

ELVIS THE GUNSLINGER

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|--|----|
| CHAPTER ONE – DINNERTIME..... | 1 |
| CHAPTER TWO – PEACE AND QUIET?..... | 8 |
| CHAPTER THREE – DUTY CALLS..... | 14 |
| CHAPTER FOUR – P-MONEY..... | 23 |
| CHAPTER FIVE – HOME AWAY FROM HOME..... | 27 |
| CHAPTER SIX – COULD HAVE, SHOULD HAVE..... | 31 |
| CHAPTER SEVEN – STUDY BREAK..... | 36 |
| CHAPTER EIGHT – MORE SNOOPING..... | 41 |
| CHAPTER NINE – VERY SAFEKEEPING..... | 46 |
| CHAPTER TEN – MR. HAPPY!..... | 50 |
| CHAPTER ELEVEN – FRIENDS, OLD AND NEW..... | 57 |
| CHAPTER TWELVE – A SPLASH OF UNCOMFORTABLE..... | 62 |
| CHAPTER THIRTEEN – A TIGER BIDS HELLO . . . AND ADIEU..... | 65 |
| CHAPTER FOURTEEN – “OFFICIAL” VISITORS..... | 74 |
| CHAPTER FIFTEEN – SCUZZY RENDEZVOUS..... | 78 |
| CHAPTER SIXTEEN – BACK TO THE COMPOUND..... | 84 |
| CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – WORKING HARD, PLAYING HARD..... | 92 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – SURVEILLANCE: A DANGEROUS OCCUPATION | 95 |
| CHAPTER NINETEEN – FULL-SERVICE ACCOMMODATIONS..... | 104 |
| CHAPTER TWENTY – DROPPING IN ON THE QUEEN..... | 112 |
| CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – READYING FOR A RIDE | 118 |
| CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO – MAPS AND MONEY..... | 121 |
| CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE – GETTING THE SHOW ON THE ROAD | 126 |
| CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR – OH, WHAT A TANGLED WEB | 132 |
| CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE – ARE YOU KIDDING ME? | 142 |
| CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX – SUCKERS, ALL OF THEM..... | 151 |
| CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN – EVERYBODY’S GOT A PLAN..... | 159 |
| CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT – THE START OF A BIG DAY..... | 168 |
| CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE – A COLORFUL EXCHANGE | 174 |
| CHAPTER THIRTY – DOWN AND DIRTY..... | 183 |
| CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE – ALL PAWS ON DECK | 191 |
| CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO – THE FINAL COUNTDOWN..... | 199 |
| CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE – A SLEEPLESS NIGHT..... | 208 |
| CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR – HOW IN THE WORLD? | 215 |
| CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE – TO THE VICTORS GO THE SPOILS | 221 |



CHAPTER ONE

DINNERTIME

Even those with a penchant for the spectacular need to recharge now and then, so he snoozed away early on a calm summer evening. Curled up in the rickety, wooden rocker perched on his country porch, directly in front of an enormous picture window. His dark brown fur contrasted sharply with the weathered gray seat as he rocked gently back and forth.

The fading sun was working its way from yellow to orange and the trajectory of its rays now forced a tight squint whenever Elvis tried to sneak a peek through his emerald green eyes. A slight chill began to set in as the shadows thrown by the pickets supporting the porch railing painted lines over his favorite resting spot. After a drawn-out yawn and a few licks to the white stockings of his forelegs, he casually slipped down from the rocker and strolled through the open doorway of his modest log home.

As he entered, much of the wall to his right was comprised of a brownstone fireplace that reached nearly to the three-foot high ceiling. His grandfather crafted the hulking structure when Elvis was just a kitten – his first memory. Above the mantle was his late father’s prized possession, an antique shotgun that had been used in the last great war, when the raccoons (the troublesome ones, anyway) were finally run out of the province. The coonskin rug on the floor below was a product of the first episode that forebode young Elvis’ own talents in battle. It conjured up memories of how he nearly bit off a little more than even he could chew that day.

To his left was a round, mahogany dining table encircled by five oak chairs, though only four fit around it neatly. His mother served the family dinner there each night until her passing, almost two years ago now. It held a warm place in Elvis' heart and was his very favorite spot to indulge in his second favorite pastimes, food and beverage. Beams of sunlight shone upon the tabletop through the window's sparkling pane of glass, but the brightest of the light had faded away.

He lazily worked his way over to a small, square cherry table in the corner of the room. On its front was a brass plate, inscribed with a message from the Governor: "To Elvis, a True Statesman." He gazed into the front yard as he raised himself onto his hind legs and slid open a tiny drawer. He plucked out a red-tipped match, struck it across a razor-sharp claw and set afire the wick of an oil lantern centered atop the table.

As he fell back to all fours, he extinguished the match with a quick puff from the side of his mouth, and then he meandered around the dining table and into the kitchen. A bulky cast iron woodstove in the very center of the room warmed the dwelling during the cooler months, but its primary occupation was to heat surfaces. It was there that Elvis practiced one of his hobbies, basic cooking. The wide window above the big porcelain sink provided a great view of the broad side of the faded blue barn that stood northeast of the house. A quick glance reminded Elvis that he ought to take care of the evening feeding while sufficient natural light remained for the task.

He scampered across the kitchen, dashed through the doorway on the side of the house, and swung the door closed behind him, reaching back to snatch his black leather hat off of a hook just before the door slammed shut on his paw. He straightened his headgear as he began to lope, and he quickly traversed the forty or fifty yards separating his abode from the big, sliding doors fronting the barn. Struggling to pry them open, he mumbled to himself for the umpteenth time about how much easier it would be if he would take just a few minutes out of his life to grease the rollers at the top. Some tasks, however simple, never seemed to find their way to the top of the Elvis priority list.

Elvis grunted as he pushed and pulled the doors open as wide as they would go, and then trotted down to the feed chute in the center of the barn. All was quiet for the moment, with the dogs still busy dozing in the back field. Elvis yanked upward on the chute door, releasing a torrent of small, crunchy brown chunks into the little red wheel barrow that he'd used for as long as he could remember to tote feed from stall to stall. The sound of rushing goodies snapped the canines out of their late day semi-slumber.

Simultaneously they rose to stretch, yawn and begin lumbering slowly toward the gate near the back of the barn. All approaching from different areas of the field, as if it had been choreographed. Meanwhile, Elvis made his way to the back doors and slid them open with considerably less effort than he had expended to achieve the same result at the front of the barn.

He bounced across a swath of green grass that was in sore need of a trim, and arrived at the swinging metal contraption that governed admittance to and from the field. By the time he had finished fiddling with the rusty latch (another good candidate for a lube job) that held the gate in place, the dogs had arrived together on cue.

Elvis made an effortless leap to the top of the gatepost and looked out over the field as he held the gate shut with his right forepaw. The fading sunlight gave shimmering highlights to the golden grass, all the way to the foothills at the end of the valley. The flat clouds hovering at the horizon were transitioning from a pale white to a purplish-pink, with a fiery red about to move in for the kill.

He sat mesmerized for a moment, but then was startled by a few crass barks from the troops. They weren't impressed by sunsets under even the most ordinary of circumstances, much less when dinner hung in the balance. Elvis lifted his paw and let the gate swing open to the sound of creaking hinges.

As usual, Amos was at the head of the pack. A young, spirited Catstralian Shepherd who was large for his breed and liked to be first regardless of what he was doing. Shuttling between field and

barn, being saddled and bridled for an evening trail ride, even lining up for the weekly application of flea spray. The nature of the activity was of little importance and all events held equal wonder in his wild eyes. He was happy just to be doing something and he seldom found reason to wait for someone else to kick things off.

Jezebel, a beautiful Black Labrador, was next through the gate, trailed closely by her five adorable puppies, who now were approaching two months in age and starting to resemble dogs, not the nondescript balls of fur that they were just weeks before. Although she finally was beginning to show signs of her eight years, Jez still was sharp as a tack and could run circles around most dogs half her age.

Speed (a misnomer if ever there was one) was not too far behind the puppies, moseying like a train whose conductor couldn't loosen himself from the brake. A gentle Collie, she was the perfect mount for Uncle Sam on the infrequent days when he needed to ride somewhere. They were a match made in heaven.

Daisy looked around to make sure that the others had made a safe exodus before rounding out the group, and then moved briskly toward the barn, jumping up to give Elvis a friendly lick on the face as she passed him by. She was slightly smaller than most Golden Retrievers, but the gate was a mere formality for her. She had launched herself over the six-foot, wire fence that surrounded the field on countless occasions, but only for sport, not escape.

Elvis often recounted the day when the cocky trainers at Kleptown Downs stood with their mouths agape after Daisy nearly outran the swiftest greyhounds they had to offer. Had the distance been much greater, they surely would have worn out and left her the outright victor. The day's wagers extended only to whether she could finish within twenty yards of the pack, and Elvis spent much of the train ride home that night counting his absurd winnings from the affair.

He considered taking in more of the sunset, but decided to postpone the matter for a few minutes, knowing that he would enjoy it

more if his chores were not left hanging over his head. So, he dashed into the barn while the others proceeded to their stalls. Elvis zigzagged down the aisle with his wheel barrow and water bucket, tossing scoops of feed into shiny metal trays and pouring cold water, fresh from the well located just outside of the barn, into faded black rubber bowls.

Nary two minutes later, was he negotiating the steep roof of the barn in an attempt to improve his vantage point for what remained of the setting sun. His stare was fixed and he seemed unaware of most everything else, as he watched the last of the big fireball creep over the horizon's edge from his choice spot on the apex. Peace and quiet were short-lived, taken in exchange for an inquiring voice.

“Elvis. ELVIS. ELVIS!” His head snapped down as he broke from his trance. He looked to where the road that passed by the front of the house met perpendicular with the pathway extending from the barn, worn over time by the wheels of the Elvis family wagon. He distinctly remembered eight o'clock being the appointed time, not seven-thirty. He hadn't even begun thinking about making a quick sweep of the house, much less setting some food out on the table. Minor inconveniences, though; Calli was stunning.

Elvis trotted along the apex to the front of the barn and launched himself to the ground. He landed soft and silent, and nonchalantly made his way toward her, reached for his hat (in place despite the nine-foot drop) and tipped it slightly, kissed her forepaw lightly and proceeded to escort her over the front lawn, up the steps, across the porch and into the living room.

As the door closed behind, he blindly tossed his hat over his left shoulder, landing it squarely on the hook set upon the back of the door. He then ushered Calli over to the big, worn leather couch in the front of the room, where they dabbled for a few minutes in meaningless small talk. Her ice blue eyes were startling against her sleek black fur. Elvis got up to begin kindling a fire, ostensibly to add light and warmth to the darkening room, but just as much to keep himself from staring embarrassingly.

She pulled the family photo album from the top of the walnut coffee table. Elvis always enjoyed showing it off, and he left her to peruse it while he disappeared into the kitchen to carve some bleu cheese from the pungent block that he'd picked up at Uncle Sam's grocery store earlier in the day.

Calli was new to town and Elvis was intrigued by her. He loved life in Woodville, whenever he had the chance to enjoy it, but it seemed unusual for a young woman of her beauty to take up residence there. On her own volition anyway. The cozy town provided a very peaceful setting for day-to-day life, but there certainly wasn't much excitement to be found.

She had said when they met that she hailed from Albemarle, a coastal town nearly forty miles to the west with a population almost ten times that of Woodville. Elvis was puzzled as to why she hadn't stayed there, or ventured someplace that offered at least a modicum of culture or vibrancy. Her story about wanting to get away from the hustle and bustle, and find a simple place to settle down after struggling to put herself through two years of study at an East Coast university, seemed a bit contrived.

A few bites of the tangy cheese had both of them yearning for a sip of something, so Elvis took her by the forepaw and led her down the hall. It was too dim to see what appeared to be artwork and a few family pictures lining the walls, and they continued to a closed door near the back of the hallway. The damp chill sneaking underneath the door hit Calli with full force as Elvis swung it open and descended into the musty darkness. Being led into a black basement by someone she'd really known for barely half an hour wasn't part of her usual repertoire, but she did her best to ignore the uneasiness.

She made her way down the steps on her hind legs, just behind Elvis, her right forepaw gripped tightly to a smooth banister that she could feel, but not see. The eerie silence hanging in the air as they approached bottom had her rethinking the decision to follow. An abrupt movement just ahead sent her leaping halfway back up the stairwell as she let out a piercing shriek.

She stopped just short of the doorway at the top of the steps as she heard the sound of Elvis giggling and saw the spooky room begin to light up. Elvis tried to steady himself from his own laughter as the large match in his paw burst into flame while he reached for the lantern perched on a small wooden shelf lodged in a corner. Slightly embarrassed, she crept back down and began to look around in amazement as Elvis bounced to the remaining corners, lighting three more lanterns without resorting to a second match.

Elvis had arranged for the cellar to be dug in the fall of '61. Though he still had a ways to go toward rounding out his stock, things were coming together. Elvis was reluctant to admit it, but Uncle Sam's eye for quality imports was improving with every trip to the marina, and Elvis by now had become a respectable connoisseur in his own right. Nearly every eastward journey he'd made during the past few years had included a detour to the heart of wine country to sample the latest there was to offer. Between shipments from noted vintners he'd befriended, and the rare wines and fine Champagnes that Elvis occasionally received as gifts from luminaries, he had amassed what was becoming a fairly impressive store of grape juice.

Because the imported Chardonnay that Calli chose was so exceptional, Elvis didn't bother to mention that he preferred red. They came back up the steps and Elvis made a quick detour on his way to the dining room, breezing through the kitchen to pick up a pair of wine glasses, place settings, candles and a tray of salmon. After everything was situated, they plowed through the fish and the wine. Shortly after they finished, they agreed that it was a beautiful night for a stroll.

A decorative, black, ornate frame with white scrollwork borders. Inside the frame, the text "CHAPTER TWO" is written in a white, bold, serif font.

CHAPTER TWO

PEACE AND QUIET?

Calli leaned back to relax while Elvis rummaged through the hall closet to find her a light jacket. It was clear and slightly cool outside, and the sky was filled with bright stars and a sliver of crescent moon. They took to a path behind the house that led south, away from the barn. Elvis had opted against bringing a lantern, although he did strap on a faded leather gun belt, just in case an unwanted visitor might be on the prowl looking for its own tasty dinner. As they made their way down the trail, the sound of running water became louder with each step. Limbs and branches of oaks, pines and birches hung over the way, and it all looked very enchanting.

The Rio Albemarle had its beginnings almost due east of the ranch, in the upper peaks of the Slipstill Mountains, the foothills of which began to rise less than five miles from Woodville. It passed through his property approximately thirty-five yards south of the house. There, the water usually ran steady, but not too strong, and was no more than twenty yards across on the average day.

Just short of the river's edge was a log bench with a high back. Elvis had carved it at the age of one from a massive oak tree that was felled by a lightning strike and landed just along the bank. He was very proud of it, and Calli could see as much in his face when he invited her to have a seat with him.

She was plenty warm in the wool jacket that Elvis had found for her, but Calli feigned being chilled as an excuse to slide close up next to him. The sounds of the running river and the night creatures

seemed to gather intensity. Elvis pulled a flask from his vest pocket and took a nip of his favorite Catgnac. She did likewise when he offered, but mostly in a show of attitude and enthusiasm; Calli really wasn't much the Catgnac fan. With stomachs full, both were in danger of being lulled into an impromptu nap when Elvis jerked his head into the air and turned to look over his left shoulder.

Calli obviously hadn't heard anything and her face looked up curiously from its perch on his warm chest. Either the years of partnership had him uniquely attuned to the pitch or maybe it was something more instinctual, but Elvis could hear Daisy's bark or yelp from unthinkable distances and above most any distortion. He raised up from the bench, careful to not let Calli's head fall against it, and looked intently back up the path. She reached out as he began to move and asked, "What's the matter?" Her paw found nothing but empty bench, as Elvis had taken off toward the house like a circus clown who'd been shot from a cannon.

Elvis was out of sight before Calli could kneel up and peek her head over the back of the bench. If she had stayed and waited for a few moments, Elvis may well have been able to sneak up on the source of his concern, but she came after him as fast as she could, and her loud cries of "Elvis, come back!" couldn't help but to have startled anything in earshot. Passing by the house and quickly closing in on the barn, he was starting to make out the silhouettes of two, possibly more, animals scrambling out from the front doors of the barn and into the nearby woods. Elvis fired two shots at them as he bolted across the remaining distance toward the barn.

He ran inside and darted toward Daisy's stall, yanked open the door and jumped onto her back as she took off down the aisle. Her right turn out of the barn was sharp and rapid, and her side nearly dragged the ground as she burst toward the woods. As she wended her way through the tree trunks, Elvis emptied the remaining rounds in his revolver toward the branches and bushes that he could see rustling in the distance.

In just a few seconds, Daisy had closed the gap considerably and the shadows were about to take true form. Suddenly, Elvis

caught a whiff of smoke and let out with a loud “WHOA!” Daisy slid to a stop and Elvis looked over his shoulder to see a flickering light through the stall window at the back of the barn. Daisy rose up onto her hind legs, spun toward the opposite direction and ran back to the barn faster than she had left it. Even Elvis was having trouble holding on without the luxury of reins or saddle.

At Elvis’ urging, Daisy ran down the aisle to the rear of the barn, where a small fire was spreading across the straw bedding in the last stall. Elvis jumped off, grabbed two water buckets that were sitting nearby in the aisle and emptied them onto the base of the flames. Daisy already was heading through the back doors with the handles of two much larger buckets lodged in her jaws. Elvis came running out behind her on his hind legs with the handle of an empty bucket in the crick of each foreleg, and they began working the well rope as fast as they could.

Daisy ran into the barn on her hind legs carrying a full tub in each foreleg, and Elvis was trailing close behind with his smaller buckets. They doused the flames again, but Elvis was uncertain whether they might have to give up the task and get the rest of the dogs to safety before the entire barn ignited. Daisy had nearly refilled her buckets by the time Elvis arrived back at the well, and Elvis took over at the well while Daisy returned to the barn to keep up the splashing.

Amos was banging his body furiously against his stall door, yelping to be let out, and Elvis tried to ignore the cries of Jezebel’s puppies, who obviously sensed that something terribly wrong was underway. They could have used Jez’s help more than anything, but her paws were full trying to keep her progeny under control, and Elvis knew that they couldn’t be left alone at the moment. Amos wasn’t the most reliable animal in the barn and there was no time now to be distracted by having to keep an eye on him, but they desperately needed the help. So, while Daisy stayed at the well to fill the third round of buckets, Elvis ran back to the front of the barn to get Amos.

As he opened the stall door, Elvis made it clear that this was not a time for frolic, and Amos could sense that his often light-hearted

master was not joking. They ran as fast as they could toward the back of the barn, passing by Speed, who lie asleep in her stall through all of the commotion, and Jez, who stood with a concerned look on her face as she tried to keep the youngins calm. Elvis directed Amos to pick up two more large buckets, and as they were exiting through the back doors, Calli appeared, running toward them from the other end of the barn.

Amos and Elvis went straight to the well, where Daisy already had filled buckets for herself and Elvis, and was about to begin carrying her load. Elvis told her to stay put and fill the new buckets that Amos had brought, and Elvis and Amos rushed back inside, water swishing and splashing from side to side with every step. The flames were reaching dangerously close to the top of the stall, and Elvis threw water onto the walls as high as he could. Amos followed his instructions like a champ and, being nearly five times the size of Elvis, he proved to be far more successful at dousing the high boards.

Elvis knew that the cause would be lost if the bright orange flames were able to reach their way another foot or so to the ceiling and into the straw loft, so they ran back to the well as fast as they could with their empty receptacles. Calli arrived at the well with more buckets, and Daisy was dunking and raising as fast as their eyes could see. Seconds seemed like hours to Elvis, as he could see through the stall window that the flames still were ascending with each lick of the wall.

As Elvis was about to start down the aisle to get the others to safety, Daisy completed filling yet another round of buckets. Elvis stayed to help and all four of them staggered back into the barn with a full complement of water. The stall was lit up like a Christmas tree by now and the smoke was beginning to choke the air from the barn. The puppies were whining and rustling more fervently than ever, and Elvis could sense that Jez was starting to come unglued. Even Speed had awakened by now, and was uncharacteristically jumping and prancing around.

Elvis reached back for momentum to throw another bucketful, but his right foreleg was yanked from behind. Amos snatched the

handle from Elvis' paw, wound up and deposited the contents far higher than Elvis could have hoped to. With tears rolling from their burning eyes, Elvis and Calli turned over their remaining buckets to the canines, who launched the water from them and proceeded to do the same with their own larger buckets.

Every splash landed squarely upon its mark and though the flames still licked at the walls, they appeared to retreat for the first time. Everyone instantly returned to the well, where Daisy resumed her work. Elvis and Amos were quickly back at the stall with four more buckets for Amos to throw, and as they rushed back out with their empties, Daisy and Calli passed them going in.

As Elvis began working the well rope, he could see that the reach of the flames no longer extended to the heights of the window, and he started to feel a slight hint of relief. After another full round of dousing, things began to look almost under control. Elvis sternly told Amos that if he wanted to see his next breakfast, he'd better continue splashing the floor and walls as fast as he could until Elvis and Daisy returned. With Amos and Calli appearing fully up to the task, Elvis pounced onto Daisy's back and she again took off down the aisle, out of the barn and into the woods.

The stars shone bright and Daisy's sense of smell was impeccable, but Elvis knew that unless one of his shots had serendipitously landed squarely upon one of the perpetrators, locating any of them at this point was a virtual impossibility. Daisy surely had gotten a good look at them in the barn, and no doubt would recognize any of them that she might encounter again, but providing a verbal description was a bit of a stretch even for her. We already have cats talking here and must live with some constraints.

Daisy meandered through the woods with her nose to the ground, as Elvis stared into the darkness – back and forth, side to side, hoping to find something that might lend a clue. After venturing fifty yards or so into the forest, it was obvious to Elvis that, if anything useful was to be found, the assistance of morning's light would far outweigh any advantage that immediacy of the search could provide. With no serious harm having been done to the barn or the animals, he

began to question his own wisdom. Wasting away time on an almost certainly fruitless ride in the dark while one of the most attractive individuals he ever had laid eyes on had been left behind on firecat duty? He promptly steered Daisy back to the barn.

Elvis stomped all around the area where the fire had burned, wanting to assure himself that it was fully extinguished before turning his attention to other matters. A stiff breeze had begun to blow in from the mountains, and it took only a few minutes to almost fully clear the barn air with the doors wide open at both ends. Amos was busy looking around for something new to get into, happy to have an excuse to be out at night. Elvis led him into his stall with a gracious pat on the neck and turned back to do the same for Daisy, but she was taking care of the matter on her own, now back in her stall sliding the door shut for herself. Elvis briefly entertained the idea of returning to the riverside, but decided that he probably would do better to stay nearby and keep a closer eye on things for the rest of the night.

Midnight was upon them and the fire that roared inside the house earlier in the evening had nearly burned itself out. They leaned back into the cushions of the couch and began to kiss, as the last flickers of flame were disappearing in the fireplace. As would any true feline gentleman, Elvis momentarily came up for air to ask Calli if she would like him to escort her home. She looked up with a puzzled expression and asked, “Now, why would you want to do that?” Knowing that it’s always best to tell the truth when you can, he replied, “I don’t.”

CHAPTER THREE

DUTY CALLS

Elvis and Daisy had been rummaging around for clues since shortly after the morning feeding. The woods extended north from the barn for nearly a quarter mile, all the way to Main Street. Elvis was fairly confident that he had determined the escape route of the pack that had engendered the flames the night before. After several passes back and forth along what seemed to have been their path, he figured that he had gathered as much useful information as could be found, and there wasn't much.

He did stumble upon a fresh bloody chunk of white fur in the woods, likely the product of one of the shots that he had fired the night before. That was it. Thanks to some heavy rain that had fallen just a couple of days before, it was muddy at the far edge of the forest, at the bottom of the bank leading up to Main Street. Elvis was able to make out three separate sets of prints and the distance between the hind and forepaws in each stride left no doubt that the trio had been in a great hurry.

Calli was awakened by the closing of the side door of the house, followed by the sounds of Elvis shuffling around in the kitchen. Since Elvis was out and about anyway, he had decided to stop by Uncle Sam's store on the way back to the house. The sound and smell of eggs and bacon crept their way down the hall and into the bedroom, and the enticement was too much for her to resist. She pried herself from the comfy bed and went out to say hello.

Elvis turned and smiled when she stepped from the hall into the kitchen, but then quickly returned his attention to the two pans

sizzling atop the stove. She was able to find a mug on her own and poured herself some milk from the bottle on the counter as she offered to help with breakfast. He motioned toward the worn china plates in the cupboard. She grabbed two and he followed her into the dining room, where he slid fried eggs from pan to plates. He stepped back into the kitchen and returned quickly with a plate full of crispy bacon. Elvis hoped dearly that he was only imagining the meter of a very familiar walk making its way up the front steps and across the porch. No sooner did he fall into his chair and reach for a strip of bacon when three loud raps on the front door abruptly dashed his hopes.

He sighed, raised himself up, walked slowly to the front door and swung it open to the sight of a frequent visitor. Frank had a large frame, but he weighed little more than Elvis. Due primarily to a propensity for fidgeting that kept him thin, even though his appetite more closely resembled that of a small dog than one of a cat. His tan fur matched well with his blue-green eyes, although getting a good look at them required fighting through the oft-dirty lenses of his wire-framed, rectangular spectacles. Frank was the oldest and dearest friend that Elvis ever had, although Elvis couldn't have said at the moment that he was entirely glad to see him.

Elvis stepped back inside, rolled his eyes and whispered under his breath, "Really? Ten o'clock in the morning? On a Saturday?" Elvis introduced Calli to Frank, who obviously was impressed, but the meeting was brief, as the boys quickly made their way back onto the porch. Frank had more connections than most gossip columnists, and Elvis was all but certain that Frank somehow had gotten wind of the events of the night before. Elvis was surprised, shocked actually, to hear that the fire and the date all were news to Frank, which really set Elvis' mind to worrying. If Frank was visiting at this hour on a weekend and hadn't come to discuss the barn fire or the date with Calli, then something big probably was up.

Elvis asked Frank if all of this – whatever it was – could wait for just a few hours, so that he could at least enjoy his breakfast and a little more time with Calli before the proverbial hell broke loose. Frank fretted, as usual, but acceded to Elvis' request and agreed that he would return at one o'clock sharp. He put on his battered, black

straw hat, trotted down the steps, jumped onto Stella's back and took off southbound down the road, turning back to wave just as he was about to vanish from Elvis' sight. Elvis stepped back into the house, steeped in certainty that the night before and the breakfast on the table soon would be distant memories, and that he would be off in short order to deal with some sort of impending disaster.

Calli waited for Elvis to return to the table before digging into her own breakfast, and she could tell that Elvis was distracted from the moment he sat down. He struggled with whether he should say anything to Calli about the paw prints and fur that he had discovered during his morning ride. Nothing like this ever had happened at home. Sure, he had a few enemies. Many were among the most despicable individuals that the feline world had to offer, but most of them had been hanged or locked away for good. Beyond that, Elvis' adventurous exploits – at least those that might make him an enemy or two – typically took place a considerable distance from the friendly confines of Woodville.

Even if the ranch somehow had become fair game for a gutless pot shot, who possibly could have known that he was not in his house for that brief period of time last night? It all seemed a bit too coincidental, and with each glance at Calli's amazing body, Elvis hoped sorely that it was just his imagination running amok. Still, he thought it best to keep his mouth shut for the time being.

They were so occupied with breakfast that they barely exchanged words until their plates were licked clean. Elvis cleared the table, opened the front door and motioned for Calli to follow him out onto the porch. They cuddled on the oversized bentwood chair that sat next to Elvis' rocker and nearly fell back asleep, as the sun began to warm the air and a light breeze gently shook the leaves of the trees that spotted the front yard.

Elvis said quietly, "I don't know for sure, but there's a good chance I'll be out of town for at least a little while. I can tell when Frank is stopping by to make a social call, and this wasn't that sort of visit. I might be wrong, but if you don't see me for a while, it has nothing to do with you. And if we do leave, we should be back

before too long.” He paused for a moment and said, “I hope, anyway.” Before he could speak again, Calli pulled his body close and covered his lips with hers. With that, they returned into the house and back down the hall, so that they could say a proper goodbye.

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Elvis stood on the porch, looking at one of his most prized possessions. A gold pocket watch passed down by his grandfather just before his death. Just as Elvis was tucking it back into his vest pocket, Frank came around the corner on Stella, a big, beautiful Golden Labrador, and hollered from across the yard, “WHY ARE YOU LOOKING AT THAT THING?” Elvis couldn’t think of a plausible reason, not with the feline alarm clock keeping tabs on him. All he could think to say was, “Just making sure this old piece of junk still works. By the way, you’re a minute early.”

“You’ll wish I was a week early after you hear this one, my boy,” said Frank. Not only were Frank’s saddlebags stuffed full, but Stella also was pulling a small, covered cart that was bulging at the top. Elvis could only imagine what was in there, but he didn’t have it in him to ask. With an exasperated look, Elvis sighed and said, “I was afraid you would say something like that. You may as well come in and get on with it.”

Frank shook his head back and forth and said, “I don’t reckon we’ve got time for that, partner, not after the time we just gave up so you could roll around with that new friend of yours. You need to get your gear together, pronto, so we can make the two o’clock train. The four-forty-five don’t run on weekends and this can’t wait ‘til tomorrow. I’ll tell you all about it on the way to the station. Hurry up now. I’ll go out to the barn and get Daisy saddled up for ya.”

Elvis yelled, “TWO O’CLOCK! I’m supposed to be at a party in Albemarle this evening. And what about the place? I haven’t gotten anyone lined up to take care of it.” Frank already had Stella trotting off toward the barn, and even though he was facing in the opposite direction as he rode away, he yelled back at such a high volume that his voice still was audible, albeit fading. “Folks at the

party will understand, and I've already spoken to Sam. Everything's covered around here for the time being. I hope you told that new girlfriend of yours that you're gonna be gone for a while. Assuming we even make it back this time."

Elvis went into the house shaking his head in angst, not in the mood for a sudden rush job after what had been (save the previous night's fireworks) a long-overdue stretch of relaxation back at home. He walked to the closet in the middle of the hall, stood up on his hind legs and opened the door. He reached for his large saddlebags with his left foreleg and tossed them out onto the floor, and then threw his black, twin-holster gun belt on top of them with his right.

The belt was one of those nifty models with rotating holsters that lock into three places – one perpendicular to the belt strap, one parallel with it and the third right in between. It kept his gun barrels pointing downward whether he was standing on all fours, up on hind legs or just sitting typical cat-style, with his hind legs tucked under his body. With summer in full bloom, Elvis was happy to pull out a light blanket and forego the musty smelling, oversized bundle of feathers that he called a sleeping bag. He reached in for his deerskin rifle holster, threw it into the hall, fell back down to all fours and used his forepaws to pull up two wide floorboards at the bottom of the closet.

He reached deep into the compartment, barely holding himself up as he hung from his hind legs, and pulled out two extraordinarily beautiful pistols. Each with a gleaming silver barrel and a pearl handle inlaid with an intricate gold "G" on both sides, they resembled art pieces as much as weapons. Elvis set them on the floor, reached back into the compartment and pulled out a long, lever-action rifle. With a cherry stock, a shiny black barrel, and a pewter hammer and trigger, it was nearly as beautiful as the pistols.

After extracting a small bag crammed full with cash, he returned the floorboards to their places. He pulled two boxes of matches and a few hundred rounds of ammunition from the back shelf of the closet, and pushed everything that he had assembled into a pile

in the middle of the hall floor. He went to his room and rounded up two blue bandanas (one of which he tied around his neck), a sterling silver flask and a deck of playing cards. As he looked around to see that nothing important was being left behind, he threw those items out into the hall with the rest of his stuff.

Elvis moved quickly toward the front door and bolted it shut, grabbed his hat from the hook, drew the curtains closed in the living and dining rooms, and returned to the pile in the hall. He stood on his hind legs, strapped on his gun belt, loaded his pistols and carefully placed them into their holsters. He loaded fifteen rounds into the rifle and shoved it into its holster, inserted another thirty or so rounds into the small wells that dotted his gun belt, and threw the rest of the ammunition into his saddlebags, along with his wad of money and other belongings.

With his blanket and saddlebags over his right shoulder and his rifle in the crick of his left foreleg, Elvis walked through the kitchen and out the side door. He locked it behind him and wondered to himself how long it might be before he would have the pleasure of going back through it again. The early afternoon sun was blazing, so much that even the grass had become quite warm, as Elvis began to amble slowly toward the barn.

Frank had let Jez and her pups out into the field with Speed, and Elvis was leading Amos down the aisle to join them when Frank interrupted, “Elvis, I think we might need him this time.” Amos snapped his head back with excitement as Elvis, nearly at the far end of the barn by now, looked back with a surprised expression and hollered, “AMOS?” Amos looked at Elvis disappointedly, a bit hurt by the backpawed comment, but he quickly regained his enthusiasm as Frank began to speak. “Unless you think those puppies will be all right without Jez around for two weeks, I don’t think we have much choice,” said Frank. “TWO WEEKS!” Elvis exclaimed.

“Yep” was all that Frank could say, as he reached under Daisy’s belly for the cinch to tighten her saddle. It was a special saddle that Elvis had just bought from Weaver, the local leather smith. It had a deep, padded, brown suede seat that he could

comfortably hunker down into when sitting with his rear legs tucked underneath. There was a padded, rigid flap that could be laid over the deep seat, which made for a comfortable ride when Elvis needed to extend his legs and keep his hind paws in the stirrups. What Frank envied most, though, were the small wells on each side of the saddle horn and the two directly behind them in the back of the saddle. A soft, secure place for each paw when the rider tired of sitting and opted to stand on all fours to stretch for a spell.

Frank said to Elvis, “When we get back from this one. If we do get back, that is. I’m goin’ down to Weaver’s first thing and get me one of these. I’m getting sick and tired of sliding all over whenever I need to stand up and stretch for a while.” Elvis didn’t offer to tell Frank that there already was one in the works, a special present for Frank’s sixth birthday, which was coming up at the end of summer.

Elvis turned around and started back down the aisle with Amos in tow. Actually, it was Elvis who was in tow, as Amos trotted quickly back toward the front of the barn with Elvis being dragged behind distractedly, wondering what sort of mess possibly could take two weeks to resolve. Elvis finished saddling and bridling Daisy, and fastened his rifle holster, blanket, saddlebags and lariat into place.

Meanwhile, Frank loaded Amos up with two sacks of supplies large enough to make even Amos start to lose a little bit of enthusiasm. He wouldn’t let it show, of course, and somewhere around one-thirty, Stella and Daisy were carrying their riders out of the barn side-by-side. Making tracks toward the front road with Amos trailing close behind.

They turned right at the end of the drive and started toward Main Street. Elvis was mulling over the events of the night before and Frank was sorting through some official looking papers that he had just retrieved from a special delivery to the post office. It was a clear day, and the sun scorched their shoulders and backs as they turned onto Main Street and headed into town, with the foothills of the Slipstills lurching up in the distance straight ahead.

Daisy and Stella were among the most finely trained rides you could find anywhere, and needed virtually no guidance finding their way. The sound of their paws along the hot road was barely audible, washed out by the ruffling sound of Frank lining up his papers just so, in chronological order, careful to create a single new fold. As he pressed them back into his saddlebag, Frank said, "So, what's this you tell me about a fire last night? A fire, did I get that right?"

Elvis nodded his head affirmatively and said, "Yep, a fire. Right inside my barn." Elvis tried to continue, but Frank exclaimed, "IN YOUR BARN? I was so preoccupied with the pups back there, I didn't notice anything. I haven't seen you light a match in there since we were kids. How did you end up with a barn fire? Don't tell me someone was fooling around in there last night while you were busy with Candy, or whatever her name is. By the way, I've seen her somewhere, just can't place her."

Elvis said, "Her name's Calli, and you've probably seen her down at the train station. She just took a job with the rail line." Frank said, "Yeah, that's it. I saw her at the station the other day. How long you known her, anyway?" Elvis replied, "Oh, just a few days. Met her at Sam's and couldn't help but ask her over." Frank nodded and said, "Well, I sure can understand that. Probably would have done the same myself if I'd had the chance. You'd better be careful, my boy. Something tells me she could be trouble."

Elvis was fully aware of Frank's innate ability to sniff out a rat in most situations long before others could. Not being in the mood to jump to a conclusion on this one, however, Elvis responded, "You might be right, my friend, but the way she looks, I'm gonna need a little more than one of your hunches before I just give up on her." Frank knew that he would have a hard time arguing with that sort of logic, so he didn't bother to offer a response.

Elvis unsnapped a pocket on his gun belt, pulled out a small box, opened it up and said, "Look here. I found this clump of fur in the woods. Have you heard any rumblings lately about somebody being upset with me? You know everything that's going on around here." Frank glanced down at the evidence, and then looked back up

at Elvis and said, “Sorry, partner, nothing that I know of. You’re the pride and joy of this place, in case you forgot. I wouldn’t get too caught up in it at the moment, my boy. We’ve got plenty more than that to worry about.”

Frank continued, “Last week, up in the mountains outside of South Sebastian.” Elvis exclaimed, “South Sebastian! We’re going clear across the country again?” Frank, impatiently tapping his free forepaw on the front of his saddle, nodded and said, “Well, I didn’t say that, but if you’d give me chance to finish a sentence or two, I probably would have. What are you worried about anyway? You’ve been home napping, eating fish, drinking wine and schmoozing for the better part of a month. We do have to work sometime, you know. Now, where was I? Oh, yes, South Sebastian.”

“Seems that Clevin Pusserschmott and his wife, Melba, were up at the family lake house last weekend. They were supposed to come back this past Tuesday, but nobody’s seen hide nor hair of them. Old man Pusserschmott sent a crew up there to fetch them, and all they came back with was a note demanding five million bucks if they ever want to see Clevin and Melba again.

“Then they get a wire with more instructions. The old man probably feels about the same way as we all do about Melba. Big deal if they keep her. But, they say he’s about yanking his whiskers out on the prospect of anything happening to Clevin. He’s the only tomcat in the family and I think pops is pretty much finished procreating. Anyway, the wire said that the family has three days to get the cash together.”