

**Authors note:** The “gizmo” that figures in this chapter is described early on so I’ll give you some background. Valdese Landry is a welder and machinist. In the textile mill’s machine shop Val sometimes needs another hand or two and they aren’t available to him. So he rigged a propane torch to an Army surplus magnet, using a large hose clamp. Val could then attach the torch/magnet to whatever steel he worked on and because of the clamp, he could rotate the torch in almost any direction. It is December, 1960.

## Chapter Thirty-One

*A Tobacco Field at Night, a Gizmo, Propane*

*Torch, Gasoline, The Klan*

Clammy sweat running down the center of Val’s back was a sure sign of fear. After all, it was well after midnight on a chilly December night. It was a given that the bed sheet brigade coming to burn down his house--and who knew what else--would arrive sooner or later and he had planned for them for quite some time. But right now, it was the little things that bothered him. His bare feet too - used to sturdy welder’s boots - hurt as he raced across the tobacco field in the dark, using a thick row of loblolly pines and darkness as cover. The other thing that bothered him was the suspicion that all his warning devices were too complicated, too many batteries; maybe they wouldn’t work. Maybe he had out-clevered himself. But it was too damn late now. They were here, sauntering up his sandy road bringing gasoline, guns and a lot of trouble.

He had been right about when the crackers would show. He had thought to himself, yeah, they almost killed young Brian, and who they gonna get next? And only two miles up the road is Westminster A.M.E. church, the kind of colored church them

folks like to torch and destroy. That's when Val finalized plans that he'd contemplated for a long time. At least the first warning had worked perfectly, mostly because cracker rednecks were so predictable. He knew they'd show up and park their trucks right at the road, thinking they'd block any escape. So that's where he laid the ground contacts that rang a telephone bell screwed to the windowsill next to his bed.

He had shown Henry a sketch of how he might lay it out, and Henry was impressed. And it was Henry who had gotten the door skins from a couple of wrecked Chevys that were perfect for the job, slightly convex and thin. He put a twelve-volt car battery underneath an upturned bucket hidden in honeysuckle that lined his road. Then with the huge roll of Army surplus copper telephone wire he'd found in Gastonia, he connected the positive side to steel carriage bolts that lay in a small cavity under each sheet of door metal. The other positive wire he had brazed to the edge of each door skin. He then ran that wire and the negative wire across the four-acre tobacco field to the bell on the windowsill. He had five of them in total: one door skin with bolt underneath in the center of the road, and then two more where the tire tracks were, and then another two along the very edge of the road. All of them were buried in a thin layer of sand and pea gravel. As soon as anyone stepped or drove into the first twenty feet of his quarter-mile road, the door skin would drop enough to contact the wired bolt, thus closing the circuit and causing the bell in the bedroom to ring. And now here he was sprinting towards the county road while Lucille stationed herself next to the big silver maple out by the dog pen.

He had made good use of that Army-Navy surplus store. There were two black Navy sweaters, miles of that wire and an olive drab hand-held marine spotlight that was

intensely bright and it worked from a regular car battery. He believed running barefoot was the quietest way to go and he was closing quickly on the vine-filled ditch beside the road at the far end of the tobacco field. Once on the other side of the ditch, he made for their trucks, hopefully arriving before the second alarm and light show began. His Navy issue Colt .45 automatic was jammed into his cinched pants and the black bag holding the magnetic third-hand gizmo bounced and jarred against his back.

When he got to the county road he stopped to hear the men—he didn't know how many—chuckling and whispering in the pitch dark further up his road. The dogs hadn't yet gotten to full volume. Val figured they had about another two hundred feet to the next trip-wire. He had successfully skirted past them. Hell, those guys would never imagine he was now behind them.

*Times like this it sure is nice to be married to a gutsy lady like Lucille.* Sweat poured now in the chill night air as he pictured Lucille in her black Navy sweater, holding a twelve-gauge shotgun under the maple that stood well away from the house, ready to turn on the big spotlight and rev up the second siren. If the plan didn't work, they were in a peck o' trouble.

Henry's friend Collie had found two old sirens, one from a wrecked ambulance in Rutherfordton and the other, as Collie dryly noted, was borrowed for an indefinite period from the Shelby police. Both had blinking lights that only needed new bulbs and some fresh wiring. Pretty soon, the first one would come to life in a line of trees off to the crackers' left, far enough away to look as if it was on a car coming down the county road. And when it howled, Lucille would pull a rope attached to the dog pen door and the big chows, Shadrak, Meschak and Abednego would make havoc.

Shad was the fastest dog Val had ever seen, an enormous furry chow that could cover the four-acre pasture in about ten seconds. To see him at that speed was frightening. Their road was L-shaped, the longer leg starting at the county road being just shy of a quarter mile and then it turned sharp right for another four hundred feet to the house. It was a big dogleg and Val knew that whoever they were would prefer the road to crossing a dark tobacco field.

He reached the lone pickup, what could be the red-primered one that Brian had seen. It was too dark to tell but it was an early fifties Ford. He was relieved there was only one. Maybe there'd only be two men, maybe three. He looked in the back and saw several jerry cans tied to the side of the truck bed; he pushed on the closest one and found it full. The smell of gasoline was acrid. *So, another church to be burned...*

The red flashing light began off to the left and the old siren commenced a low moan, building towards a full shriek. He heard one of the guys: "Oh, shit." When the other one said "Hold on," the big Navy spotlight next to their house came on, lighting the corner of the road where the guys had hit the second tripwire. The second siren at the back of the house came to life as well. Val could see the two men freeze and then begin to turn back towards the truck as a roaring Shadrak flew into them, knocking the smaller guy over. The other guy dropped the gasoline can in the road, pulled a revolver and began shooting.

Val heard one of his dogs yelp but he got busy placing the third-hand gizmo on the truck. He knew that in these old Fords, the gas tank sat low behind the driver's seat. He opened the driver's door, reached in and felt for where the gas filler neck connected to the thin upright tank. The five-pound magnet grabbed the inside of the cab with a metallic

clunk. He positioned the magnet so the business end of the propane torch pointed at the tank, right at the base of the filler neck. He could hear his dogs growling and barking and the guys thudding up the sandy road, yelling and shooting. Then two blasts from Lucille's shotgun. He flicked his Zippo and the propane came to a nice steady blue hiss. He made one last adjustment to make sure it was secure, pressed the door closed, and dove to the opposite side of the county road, rolled into the ditch, making himself as small as possible.

He felt faint. After all, one of the possible outcomes if the gas tank leaked--or if there were too many fumes from the jerry cans--was that the truck might explode in his face. And this was clearly an old clapped-out truck. With this plan, he had to face that possibility but the propane had popped into a nicely formed blue cone... and nothing exploded. He held his breath and the Colt close as the men cursed and yelled at each other, slamming the truck's doors and cranking the engine with a roar.

“Goddammit. Fuckin’ niggers ain’t worth this shit...”

He clicked the Colt off safety and hoped the dogs wouldn't give him away...if they were still alive.

They revved the engine and made a skidding one-eighty turn, almost running a back tire into the ditch where Val lay curled. With grinding gears they disappeared around the corner at Washburn's store as distant lightning lit up the western sky a faint bluish-purple color. The sound of the old truck soon merged into the night, but the strong odor of gasoline and the wailing of sirens out in the trees remained.

He whistled for his dogs and walked back towards the house on his sandy road so he could disconnect the battery wires powering the siren in the woods to the left. When

he turned it off, Lucille also cut the power to the other siren behind the house. But she kept the spotlight on. He paused to look back towards the darkness of the main road. His bare feet hurt and were cold. He wondered how far those crackers might get. Maybe the propane torch came loose when the truck spun wildly around. Maybe the flame went out or they heard the low hiss behind them. Maybe they'd be back, it was hard to know.

He stood in the quiet and took a deep breath. The men had dropped a gasoline can at the corner. The smell was strong and nauseating but Val could see that much of the gasoline was still in the can.

His warning system had worked. But now he was looking at one of his dogs lying crossways in the road in a pool of blood. He'd always known the dogs were for their protection. Between the siren screams, the ultra-bright spot light and three very large chow dogs racing out of the intense glare, no wonder the crackers had fled. Abednego brushed against his leg, licked his hand while Val stood looking at Shadrak lying in a dark heap.

An orange flash bloomed across the underside of a long cloudbank up Pea Ridge Road to the northwest. To Val it momentarily looked like the last vestige of a sunset across the South Mountains. Then a ball of flame a hundred feet high billowed skyward in slow motion. The delayed sound arrived five or six seconds later, sweeping across the tobacco field. It was a muffled explosion, sounding like a thunder crack in the distance.

*Guess the propane torch held.*