

*Starting the Day in Arab*

An excerpt from *Katelyn Manor* by David A. Myers

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The streetlamps on Main Street didn't do much to light the sidewalk. Shadows ruled the street at 4 a.m. in downtown Arab, Alabama. For the moment there was no traffic, pedestrian or otherwise. At 4 a.m. the occasional call of a whippoorwill could be heard even on Main Street. The dark street didn't bother Jenna a bit. In fact, she loved the quiet and solitude of the early morning. The cool mountain air was as invigorating as the coffee she would soon be brewing. It wouldn't be much more than an hour or so before patrons would start arriving at the Rancho for coffee, eggs, biscuits and red-eye gravy over grits. The tranquility would expire with the rising of the sun, to resume at sunset.

Most Arabians accept the fact, and rightfully so, that the transport of freight is the locomotive that drives not only the local economy, but the Brindlee Mountain way of life. It's generally recognized that the noise and traffic associated with the shipping, receiving, and movement of goods support a necessary activity, one that results in the availability of merchandise. Arabians love to see items on the shelf, so the racket is accepted as the backdrop to the environment in which they exist. Because there is no railway running through Arab, the freight that moves to, from and through the city does so by truck. No one in town ever gave this fact much consideration, least of all Jenna Humphries. The rumbling of diesel engines passing through town on Main Street usually moved into full gear by five in the morning. They never woke her up. By that hour Jenna was already at work. Her apartment on Main Street was directly across from the Rancho, the café that she managed and opened every morning, excluding Sunday.

Jenna loved living on Main. Her second-floor balcony was her personal garden retreat. Anyone with regular occasion to traverse Main Street knew that Jenna watered at six o'clock every evening. The water dripping from the balcony onto the sidewalk below served as Arab's version of Big Ben and was as reliable.

She sometimes entertained in her garden. Sometimes Jenna enjoyed the company of a gentleman, though she would admit to neither the "enjoyed" nor the "gentleman" premise in regard to said company.

"I wouldn't use the term 'enjoy,' maybe 'put up with.' And 'gentleman' when referring to Roger? Isn't that a little generous?"

The short walk from her apartment to the Rancho's front door was a routine one. She casually moved down to the traffic light, past a cast iron fence that was covered with a thick patch of morning glory vines. From time to time, she had found them to be in display, even at this early hour. This morning they slept in.

Jenna crossed and headed up the opposite side of Main. She always entered the café through a side door, one that led directly into the kitchen. That first batch of biscuits would soon be placed into the oven and the all-important first pot of coffee would soon be brewing. She could probably do this in her sleep, for she'd kept this routine for twelve years, six days a week. During that time Jenna had failed to perform her duties only twice. Both times she'd had transportation problems. After the second time she took steps to ensure that it would never happen again. She moved from her family farm in rural Hulaco to the upstairs apartment across the street from the café. Her pattern of consistency was subsequently re-established. In this regard, it could be said that Jenna typified the city and its citizens. Consistency was the name of her game. This was certainly true of the

Rancho patrons, as well as of the other Main Street shop owners. The Main Street proprietors were models of consistency and their customers were creatures of habit.

On this morning Jenna would notice two things that were out of the ordinary. Later, in her interview with that handsome gentleman from the *Arab Advertiser*, she'd comment on how displeased she'd been about that.

"Mr. Wilder, you may not appreciate this, being a Yankee and all, but around here we like things to stay the same. I got my routine and when something's different, I get all outta sorts."

"Yankee? What makes you think I'm a Yankee, Mrs. Humphries?"

"Well, the way you talk, for one thing," she'd drawl.

"Well, you can be sure I ain't no Yankee, Jenna. I come from farther south than you. I'm from New Orleans, about four hundred miles that way," Chuck Wilder would say, pointing southeast.

"New Orleans? Well, you may not be a Yankee but I reckon you sure are a Cajun. I admit that's not as bad as bein' a Yankee but I don't think you Cajuns are quite right either. I gotta admit, though, y'all do tend to be rather good-lookin'."

The pleasant feel of the morning air led Jenna's thoughts adrift. Just as she reached the Rancho, she received a start. She cringed. A loud truck, perhaps the first of the morning, had turned onto Main from Cullman Highway, gears grinding and engine backfiring. It took her a moment, but she recognized old Gerald Albright and his son Bruce passing by, a load of chickens packed into cages on a trailer behind the truck. The birds were silent and stared at her bleakly as they passed by, prisoners headed for the gallows. She thought it a little eerie and felt a twinge of guilt. It was Friday and fried chicken was the Rancho's lunch special of the day.

"*Now that's a strange coincidence,*" she thought.

Jenna knew that she was related to the Albrights somehow, but exactly how escaped her at the moment.

*Livres Treize Page* was the Rancho's next-door neighbor and the businesses shared an alley. Jenna took note of the light from the bookstore's interior spilling onto the front sidewalk and wondered. This had never been the case before. This was something different and she didn't care for that a bit. She knew the bookstore operated from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. There should have been no more light than Rose's two interior security lamps could produce. These lamps never spilled onto the front walk.

As she passed the front door of the café Jenna noticed a second unusual, and this time downright scary, variation from the norm. There had always been two outdoor lights in the alley between the businesses, one at the Rancho's side door and one a little further down at the bookstore's rear exit. Between them they always lit up the alley nicely. This morning neither was illuminated and the alley was dark. It was blacker than dark.

"*Pitch black. That's what it is.*"

The noise from old man Albright's truck sounded in the distance as he made the turn at the First Baptist Church and headed for Guntersville. He missed a gear and an offensive grinding noise and backfire carried back down Main. Still on the sidewalk, Jenna dug around in her purse for her key chain. The key to both the front and side door of the café hung on one keychain, along with her apartment key. There were also a couple of potentially useful items attached to the chain, items made for just such an occasion. A penlight hung from the chain as well as a small pen-sized container of mace. She hadn't used the penlight in a while and as luck would have it, the batteries were dead. She'd never used the mace and felt confident that, at least, she'd find it to be fully

charged and ready to deliver its own brand of misery, if need be. The side door key was in her hand, ready to be inserted, turned, and smoothly removed. She'd quickly move down the dark alley, enter the kitchen and close the door behind her. Ready, set... She stopped short.

Something moved, she thought.

There was a soft click, she thought.

There seemed to be a spot in the alley, a spot that was just a little less black than its surroundings, hugging the wall of the bookstore. Did it drop briefly to the ground and rise again? She wasn't quite sure and strained her eyes to focus into the dark. It wasn't happening. There wasn't enough light to stimulate the retina. She fiddled with the penlight again to no avail.

*"Dammit!"*

It was a word that sometimes popped into her thoughts, but seldom found its way into utterance. It almost did this time.

"Hello! Anyone there?"

There was no verbal reply, but she did seem to get a response of sorts. The spot seemed to start shrinking in size, which in Jenna's mind served as an indication that it was moving quickly away from her. In an instant it was gone, and the constancy of the darkness returned.

"Well, standin' here ain't gettin' me nowhere," she said in a quiet voice.

*"I have got to get the oven on and the biscuits started,"* she thought.

"Well, standin' here ain't gettin' me nowhere," she repeated, this time loudly. She figured the sound of a voice may run off anyone or anything that waited in the dark.

Jenna took a deep breath and took off into the alley mace first, at arm's length and at the ready. She reached the door without incident and fumbled with the key for what seemed an eternity before finally getting the latch to release. She pushed her way inside and locked the door behind her, exhaling a breath of relief. She turned on the kitchen light and walked into the dining area, turning on the lights in there too. She took note that the alley light switch was indeed in the on position.

"Hmmm..."

Jenna got busy with her daily duties, biscuits in the oven and coffee pot started. It wouldn't be long before someone would show, probably Roger first, as usual. Within thirty minutes, Roger Bisom knocked on the front door.

"What ya got the door locked for, darlin'?"

"Get on in here, you big turkey! Where you been? I expected you here fifteen minutes ago!" Jenna exclaimed.

"Well, you ain't never been too worried about my glorious arrival before. Don't tell me I'm finally wearin' you down with my charm and good looks," he answered.

"Shut up, idjit!" she replied. "Look! Somethin's goin' on next door and I need someone to run over there and see."

"What you mean, darlin'?"

"I thought there was someone out there, down the alley, but I couldn't see good. I thought somebody came out of the bookstore in the dark and high-tailed it down the alley. I couldn't tell for sure. Both the lights were out. I need you to go out there and see if the bulbs are burned, broke, or just unscrewed."

Roger's eyes widened. He moved a curtain slightly and peeked out of a side window. He looked back at Jenna, still wide-eyed.

"It's pretty dark out there yet."

Jenna reached behind the counter and pulled out a flashlight, testing it and holding it out to Roger.

“Here! Now get out there or you won’t be gettin’ no breakfast!”

Roger hesitated but finally took the flashlight. He still wasn’t moving.

“Git!”

“I’m goin’, but I’m goin’ out the front!”

“Good idea,” Jenna replied.

She locked the door behind him and returned to her kitchen just in time. The first of the biscuits were ready, at just the right shade of brown. She removed them from the oven and put them under a heat lamp. She continued preparing for the morning rush, getting a pot of grits started before stopping to once again answer the door. She wanted to make sure the grits were cooking steadily so it took a couple of minutes for her to reach the door. It was Roger again.

“What the heck took so long?” he asked.

“Whatcha think? I was cookin’,” Jenna said. “Now, tell me what you saw.”

“You were right about the lights in the alley. They were both unscrewed, just enough so they wouldn’t light. They’re lit now.”

He was whispering, for some reason. He also appeared nervous.

“Ha! I figured. What else?”

“I went over to the front door. It was the light over the counter that was lit. I know for a fact Rose has a safe under there.”

“Hmmm. See anyone? How ‘bout the side door?”

“Side door locked. Didn’t see nobody inside the place,” Roger said.

They were both startled by the opening of the front door. She’d forgotten about relocking. It was Ruth, Jenna’s cook

“Oh, thank the Lord! Ruth, wait here while me and Big Boy here go outside for a minute.”

Ruth could hear the excitement in her voice.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you when we get back. Let’s go, Big Boy.”

“Can’t we wait a little while? The high sherf will be here anytime now.”

“He won’t be here for another hour. I want to take a look myself. Look, Roger, the sun’s comin’ up. Think for once, Big Boy. Rose might need our help.”

They exited the front door, walked to the alley and looked down it, standing close together. Jenna took hold of Roger’s shirt sleeve with her left hand. She touched her lower lip with the other.

“Still a little dark down there,” Roger said.

“Yeah. Let’s go look in front.”

The couple moved further down the walk to the front of the store. They peaked in the front window. For a moment, neither spoke; for a moment, neither breathed. It was Jenna that noticed something amiss at the base of the counter.

“Look! A pile of books layin’ there on the floor.”

She was whispering. They inched closer to the window. Jenna tightened her grip on Roger’s arm.

“Ow! Your nails are diggin’ into my arm!”

“Look, Roger! Are those feet? Look at the edge of the counter.”

He saw them, too. To be more accurate, they were observing two shoes lying on their sides. As to whether or not there were feet in them was open for speculation. The counter blocked their view. All they could see were the soles of a pair of high heels.

“It’s Rose!”

“Is she moving?”

“Not that I can see.”

“Get outta here!” Roger exclaimed.

They took off back to the restaurant in an unorganized retreat. Once in, they shouted to Ruth.

“Call the sherf! Tell ‘em don’t send no deputy! We need the high sherf!”

“Why?”

“Somebody done killed Rose Saldo!”

OMG! What happened to Rose!

Get the whole story in *Katelyn Manor*.

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