

**END
OF THE
ROAD**

ZEATA P. RUFF

YAV PUBLICATIONS
ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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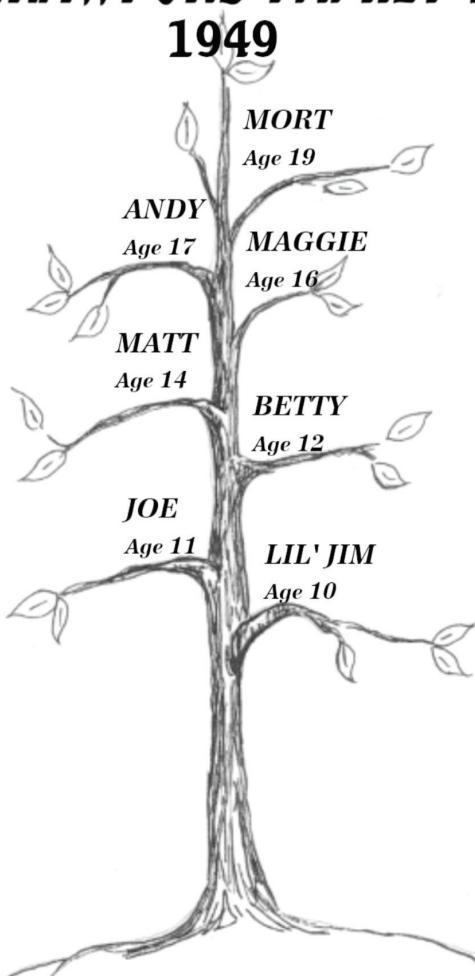
For “Big Jim” who would not let me quit.

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THE CRAWFORD FAMILY TREE

1949



R.L. CRAWFORD - Father VADIE CRAWFORD- Mother
Daddy Robert - R.L.'s Father Granny Ruth - Vadie's Mother
Mama Annie - R.L.'s Mother

CHAPTER 1

WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA MOUNTAINS

NOVEMBER, 1949

THEY SLIPPED IN, all five of them, kinda like they were hopin' nobody would notice. Set on the back row. But folks did notice. First one, then another, then somebody would elbow his neighbor so they'd turn around. The church was almost full, nigh on fifty people. It sounded like a bunch of bees had done and got loose with all the buzzin'. Nobody was payin' any mind as to what the preacher was a sayin'. All five of the latecomers, except Big Jack, was lookin down at their shoes like they'd never seen 'em before. Just waitin' for somebody to tell 'em they weren't welcome here. But Big Jack was sittin' up real straight like he was still in the army and just darin' somebody to say something.

It's the first time that they'd been to church since...and I don't recollect that I've ever seen Big Jack in church. Preaching and singing went on—just like always. But you could see folks takin' a peek over their shoulder ever now and again, makin' sure they was seeing what they was seeing. All five sneaked out just as the preacher was passin' their row to stand at the door. Reckon they knew what all the whispering was about. Everybody else was singin' the last hymn.

"Hazel, wait!" Mama called kinda loud, as she squeezed between me and my friend, Harvey. She stepped out into the church aisle just as we finished up the last verse. "Wait, Hazel," she called again and rushed to the back of the church almost knocking Miz Henderson back down in her pew. Mama brushed by the preacher without even a howdy, still hollerin at Hazel Hall to stop.

The whole Crawford clan was right behind her, falling all over themselves and trying to figure out what Mama was gonna do. Ain't never seen Mama act like that or run that fast—and in church, too. Pa stopped, but just for a minute, and helped Miz Henderson steady her feet. "Sorry, Fannie, don't know what's got into Vadie."

"R.L., you all go ahead and get in the truck. I won't be but a minute. I gotta speak to Hazel," Mama hollered back over her shoulder just as we got outside. We couldn't do nothing but just stand there and watch Mama runnin across the grass toward the Halls. "Please wait, Hazel!"

When I looked back at the church door, it seems like everybody had come out all at once. Pushed their way right past the preacher. Their mouths all gapped open and not takin' their eyes off of Mama. They watched as she ran over to Miz Hall and put her hand on her shoulder, "Please wait a minute, Hazel. I need a word with you," Mama begged almost out of breath.

Hazel Hall stopped but kept her head bowed and didn't look Mama in the face. She turned around, kinda slow like. The Hall boys and Big Jack stepped up real close behind her, like they weren't sure what was goin' to happen or what Mama could possibly have to say. Reckon nobody did, cause the churchyard was soon full of gawkin' folks and nobody sayin a word. They were all strainin' to hear what Mama could possibly have to say to Hazel Hall.

"Glad to see you and your boys back at church, Hazel. You, too, Big Jack," Mama began and she sorta nodded at each one and caught her breath. "Been real tough on all of us these last few weeks. I finally came around to realizing that God and church are the only way to get through it. You're a good woman, Hazel, and got some real fine boys here. Nothing for you to hang your head about. No need for these boys to be feeling ashamed either. Had nothing to do with it."

"But, Vadie...how can you of all people forgive...." Hazel stammered, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"You listen to me. There's nothing to forgive. It hasn't been easy—on any of us. I'm sure that there'll still be some dark days ahead but I've turned it over to the Lord and I know He'll take care of it. Good Book says that the Lord don't put nothing on us that we can't handle. Took me a while, but I finally remembered that I'm a mountain woman, made of strong faith and sturdy grit like my mama and a lot of the other women around these mountains. You are, too, Hazel, and don't you forget it. It's gonna be hard but we'll make it to the end of this road. We got to. Gotta do it for our young 'uns' sake. You've had a hard row to hoe for a long time, these boys, too. But you've made it through. So you hold your head high and don't let nobody tell you any different." Mama turned around and headed toward the truck leavin' Miz Hall and the rest of Shady Hill Baptist Church starin after her.

"I'm ready, now, R.L.," I heard her tell Pa as she climbed into the front seat. "You know, we got a lot to do and it's almost Thanksgiving," she added taking a long, white feather from the dashboard and rubbing it against her cheek. "Don't know when I've seen these Smokey Mountains look so clear on such cold November day."

It sure was gonna be good to have Mama back to her old self. Even if I am only 10 years old, I know that 1949

was a hard year and things could only get better. Had to. For all of us. What began back in January maybe ended today. Mama let Miz Hall and the rest of Hazelgrove know.

CHAPTER 2

JANUARY 1949—THE LIST

IT WAS KINDA WARM for a January day. Yesterday's rain had frozen last night but had been thawed by the morning sun to make a slick layer of gooey, brown slush. The river of mud was covering the whole dog lot. Saturday chores were getting done but nobody was movin' fast. It was nice just to let the sun warm your bones as you worked.

"Joe, you and Lil' Jim rake that lot out real good afore you put down fresh straw. We'll move Queenie to the porch tomorrow, but I want that lot clean for Napoleon," Pa yelled at us from the back porch.

"Don't he see we're working as hard as we can? Don't know why he's in such a bad temper. Got the longest list he's ever had. I think he's still mad about Brother Mort joinin' up last week," I complained to Joe.

"Y-y-yeah," Joe replied. "We're w-w-workin' h-h-hard."

Sometimes Joe has a hard time getting his words out just right. He talks kinda funny and kids make fun. Sometimes he don't talk at all, especially if they's strangers around. One time, I heard his teacher tell another teacher that Joe was "slow". But heck, he ain't slow. He can run faster than anybody in 5th grade.

"Matt, bring me some more of them shavins out of the barn!" Pa yelled again. "Here, Andy, make sure that box is snug in the corner and there ain't no nails or nothing stickin out. It's gonna turn cold and we'll need to keep 'em out of the weather." They shoved the large wooden box that Andy had just built, back into the far corner of the back porch. It was ready to be filled with the cedar shavings that would keep Queenie and her new born pups warm.

"Get on in your house, Napoleon, and stay out of the way!" I ordered, a little bit ticked off. About every other year, it seems like the whole world turns around Pa's list. Don't nothin else matter. Gotta take care of Queenie! Make sure Queenie has plenty of food. Queenie got plenty of straw in her house. Queenie this, Queenie that! Guess that dog thinks she really is some kind of Queen.

Pa started raising bird dogs afore I was born. He's had some real dandies but none like Queenie. Bout three years back, they started havin' a contest over in Asheville just for bird dogs. Guess they got tired of every hunter sayin' his dog was better than yours and no way to prove it. So they come up with this here contest—call it field trials. Have it in September and everybody brings all their dogs together and watches 'em work. They judge 'em on their find and point, and on their retrieve. They even judge 'em on how they look—their color and markins' and such. Well, Pa's been takin' Queenie ever since they started and ever year she comes back with another little tag on her collar "BEST OF SHOW." Must really be something, 'cause ever since, Pa's list has got longer and longer.

Now, Napoleon, here, well he was the runt of Queenie's first litter. So small, nobody thought he would make it. But he's also the meanest of the litter. When he was hungry, which seemed like most of the time, he'd root his brothers and sisters out of the way until he could latch

on and git his fill. That's why they named him 'Napoleon'. It was Brother Mort's idea. Seems like that there was this here King in France a long time ago who was real small but kinda mean. He had big armies and tried to rule the world. It sure is a funny name for a dog but I guess it fits.

"Hey, Joe, here comes the first uns!" I called as the two pickups drove up the driveway and stopped at the porch where Pa and Andy were putting the shavins in the box. "That's old man Snyder and his boy. Where are they on the list?"

"Don't know. M-m-must be-e-e near the t-t-top, though, 'cause they's here l-l-last week, too," Joe answered.

"Don't know them fellers in the other truck, do you?" I asked as they all began to make their way toward us sloshing through the mud. Each man put in a fresh chew and offered one to Pa just as they reached the gate.

"You keep a clean pen, R.L., that's real important," Mr. Snyder said as Pa lifted the hasp. Everybody else nodded in agreement. "How much longer you figure she's got?"

"Maybe a week, 10 days at the most. Me and my boy, Andy, are fixin' her a place on the back porch. She had a hard time with that last litter and we want to keep a close eye on her," Pa answered just as another truck pulled in behind the others. David Lee Hall and his oldest son, Johnny Lee, got out and started toward the group. The Halls are our only close-by neighbors. They have three boys. Johnny Lee, is 17 and one of the boys that likes my sister Maggie. Why, one Sunday, he was tryin' so hard to get her attention that he fell over his own two feet and landed right smack in the third row in old Miz Setzer's lap. She weren't none too happy and let him have an ear full right there in the middle of church. Johnny Lee just picked up his hat and ran out the door. He didn't say excuse me or

nothin. Don't know where he was but he sure didn't come back to preachin' for a couple of Sundays.

"Hey, R.L., just the man we need to see!" David Lee yelled as he came up the hill. "Understand Queenie's bout due."

"You all know Fred Snyder and his boy, Carl. This here's Joe Hunter and Sam Fox. Our neighbor, David Lee Hall, and his boy, Johnny Lee," Pa made the introductions as the Halls joined the other men. Everybody shook hands and spit tobacco over their shoulder. It's kinda what all the men folk do around here to let everybody know that they's all on the same footin'.

"Well, R.L., me and my boy want one of them pups. I'll pay top dollar. Figure I just might git in the bird dog business myself," David Lee announced as he nodded to each man and spit again, barely missin Fred Snyder's boot.

Spittin' tobacco juice on the ground, and wippin his mouth on the sleeve of his coat, Pa took a minute to answer. "Your name ain't on the list, David Lee. Queenie probably won't have more than 7, maybe 8, and I already got eleven on the list. Everybody that don't get a pup this time will move up the list for the next litter."

"Hell, R.L., ain't we been neighbors a long time? Good neighbors. Don't reckon it would hurt nothin for you to put me on the top of the list and let somebody else wait, now would it?" he suggested as he patted Pa on the shoulder and spit once more, barely missing another boot.

"No, David Lee, it don't work that way. First come, first serve—that's how it's made. Don't move it around for nobody. Sides that, don't know as how I will put your name on the list for the next litter, either." Pa was quick to answer as he looked him right in the eye.

"Why, what do you mean? I got just as much right as anybody else! Ain't my money good enough for a Crawford?" he asked angrily, pushing the sleeves of his

coat up like he was getting ready to fight. Everybody knows that David Lee Hall has a quick temper and likes to shove his weight around.

"It ain't your money, David Lee. It's the way you treat your dogs. Last fall, you kept a coon dog tied to a tree until it almost starved to death. A body could see his ribs poking out. Don't want my pups goin' to nobody that would mistreat 'em. You'll have to find 'em somewhere else if you want a dog." Turning to the other men, "Fred, you and Carl come back in about two weeks and y'all can git the pick of the litter. Your name's on the top."

"Come on, Pa," Johnny Lee quietly said to his father as he tugged on his sleeve and urged him toward their truck. It was easy to see that Johnny Lee was afraid that his Pa might start fightin' or something.

"Let go of me, Johnny Lee! Don't you ever put your hands on your Pa again, you hear!" David Lee growled and pushed his son into the mud. "Ain't no use tryin' to talk to 'em no ways. Shoulda knowed. He's a Crawford. Thinks he's better than everybody else. Hell, we'll show 'em. I'll just git me a dog and see who wins them trials the next time," David Lee yelled back to the group of stunned men as a red-faced Johnny Lee followed him toward the truck, head bowed and mud all over the knees of his pants. "You'll see! You'll see! Won't let no Crawford beat me."

As the father and son reached the truck, he grabbed Johnny Lee by the coat and shoved him into the side of the truck, "Don't you ever embarrass me like that again, boy, you hear? Don't need no snot-nosed kid telling me what to do. Now git in this here truck. I'll take care of you when we git to the house."

The other men milled around makin' small talk for a few minutes before they left, making sure to let David Lee get on down the road. Nobody could help but hear what he said to Johnny Lee and nobody wanted any more trouble.

Before the day was over, all the rest of the fellers on the list would stop by to check on Queenie.

"Why do you always want Queenie to litter in the middle of the winter, Pa?" I asked as we finished supper. "Wouldn't it be better if it was in the middle of the summer when it's hot and you don't have to check on her so much?"

"Yeah, Lil' Jim, it'd be OK anytime. But I like to have my pups ready early in the year so that their handlers can git some trainin' in before bird season in the fall. If they're eight or nine months old, you can put them in the field with the older dogs and they'll just fall right in—it's in their blood. They know just what they're suppose to do," he patiently explained. "Good supper, Mama."

"Nothin special," Mama answered, distracted, as she began to clear the table. "Wonder what Mort's havin'?"

"Sh-h-h! Everybody be real quite. Listen, Pa. Ain't that Queenie and Napoleon?" Andy asked as we all held real still and strained to hear. "Bet that old fox is back, looking for something to eat."

"Well, he might git et hisself if he tries to git in Napoleon's food." Pa laughed as we all listened to the song of the barking dogs. "He's probably just passin' through. Listen, they've stopped. We'll move Queenie first thing in the morning. Don't need her all stressed out so near her time. Now, y'all git on in bed. We've had a hard day. Got a lot to do before church in the morning."

"Ah, Pa, I ain't sleepy. Let us listen to a little of the Opry afore we have to tuck in," Matt begged. "Little Jimmy Dickens is suppose to be on tonight."

"Yeah, Pa," everybody chimed in. "We'll go directly. Let us listen to it a little bit."

"You all heard me. Git on up them steps. Don't need nobody pitchin' a hissy fit. Been a long day. And don't forget to give your Mama some sugar afore you tuck in."

When Pa said something, he meant it and would never change his mind. So we all lined up to kiss Mama on the cheek afore climbing the stairs.

We began our chores just as the sun was peeking over the mountains. Pa had sent Andy to the dog lot to bring Queenie to her new spot on the back porch. "Pa, come quick! Come quick! Queenie's gone and something is wrong with Napoleon!" Andy yelled toward the house.

"What are you hollerin' about, Son?" Pa yelled back as he leaped off the porch and ran toward the lot. Betty hung her egg basket on the fence, Joe and I dropped our load of firewood and we all ran in the same direction.

"The gate was open, Pa! The gate was open! When I got here, the gate was open. Queenie ain't nowhere and Napoleon's layin' over there behind his house! I think he's dead! Pa." Andy shouted louder even though we were all standin right beside him.

"Let me look at Napoleon, git out of the way. Maybe he's just sick," Betty said through tears as she knelt beside the still dog.

"Queenie, here Queenie!" Pa called over and over as he wandered around the lot and up toward the pine trees. "Queenie, Queenie! Here girl!" But the dog did not appear.

"Ain't no way she coulda got out. Somebody had to flip the hasp and open the gate. Ain't no way," Andy said shaking his head and looking all around the frozen grounds.

"Joe, you and Lil' Jim go to the barn and see if she might be down there with Maggie and Matt. See if they've seen her. Maybe she got out and went down there last night to git warm."

"Pa, Napoleon is dead. He ain't breathin or nothing. Oh, Pa, what do you think coulda happened to Napoleon and Queenie?" Betty begged for an answer, tears streaming

down her cheeks as she cradled the dog's head in her lap and rocked back and forth.

"We gotta find Queenie. She's too near her time to be out wanderin around. Now, git goin boys. Go on down to the barn and see if she's there. We'll take care of Napoleon later, Betty. Go tell your Mama that Queenie's missin. Here Queenie! Come here girl! Queenie!"

But she wasn't at the barn. She wasn't at the can house or the chicken coop or under the front porch. She was nowhere to be found. It took a while, but finally Pa understood what Andy was tryin to say, "Ain't no way she could unlock the gate. Somebody had to do it."

"Andy, take the truck down to the store and tell Daddy Robert to call the sheriff," Pa ordered. "The sooner he gits on this the sooner we have her back."

The sheriff drove up in his patrol car about nine o'clock looking none too pleased about having to come out this far on such a cold day and a Sunday to boot.

"Sheriff Taylor, you gotta find out who took my dog, Queenie. It's about her time and if she's not took good care of, she might lose those pups and not make it herself," Pa almost begged the sheriff.

"Look, R.L., I'm real sorry about your dog. But I don't have no time to go looking for strays. I got real sheriff work to do. We got us some Klan trouble. Last night somebody done burned a cross in old man Putnam's yard. I been up almost all night tryin' to figure out what's going on."

"What do you mean, Sheriff? We ain't never had no Klan around here. Why would anybody have a gripe with poor old Ned Putnam. He ain't never caused nobody trouble."

"I don't know, R.L. You remember his boy, Nathaniel? Well, seems he moved back in with Ned a few weeks back. Been livin' down round Charlotte and got into

some trouble with some white boys that didn't like the way he's talkin' to white girls. My guess is, he decided the these hills are a lot safer than that flat land. But I reckon somebody done found out and followed him up here," Sheriff Taylor explained to all the Crawford males who were staring in disbelief.

"That's mighty disturbin'. We don't need that kind of trouble around here. Maybe they've had their say and will let it be. I ain't seen Nathaniel around. How old is he now anyway? 15? 16? Think I remember he's about the same age as Andy?"

"Probably about 17," The sheriff answered. "He was just a little 'un when Ned sent him off to live with his mother-in-law."

"Guess Nathaniel has been layin' low. Best he stays holed up until this blows over," R.L. told him shaking his head and looking at his boys, who were as still as mice. Their mouths all gapped open. "You reckon it was men from down around Charlotte? Don't think they could be from around here."

"I hope they ain't from around here. I hope they are from Charlotte and are long gone. Gotta go, R.L. Hope you find your dog."

"But I'm tellin you, Queenie was stole. Stole right outta her lot. And who ever took her musta poisoned Napoleon, too. That's a crime—that's not a stray!" Pa tried to explain again as the sheriff got back into his car.

"It was that mean ole David Lee Hall! Up here yesterday trying to buy one of the pups. You otta stop by his place. Bet you'd find Queenie tied in his barn!" Andy yelled at the sheriff.

"Now don't go off half-cocked, Andy. Gotta have proof. I'll keep my eyes open, R.L. I'll keep my eyes open. If I turn anything up, I'll let you know. You let me know if

you hear anything about this Klan stuff," and he drove out of our drive with us all looking at each other.

"What's the Klan, Pa?" I ventured to ask.

"Nothin' for you to trouble your head about, Lil' Jim. Not none of you. Just a bunch of men with hate in their heart instead of the love of the Lord. Think they know what's best, yet, they hide behind white robes and masks," he explained to his four dumbfounded sons. "Now, what we gotta do is find Queenie. Gotta find her before she pups and we lose her as well as her brood. Lil' Jim, you and Joe dig a grave for Napoleon. The rest of us will divide up and search for Queenie. You boys get a move on, you hear? Don't look like we'll be going to church."

"Bet it was that David Lee Hall. Came up here yesterday with his chest all stuck out wantin' to buy a pup. I wouldn't put nothing past him," Andy accused. "Probably got her tied up down at his barn right now. Come on, Pa, let's go down there and git her back!"

"I don't know, Andy. We can't go accusing somebody just because we don't like 'em. And we shore can't go down there and make a ruckus. But we'll watch and if you get a chance, ask Johnny Lee about it. He might just tell you—especially if his Pa's been beatin' on him again." Pa just shook his head and went into the house.

"Shucks, I gotta a good mind to go on down there myself—right now! Just see what old David Lee's got in that barn! Probably got Queenie and no telling what else," Andy told his brothers.

"Better not, Andy! Better just be quite about it and keep our eyes open, like Pa said," Matt stated and the rest of us nodded. "No telling what David Lee would do if he caught you sneakin' around. He may even be one of them Klan fellers."

"Yeah, he's real mean. He might even shoot you!" I added. "You saw what he did to Johnny Lee yesterday

when he didn't do nothin but try to keep him from fightin!"

"Well, I ain't afraid. Ain't afraid of David Lee or the Klan or nobody. And I shore wouldn't let David Lee push me around like he did Johnny Lee. First time he hit me, I'd hit him back—right in the mouth. Pa or no Pa. Ol' David Lee acts real tough but I bet he ain't. Bet he's just bluffin'. Bet if somebody stood their ground, he'd tuck his tail and run like some scared pup. Be just like him to be one of them fellers hidin' behind some white robe and mask. Sneakin' around, afraid to show his face. But I won't go. I'll do what Pa said and ask Johnny Lee first time I see him. Tell him he better fess up if he knows what's good for him, too. Tell him we know his Pa's got Queenie and we'd better git her back! And her pups, too! And they'd all better be in good shape."

"Wh-o-o's that Nathaniel guy? Y-y-you kn-kn-know him, Andy?" Joe asked.

"Nah, I don't know him. You all know his pa. Colored man who works down at the mill, sweepin' up. And his ma works for some ladies in town, helping' with cleanin' and stuff. Real nice folks. Wonder why they sent him off? Maybe he's touched in the head or something," Andy answered his brother. "Maybe you and Lil' Jim better start lookin' over your shoulder when you're walking home."

"Come on Joe, lets finish diggin that grave and get Napoleon buried afore Betty gits back out here and starts bawlin' again," I said, picking up a shovel. Everybody scattered. If they're like me, gotta a lotta thinking to do.

At least the wet ground had thawed and the digging wasn't hard. I couldn't help but think about David Lee Hall as we shoveled the soggy dirt into a big pile. Don't know if Andy's right or not about his stealin Queenie...he sure seems mean enough. Can't figure about this Klan stuff,

either. Sounds kinda scary. Sure wouldn't want to make them mad. Just glad that Andy didn't take it on hisself to go down to the Halls and stir up more trouble.

And that Nathaniel feller. Boy, I sure wouldn't like it if Ma and Pa sent me away to live with somebody else. Even if it was kin. "Joe, do you think Andy's right? About that colored feller being touched?" I asked as we dug.

"D-d-don't k-k-know about you, but I am gonna be careful," he answered. "D-d-don't want nobody s-s-sneakin' up on me. T-t-touched or not."