



Chapter 8: Lone

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EARLY MELONES!

The track was too narrow, the turn too sharp, but Lone managed to get the Oldsmobile off the dirt and onto the tarmac without knocking the sign down completely. On the way in, with the darkness and the single headlight, she couldn't prevent the bumper from scraping it and now the post leaned. Early Melones! One of them can't spell worth post. The one with the tk most likely. Not much schooling there. But "Early" was correct and not just the letters. July not over and the Convent garden had n **CHAPTER 8** ady ripe for picking. Like their heads. Sweet inside but thick. None of them would listen. Didn't believe a word she said. After d **LONE** out there in the middle of the night to tell them, warn them, they just yawned and scratched their heads. Now she had to figure carefully what to do otherwise the melons that got split would be their sweet bald heads.

The night air was hot and the rain she smelled was far off but still coming which is what she thought two hours ago when she padded around the stream bank hoping to collect tk while it was still dry. Had she not been, she never would have heard the men or

discovered the devilment they were cooking.

The night sky wore its best jewelry and the road to Ruby was

EARLY MELONES! familiar as]. She squinted, nevertheless, in case

The track was too narrow, the turn too sharp, but Lone managed to get the Oldsmobile off the dirt and onto the tarmac without knocking the sign down completely. On the way in, with the darkness and the single headlight, she couldn't prevent the bumper from scraping it and now the post leaned. Early Melones! One of them can't spell an worth poot. The one with the tk most likely. Not much schooling there. But "Early" was correct and not just the letters. July not over and the Convent garden had melons already ripe for picking. Like their heads. Sweet inside but thick. None of them would listen. Didn't believe a word she said. After driving out there in the middle of the night to tell them, warn them, they just yawned and scratched their heads. Now she had to figure carefully what to do otherwise the melons that got split would be their sweet bald heads.

Morg The night air was hot and the rain she smelled was far off but still coming which is what she thought two hours ago when she padded around the stream bank hoping to collect tk while it was still dry. Had she not been, she never would have heard the men or

discovered the devilment they were cooking.

The night sky wore its best jewelry and the road to Ruby was straight as tk [familiar as]. She squinted, nevertheless, in case something or somebody scampered up ahead--beyond the single headlight. Possum, racoon, white tail deer, or an angry woman. For women walked this road. Only women. Never men. For more than twenty years Lone had seen them. Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost. Out here in a gold and copper land cut through now and then with black rock or a swatch of green; out here under skies so star-packed it was disgraceful; out here where the wind handled you like a man, women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the only pedestrians. Sweetie Fleetwood had walked it, Billie Delia too. And the girl called Seneca. Another called Mavis. Arnette more than once. And not just these days. They had walked this road from the very first. Soane Morgan, for instance, and, when she was young, the white-eyed woman in the Convent. Consolata was her name. Consolata de Socorro. Many of the walkers Lone had seen; others she learned about. But the men never walked the road; they drove it, although

sometimes their destination was the same as the women's: Sargeant, K.D., Roger, Menus. And the good Deacon himself of couple of decades back. And she did not get somebody to fix the fan belt and plug the oil pan she would be walking it too, provided there was anything useful left to do. If ever there was a time for speeding, this was it, but the condition of the car precluded that. In 1960 the wipers, the air conditioning, the radio worked. Now a fierce heater was the only element reminiscent of the Oldsmobile's original power. In 1968, after it had two owners, Steward and then Dovey Morgan, Dovey asked her if she could use it. Lone screamed her joy. Finally at 79 she was going to learn to drive and have her own car too. No more hitching up the wagon, no more brakes squealing in her yard at all hours, summoning her to emergencies that weren't or to stand-bys that turned into crises. Now she could follow her own mind, check on the mothers when she wished; tool on up to the house in her own car and, most important, leave when she wanted to. Too late. Just as she became truly auto mobile, nobody wanted her craft. After having infuriated the hooved and terrified the clawed; having churned columns of gold dust up and down tractor trails for weeks she had no place to go. Her patients let her poke and examine, but for the

delivery they traveled two hours (if they could make it) to the hospital in Demby for the cool hands of white men. In spite of her never-fail reputation (which was to say, she never lost a mother as Fairy once had) they refused her their swollen bellies, their shrieks and grabbing hands. Laughed at her clean belly bands, her drops of mother's urine. Poured her pepper tea in the toilet. It did not matter that she had curled up on their sofas, nodded in their kitchens, braided the children's hair, planted herbs in their gardens and gave good counsel for the past 25 years and for fifty more in Haven before being sent for. She taught them how to comb their breasts to set the milk flowing; what to do with the afterbirth; what direction the knife under the mattress should point. And got them the kind of dirt they wanted to eat. No matter she had gotten in the bed with them, pressing the soles of her feet to theirs. Or massaged their stomachs for hours. She had been good enough to bring them into the world and when she and Fairy were summoned to continue that work in the new place, Ruby, the mothers sat back in their chairs, spread their knees and breathed with relief. Now that Fairy was dead, leaving one midwife for a population which needed and prided itself on families as large as neighborhoods, the women took their wombs

away from her. But Lone believed that there was more to it than the fashion for Demby. She had delivered the Fleetwood babies and each of the defectives had stained her reputation just as if she had *made* the babies, not simply delivered them. The suspicion that she was bad luck and the comforts of the Demby hospital combined to deprive her of the work she was trained for. One of the mothers told her that she simply loved the week of rest, the serving tray, the thermometer, the blood pressure tests, the sleeping and pain pills, but mostly she said she loved the fact that people kept asking her how she felt. None of that was available to her if she delivered at home. There she'd be fixing x's breakfast the second or third day and worrying about the quality of the cow's milk as well as her own. Others must have felt the same--the luxury of sleep and being away from home, the newborn taken away each night for somebody else's care. And the fathers. Lone suspected they too were happier with closed doors, waiting in the hall, being in a place where other men were in charge instead of some toothless woman gumming gum to keep her gums strong. "Don't mistake the fathers' thanks," Fairy had warned her. "Men scared of us, always will be. To them we death's handmaiden standing as we do between them and the children their wives carry."

During those times, Fairy said, the midwife is the interference, the one giving orders, on whose secret skill so much depended and the dependency irritated them. Especially here in this place where they had come to multiply in peace. Fairy was right as usual, but Lone had another liability. It was said she could read minds, a gift from something that, whatever it was, was not God, and which she had used as early as two when she positioned herself to be found in the yard, when her mother was dead in the bed. Lone denied it; she believed everybody knew what other people were thinking. They just avoided the obvious. Yet at 85 she did know something more profound than Morgan memory or Pat Best's history. Knew what neither memory nor history can say or record: the "trick" of life and its "reason."

In any case, her livelihood over (she had been called on twice in the last eight years) Lone was dependent on the generosity of congregations and neighbors. She spent her time collecting medicinal herbs, flitting from one church to another, driving her beloved Oldsmobile, and surveying the fields which she loved not because they were open but because they were full of secrets. Like the carfull of skeletons she'd found a few months ago. If she had been paying

attention to her own mind instead of gossip, she would have investigated the buzzards as soon as they appeared. Two years ago at spring thaw, March of 1974. But because they were seen right when the Morgan's and Fleetwoods' had announced the wedding, people were confused about whether the marriage was summoning the buzzards or protecting the town from them. Now everybody knew they had been attracted to a family feast of people lost in a blizzard. Arkansas plates. Harper Jury's label on some cough medicine. They loved each other, the family did. Even with the disturbance of birds of prey, you could tell they were embracing as they slept deeper and deeper into that deep cold.

At first she thought Sargeant must have known all about it. He raised corn in those fields. But there was no mistaking the mute astonishment on his face. Or on any of the others' when they heard. The problem was whether to notify the law or not. Not, it was decided. Even to bury them would be an admission of something they had no hand in. When some of the men went to look, most of their attention was not on the car's inhabitants, but on the Convent that loomed far off in their sightline. She should have known then what they were thinking. Had she been paying attention first to the

buzzards, then to the minds of men she would not be using up all her Wrigley's and her energy on a mission she hoped would be her last. Eyesight too dim, joints too stiff, this was no work for a gifted midwife. But God had given her the task, bless His holy heart, and at thirty miles an hour on a hot July night she knew she was traveling in His time, not outside it. It was He who placed her at the stream bank; encouraged her to look for the tk that was best picked dry at night. (over) So He ~~must have~~ wanted her to hear the men gathered at the Oven to decide how to run the Convent women off, and if He wanted her to witness that, He must also want her to do something about it. At first she didn't know what was going on, or what to do. But, as ^{in the} ~~past~~ ^{always}, when she was confused, she closed her eyes and whispered, "Thy will. Thy will." Then the voices rose and she heard as clear as if she had been standing among them what they said to one another.

What they vocalized and what they did not.

^{There were} ~~They had come,~~ about nine of them ~~and, after disrupting the~~ youngsters from their courting rituals, clustered together with their flash lights turned off. ^{Some} ~~They~~ smoked ^{Some} and sighed ^{as} and one by one ^{they} began to speak. Much of what they said, Lone had heard before although without the rough ^{beard} beard hair that the words grew as they seeped

The stream was low; the coming rain would
remedy that ~~as it washed away~~ while it ~~ruined~~ the — blossoms,
and wash away

She heard Light laughter and radio music ~~traveled~~
~~like~~ the traveling from ~~the~~ ~~flames~~.
Young couples at ~~their~~ ^{she thought} cawking. At
least they were ~~in the~~ open; ~~not~~
~~hidden away~~ ^{scrambling up} scooching off in a hay loft.
or —.

~~They~~ ^{Then} the laughter and the music
stopped, and she heard deep male voices
^{gave} giving orders; flashlights ~~cut~~ slashed ~~go~~
~~the dark.~~ ^{snooped off} ~~lane~~ ~~cut~~ her own flashlight
^{the men} There were enough — in her basket ~~and~~

She ~~was~~ ^{people} The young left without a murmur ~~and~~ but the men
didn't. They sat down, ~~together~~ ^{clumped together} in darkness
↓

~~And floated~~
~~into the shadow.~~

Night

to Stop ~~feeling~~ nursing resentment at the town's people's refusal of her craft; stop paying them back by ignoring what was going on. She had to

And she would have tramped along the bank to where her car was parked ~~except~~ had she not remembered the other events she had ~~missed~~ ^{ignored} or misunderstood: the Easter buzzards. And Apollo's ^{new} handgun. She had ~~to~~ start paying attention again. Close attention. was to avoid the language God spoke in. He did not thunder instructions or ~~sneak~~ whisper messages into the ~~ear~~ ear. Oh no. He was a liberating God. A teacher who taught how to learn, to see for yourself - His signs were clear, abundantly so, if you paid attention to ~~the~~ ^{His} world ~~and~~ stopped steeping in ~~the~~ ^{vanity's} sour juice of ~~vanity~~ and

Playing blind was