

# ffin Rock Redux 43

needed guns anymore. We tried to take a stand, but we felt like the whole face of our country had changed and we were left outside.

"Me and a friend of mine, when we saw what was happening, we came and built a secret place up here on the mountain. A place where we could put our guns until we needed them. We figured some day Americans would remember what it was like to be free, and what kind of price we had to pay for that freedom. So we hid our guns instead of losing them.

"One fellow I knew disagreed. He said we ought to use our guns now and stand up to the government. 'Said that the colonists had fought for their freedom when the British tried to disarm them at Lexington and Concord. Well, he and a lot of others died in what your history books call the 'Tax Revolt of 1998,' but son, it wasn't the revolt that caused the repeal of the Second Amendment like your history book says. The Second Amendment was already gone long before they ever repealed it. The rest of us thought we were doing the right thing by waiting. I hope to God we were right.

"You see, Thomas. It isn't government that makes a man free. In the end, governments always do just the opposite. They gobble up freedom like hungry pigs. You have to have laws to keep the worst in men under control, but at

the same time the people have to have guns, too, in order to keep the government itself under control. In our country, the people were supposed to be the final authority of the law, but that was a long time ago. Once the guns were gone, there was no reason for those who run the government to give a damn about laws and constitutional rights and such. They just did what they pleased and anyone who spoke out...well, I'm getting ahead of myself.

"It took a long time to collect up all the millions of firearms that were in private hands. The government created a whole new agency to see to it. There were rewards for turning your friends in, too. Drug dealers and murderers were set free after two or three years in prison, but possession of a gun would get you mandatory life behind bars with no parole.

"I don't know how they found out about me, probably knew I'd been a hunter all those years, or maybe somebody turned me in. They picked me up on suspicion and took me down to the federal building.

"Son, those guys did everything they could think of to me. Kept me locked up in this little room for hours, no food, no water. They kept coming in, asking me where the guns were. 'What guns?' I said. Whenever I'd doze off, they'd come crashing in, yelling and hollering. I got to where I didn't know which end was up. I'd say I wanted my lawyer and they'd laugh. 'Lawyers are for criminals,' they said. 'You'll get a lawyer after we get the guns.' What's so funny is, I know they thought they were doing the right thing. They were fighting crime!

"When I got home I found Ruth sitting in the

middle of the living room floor, crying her eyes out. The house was a shambles. While I was down there, they'd come out and took our house apart. Didn't need a search warrant, they said. National emergency! Gun crisis! Your grandma tried to call our preacher and they ripped the phone off the wall. Told her that they'd go easy on me if she just told them where I kept my guns." The old man laughed. "She told them to go to hell." He stared into the distance for a moment as his laughter faded.

"They wouldn't tell her about me, where I was or anything, that whole time. She said that she'd thought I was dead. She never got over that day, and she died the next December.

"They've been watching me ever since, off and on. I guess there's not much for them to do anymore, now that all the guns are gone. Plenty of time to watch one foolish old man." He paused. Beside him, the boy stared at the stone beneath his feet.

"Anyway, I figure that, one day, America will come to her senses. Our men will need those guns and they'll be ready. We cleaned them and sealed them up good; they'll last for years. Maybe it won't be in your lifetime, Thomas. Maybe one

day you'll be sitting here with your son or grandson. Tell him about me, boy. Tell him about the way I said America used to be." The old man stood, his bad leg shaking unsteadily beneath him.

"You see the way this stone points? You follow that line 100 feet down the hill and you'll find a big round rock. It looks like it's buried solid, but one man with a good pry bar can lift it, and there's a concrete tunnel right under there that goes back into the hill."

The old man stood, watching as the sun eased toward the ridge, coloring the sky and the world red. Below them, the river still splashed among the stones, as it had for a million years. *It's still going*, the old man thought, *there'll be someone left to carry on for me when I'm gone*. It was harder to walk back. He felt old and purposeless now, and it would be easier, he knew, to give in to that aching heaviness in his left lung that had begun to trouble him more and more. *Damn cigarettes*, he thought. His leg hurt, and the boy silently came up beside him and supported him as they started down the last mile toward the house. *How quiet he walks*, the old man thought, *he's learned well*.

It was almost dark when the boy walked in. His father looked up from his paper.

"Did you and your granddad have a nice walk?"

"Yes," the boy answered, opening the refrigerator. "You can call Agent Goodwin tomorrow. Gramps finally showed me where it is."

*Editor's note: "Sundown at Coffin Rock" is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual events or to actual people, living or dead, remains to be seen.*

