

LONESOME WHISTLE BLOW – Chapter 18

“Ain’t you worried about him?” Addie asked, as she and Elias got into bed.

“No, not much,” he told her. “When I was younger than Rafe, I was runnin’ Charlie Birger’s bootleg hootch from East St. Louis up to Quincy – with hijackers shootin’ at me along the way.”

“And I was courtin’ you at the same time,” Elias added with a grin. “Now that was something to be worried about.”

But he was lying to Addie, not wanting to upset her. Elias had read the papers and knew how things were across the country these days. The *Journal-Pilot* had recently carried a story about vagrants on the roads. The Depression had set thousands of unemployed on the road and rails in search of work – fellows just like Rafe, hoping to reach somewhere, find work, and settle. According to the article, these men would find few prospects.

In January of 1933, Elias had read, the nation's homeless were estimated at almost a million and a half, seven hundred thousand of who were believed to be on the roads.

Now his youngest son was one of them.

The next day was Sunday. While Addie and Dorie were fixing chicken and biscuits for dinner, and Aaron was off helping Volney Crowe repair a broken piece of equipment, Elias had agreed to take his two small grandsons fishing.

For two hours the night before, he’d had them out back of the house in Addie’s garden with trowels and a flashlight, digging up worms and nightcrawlers.

“Why would a fish eat a worm, Grandpa?” Earl asked.

“Because it’s a fish, I expect,” Elias explained. “And worms is what some fishes eat – just like little boys eat jelly beans.”

“Lookit me, I’m a fish,” Frankie laughed. He popped a plump nightcrawler in his mouth and gulped it down.

“Ugh,” Earl said, making a face. “What’s it taste like?”

“I dunno,” Frankie said. “I didn’t chew it, I just swallowed it.”

“Well don’t swallow no more,” Elias told him. “Your ma’d be plenty upset did she know I let you eat bait.”

The next morning after church, Elias and the boys drove down to the river and parked off the road, near a backwater not far from where Elias used to shoot ducks and geese for the market when he was young. He’d brought three cane poles, each one rigged with a small hook, a piece of split-shot for weight, and a red painted cork bobber.

“What are we gonna catch here?” Frankie wanted to know.

“Just panfish, most likely,” Elias told them, as he showed each boy how to pinch off an inch or so of nightcrawler and thread it on their hooks. “Maybe a big old carp if we’re lucky.”

“Is the river deep?” Earl asked.

“Further out it is,” Elias said. “Your great-great grandpa is out there somewheres – whatever’s left of him, anyway.”

“Great-Grandpa Japheth?” Earl asked.

“No, Great-Great Grandpa Simon.”

“What happened to him?” Asked the boys.

“He got himself drown’t – shot a hole through his boat.”

“Couldn’t he swim?”

“Nope,” Elias said. “He never learn’t how.”

“Sounds like he never learn’t to shoot, neither,” Earl said.

As he got their baits in the water, Elias lit his pipe and relaxed on the ground, watching the river traffic as it passed. He marked the *William T. Hopper*, a side-wheel steam dredge that belonged to the U.S. Corps of Engineers.

And passing from both north and south were workboats and tenders, and the swift, little towboats that skillfully moved barges loaded with grain or cut lumber.

Elias even recognized an old wooden houseboat that had been on the river back when he was still a youngster. Named the *Robin*, it housed a large john boat still used to harvest freshwater mussels from the river for the pearl button factory.

For a pleasant moment, Elias let his mind and memory wander back to a soft, cool evening many years before – the night when he and Jaylee Pitts sat on a hill above the Quincy waterfront. They’d watched the boats then, too, and later gone to her poor, small room in town, where Jaylee took him to her bed.

His thoughts were suddenly broken as Earl was shouting and jumping around. “Hey, I got one, Grandpa,” the little boy yelled, as his pole was bent and thumping up and down. “I got a fish!”

Then Frankie started yelling, too, and soon there were two fat perch flopping on the ground.

“These two is big enough to take home,” Elias said, showing the boys how to unhook the fish and put them on a stringer. After an hour, they had a decent mess of sunfish and perch, but Earl got bored with fishing and began to wander off.

“Don’t you get lost,” Elias called out. “I don’t want to have to go looking for you.”

“I wanna catch a crawdad,” the boy said, laughing.

“You find a crawdad,” Elias called back. “And I’ll show you how to catch a big, old channel cat.”

Ten minutes later, Earl was yelling and crying. Elias put down his own pole and ran to him. The boy was clutching his right hand and the front of his shirt was covered in blood.

“It bit me Grandpa,” Earl was sobbing.

Elias parted the shoreline brush and suddenly saw the creature. Half in the water and half out, the alligator snapping turtle looked

up at him with cold, dead eyes. In its hooked beak was a portion of little Earl's index finger, sheared off just below the knuckle.

Cursing, Elias picked the boy up and raced to the car, shouting for Frankie to come quick, and to bring a fish pole with him. Elias cut a piece of fishing line with his knife and tied it tight around his grandson's severed finger. He wasn't sure Doc Hagan would be in his office on a Sunday afternoon, so once the bleeding stopped, the three of them jumped into the Ford – sped out of town and drove across the river bridge, heading for the hospital in Fort Madison.

Earl had stopped crying and was staring at his finger. "Does it hurt awful bad?" His brother asked.

Earl just shook his head. "It don't hurt at all."

The emergency doctor they saw at Sacred Heart Hospital was an old fellow who'd polished his medical skills patching up Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War.

"That big snapper took off the little feller's finger as slick as a whistle," the doctor told Elias, after he'd cleaned the wound with antiseptics and bandaged Earl's stump. "You did good tying it off to stop the bleeding. The boy'll heal up fine if it doesn't infect."

Driving home, Elias was dreading how Dorie and Addie might react to what had happened to Earl. Addie could be high-strung as far as her grandsons were concerned, and might easily come down with what she called a "nervous attack" over the boy's misfortune.

But in the back seat, Frankie was increasingly excited by the whole business, certain that having his older brother's finger bitten off by a snapping turtle would be a fine story to tell all the kids at school.

Earl was still dopey from a morphine injection the doctor gave him, but he was curious whether the snapper had actually eaten his finger, or merely bitten it off.

"It's hard to be certain," Elias told him. "We had to race off so durned quick."

"He et it for sure," Frankie stated. "They eat most anything."