

Book One of the  
Spared Territory Series

# SLINGSHOT 8

by Danny Creasy





*Seventy years after terrorists unleashed a weapons-grade virus on the world, a lone cluster of mankind survives in the Shoals Area of NW Alabama. Why? A U. S. Air Force C-130 carrying the only supply extant of the "Mad Flu" vaccine crash-landed at the Muscle Shoals Airport in Colbert County.*

*Two draconian figures, Henry Wade Smith III and Charles Edward Ragland V, stepped up, and in the vacuum of governmental and military collapse, they cooperated to save the citizens of their two counties. Smith ruled Lauderdale County on the north side of the Tennessee River, and Ragland became the benevolent dictator of Colbert County to the south. They succeeded but not without costs.*

*Democracy is gone; the Smith Ascendancy in Lauderdale and the Ragland Ascendancy in Colbert dictated the leaders since the apocalypse. A falling-out between the ruling families led to two devastating wars leaving the occupants of the "Spared Territory" divided and hate filled. Always competing for resources, the two principalities have reached another breaking point.*

*President Henry Wade Smith V is taking them to war for the third time from his seat in a painstakingly preserved Humvee, designated Slingshot 8...*

## **Slingshot 8**

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# ***SLINGSHOT 8***

**Danny Creasy**

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## Table of Contents

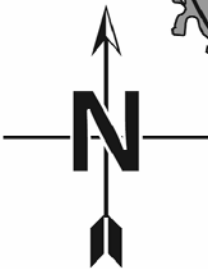
THE LAUDERDALES .....	ix
THE COLBERTS .....	xii
DAY ONE .....	1
DAY TWO .....	22
DAY THREE.....	60
DAY FOUR - THE MORNING.....	94
DAY FOUR - THE AFTERNOON .....	117
DAY FOUR - THE EVENING .....	163
DAY FOUR - THE NIGHT .....	189
DAY FIVE.....	220
DAY SIX.....	266
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	276

# SPARED TERRI

TENNESSEE

NORTHERN

LAUD



MISSISSIPI

Waterloo

TENNESSEE

Central

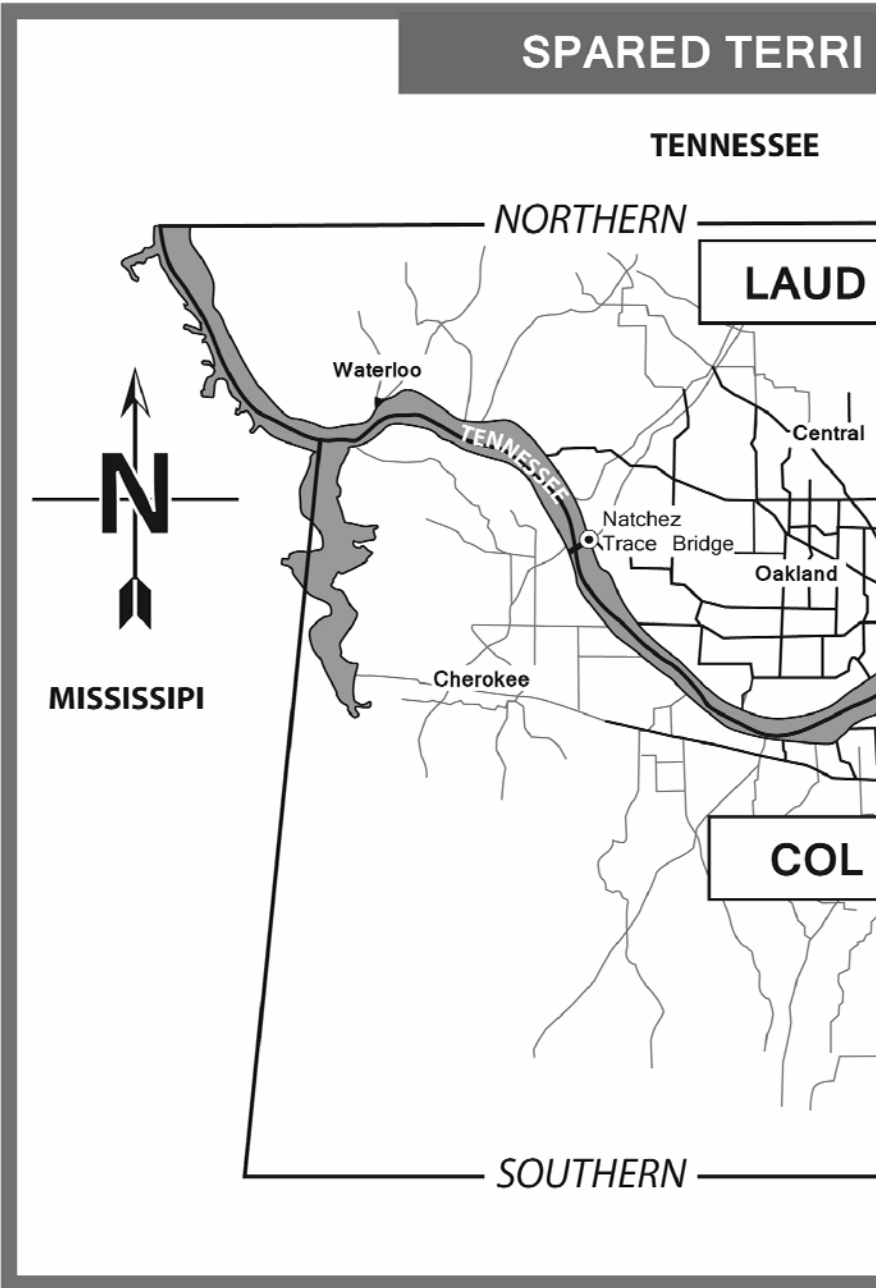
Natchez Trace Bridge

Oakland

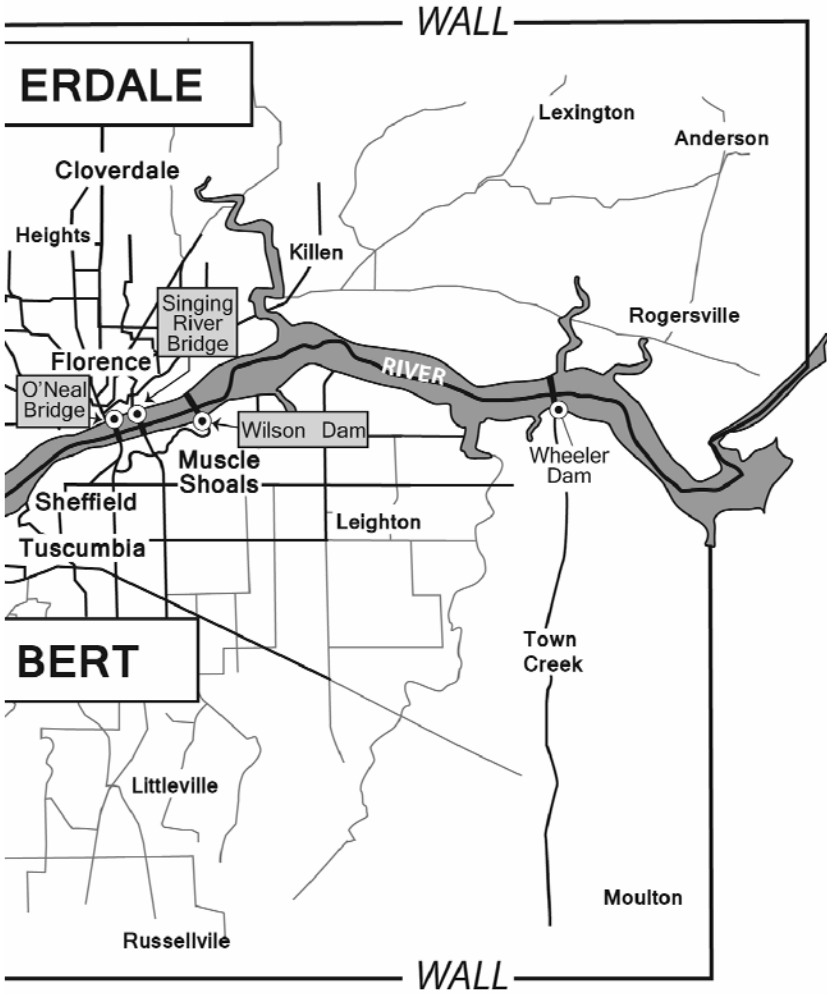
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# TORY- YEAR 70









## **THE LAUDERDALES**

“Henry” Wade Smith III – Former President, long-deceased

Henry “Wade” Smith IV – President

Henry “Harry” Wade Smith V – Son of the President – Overall  
Slingshot Commander

Philippa Smith Carter – Daughter of the President – Director of  
Ladies Auxiliary

Ben Smith – Brother of the President – Florence District Leader –  
Overall Commander, Lauderdale Militia

David Smith – Brother – Central/Waterloo/Oakland/Cloverdale  
District Leader

Clifford Hayes – Brother-in-Law – Green Hill/Lexington/Anderson  
District Leader

Peter Hayes – Brother-in-Law – Killen/Center Star/Elgin/Rogersville  
District Leader

Curtis Campbell – Nephew – Council Representative

Biscuit Gray – Nephew – Council Representative

Bill Snope – Nephew – Council Representative

### **Church Leaders**

The Reverend Arthur Canterbury – Lauderdale High Church Leader

Brother Eli Stram – Lauderdale Low Church Leader

### **The Slingshot Defense Force Commanders**

- Slingshot 1 – Colonel Phil Goins – Cloverdale – North Wall Defense  
Command  
Slingshot 2 – Major Donna Flurry (Phil’s daughter) – North Florence  
Slingshot 3 – Major Wayne Morris – Anderson  
Slingshot 4 – Major William Fuqua – West Florence  
Slingshot 5 – Captain Clara Smith (Ben’s daughter) – East Florence  
Slingshot 6 – Captain Bedford Smith (David’s son) – Waterloo  
Slingshot 7 – Chester Hayes (Clifford’s son)– Killen  
Slingshot 8 – Overall Slingshot Commander’s Humvee

### **Slingshot 8 Crew Members**

- Sergeant Mortimer “1911” Johns  
Corporal Chance Bardolph  
Corporal Thomas Nim  
Falstaff’s orphan – Robby

### **Commanders of Combat Arms and Support Units**

- Major Donnie Smith – Logistics  
Captain Thomas “Scooter” Shelton – Lauderdale Artillery  
Captain Jesus Juarez – Lauderdale Cavalry – mount’s name is *Chain  
Lightning*  
Lieutenant Neva Lazo de la Vega – Communications  
“Crazy” Ned Flanagan – Air

### **Enlisted Personnel, Lauderdale Cavalry**

- Sergeant Mark Gillespie – Platoon Sergeant – mount’s name is *Noble  
Deed*  
Corporal Michael Williams – Squad Leader, 1<sup>st</sup> Squad – *Dungee Boy*  
Private John Bates – Assistant Squad Leader, 1<sup>st</sup> Squad – *Black Jack*  
Private Alexander Court – Trooper, 1<sup>st</sup> Squad – *Cider* and later, *El  
Truenos*

## SLINGSHOT 8

Private Betty Sands – Trooper, 1<sup>st</sup> Squad – *Double Knot*  
Private Cameron Brown – Trooper, 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad/Buffalo Soldiers –  
*Sugar Rhea*  
Private Clive Bennett – M249 Gunner, Weapons Squad – *Hector*  
Private Jake Connelly – M240 Gunner, Weapons Squad – *Margie Sue*

### **Enlisted Personnel, Slingshot Teams**

Sergeant Annie Slocomb – Tactical Team Leader, Slingshot 2  
Corporal Ruff Creasy – Asst. Tactical Team Leader, Slingshot 5  
Private Deb Romine – Shooter, Tactical Team, Slingshot 2  
Private Judy Kelley – Shooter, Tactical Team, Slingshot 2

### **Militiamen, Zip City Squad, East Low Church Militia**

Sergeant James “Pastor Jim” Dayton – Squad Leader  
Corporal Mary Dayton (Pastor Jim’s daughter) – Assistant Squad  
Leader  
Private Tim Gray – Rifleman  
Private Jaybird Rhodes – Rifleman

### **Lauderdale Telephone System**

Sarah Haney, Senior Operator

### **Miss Nell’s Place – Inn, Restaurant, and Brothel**

Nell Quickly – Proprietor and Madam  
Ginger Davis – Prostitute  
Cold Zee – Prostitute



## **THE COLBERTS**

“Big” Charles Edward Ragland V – Former President, long-deceased

“Little” Charles Edward Ragland VI – President

Isabel “Izzy” Ragland – Wife of the President

Charles Edward Ragland VII – Son of the President – Director of  
Operations for Wilson and Wheeler Dams

Catherine Isabel Ragland – Daughter of the President – Liaison to the  
Colbert People

Daniel “Danny” Ragland – Nephew of President – Constable of  
Colbert – Commander of Black Force Knights and Colbert Militia

Lawrence Foster – Adjutant Constable of Colbert

### **Coffee Club Members**

Pickard Thompson – Leading Colbert Industrialist

Midge Burkett – Credit System Director

The Reverend Thomas Utter – Colbert High Church Leader

Brother Donnie Butler – Colbert Low Church Leader

### **Ragland Staff Members**

Johnny Montjoy – Envoy to Lauderdale

Alice Boyd – Catherine Ragland’s Personal Assistant and Body  
Guard

Knight Holt – Head of Security, Ragland Palace

*SLINGSHOT 8*

Gail Atkinson – Black Force Communications Assistant

**Colbert Militia Roving Sniper Team**

Corporal Jimmy Putnam – Shooter

Corporal Ted Creasy – Spotter



# **DAY ONE**



Henry “Harry” Wade Smith V shifted his arms and legs ever so slightly to ease his stiffening muscles and joints. He had been flat on his belly for almost an hour. Harry let his heavy binoculars rest on the ground for a moment; his arms were cramping. If the tip was accurate, the swimmer should have already shown. Harry’s traitorous cousins, Curtis Campbell, Biscuit Gray, and Bill Snope, made their appearance as the morning sun broke over the horizon; but their Colbert messenger was late. Curtis and Biscuit perched on the tailgate of Bill’s big 4X4 pickup truck while Bill stood in the bed anxiously watching the ancient river. Curtis, this sector’s River Watch commander, must have given the early shift a morning off with a promise to cover for them.

Chance Bardolph, Mortimer “1911” Johns, and Harry arrived well before sunrise. They had also brought along the orphan named Robby. After parking Slingshot 8 well off the Gunwaleford Road and covering it with some brush, the three Lauderdale men left Robby with a 12 gauge pump shotgun. They told him to stay close to the vehicle and be quiet. Harry then led his old soldiers down to a remote earthen boat ramp on the river where they carefully selected an advantageous spot from which to observe the rendezvous. The colors were turning, but few leaves had fallen; the men had no trouble concealing in the dense foliage.

According to Harry’s spy, the Colbert scuba diver was supposed to emerge from the Tennessee River around sunup and meet with Harry’s cousins. Harry did not know what information or items were to pass, but he knew it had to be dangerous. The plotters hated Harry’s father, President Smith, and they had been jealous of Harry since the four were boys.

*Could it have been too cold for the diver?* thought Harry. Typical for November in Northwest Alabama, it bottomed out around 40 degrees as they departed Florence. The water temperature would



be close to the same. *Properly suited up, the messenger should be fine*, Harry optimistically reasoned.

As soon as Harry finished his internal argument, a head bobbed up from the shiny green water. The conspirators shuffled down the old earthen boat ramp to help the diver remove his flippers and tank. They walked him back up to the truck and Biscuit poured the cold Colbert man a cup of coffee from his battered stainless steel thermos.

“Damn,” Harry whispered to Bardolph at his side, “That son of a bitch used to drag out that same old thermos when we hunted whitetails at Waterloo.”

“Shh,” Bardolph responded from Harry’s side. He patted Harry’s shoulder with a calming touch that was no stranger to the young heir apparent.

The meeting lasted only a few minutes. The diver removed a plastic bag from inside his thermal suit and handed it to Cousin Curtis. The distance was only about 80 yards. Harry easily made out folded papers in the clear plastic bag. Curtis didn’t even open it. The messenger and the traitors talked intensely and quietly for a few minutes before and after the exchange.

As the covert meeting was concluding, Bill went to the cab of the truck and retrieved a manila envelope. He handed it to Curtis; and Curtis proceeded to open the plastic bag. The Colbert contents and Lauderdale contents were swapped, and the freezer bag was sealed and returned to the diver.

After the diver secured the bag and zipped his suit, Harry’s cousins appeared to offer physical assistance to the messenger as he lifted his diving tank. However, he waved them off and urged the Lauderdale men to depart. Harry’s nervous kin gave little argument, climbed into the 70-year-old truck, and noisily departed. As the bio-diesel fueled truck passed from view, the diver shuffled over to a tree stump near the riverbank, sat down, and stiffly began putting on his flippers.

Harry looked back over his shoulder at old 1911 and softly commanded, “Mort, hand me my rimfire.”

The 62-year-old subordinate anticipated Harry’s need and had the sleek .22 caliber rifle ready. Staying low, he slid the rifle to

Chance. Chance eased it over to Harry. Harry rolled on his back and exchanged the binoculars for the bolt action rifle. As Bardolph focused the field glasses on the distant diver, Harry ran his left arm through the loop in the decades-old supple leather rifle sling. He cinched it tight above his bicep and rolled back over to assume a prone firing position. Earlier, Harry told 1911 to set the variable scope on 8-power, set the adjustable objective halfway between the 50 and 100-yard marks, insert a five round magazine of sub-sonic hollow points, cycle a round in the chamber, and place the rifle's safety on. With a trust forged since his childhood, Harry had no reason to check these settings.

The diver stood and turned towards the river. He was fiddling with his mask, and the pause provided a perfect silhouette. Harry eased the safety off and centered the scope's reticle on the back of the frogman's head. The shooter took a deep breath, let most of it out, raised the point of aim a couple of inches over his victim's noggin, and began to press the trigger. At the shot, the six-inch silencer, threaded to the rifle's 16.5-inch barrel, suppressed the report. Not a bird on the river fluttered. The Colbert man's knees buckled and he fell forward jerking and prostrate at the river's edge with his head in the water.

Harry cleared his weapon and passed it back to 1911 in exchange for the team's LLSR-10. A 7.62X51mm battle rifle based on a scaled up M16 receiver, Lauderdale Loads had manufactured a dozen of these powerful and accurate weapons for the Slingshot Teams in ST year 65. The development of the Lauderdale Loads Slingshot Rifle Model 10 was one of Harry's earliest administrative assignments. Facilitating projects requiring the fulfillment of governmental needs by privately owned enterprises had become one of Harry's fortes.

The typical river fog was rising in the channel, so the visibility from the Colbert side was obscured. Given the shroud, they all advanced slowly to the motionless body. No Barrett wielding marksman from the south side of the river could threaten Harry and his men.

Bardolph rolled the man over, unzipped his suit, and retrieved the plastic bag. He handed it to 1911, and then removed the diver's oxygen tank, mask, diving weights, and flippers. Harry scanned all directions for observers or interlopers. 1911 had brought along a large nylon bag and rope. After he and Bardolph filled the bag with a couple of hundred pounds of rocks, they wrapped the rope around the dead man's mid-section and tied the loose end to the bag. Bardolph grimaced in the cold water as he waded the body out into the river. When Bardolph was waist-high, he slid the diver into the current and watched him float away. The insulated diving suit provided some buoyancy, but the bag of rocks soon pulled the body beneath the surface.

As expected, the little soft-lead bullet did not exit, thus the dead man's face was intact. Harry thought he recognized the middle-aged courier, from a ball game or some such event — back during The Peace. “Was that a Chandler?” asked Harry. “He looked like one of them Chandlers from Colbert Mountain.”

Bardolph shrugged and answered, “Coulda' been. Some Colbert gal will be missin' her man tonight.”

“Damn, Harry, your mole was right on with the info about this drop!” commented 1911.

“That's true enough,” added Bardolph, “Harry, that poor Colbert bastard had a nice little knife and a stainless .38 Special on him. Can I keep 'em?”

Harry thought a moment and said, “No. Well, you keep the knife, but give the revolver to Robby. He ain't got a handgun.”

“Will do, Harry,” Bardolph acknowledged without hesitation.

The tired men divided the burden of the scuba gear and hurried back to Slingshot 8. Harry had securely donned the heavy tank, not only to help out his aging companions, but this would keep his arms and hands free to operate the LLSR-10. Fortunately, Harry's skills as a killer got a rest. They made their way back to young Robby without incident. The mist from the river swept them ahead of it.

The observant young man shivered as he watched his seniors approach. He wondered if his chill was caused more by the cold or the eerie white cloud following the returning Slingshot team. Robby

raised his gloved hand high above his head and saw 1911 respond with the same recognition. Robby was relieved that all three men returned. They'd soon be headed back to the warmth and sustenance of Miss Nell's place. He could only imagine how good the hotcakes, bacon, and chicory would taste. He knew nothing of this mission's objective, but he had found it best not to concern himself with such matters.



“Hello, preacher!” greeted Arthur Canterbury.

The Low Church leader, Eli Stram, responded, “Hello, Arthur! At least you didn't have to bring your kneepads for my church. I guess that's a relief.”

Reverend Canterbury played along with the jibe and said, “Yes, that will give these old arthritic knees a rest.”

The two men chuckled then shook hands. Brother Stram gestured for his old friend to have a seat on the front row. Eli glanced around the sanctuary to make sure they were alone and joined Arthur on the pew.

Both men sighed with the pleasant relief of getting off their feet. They each had a busy morning.

“How're Grace and the family, Arthur?”

“Fine. Just fine, Eli, and how about your Mary and that new grandbaby?”

Eli knew better than to deceive his old High Church friend, and decided to quickly dispense with the painful news in his life. However, always the optimist, he opened on a high note, “The little girl is healthy and happy, and beautiful to boot!” Then he dropped his smile, looked into Arthur's eyes with his own watering ones and said, “Doctor Flynn says that Mary's cancer is growing and all we can do is try to keep her comfortable.”

Reverend Canterbury's joyful smile dropped, "Oh no, Eli. That is sad to hear. Yes, very sad news. God bless you and your family, my old friend."

"Thank you, Arthur."

"I take it, you have her at home?"

"Yes, we hired Betty Flynn to come take care of her."

"Ah, there is none better than Nurse Betty."

They both looked around to escape the anguish, and in unplanned unison, wiped away tears with their wrinkled hands.

"Let me know what I can do to help, Eli."

"I will, my friend. I will."

After a moment or two, Eli asked with a businesslike tone, "What is the latest on Brother Wade?"

Arthur answered, "I fear that President Henry Wade Smith will not survive the day. I only left the hospital because of the urgency of our meeting."

"Was Harry there when you left, Arthur?"

"No, our would-be leader slipped out around midnight after receiving a visit from Mortimer Johns."

"Dear Lord! 1911 Johns? Arthur, that old reprobate should have been hanged a dozen times."

"I agree, Eli. Nonetheless, he and his two cronies have always had Wade's back. All three are bound even tighter to young Harry."

Eli asked, "Do you think it had something to do with those trouble making sons of the Smith sisters?"

"I'm almost sure of it, Eli. Those three are like a pack of wolves at the kill. They will never be satisfied with the Smith Ascendancy, even as successful as it has been. Their busybody mothers have pushed for free Lauderdale elections for years, and the whole lot of 'em see this as an opportunity."

Eli considered for a moment and then said, "Some of my Low Church elders have told me that Biscuit, Curtis, and Bill have been talkin' up their ole Colbert friendships and griping about everybody's lost trade."

“Eli, I would not put it past ‘em to conspire with the Colberts and sellout Lauderdale in a power grab — all under the cover of elections.”

“There must be good reason for Ben Smith’s placing the militias on High Alert Status.”

“These are grave matters, Reverend Canterbury.”

“Yes indeed, Brother Stram.”

“The two of us need to meet with Harry real bad, Arthur. Surely, he will call a meeting of the Lauderdale leaders after his daddy’s passing.”

“Yes, he will, Eli. Wade’s brother Ben told me that Harry asked his four uncles to plan for a council meeting within a half-day of Wade’s death — no matter the hour.”

“My Low Church congregations are sick of the Colberts’ escapades over the past two months. They are ready to fight. How ‘bout your uppity ups?” asked Eli while giving a teasing poke of his finger to Arthur’s forearm.

Arthur feigned insult and answered, “Some of my people will need urging, but there is as much High Church blood soaking these fields as Low. My parishioners remember, my friend, they remember.”

“I know they do, Arthur. Please remember to keep me informed.”

“I will, Eli. Now, I must get back to the hospital. Give my regards to Mary and your kids. You are all in my thoughts and prayers.”

“I will, Arthur. Be safe, and Jesus be with you.”

The Reverend Arthur Canterbury departed the Petersville Church and checked his watch. It was half-past ten, and there was still much to do. *War! Well, if it has to be.* He put on his cuff-clips, climbed on his bicycle, and pedaled off to the hospital.



Harry slowly awoke from a deep sleep at noon. As he had requested, pretty Ginger Davis had come in to wake him up. Ginger was never brusque about this task. She was perched cross-legged on the corner of the bed. Unaware that Harry was awake, the nineteen-year old was looking at herself in the mirror while softly singing along to a song on her tiny Old World media player, which was a gift from Harry. It had hundreds of pre-Mad Flu songs stored on it and was her most treasured worldly possession. He grinned as he watched her long red tangles dance back and forth. She had an earplug cord in each hand and gently swayed them back and forth with the beat of the song. She had a nice voice, and Harry had no trouble determining the song. Given all his troubles, he couldn't imagine a better way to wake up. Harry had every intention of letting the song play out, but Ginger glanced at his face and saw his open eyes.

She exclaimed in embarrassment, "Oh, you and that shit eaten' grin!" She pulled the earplugs, tossed them aside, and dove on top of Harry, flailing away in a half-hearted beat down.

Harry took the hits with no resistance, and his smile turned to laughter. This just frustrated Ginger more and the mock punishment continued until she tired and collapsed at Harry's side. He rolled over and kissed her. Their lips parted. She shyly smiled.

"Hey, what ya' got to trade for a tumble, your highness?"

He chuckled at the working girl and replied, "I got a box of .22 long rifle cartridges over in my coat pocket."

"Is it a full box?"

"Well, there's one round missing."

Ginger considered for a moment and countered, "Two boxes?"

"Hell, nah. I ain't got two boxes with me. It's one or nuthin', darlin'!"

"Hmm. Okay, one it is," said Ginger. She stood facing her vanity's mirror. After pulling loose the bow of her pink chiffon robe,

she let it slip from her shoulders to the floor. Her gaze never left Harry's reflection.

Harry had always thought she had the best figure in Lauderdale, and with her standing there naked, at five feet two and a hundred pounds, he had no reason to change his mind.

She knew she was as hot as a firecracker and loved mesmerizing the soon to be most powerful man in Lauderdale.

Harry asked, "Where'd ya' get that tan this late in the season, girl?"

Ginger pivoted to Harry and giggled, "See what ya' miss when you're gone for more than a couple of days? Nell just acquired the last workin' tannin' bed in the Spared Territory. She keeps it down in the basement and guards it with her life. We been takin' turns using it.

"Why don't you just tan without a stitch and not have them bikini lines?"

"No way. That little white ass gets you boys going and out of here in half the time. Why?" She turned and looked back over her shoulder at the mirror, "You don't like it?"

"Aw nah — I like it just fine. Now, get it over here."

Harry reached out and grabbed Ginger's arm. He gently tugged her back onto the bed and pulled the thick covers over them.

She cooed, "Not that I want you to take 'half the time', Harry."

He smiled, "I wouldn't dream of it, darlin'."

Later, Harry sat up on the side of the bed and pulled on his BDUs. He stood and walked over to his coat. Harry fumbled around in the coat's side pockets for a few seconds. Ginger watched his shuffling about with curiosity and anticipation.

Harry neatly stacked three boxes of *Lauderdale Loads* rimfire ammunition on the dresser and said, "That's three, Ginger. I have to head back to the hospital. I shouldn't have been gone this long. After I leave, go down and bring Robby up here and show him what's what. I'm sure it will be his first time. So, be extra sweet and patient with him. Deal?"

"Deal!" said the elated redhead.



Harry finished dressing, put on his pistol belt and coat, and walked back over to the bed to kiss the beauty good-bye. Without another word, he winked at Ginger and then closed the door behind him on the way out.

Ginger looked at the stack of ammo on her dresser, and thought, *Damn, me and Nell have enough to trade for a new wind generator now.*

She laid on her back for a moment. After a couple of minutes of daydreaming, she said quietly, “Ginger girl, you got paid in advance. Now, you best go earn it.” She chuckled and thought, *Oh well. That Robby is kinda’ cute.*



President Charles Edward Ragland VI glared at his son, Charles Edward Ragland VII. Charles leaned back in his sumptuous leather desk chair while Eddie sat across from his father. The Colbert President’s office was on the third floor of the Ragland Building high atop Sheffield’s river bluff. The wall behind Charles was dominated by a large picture window providing a magnificent view of the Tennessee River, the O’Neal and Singing River Bridges, and downtown Florence. The entrance of Constable Daniel Ragland broke their stares. Danny Ragland had entered without knocking. He had no fear of reprimand from his Uncle Charles. As Constable, he was second in power to Charles, with direct control over all of Colbert’s defense and law enforcement personnel. Charles trusted no one more than his nephew.

Danny caught the air of tension hanging in the room. He exchanged glances with the two men and asked, “What’s up with you two?”

Charles smirked at his son and responded, “Oh, we’re fine. Aren’t we fine, Eddie?”

Edward slurred, “Just fine, Cousin Danny, everthang’s peachy.”

Noting the sarcasm, Danny decided to invest little in the fuss and move on, “Okaaay then,” After sitting in the chair next to Edward, he announced, “Chandler has not returned.”

Charles shot back, “What the hell? That was hours ago. Wasn’t he supposed to meet Biscuit and his cousins around sunup? Shit, even this pussy over here”— pointing at his son —“could’ve scuba dived the Tennessee River three times by now.”

Danny showed no weakness or sense of responsibility. He felt no need to respond to the obvious.

However, Edward did, “Didn’t you have spotters watchin’ him from our side?”

The president snarled at Eddie, “Of course he did, and they couldn’t see a damn thing through the fog on the river. Right, Danny?”

Danny Ragland simply nodded affirmatively and added, “My observers didn’t hear a shot, but that doesn’t mean much. I have had them spot-checkin’ ever since the fog burned off, but no luck. No sight of a body — nothin’. They did hear a vehicle, but that was probably just Biscuit and them other two traitorous sons-uh-bitches.”

The three men pondered in silence for a moment.

Edward knew that he would get his head bitten off once more, but he chose to press on, “Now we don’t know when, where, or how they are going to kill Harry.”

His father and cousin frowned at Edward.

Knowing he would probably have to answer to the president’s son someday, Danny invested in his future by shrewdly inserting himself between the disgruntled father and son. He turned his head to Edward and said, “That’s true enough, Edward. I thought about all this on the way over here, and I have an idea.” Quickly, he turned back to President Ragland and continued, “We know that Wade is on his deathbed, and we can guess that Harry will call a full council meeting as soon as his daddy has passed. I say we gamble and send an ambassador across the river under a flag of truce.”

“What good will that do?” asked Edward.

Charles said nothing, as he contemplated about the direction his nephew may be going.

Danny continued, “If we send the right person over there, openly, he can at least assess the situation and see if Biscuit, Curtis, and Bill are still in the mix. If they are missing from the meeting, then we can assume that they have been found out. We know that they weren’t going to move on Harry for at least a day or two after Wade’s death.”

Charles said, “It would need to be quick.”

“Absolutely,” responded Danny.

“Who do you have in mind, Danny?” asked Edward.

As the constable pondered, Charles said, “Johnny Montjoy.”

“What the hell? That old fag?” blurted Edward.

Danny interjected, “Yeah, Montjoy. He’s perfect - smart, unthreatenin’, an’ charmin’.”

Charles chuckled and said, “Those Smith bitches loved that guy back in The Peace. He was invited to every party, wedding, and funeral. And, he knows ‘em well.”

“But, Daddy! —”

“Nah, that’s enough son. Johnny may be gay or just a big sissy. Whatever. But, he is loyal, kin, and downright fearless. You two don’t know this, but I used him as a spy when Johnny was a teacher in Florence. He worked at their college and rented a room from that rich ol’ widow lady, Mary Parker. He went around on sightseeing trips. Under the guise of documenting the flora and fauna of Lauderdale, he plotted the Slingshot patrol routes. That’s what enabled us to knock most of ‘em out on the first day of the Three Day War.”

“No shit?” uttered Edward.

Danny indicated no surprise. The Colbert Constable was, in fact, aware of Montjoy’s contributions to the field of espionage. He asked, “Uncle Charles, how’s his health? What is he? Like seventy somethin’?”

“No, no, not that old. Miss Isabel, on her good days, keeps me up on him just like everybody else in our territory. He’s pretty spry. If memory serves, he celebrated his 65th birthday this year.”

“You know we need to respond to the Lauderdale’s formal complaint about the electrical supply anyway, Daddy. Could that give us an angle?”

Shocked, the two territorial leaders smiled at the young man.

“Damn, son. That’s a good thought. Maybe there is hope for you yet.”

Proud, but embarrassed, Edward sat up with his chest pumped.

After a moment of mutual contemplation, Charles jumped in, “Okay, I better go see Johnny, myself. I know he’ll do it. Crap, it’s almost three o’clock. Danny, prepare an escort for Mr. Johnny and break the ice with the guards at the Dam — both sides, ours and theirs. I will have Johnny here at seven tonight for a briefing. Both of you be here a few minutes before that. Clear?”

Edward and Danny simply nodded, stood, and departed. Both men always knew when Charles Ragland was done.

Charles waved them out and walked to his big office window. He stared out over the Tennessee River, across to Florence, and beyond. He would normally imagine Wade Smith staring back at him, but at this moment he smirked, and figured his old Lauderdale foe was probably staring at nothing but the ceiling, if that.



Harry Smith stared out of his father’s office window. His trip to the hospital was delayed by a meeting with his uncles. The meeting at the Lauderdale Building started at two o’clock. An hour later, it was over. Ben Smith, David Smith, Peter Hayes, and Clifford Hayes had departed. Ben and David were his father’s brothers. Peter and Clifford were his late mother’s brothers. He loved and trusted all four of the men. Each one ruled a different section of Lauderdale. Ben controlled the center of the territory and lived in Florence. David lived in Waterloo and saw to the west end. Peter did the same for the east end out of the Lexington community. Clifford held down the heavily populated Killen area just east of Florence.

He had disclosed the contents of the diver's envelope. It angered and hurt all five of them. Harry's traitorous cousins were making a power play. They had cut a deal with the Raglands to kill Harry, sabotage the Slingshots, and generally panic the Lauderdale populace. These activities would pave the way for an invasion force already assembled at the Colbert's Nitrate City Training Center. When a new order was restored, the Raglands would rule both sides of the river. The three traitors and their families would hold positions of power. Unfortunately, the envelope did not contain a disclosure of the invasion's river crossing or a battle plan. The Raglands were too wary for that.

Biscuit wrote that he would transmit a coded spark-gap message as soon as Wade died. He further promised that Harry would be assassinated within 24 hours of Wade's death followed by his accomplices' simultaneous attacks on the Slingshot Teams. He could not guarantee the destruction of all eight Slingshots, but he assured the Raglands that the force would be crippled.

The hot-tempered Hayes brothers wanted to go shoot all three of the conspirators and jail their wives and parents immediately, but Harry calmed them down and presented a plan. The five men worked out the details and promised to say nothing of this matter to anyone — not even their Slingshot team commanders.

Harry urged himself to go to his daddy's side, but he dreaded the pain of seeing the most important and beloved person in his world pass. He glanced at the Ragland Building on the Sheffield bluff and growled, "I'm going to send you to hell, Little Charles, and I'll make sure your goddamn son and nephew are there to keep you company!"

Harry's Uncle Ben was waiting to drive him over in his old pick-up. Two of Ben's men sat in the back. No weapons showed, but Harry knew the boys had heavy firepower concealed in the truck bed. As they drove away, Harry wondered if his next visit to this building would not be to his Daddy's office, but rather his own.



Robby came down the long staircase at Miss Nell's on wobbly legs. A moment earlier, Ginger had gently escorted the young man to her door, tousled his shaggy brown hair, and sent him on his way. Robby floated over to a big leather chair in Nell's front room and plopped down to stare out the room's picture window.

Shortly, Robby's orphan friend Brud Tate came in cockily strutting across the room. "What the hell is up with you, Dude?" asked Brud.

Robby shook off his dreamy state and glanced at Brud. Embarrassed, he mumbled, "Aw nuthin', Brud. What are you up to?"

Mean chuckles emitted from the shadowed corner of the room turning the orphans' heads in their direction. After a blink of their eyes to adjust to the dim view, they recognized the profiles of Slingshot 8 crewmen Chance Bardolph and Thomas Nim sitting at the corner's small table and two chairs.

"Nuthin' — my ass" growled Bardolph. "Our little Robby just lost his cherry. If that ain't enough; Ginger got it!"

A bunch of feelings came over Brud, but he thought it best to not respond. There was not only jealousy in Bardolph's words but anger, too. Bardolph and his old buddies had repeatedly begged Ginger to be with them ever since she started working for Nell the year before. However, the beauty would have nothing to do with them at any price. She sold her favors dearly to only those men she liked and to whom she was physically attracted. Her clients were usually young men from the gentry. Occasionally, a handsome construction worker or farmhand would get spruced-up, travel to *Miss Nell's*, and proffer a week or two's pay in exchange for Ginger's favors.

After Brud assessed that the two soldiers were probably too drunk to do anything but cuss and stare, he looked back to Robby and asked, "No shit, man?"

Robby said nothing, but his expression answered his friend.

Suddenly, 1911 and Nell burst in from the back. They were giggling, hugging, and kissing like a couple of lovesick school kids. The couple straightened up a bit after they became aware of their audience. They had obviously just departed Nell's quarters in the back of the cavernous inn.

Brud broke the silence, "Hi, Miss Nell! Hey, Sergeant Johns!"

Nell and 1911 slowly shifted their gazes from the cloistered Nim to the boys. Their smiles returned as they said, almost in unison, "Hello, fellas!" Neither addressed the dark corner.

1911 continued, "Well, my young friends, it is no longer Miss Nell, but Mrs. Nell or better yet, Mrs. Mortimer Johns."

Robby blurted, "Y'all got married this afternoon?"

Nell nodded with excitement.

The boys went over and gave congratulatory hugs to Nell and handshakes to 1911.

1911 teasingly added, "And, we have had our honeymoon as well!"

The embarrassed young men looked down while Nell smirked at 1911 and jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. She was a curvaceous blonde in her mid-fifties, but she looked ten years younger at this moment. The six-foot two 1911 seemed a strapping six-foot seven.

Nim stood and fired his chair backward into the next table. The noise caused the boys and the newlyweds to turn and step back defensively.

Everyone knew what was up. Nell Quickly, the madam of Lauderdale, had not turned tricks in years. She let her string of ladies handle that traffic. She saw over them, her restaurant and bar, and the attached hotel. Nell steadied with a series of different men since her "workin' days." Nim was one of them. She had long since gotten over him, but he could not claim the same. 1911 honored his friend's broken heart for a long time. He and Nell, friends for years, recently realized they loved each other and began keeping time a few weeks ago. Nim had cooled towards them, then smoldered. He missed their dawn mission because he had "hung-one-on" to try and bury his depression over the situation between 1911 and Nell.

This marriage news was just too much. Nim staggered towards 1911, flipping open his combat folder, and extending it threateningly. Quick as a cat, Bardolph, leapt from his chair, sending it crashing to the floor, and grasped the wrist of Nim's knife wielding right arm and twisted it up towards the ceiling and leaned into his friend to bring him down. Robby and Brud raced to Bardolph's assistance. Nim finally let Bardolph wrench the knife from his grasp and began to sob uncontrollably.

1911 started to advance from his defensive stance. Nell stepped in front of him, put a firm palm on his chest, and commanded, "No, no, you go to the back! Go on, get out of here!"

1911 sullenly departed — slowly backing away from the scene.

After 1911 was gone. Nell went forward and knelt at the distraught Nim's head. With her knees gently touching his crown, she bent her head over his, clasped her hands on his cheeks, and wiped away the tears. She motioned for the others to let Nim loose and move away. They complied cautiously. Robby subtly picked up Nim's blade as he rose, closed it, and handed it to Bardolph. They watched the madam and Nim carefully, but could not discern the cooling whispers Nell bestowed upon her past lover.

After a few minutes, Nell rose. Nim rolled over and then stood up. Embarrassed and beaten, he tried to stand up straight and take a proud stance — chest out. He seemed to want to step forward but was stiffly holding back. He finally said, "How about a shoulder, boys?"

Brud and Robby came to his sides. One under each arm, they walked the old warrior to the door. Bardolph looked at Nell, shrugged, turned, and followed them out.

Nell watched the door close behind them. She turned to take in and assess the damage. It was just overturned chairs and a broken glass. She caught the time on the big clock back above the bar. She called to her staff cowering in the bar and kitchen, "Mae, Mary, get out here and help me straighten up this mess! It's after four and the first guests should be here any minute. We got an establishment to run."





Harry had been sitting by his father's bed in the old Smith Hospital for a couple of hours. Slowly, the other friends and kin left the room. Wade Smith's congestive heart failure was sapping the life from him. His eyes were clinched shut as he gasped for breaths. He was not going away easily.

Shockingly, Wade rose up on his elbow, looked around the room then fixed on Harry. Harry leaned forward and gently pressed his father back down. However, Wade's eyes never left Harry's.

Wade began to speak — broken occasionally by gasps for air. "Harry, my strong, handsome son, you've had your good times. I can't fault you for that, but I hope you have burned up that wild hair up your ass. You're a good soldier, a good leader, a smart tactician, tougher than I ever was, but with a gentle heart. Son, I overheard the nurse telling y'all that Ol' Jack had just died, right down the hall. Well that leaves you on your own, man. Time to step up. The shit's about to hit the fan again with the Colberts, and you know what that means. Be hard when you have to — even ruthless — but save sumthin' for the gentler times. God, I hope for gentler times."

Harry watched Wade's eyes glaze over and he said, "So long, Daddy. God bless you."



Robby was jarred from his sleep by Bardolph's angry voice. "Goddammit, Robby, answer that phone!"

In deep sleep, the boy hadn't even heard the jangle of the old wall phone. He sat up, rose, and stumbled to the phone. He paused a second at the wall, shook off the sleep one more time, and picked up the receiver.

"Slingshot 8." Robby stated in a surprisingly coherent voice.

"Is that you, Robby?" asked Ben Smith.

“Yes, sir.”

“Robby, inform the 8 Team that President Smith passed away earlier this evening.”

“Uh...Oh... Yes, sir. I’ll tell them.”

“And, Robby.”

“Yes, Mr. Ben?”

“You know your ol’ guardian, John Falstaff? He passed away tonight as well.”

“Cap’n Jack is dead, too?”

“That’s right son. I’m sorry. I know he was like a Daddy to you.”

The boy could only manage a muted, “Ohhh.”

“Somebody should have come and got ya’. You know...to be at his side. I guess with all the hoopla over Wade’s condition and the fact that Jack went down so fast and unexpectedly...well, it just didn’t get done. I hate that, son. If it’s any consolation, Captain Falstaff was unconscious the whole time. The ladies from the home said that his head just tilted forward in the dining hall at supper, and it was like he went to sleep. They couldn’t rouse him, so they sent for an ambulance and had him brought to the hospital. He died a couple of hours before Wade. I guess those two old hard-knots just had to go out together.”

The boy had regained his voice and asked, “Is there anything else I need to tell the crew, sir?”

“Uh, yes there is, Robby. Someone will call in the morning with the details about both funerals. In the meantime, tell 1911 and the rest of ‘em to have Slingshot 8 all serviced, armed, and ready down at the council hall just before noon tomorrow. That is straight from Harry. Okay?”

“Yes, sir. The whole bunch, in the 8, outside the council hall, before noon.”

“That’s right, Robby. Good man. Now, you try and get back to sleep, son. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

“I will, Mr. Ben.”

“Okay, goodnight.”

“Goodnight, sir.”

*SLINGSHOT 8*

Robby returned to his bed, but sleep would be a long time returning. The recollections of a young man's life shared with an elderly soldier flooded his mind. Captain Falstaff had been hard on Robby but never cruel or unreasonable. There were many more good memories than bad. Robby was glad the old man went peacefully.

*I'll miss you, Cap'n. God rest your soul.*



*Seventy years after terrorists unleashed a weapons-grade virus on the world, a lone cluster of mankind survives in the Shoals Area of NW Alabama. Why? A U. S. Air Force C-130 carrying the only supply extant of the "Mad Flu" vaccine crash-landed at the Muscle Shoals Airport in Colbert County.*

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