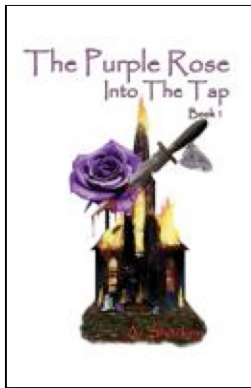
“You can look at the stove and we’ll still have time for dinner.”

He nodded. Turned to go.

“Thanks again, Jack,” she called after him, watching as he climbed the stairs.

He did not look back. Moments later he reached the top of the stairwell, and the world outside. Leaving the same way he’d come in. He folded the cellar door shut behind him. Extinguishing the sunlight.

Ronni knelt and picked up the candle. Her excitement burned as brightly as the candle’s dancing flame. She turned toward the opposite set of stairs that led to the cabin’s interior. Oblivious of the thing that watched her. Even when its movements grew more restless with each departing step she took...But it was careful. And cleverly hid itself in the cellar’s deeper shadows. Now was not the time...but soon...



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