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The Grandmother

Chapter One

This was the first time the Scout had been out this direction and the old farm house looked promising. Tin roof two-story with imitation brown brick fiber board siding. From the outlines in the snow the only thing left of the barn was the foundation. As he spied the house for life it wasn't too long until he was shivering with cold. As long as he had kept hiking he had managed to stay warm. Now as he laid in the snow trying to hide from anyone that could be in the house the winter wind was cutting right through him. No tracks in the snow. No heat vapor from the chimneys. No signs of life. With the windows and doors intact there could be a good possible the house hadn't been looted. If true then it would have made the risk of coming this far worth it. See what treasures the house might have, spend the night and then head back to base at first light. Time to move. The only question that was left was front door or back door? He choose the front door. It wasn't even locked.

He quietly shut the door behind him. He was standing in what he would call a foyer. To his left was a closed door and to his right were the stairs leading upstairs. The first stairway step creaked as he put the weight of his foot on it so he stopped to listen. Nothing. The rest of the way up the stairs he stepped on the ends of the treads, more solid and less chance of another creak to announce here he was. Three bedrooms upstairs with the way outdated flowered wallpaper. Rooms were still orderly but looked like they hadn't been used in a long time. Bed sheets were the

only thing he found that they might be able to use, a disappointment. He went back down the stairs as quietly as he could to the closed door leading into the main floor.

The door hinges squeaked a bit as he opened the door. Typical hundred year old house with the tall ceilings, wide wood trim and a cast iron ceiling vent that allowed heat from the downstairs to heat the upstairs. To bad the potbelly stove had been removed, that would have been a great find! A closed set of double doors opened into a dining room. Like the upstairs the downstairs was orderly too. Just wasn't too much that could be useful. The kitchens and the basements were usually the gold mines.

He found her in the kitchen sitting in a chair and covered in quilts. She said her name was Ella Mae and she looked like how he remembered his grandmother looked. He stammered out an apology for entering her house without knocking first. She said that was all right and how she was sitting here waiting on the good Lord to take her home. The kitchen had a wood stove and there was firewood in the cellar. The cold was aggravating her Arthritis and the last time she almost fell down the stairs trying to bring a piece of wood up. She didn't want to die in a dark basement so she decided that was enough of that. Here in her chair she could at least look out of the kitchen window to where her garden use to be and imagine how pretty the flowers would look come spring. Then she had heard the front door open. Abraham was home she had thought. But then she remembered that her husband had died fourteen years ago. One of the children or perhaps all their children had come home to visit as a surprise! She hope they had brought the Grandkids with them...that's why she left the doors unlocked...oh how she had hoped. "Mom" they had told her. "You need to get a computer! Then you could email and FaceTime us." Ella Mae told him how she didn't know anything about computers, email or Timeout. She continued to write them letters and sent cards on Birthdays, Anniversaries and on Christmas. But then her letters and cards, one by one, started to be returned and stamped "UNKNOWN ADDRESS". She had ask the Route Carrier what that meant and he said they must have moved and left no forwarding address. She knew Abraham wouldn't approve spending money calling long distance but she tried anyway only to find the phone wasn't working. She must have forgotten to pay the phone bill, Abraham had always taken care of things like that. "Is that why the electric went off too? I forgot to pay that bill

too?” She asked me. She sighed before he could think of an answer and continued with her story.

That was two years ago last summer when the electric quit and she started living in the kitchen. Plenty of homemade canned goods in the basement. Along with a hand water pump that county guy insisted was a health violation and Abraham was required to remove. Ella Mae leaned towards him. “Abraham put it right back in after the county guy left” she whispered like she was telling him a secret. She leaned back into her chair as she went on about how she done alright by herself until she had almost fallen down those cellar stairs.

The Mutual Aid Group that he was a member of had strict rules about bringing in strangers. Even if he could it was a long day’s walk back to base, no way Ella Mae could make it that far. He would have to leave her. Ella Mae’s had teared up as she told him about her children and their busy careers. The last she had seen them is when they come home for Abraham’s funeral. She was all smiles as she rattled off each of the grandchildren’s names and how old they were. She had a photo album she wanted to show him in that kitchen drawer over there, could he be so kind and get it for her? Her explanations of who it was on each page and how old they were when the picture was taken slowed down until her eyes closed and from her heavy breathing he could tell she had fallen asleep. Gently he took the photo album from her lap and put it back in the drawer. Four doors in the kitchen. One lead to the dining room where he had entered from, outside back door, another to a the bathroom and the fourth and final door to the basement. He headed to the basement.

While Ella Mae sleep he made up his mind. He brought up armloads of firewood to stack along one of the kitchen walls before he started a fire in the stove. More basement trips to bring up glass Mason jars of food that he placed on the kitchen counter. More trips to pump water to fill everything he could find to hold water including the bathroom tub. The stool smelled strongly of urine. He chuckled when he saw the hand written note taped to the stool tank lid. He guessed it was Ella Mae’s handwriting. “IF IT’S YELLOW, LET MELLOW. IF IT’S BROWN, FLUSH IT DOWN”. He filled the stool tank with water and flushed. He locked the front and back doors before heading back up the stairs. It was night and the moon lite up the snow. He spent time at each window looking out for any movement or signs of danger. Seeing none he went back to the now

warm kitchen to layout out his bedroll beside the firewood. Checking on Ella Mae in the fire light he saw she was still sound asleep. He laid his rifle between his bedroll and the firewood, it would be out of site but within quick reach if needed. By habit he left his clothes and boots on as he nestled into his bedroll. What was to become of Ella Mae was his last thoughts as he fell into a sleep.

He was ten years old. Dad had taken him and his older brother camping in the National Forest preserve. They had set up the tent before exploring the woods. Dad showed them what poison ivy looked like, how to make sassafras tea from the roots. Told them what animals had made the different tracks they found on the trails and how to tell how old the tracks were. He never knew my dad knew all this neat stuff. He was dead tired when we laid down to sleep. The smell of Dad cooking breakfast over an open fire work me. Except this time it was Ella Mae's cooking on the wood stove that woke him from his dream.

He was sincere when he thanked her for the breakfast. It had been a long time since He had a breakfast that good. She said it was the least she could do for him for carrying all that wood, water and food up from the cellar for her. He told her he had a long days hike back to his home and he needed to get going if he was going to make it before dark. He stood outside on the front porch until he heard the door lock behind him like she said she would do when he had asked her. He briefly thought about trying to brush away his coming and going footprints he had left in the snow but too many to make it worthwhile. As he headed quickly towards home he smiled as he wondered if Ella Mae had treated him like they had that county guy about the basement well and waiting until he was out of sight before she unlocked the front door...just in case her children came to visit.

Chapter Two

Some of his group thought she was lucky the hordes had missed her farm and that she was still alive. Just wait till spring then go back to bury her and load up what he had found in the basement along with the wood cook stove. Others thought perhaps they shouldn't wait till spring to take her stuff. Leave enough food behind for her to ease their consciences then take the rest. Their group was barely holding their own without taking on

elderly member that couldn't contribute towards their group. When he offered to feed Ella Mae out of his food allotment enough members changed their vote to the three-fourths their by-laws said was needed to vote in a new member. Other than a few patrols and scouting the majority of the group was hunkered down till spring. Their Leader said they could spare six volunteers to bring back the old lady and all the supplies they could in one trip. If they were successful he would reassess the situation to see if any return trips that winter or wait until the spring crops were in to take one large group for one trip.

When he asked for five more volunteers he was pleased the other five that had raised their hands were young strong adults. He was especially pleased that one of the raised hands belonged to the former EMT, hard telling what physical condition they would find Ella Mae in and ...ah... he was kind of sweet on the EMT. Six volunteers divided into three teams of two each. Each team would be responsible for finding or making a sled that they could pull to the farm house and return to base when loaded. They have two days to get ready. It had been two weeks since he had left Ella Mae at her farm house. Their Leader agreed one rifle and one pistol with two magazines each would be issued to each team. The two days went slowly for him. It had been two weeks since he had left Ella Mae and leaving a Grandmother alone like that just didn't set well with him.

It was time. They had loaded up the night before so they'd be ready at first sunlight. It was still biting wintery cold out. On the positive side the twelve inches of snow was hard crusted and they could walk on the crust without their feet breaking through. The two toboggans and the sled made from the hood of a Volkswagen Beetle would be easy to pull on top of the snow...on the return trip it could be a different story.

At first Ella Mae protested. She was fine where she was and didn't want to be a burden on anyone. She was happy to have company and loved to be able to cook a good farm meal for them. Plenty of bedrooms upstairs if they could stay for a while. Make yourselves at home she insisted. While Ella Mae was explaining the pictures in her photo album to the EMT, in return the EMT quietly was assessing Ella Mae's physical ability to make the trip to their camp. The other five of the "rescue" party was inventorying what they found in the basement. It had been dark when he had been carrying the canned food and wood up for Ella Mae and it had been hard to see what was in the basement. Now with daylight shining in through the basement windows...WOW!

Rows and rows of canned food on shelves. Each jar dated with the month and year it was home-canned.

The house had been heated with a wood furnace which was still in the basement. The furnace had been converted to fuel oil but to them it looked like it could be easily converted back to wood. They took measurements and looked to see how hard it would be to partially disassemble it so they could haul it back at a later date. If they could get it back to the group it would be worth it. The fuel oil tank was in the basement too and sounded like it was full of fuel. They'd take a sample of the fuel oil back with them and let their expert determine if it was still good and worth while to retrieve.

In the back corner of the basement was a workbench. Old tools like brace and bits to hand drill holes into wood, wrenches and hand saws hung above the bench. The tools would go back on this trip. Hidden under the workbench they found a double barrel 410 shotgun wrapped up in an oily cloth. Three boxes of shells for the shotgun they found behind a ceiling joist. These would be going back on this trip too. As much canned food they could load would top off their load. They had just finished their inventory when Ella Mae had shouted down the basement stairs, "Kids! Come up and wash up for supper!"

Ella Mae had set the meal in the dining room with real glassware, silverware, placemats and cloth napkins. Ella Mae asked them to hold hands as she asked the man who happen to sit at the head of the table to say Grace. The food was amazing! There were even dinner rolls! How Ella Mae had managed to bake dinner rolls on a wood stove was something the men ask her to teach their wives. "Most of our children have never had..."

"You have children?" Ella Mae interrupted. When she saw most of those at the table nodding their heads she continued, "Tell me about the children". The rest of the meal was eaten around stories about the children, their names and ages which Ella Mae would repeated back as they were told as if memorize them. Ella Mae looked years younger when she announced, "Well if you think I could be of some help, I'll go back with you in the morning. Perhaps you might need some help with the children and it would be pleasurable to be around family...people again."

They left in the morning. Ella Mae was sitting on the upside down VW hood, wrapped in blankets, jars of canned food around her wrapped in more blankets to keep her and the jars from freezing. Her “sled” was pulled by two of the men. The wood stove was disassembled the night before and the parts were distributed between the two Toboggans along with the hand tools and shotgun. Each Toboggan was pulled by a single man. That left one man and the woman EMT as reserves and every hour they all would rotate pulling one of the loads. Overall the trip was uneventful. They made it to their base just before sunset.

Chapter Three

They thought it would be best if they left Ella Mae rest for a few days before they had a formal welcoming her to the group. She did sleep late the first day but by noon she up and was heard calling each child by name and telling them stories about her childhood that memorized the children. “Grandma tell us when ...” was heard over and over again.

“Thank you all for coming to meet our newest member to our group. As I believe you all know she wants us to call her Ella Mae or grandma. If anyone hasn’t had the opportunity to meet her yet please raise you hand. Seeing none Ella Mae, as this year’s elected Leader and in behalf of our Mutual Aid Group, I welcome you to our group. Ella Mae you know Jim. He is the one that found you and sponsored you for membership. If you have any questions about our laws or how we operate, Jim will be your first contact. He will have or can get the answer for you. For the rest of the week please feel free to relax and get to know us. Ella Mae do you have any questions you want to ask now?” Being called out in front of the entire group flustered her. She was use to working quietly behind a strong male head of the household. “No” she said.

“Well in that case, now that we are all together it would be a good time to conduct a little business. This winter has reveled a hole in our MAG planning. We have camo for the patrols and scouts but unfortunately it’s all woodland greens and browns. It stands out in this white snow. At our last meeting a motion was second that white bed sheets would be used to make white camouflaged ponchos that would fit over the person’s coat. Unfortunately they didn’t turn out too well. If we had a sewing machine or anyone now where we could find one?” The Leader saw Ella Mae

tentatively raise her hand. Oh great he thought. One of those that had an opinion on everything. “Did you think of a question Ella Mae?” He asked and hoped.

“Why don’t you sew them by hand?”

“That is one of the solutions that was tried, didn’t turn out too well. That’s why we need a sewing machine.”

“You don’t have anyone that knows how to sew?”

“No we don’t and that is why perhaps with a sewing machine...”

“Well I do. And I’ll be glad to teach the ladies.”

And that was the last time the Leader underestimated Ella Mae.

That evening was her first class showing how to measure out the material, make a pattern and different type of sewing stitches for different stress points. Ella Mae demonstrated how to make the first white poncho and before the next snow the rest of the ladies had made all the other needed ponchos.

Then Ella Mae gave hands on lessons on how to make dinner rolls over a wood fire. Then how to can, make candles from animal fat, reusable cloth Menstrual pads and diapers with storage, washing and reuse technics. Ella Mae was full of useful information that had been set aside and quickly forgotten with the ease of modern technology. Like too many Mutual Aid Groups that had stocked modern day supplies thinking only needing enough until the Government came to the rescue and the products were manufactured again. Wasn’t going to happen this time. There was no retired special ops soldier that figured out the secret code and was at the right place at the right time to save our way of life. Or a rare honest politician who managed against all odds to bring the guilty to accountability. There was no white knight riding in at the last moment to save humanity...no wait, that’s not true. There was a white knight and her name was Elli Mae.

The End