

E.L.F.
“White Leaves”
By M.P. Ness
~Kindle Edition~

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**Cover Art/Illustration
By M.P. Ness**

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Maryanne Torgerson**

This book is dedicated to my late Father.
He ought to have been a writer.
&
My Mother, whose grace and support know no equal.

* * *

This is a work of Fiction, based on the real-world existence of the eco-terrorist
organization, Earth Liberation Front.

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Chapter 1

Shannon Hunter crouched in the dark. Screened from detection behind country ferns bedazzled by fat droplets from the continual northwest rains, she would not cower in fear; tonight, concealment was the stratagem of a hunter.

With sights set on her prey, huge lumbering juggernauts, she thought perhaps they should be the ones in hiding rather than bedded down in neatly ordered rows on open ground.

“Shan? Are you ready?” Jason asked at her side, dispelling her reminiscence. He’d been watching her as she let her imagination wander. Shannon blinked away imaginings of her childhood, images from some eleven years earlier, that had prompted this very evening. Visions of lumberyards and demolished earth, workers, and even her father - they all collapsed and disappeared with Jason’s intrusion.

“Are you?!” She shot back vibrantly. She was so excited, so alive in her challenge, Jason was taken aback. His clumpy, sandy dreadlocks were battened down by an inadequate black knit cap, but they stuck out at odd angles all around the edge. He looked like a burglar, a poor one at that, dusted with forest debris and dampened by the previous rainfall, but he grinned at their playful words. Shannon admired him, if not for his appearance, then for that confidence. His youth and lifestyle belied it, but he resembled her father with his certainty – one of the few things she still admired in her dad.

In many ways Jason was unquestionably her father’s opposite. Rather, she amended, in the ways that mattered. Fiery and brash, Jason Brooke wasn’t the type anyone would have expected her to end up with. She wouldn’t have believed it herself, but his determination and freewheeling air made him more appealing to her than he likely was to anyone else. She tried to picture him as unattractive without her connections to him, but failed.

Shannon briefly considered telling him how her father would be turning over in his grave - if he were dead - to know whom she’d chosen to be with. But that would lead to a humorous discussion about shotguns and daughters since David Hunter was still living. She envisioned how he’d not only turn in his coffin, but rise and walk the earth as a zombie if he found out she’d become a member of the elusive Earth Liberation Front because of Jason.

Her father would kill the young man, she knew, but she didn’t care what her father thought. She was on the right path in life. After all, she had Native American roots in the bloodline her dad had chosen not only to disregard, but to betray outright.

They were among the most noble and beautiful people she’d ever known of, and she was proud to be gifted her blood. It seemed only proper that she should do what they could not – what her father would not. She would defend the natural world they had once worshipped. The world her dad would destroy. The E.L.F. had given her that opportunity. Jason Brooke had given her the E.L.F.

Jason reached up and touched her cheek as his eyes traced the beauty of her ethnicity, studying her dark almond eyes and smoothly defined cheeks. When his eyes wandered down to her bosom and whip-thin curves, she looked away indifferently. He loved her more than she did him, and that put her in control of the balance of power between them, even though he’d brought her to E.L.F.

That meant she was in control tonight.

She felt his touch settle upon her shoulder, drawing her out of her thoughts again. The night was chill, his hand hot on her exposed skin. Excited as she was, however, she wanted the air to cool her. She felt stifled by his closeness, and she wrinkled her nose against the sensation. After all, soon enough things were going to heat up – way up.

Their hiding spot was very close to the hulking shadows of hard-edged unused machine parts at the fringe of a ruinous scar within the land where Murton and Norton Industrial rested its fleet on a nightly basis. Rocky earth lay exposed everywhere the night crew’s floodlights touched. A sawmill industriously sang its brutal tune somewhere beyond their sight. The trees there cried out as they were split asunder. It made her furious to remember all she’d once been and all she’d been through in her early life. She despised that she’d once reveled in such places as this, and hated her father for what he’d willfully become. Shannon wondered how he could live with himself for being a party to it.

The forests of the world had done nothing to deserve the suffering humanity brought upon them. She wanted to spare them by tearing it all down tonight, but her little group's target wasn't the mill. It was too well-lit to get near it. Instead, they aimed for the trucks and powerful earthmoving machines that lay in rest at this time of night - just as she'd seen done once before. Actually, that was her plan.

"Shannon Hunter? Is that you?" Jason asked. She knew he was toying with her, mocking surprise at her resolve; it was written all over his tone.

"What's keeping them? They should be back by now." Shannon ignored him, eyes scanning the uneven, lumpy lay of the yard. All she could see was irregular shapes in the forest night: shadows and more shadows, uneven shifts in bands and rays of faint light as work continued somewhere far beyond.

"You're right," Jason agreed. Their rudimentary incendiary devices took but a moment to set in place with fuses ignited, and they'd brought only twelve of them. Enough to do serious damage, but few enough to carry on foot through the Cascade foothills, making their team highly mobile and elusive, as any self-respecting E.L.F. cell should be.

"They've been too long. I'm going to check on them," he said, starting to rise, but Shannon would not be put off this test. This was her night, not his.

"No." She snared his lean arm. "I'm going. I'm faster and quieter than you'll ever be." She chided him like the no-good hippie-punk he was, shaking her head, sending her own dreadlocks bouncing. Random hair ornaments and beads clicked together quietly with the gesture.

"Okay," he said after a moment's hesitation. "But be careful and be fast." He pressed a kiss to her cheek. She delighted in it, but took to her feet immediately. She had no patience for dawdling in lovers' games - not when she had a higher purpose to execute. Instead, she used pleasure to fuel her actions. Inhaling deeply the scent of freshly turned earth and raw life pungent with the perfumes of the forest, Shannon was prepared.

She slipped away quickly, preferring not to think about what she was doing. Adrenaline was already pumping, and it left no room to dither. She skimmed her way through the shadows of the trees and undergrowth, veering to her right while staying in the woods to cover her approach. There rested the nearest of the behemoths she was going to strike this night, and the jog across open ground was shortest.

She saw no signs of movement and met no one. She'd done the legwork on planning this attack. She knew there would be none to stop them, which was why it was so troubling that they hadn't yet completed the task. Fearless, she stealthily dashed across a short stretch of moonlit gravel and arrived within reach of the first truck in seconds. Ducking down beside its massive wheels, she let out a hiss, but kept her eyes roving to be safe.

"Devin!" She waited. No sound. It was hard to hear over the thunder in her chest, and she strained to listen and breathe calmly. The acrid tang of the truck's diesel fuel and the gritty rubber of its wheels made her nose crinkle.

"Devin, where are you?" she hissed anew. Hearing no reply, she scurried beneath the truck to spot the incendiary device. It was there, but not lit. Shannon grew worried, but calmed herself, knowing there were several such bombs being placed. This should have been the first one set and the last to be lit on the way back out.

She scrambled free of the underbelly of the metal giant as the moon was enveloped by clouds, and slipped along a silent dark expanse to a second dumper. Repeating her scramble underneath, she found another placed bomb. She scanned drowned plots of moonlight and work lights in search of silhouetted movement. Nothing. Not a soul and not a single out-of-place sound.

"Willie!" She tried a different hiss for operative number two. Again, nothing came back. Confidence shaken, she slipped ahead more swiftly, rounding, at length, a small gravel mountain beneath the high skeletal workings of a turn belt tower. More trucks lay ahead than behind. Perhaps Devin and Willie were only taking their time - being safe. But she couldn't shake the feeling something had gone wrong.

When she reached the next truck, she crouched down to calm herself, bolstering her resolve to wait and see. Her wild imagination wouldn't help her here. Of course, within moments her impatience got the better of her. She should have known it would. She'd had little patience for anything since she was twelve and started to mature counter to her father's ignorance and inability to understand her.

She rose, moving immediately, but after she took only a few strides a shadow detached itself from her left, emerging from almost nowhere and roughly from whence she'd come before her circuitous move around the gravel mountain.

Although it startled her to a halt, her first thought was Jason. She grinned fiercely, thinking he'd come to ensure her safety, but no. This figure was larger and strode authoritatively, looking businesslike with a lacing of whiteness in his professional, collared shirt. His broad shoulders and stature were too forbidding to be anyone she knew or trusted. His finely shod feet crunched in the gravel at an even, purposeful pace.

Panic rose up the back of her neck in a prickling wave. This man was not alone. There was another just like him, smaller and rounder, but nonetheless the same. Before she knew it, there were others. Running in a crouch, they emerged from every available shadow like cockroaches to a fallen feast at a midnight hour. Shannon remained frozen, breathless at the unexpected turn her night had taken, but her mind raced to solve the problem. She was still within moderate cover, so for the moment she presumed she might not be seen even if they were looking for her.

She couldn't have been more wrong.

"That's far enough!" came a voice, old and... Hispanic? Confused, she stayed exactly as she was. He sounded weary, like a man playing a game now decades long in the making. He was immediately drowned out by other voices, vehement, forceful ones from the swarm arriving all around her. Their cries were accompanied by the sounds of gun safeties being thrown off.

"FBI! Freeze!" someone shouted. Her eyes exploded wide. The words startled her into bolting like a deer, spooked breakneck into the dark.

"Freeze!" they called after her, but she was small, agile, lean – and gone. Her feet pounded, blazing a trail through the maze of machinery.

She had only one thought: find Devin and Willie in the dark. She didn't know what she'd do when she found them, but there was still a chance to get out in the confusing lay of these grounds. It was dark, after all.

She ran breathlessly, hearing the men racing after her, and she gulped down a healthy dose of guilt, pushing herself hard. If she was caught, she knew she'd be looking at prison time. Terrorists rarely got a second chance, even if they were attractive young women.

She rounded a corner provided by a final dump truck, spotted a massive front-end loader and bolted across open ground for it. She skidded to a halt like a ballplayer, a true tomboy of perfect form, slipping between machine parts and ducking down in one sure motion. Heat surged on her leg where her tough camouflage pants had certainly been shredded by the jagged gravel, but she ignored it, hoping to lose the Feds by tucking away in the workings of the massive yellow beast. However, even as she did, the yard's floodlights were thrown on.

Standing all about the perimeter of Murton and Norton Industrial on huge totems like sentinels, they sent shadows screeching for cover.

The federal agents, with assault rifles of some sort, went rushing past despite the freshly turned track of her slide. Her heart locked in her throat and she froze again. She needed a moment to think, to calm the panic. Still and breathless, she watched, impatiently waiting for them to go on their way.

Devin and Willie were on their own. She had to get out while there was still a chance. This was no game. All the parameters and plans of this night had gone out the window. In their stead came a very real sense of dread.

Emerging and heading in the opposite direction from the federal SWAT forces, Shannon set herself to fly. At once she was dashing, but was forced to skid to another halt. The two men in dark suits and even darker trench coats stood waiting for her reappearance, guns and badges exposed, framed by the mountain of gravel and a neighboring dump truck's silver bed.

"I warned you, that's far enough, Ms. Hunter," the first agent said in the same manner as before, but the second and larger one wasn't so complaisant.

"You're under arrest! Down on your knees!" the younger man commanded with a peculiarly thick accent of indeterminate origin. He could have been from New York as easily as England. His shaved head shone in the lights, but her eyes locked on his firearm instead of his intense, hawkish features. She'd only seen such large handguns in movies, and confronted by one now, she couldn't look away.

The other, an older Hispanic fellow with dark but graying hair worn greased back, looked nigh unprepared, but the weight of his brow suggested he was well in control of the situation. He was the agent in charge. The other was his lackey or partner.

“You’re under arrest for attempted use of incendiary devices with intent to cause monetary damages to corporate property, Ms. Hunter.” The lead agent spoke up more calmly than his counterpart. “You’re also in violation by aiding and abetting terrorists, as well as being one yourself, if you prefer.”

The bigger one tilted his handgun to the earth at her tensed feet, his approach swift.

“Get on your knees, and place your hands behind your head!” he commanded. Shannon had no choice but to comply. She looked desperately for any quarter, but there would be none. She knew Jason. If he was still free, he wouldn’t be bold enough to assault a federal agent. He didn’t have it in him to assault anyone. He would maliciously attack a faceless corporation in defense of the earth, but it was E.L.F. policy not to harm anyone - thus they insisted their acts were entirely non-hostile resistance. So no. Jason wouldn’t take a life. At least she hoped he wouldn’t.

Slowly, she dropped to her knees, dazedly placing her hands behind her head as the gunman came forward, producing cuffs but keeping his aim keen. Shannon couldn’t even bring herself to match his solid gaze. She wore a thick defeated expression, and all but lowering her eyes in futile submission. But at that last glimmer of her glance, a blinding silver flash erupted beyond the nearing agents.

The floodlights went out as if on cue, plunging all into the crimson light of a growling mushroom so ferocious the earth and little stones shuddered underfoot.

In a single dramatic pulse, the dumper that lay sleeping behind the agents vanished, replaced entirely by an earth-rocking boom. The agents instinctively sprawled in shock. Shannon toppled back just the same. Her bottom struck hard, and she rolled until her head bounced off the rocky earth. Lights danced before her eyes at the jarring impact, the wind left her lungs, and she gasped and coughed.

Time seemed to stand still as she fought to right herself, but she only reeled as the fire slowly grew and faded away. She could run, she knew, if she could manage to get up. But her limbs failed her, wobbling like a babe’s. And they already knew her name. They therefore knew where she worked part-time in Seattle’s beloved Pioneer Square at a simple summertime craft stand run by an elderly hippie lady. They also knew where she lived. They likely knew everything there was to know about her, and even some things that she didn’t - like where her mother had gone off to in her own pursuit of the activist way.

Hell. They probably knew her damned cycle. Damned pigs, she cursed them as she fought to regain her wits. She hated the government. She hated money. She hated the control such things represented. She wanted to change it all forever, but if caught here tonight, she knew she would never have the chance to change anything ever again. Living a life as a fugitive from the government’s control wasn’t something she relished. It wasn’t even something she was sure she could do, but it was better than living in prison.

With that to fire her resolve, she bit her lip and scrambled to her knees in a desperate fight for control. Just then she spotted something on the air that she hadn’t seen a moment before. The black drifts of smoke rolling into the sky obscured the fire of the truck before her, revealing what looked like the trail of a bottle rocket lingering on the air.

But it was much brighter, lasted longer, and was oddly silver like scintillating dust motes descending a lazy sunbeam pouring through a window. Peculiar, somehow immediately familiar and alien at once, it stopped her cold, like a portent out of a dream.

Arcing like a missile’s trajectory, the trail led from the ruined truck to back over her position. It was so mesmerizing, so unusual, she forgot all about escape. She felt physically twisted by the oddity, and followed it by eye to a fair distance where the edge of the bare earth and rock of the yard rose up in a steep embankment to a plot of silhouetted stunted trees.

She blinked in disbelief. There was a light up there whence the glittering trail came, but even as she saw it she knew it as not a floodlight, but a figure. It was like an angel. Her jaw dropped in a silent gasp, and she watched the figure as though nothing else had ever mattered. All the abrupt chaos and defeat of this ugly plot of land faded from thought.

She didn’t believe in hunting animals unless it was in Native tradition, but she knew what an archer was. She watched this figure, wreathed in silver light on the little cliff as it turned lightly, shifting its aim, drawing forth an arrow, nocking, and drawing back its glittering string only to loose its bolt all in the same instant.

The loosed arrow streaked across the sky with frightening swiftness, greeting the world with a new thunderous boom as another truck was struck. It went up in a silver flash, then cascaded sound through the night in a natural fiery detonation just like the first - wreaking greater chaos as it caught three others ablaze and set them thundering in the night.

Shannon remained there through it all, seeing a new trail of glittering silver dust. Slowly, ever so impossibly slowly, it descended as glaring red mushrooms rose up in lazy fashion, each blown into being by the thumps of the last one's birth - and all turning black once matured. The concussive pulses throbbed like calm drums in the rocky earth - vibrations slow to rise and even slower to fall. She baked in the sluggish washes of intense light and heat as they rose and fell over her like gales in a dream.

Was she unconscious and dreaming? Was she dead? She didn't even waste time to consider it, forgetting even her innermost voice in light of what she witnessed - for the figure next turned and looked right at her.

It was too far away to tell for certain if it did, but she felt its eyes touch her as certainly as any angel could have. She glanced about, an instinctive reaction to being watched, as if she sought to find who else the thing could be looking at. But there was no one. The agents weren't even on their feet.

She looked back, and the figure was there as it had been, staring down upon her with all the weight of her damnation. It made her feel alive. Everything was so intensely drawn for her senses. The sounds, the light and heat, even the gravel under her hands and knees was rough, defined more sharply than she'd ever experienced. She could smell the foul burning of more than diesel fuel, but paint and steel and rubber. They came in noxious waft after acrid wash with the pulses of the heat. She felt... awakened.

Even as she took in the scene with sharpened senses, she realized: the silver sparkles were not only trickling down from the heavens in a dream of weightlessness.

No. Everything was taking an eternity to move.

She whipped her head around again, sending dreadlocks and beads bouncing as her eyes flew to find the two agents - one barely risen to his feet with ache in his eyes, and the other still scrabbling sluggishly to gain his knees and pull his Hispanic face from the gravel.

What in the world?! she started to wonder, turning back again to the deeper workings of the company yard to see if the figure was still there on the hill, but it was gone as abruptly as it had come - along with the silver dust. Suddenly the sounds of her world of chaos came dully normal; the fires raged at speed - profuse with light and heat and terrible poison smoke.

The aggressive agent was then standing over her, blocking her view of the hill with his strong figure, and shouting at her as if she had been listening for long minutes with deaf ears. His huge handgun was inches from her head, ensuring she could go nowhere.

"Fastez! You all right?" He looked away from her to his partner. A muffled grunt of affirmation and a groan came back. A new boom erupted in the dark, followed quickly by two others as trucks went up somewhere behind her. Shannon twitched fearfully at the explosions, but she didn't miss the silver glittering streak that ripped past overhead.

In the span of time it takes to snap, she felt as though buried back into the same nightmarish dream. Impulse took over, and unable to see the hillside with the agent in her way, she started leaning aside to catch sight of the figure once again. It was there, and everything around her was passing so sluggishly it didn't seem to move at all.

The agent looked down to her, but his features drew into a contortion of sudden loss. In a heartbeat, she realized somehow, in some way, she was simply gone to him. He even did a double take. Nothing. He looked about wildly, the slowest oddity yet for her eyes. As if she knew his face better than any other, she could see what he was thinking as the thoughts developed. He thought she'd scrambled away in his distraction, but there was nothing but fire everywhere he looked. Even the closest place to hide was too far for her to have gone in the blink of an eye.

Where was everyone else, for that matter? his confusion-distorted features asked. Then his thick tongue was moving, throwing out the odd sound of his voice in a drag of dreamlike echoes.

"Where the hell did she go?!" he snapped as Agent Fastez drew close with a gingerly gait, favoring his right knee. Neither of them could see her, she realized. Neither could see the silver dust. Neither could see the figure on the hill. Their whole SWAT force had utterly disappeared. Jason, Devin, and Willie, she remembered for a moment before something far more terrible suddenly gripped her.

She hadn't gone anywhere. Kneeling, she was immersed in the dream of something she'd only pretended existed during Christmas and while reading the old fantasy books in Jason's little bookshelf at home. The reality of what was happening suddenly sickened her with fear for herself above all else. What was happening to her world was far more abhorrent than being caught by the FBI for terrorism and thrown in prison for a very long time following a very long and possibly brutal interrogation.

Panic rose like bile in the back of her throat. Her mind wanted to vomit obscenities from the sheer revulsion of the facts unfolding before her. Had she gone insane, or was she really seeing the creature on the hill? She wouldn't remember the titles of the books that spoke of these sorts of creatures, but the name of the thing she'd seen she could name in her sleep. It was the very name of the loose, hierarchy-free organization she'd joined.

E.L.F. The title screamed at her senses like the recognition of her own doom. The periods that made it an acronym vanished and left her with a name: Elf.

She'd never truly believed in vampires, fairies, witches, or the gamut of supernatural things. She wasn't one for religion of the conventional sense either. She liked the precepts and meanings behind these fairy tales, but always thought them metaphors from old hippie-like writers who saw the doom of the world being wrought by mankind itself, disregarding nature in the destruction of the forests and the fiery progress of industry. However, every legend and tale she'd ever read told of these fair creatures as good and pure. Even some movies portrayed them thus, though each one she'd seen had been different.

Even with such entities being household-common by name, and with all their various portrayals, no one ever believed in them wholly. Shannon sure hadn't. Now, even confronted by the purely awe-inspiring reality, she couldn't believe she was witnessing one, and ... shooting at dump trucks of all things!? It was far beyond absurd. It made her reasoning mind reel and shut down in disbelief while her eyes flickered to catch another glimpse.

The figure turned instantly, fixing her again as if it could feel her gaze. Again she felt its study, as if it were piercing her flesh and soul. What could have been its eyes flashed like a wolf's at night, just a glimmer, and it acted on her without hesitation, drawing a glittering arrow and pulling it back on its gleaming string. The light spread from bow to arrow in a blink, and the head was primed to flare like a star. Shannon's eyes shot all the wider.

The bald agent, unaware of the entirety of the situation, was dead in the figure's aim. For all the fear she felt welling up within, and against the urge for her brain to simply shut down and refuse to witness, Shannon reacted. Despite hatred for mankind and its ways, and against all spite for authority like the FBI, instinct and impulse ruled this dream. Shannon surprised herself with the truth of what she felt as she sprang to her feet.

The figure, elf, angel, or whatever it was, loosed its arrow into a new glittering streak, and the strangest sound she'd ever heard called out to her. Like silver wind chimes carried by a swarm of angry bees all bound within an electric zipper, it rose in a shriek, crackling through the space betwixt like a bolt of lightning.

But her worry beneath that creature's lethal aim was thrown aside in the face of the unwitting agent's life. She might never know why she moved to shove him down, throwing him out of the way as easily as if she were twice her size. She just did, and back he toppled as the arrow shrieked, whizzing narrowly past her cheek. Shannon felt it rip past, snipping through her clumpy hair at blazing speed, but then the dream snapped back into its prior pace.

She toppled to the earth on top of the bewildered agent unaware of the shift in speed.

...His gunshot echoed in the night...