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Queen of the Buzzards: A Southern Woman's Legacy (Excerpt)

Callie Dowdy

For their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, my father gave my mother a shotgun. My mother fussed over it as though it were a diamond necklace, and claimed she hadn't received such a precious gift since the coupon book she'd gotten for her first anniversary. I wasn't sure what was more absurd - Daddy giving her a shotgun on the most romantic of occasions, Mamma actually liking it, or my peaceful acceptance of the entire scenario as completely normal. Mamma actually preferred the shotgun over a fancy candlelit dinner or expensive jewelry - not because Daddy couldn't afford to give her the finer things, but because gold, silver and filet mignon won't keep the squirrels out of the tomato plants.

16

Mamma called me recently, for no reason in particular. It was the end of summer and therefore time to harvest our small family garden, so I thought to ask about her tomato plants. She exclaimed happily that she'd never had such a prosperous year. Apparently she was plucking dozens of grapefruit-sized tomatoes off the vine on a daily basis.

"The 'rodent repellent' Daddy got you is working, then?" I joked.

"Oh like you wouldn't believe!" Mamma said with pride. "I got about a dozen squirrels out of my tomatoes in the first week with that gun. Who knew your ol' Mamma was such a good shot?" I was neither surprised nor appalled. Mamma would've faced an army of rabid squirrels with nothing but her little 410 shotgun if it meant saving the tomatoes and giving her family a good meal. However, the conversation then took a turn I didn't entirely expect. "But that's not the best part," Mamma said. "The best part is the buzzards. Oh the buzzards like you wouldn't believe!"

She proceeded to tell me about the flock of buzzards - West Kentucky for vultures - that had decided to take up residence on our hill, our boat dock, and even the roof of our house. Anyone who has had the misfortune to encounter buzzards understands the vile

annoyance of having an entire flock of them on your property. Like any large bird, they are hardly tidy, forever leaving their feathers and foul droppings wherever they go. Unlike most birds, they survive on carrion alone, which means along with the feathers and excrement, they bring with them countless carcasses of anything they can get their talons on – hardly appealing houseguests. My mother, finally frustrated to action by the ugly birds and the horrible stench of rotting meat, grabbed her shotgun and went to battle. By the end of the afternoon, the score stood at Buzzards: 0, Mamma: 9. Mamma told me of the shrieking siren-like noises buzzards make in their final moments, apparently followed promptly by massive fits of vomiting.

17

“You wouldn’t have believed it,” Mamma said. “Those nasty things shrieking and throwing up that dead meat and dying all over the place!” I couldn’t hold back a huge, deep laugh. Images raced through my head, of my tiny Mamma defending her hill against the smelly invaders, traipsing through buzzard vomit, feathers and fetid buzzard-food to fire her shotgun into the afternoon Kentucky heat at the next challenger. Mamma, the warrior. Mamma, the buzzard slayer.

I am descended from Western Kentucky royalty. I am the daughter of great men and women, renowned, loved and feared throughout their small but beautiful kingdom, though they never sat on a throne. I am the child of warriors, Mason-Dixon samurai, defenders of Kentucky Lake and keepers of the way of Southern gentility. If one day I am asked where I come from, I will say I am the Duchess of Blood River, the Baroness of all the lands past Rex’s Worm farm. I already have Mamma’s spirit. One day, Mamma’s land, and her simple shotgun will become mine, and it will be my turn to lead. I am the heir to Buzzard Hill.