

Circle OF DEATH

A crowd of ragged men and women had gathered around the pickup. They were armed with clubs, axes, knives, and spears.

"The welcoming committee," Ben Raines said softly.

"What do you want here?" a woman shouted at Ben and Judy.

"We don't mean you any harm," said Ben calmly, hoping for the best. "We're just traveling through."

"Why did you stop?" a man called. He held an axe in his hands.

"People on the roofs with bows and arrows," Judy whispered.

"I see them. If shooting starts, you take the south side of the street, I'll take the north."

"All right."

"We don't want any trouble," Ben called out. But he was going to get trouble-and plenty of it!
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-

LEWIS ORDE

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Alone in the Ashes

BY WILLIAM W. JOHNSTONE

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To Charles and Linda Abraham

All I want of you is a little servility, and that of the commonest goddamnest kind.

Anonymous

Them's my sentiments.

Thackeray

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Prologue

Ben knew he should feel some sort of regret; some feeling of sadness or sorrow at leaving his people-and they were his people-behind.

But the only feeling he could muster up was a feeling of freedom.

"Free at last," Ben said aloud, with only the wind and the truck to hear him.

And they gave no reply.

He shook his head at the paraphrasing of

Doctor King's famous statement, and wondered how many young blacks, a decade and a half after the world had exploded in nuclear and germ warfare, could even say who King was? Or for that matter, Ben pondered as he drove, how many young whites knew anything about J. F. K., or Watergate?

Most were too busy just staying alive in this world gone mad, Ben concluded. They didn't have time for school-even in those areas where school was available.

He sighed, the rush of cold wind carrying the sound away, out into the brisk autumn afternoon air.

He was not making very good time, even with the new truck his people had provided for him. The highways were getting worse and worse. And for some reason Ben could not fathom, highway maps were becoming as scarce as hen's teeth. Any map printed between '89 and '98 was to be treasured. He had heard that people were killing over highway maps. A good map could bring food, weapons, ammo, and on occasion, women.

Ben could not prevent a bitter laugh from pouring past his lips.

If a person could not understand the written word, how could they comprehend a map? And Ben knew from experience that a full seventy-five percent of those born after the World War of '88 were illiterate.

He had turned west at the deserted Tennessee town of McMinnville. A crude sign had stated Highway 70 leading north was closed to traffic, and another sign had stated Highway 56 north was closed to traffic. Ben doubted they were closed for any other reason except the whim of a local warlord or some religious nut who wanted a closed society to practice his or her mumblings upon.

On impulse, Ben jerked his Thompson submachine gun free of the clamps that held it upright, and laid the old weapon on the seat beside him.

"You and me, old boy," he said with a smile, "are outdated." He patted the smooth stock. "But we can still spit and snarl, can't we?"

Ben wore a .45 semiautomatic pistol belted around his waist and a long bladed Bowie knife on his left hip. In the rear of the camper-covered bed of the pickup,

Ben carried a myriad of survival gear. Tent and sleeping bag, extra clothing, a case of grenades, and two cases of .45-caliber ammunition. A rocket launcher and a case of rockets for the tube. Cases of food and jugs of water. He had a Weatherby 30-06 with scope, and a Remington model 1100 S. W.a.t. shotgun with an extended tube that held enough three-inch magnums to stop a rampaging Cape buffalo. Strapped to both sides of the Chevy pickup, and on a special framework built on top, he carried five-gallon cans of extra gas. He had enough radio equipment in the truck to transmit anywhere within what used to be known as the United States of America.

After more than a decade of leading his people, constantly

searching for a place to put down roots and live and work and grow and rebuild from out of the ashes, Ben Raines was pulling out, heading out by himself.

He would be alone. In the ashes.

BOOK ONE

Chapter 1

Ben pulled off the highway just outside of what remained of Woodbury, Tennessee. Tucking his truck behind a farmhouse on the east side of the highway, Ben sat for several minutes, his eyes searching for signs of life. Falling back on years of experience, Ben knew after only a moment that he was alone.

He inspected the house, cautiously going from room to room. The house was, of course, ankle-deep with the litter left behind by rats and mice. When the rodents had eaten everything they could find to eat, they had left. But once they had done that, the roaches had followed.

The house was crawling with living waves of brown movement.

Ben pulled out of that locale and spent the night sleeping in the cramped space under his camper.

He awakened to a cold dawn, under a sky that promised rain very soon. The dull grayness of the sky matched the landscape that surrounded Ben. Everything around him seemed lifeless.

He didn't like this area, didn't like the feeling of foreboding it offered him. Skipping breakfast of any sort, Ben cranked the engine and pulled out, finding Highway 53 and taking that until connecting with a road that would take him to Interstate 40, at Lebanon. There, he drove over the interstate and pulled off the highway at the outskirts of town.

Smoke from wood and coal fires drifted up from houses in the coolness of morning. But, as Ben had so often sadly observed over the years, the homes were not centralized or grouped for safety or work. They were widely separated, which meant to Ben-and it had been proved time after time-that the people were not organized. And in these times of anarchy and warlords, and roaming gangs of thugs and punks and creeps and assorted savages, not to be organized was an invitation to die quickly.

And to let what was left of civilization die.

Ben spotted the gang of young men and women long before they spotted him.

Go on, Ben! he urged himself silently. Go on. Just pull out and avoid trouble.

But he knew he would not. That flaw, if it was a flaw, and Ben thought not, within him was rearing up.

Ben lifted his Thompson and cradled it, clicking the .45-caliber submachine gun in his arms. He got out of the pickup and stood by the hood of the truck, watching as the young people spotted him.

Back in my day, Ben thought, they would be called punks.

I'll still call them punks, he thought.

Ben stood tall and rangy and loose by his truck. The years had peppered his hair with gray and

had put a few

lines in his face. But as Doctor Chase had told him, "For a man your age, Raines, you're in disgustingly good shape."

"Clean living," Ben had said with a smile, knowing what response that would bring from the crusty old ex-Navy doctor.

"Horse shit!" Doctor Chase had replied.

"You're going to be a dirty old man, Raines."

"What do you mean, "going to be?"

"Hey, Dads!" one of the young men called.

"They's a toll for passin" through here."

The young man was tall and slender and blond. He was dressed in dirty jeans, heavy boots, and wore a black leather jacket. His hair was very long and very dirty and very unkempt.

The knot of young men and women around the punk were, except for coloring and size, his mirror image.

Punks.

Ben was dressed in tiger-stripe field clothes. His field pants bloused into jump boots. He had already stopped along the road and fixed a meager breakfast, boiling water to shave.

Even after a worldwide tragedy and a nation swarming with anarchy, the generation gap still holds true, Ben thought.

"Public road," Ben said.

"Not no more," the spokesman said. Ben pegged them all as in their late teens to early twenties. "We took over the road. Now you shut your mouth and pay up."

"You want money?" Ben said with a smile. Money had been worthless for years.

"You a real smart-ass, ain't you?" a pouty young woman popped off.

"At least my ass is clean," Ben told her.

"Dads," the tall young man said, reaching for a pistol on his belt, "you just bought yourself a world of hurt."

"Kill "im, Tad!" the young woman cried.

"Shoot his legs out from under him and let's watch him flop around."

"Yeah," Tad smiled.

Ben dropped the muzzle of the Thompson, heavy in his hands with its full drum of .45-caliber ammunition, and pulled the trigger.

The quiet morning air was shattered by the hammering of the old Thompson and the screaming of the dead, dying, and badly wounded.

Ben knelt down beside the young woman who had wanted Tad to shoot Ben's legs out from under him so she could watch him flop around.

The young woman had managed to pull a .38 out of her belt before Ben's Thompson had very nearly cut her in half.

Despite the events that had prompted the shooting, Ben felt some small waves of pity wash over him. The young woman was really, under the grotesquely and amateurishly made-up face, a very pretty woman.

"It ain't fair," the young woman gasped.
"Tad said he was the boss of this town and he'd take care of us."

"What did you do with the people who refused to pay your toll?" Ben asked.

"Kilt 'em," the young woman groaned.

All feeling of sorrow for her left Ben.

She closed her eyes and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Tad screamed, his hands clutching his shot-up belly.

Ben walked back to his pickup and pulled out.

"You

goddamned cock-sucker!" Tad screamed after

him. "My town! My road! Jimmy kilt

Lucas for it and I kilt Jimmy.

Mine!"

"You are certainly welcome to it," Ben said.

He rolled down the window and let the cold air fan him. "Should be quite an interesting trip," he said aloud. "Certainly starting out with a bang."

At an old truck stop just outside Nashville, Ben pulled off the interstate and into the parking lot, carefully maneuvering his way between rusted-out rigs and stripped cars. He tucked his truck between two rusting hulks that once were eighteen-wheelers, and walked toward what used to be the restaurant, his Thompson slung over his shoulder, the drum refilled.

He liked to stop at these old truck stops because sometimes he lucked out and could find, among the rubble, playable cassette tapes; he had left all his back in Georgia.

The first thing he spotted were two bodies, a man and a woman. The man had been tortured, then shot between the eyes. The woman had been raped, judging by the still-visible bruises on her inner thighs and the blood that had dried on her legs and buttocks. Like the man, she had been shot between the eyes.

Ben knelt down between the bodies. He touched them both. They were cold, but they had not been dead for very long. Bugs had not found them, and rats and dogs had not gnawed their flesh.

Ben walked the ruined and littered truck stop. There was not another living soul-that he could see. He stood and looked down at the man and woman. He had

seen so many dead and rotting bodies that they had long since ceased filling him with any emotion. They were now merely a part of the way things were.

He walked out of the truck stop and to his pickup.

As he pulled back onto the car- and truck-littered interstate, Ben wondered if that was the way he'd end his span on earth. A bullet between the eyes and left to rot in some house or ditch?

Before he could answer his own question, an old woman trudging along the side of the interstate flagged him down. What did they used to call people like this? Ben thought.

Bag ladies. Yeah.

He leaned over and rolled down the passenger-side window. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

She cackled, exposing the blackened, rotting stumps of teeth. "If I was twenty years younger, you damn sure could, young feller!"

Ben laughed.

Young feller!

"Thanks, lady. You just made my day."

"Or if you was twenty years older," she laughed again. "Course, if that was the case, you probably couldn't get it up no more, could you?"

"Probably not," Ben said. "You want a ride?"

"Well, you look like a trusting sort, Mr. Ben Raines. But I think not. I just wanted to warn you not to go into Nashville."

"How'd you know my name?"

"Seen some pictures of you a time or two. Country sure has gone to crap, ain't it, Mr. Raines?"

"We'll rebuild it."

She smiled and shook her head. "No, we won't, Mr. Raines. Not none of you nor me. Maybe two, three

hundred years up the road. But we won't know nothin' about it. Don't go into the city. Thugs and shit-heads took it over. Turn back around and take the Gallatin exit. You a big, tough man, but don't tempt fate."

"Aren't you afraid of going into the city?"

"Oh, they won't bother me. Too old to do them any harm. They think I'm crazy so they leave me alone. Bye now, Ben Raines. Hang in there, kid."

She picked up her sacks and went trudging on up the road.

Ben smiled as he watched her leave. "Luck to you, too, lady," he muttered.

He turned the truck around and backtracked, found the Gallatin exit, and cut north, then west. It took him almost six hours to drive approximately one hundred miles. He finally pulled over after crossing the bridge at Lake Barkley, deciding to spend the night on the west shore of the lake and do some fishing.

He carefully hid his truck and laid out his sleeping bag on the porch of an old fishing camp, after first inspecting the cabin and several more nearby.

He got his rod and reel, gathered up several of his favorite crank baits, and walked down to the pier of the camp. Within fifteen minutes, he had caught half a dozen small-mouth bass.

"Kentuckies," he said aloud. That's what we used to call them. "Damn, they must be hungry."

Then he realized the lake probably had not been fished by sport fishermen in years.

He cleaned the fish, carefully inspecting the

liver for discoloration. He fixed an early supper, recalling as he did, that this was how he'd first met Pal Elliot. He struggled to remember what part of the country he'd

been in when he first met the man. Arkansas, he thought. They had talked about forming a new country-a country within a country. And Tri-States had been born on that evening, years back.*

But Pal was dead. And Valerie. And Salina. And hundreds more who had helped form Tri-States, and had fought for it, and died for it.

Sitting on the porch of the old fishing camp, watching the afternoon fade into evening, Ben smoked one of the few cigarettes he allowed himself daily- harsh, homemade cigarettes-and let his thoughts drift back into the past, something he rarely did.

But he could not allow much of that. And he knew it. It was dangerous. He, and others like him, needed to look constantly toward the future. That was the only way anything could ever be rebuilt from the ashes.

Far across the lake, Ben caught the first flickerings of a fire being built. No fires for me this night, he thought. Too dangerous. I don't know if the people across the lake are friends or enemies; probably the latter.

Then he realized the campfire was not across the lake but, rather, across a narrow inlet of the lake. The cabin he was using was facing the inlet. That knowledge made him even more wary.

He went to bed on the open porch. He was asleep in less than five minutes.

Voices brought him awake, tensing his muscles, bringing his nerves taut.

*

Out of the Ashes.

Slowly, quietly, he unzipped his sleeping bag and slipped from the down-filled warmth. He laced up his boots, slipped into his field jacket, and got to his feet, Thompson in hand. He eased the bolt back, locking a round in place.

"I heard a truck yesterday afternoon," a man's voice came to him. "I know I did."

"That doesn't mean it stopped around here," a woman replied.

"We have to check it out. They might be coming back for you."

"I'll die first," the woman said. "I mean it, Wally."

The man and woman rounded the corner of the cabin and came face to muzzle with Ben's Thompson. They froze.

"I'm just traveling through," Ben said softly. "I don't mean anybody any harm. My name is Ben Raines."

The man's eyes widened.

"General

Ben Raines?

President

Ben Raines?"'

"Yes." Ben first looked at the woman. And she was well worth looking at. Probably in her late twenties. Dark brown hair. Tanned, smooth face. Stacked, as used to be said. Ben shifted his eyes to the man. The family resemblance was strong between them. Probably brother and sister.

Both were well-armed. The woman wore a pistol and carried a rifle. The man wore two pistols and carried a pump shotgun.

"I saw your campfire last night," Ben said. "I wanted to check it out but didn't know what kind of reception I'd get."

Ben lowered the muzzle of the submachine gun.

"Where are all your troops, General?" the man asked, suspicion plain in his voice.

"North Georgia. I left General Cecil Jefferys in charge and pulled out. For many reasons; some of them purely personal."

The man relaxed his grip on his shotgun. "I guess even Ben Raines gets tired."

"Yes. Come on up and let's talk. I have a little bit of coffee. Would you like some?"

"This is the best coffee I have ever tasted," Judy Williams said.

Her brother, Wally, laughed. "Sis, it's the first cup of coffee I've had in months."

"I get the impression you're both running from somebody," Ben said. "Care to talk about it?"

Brother and sister exchanged quick glances. Made up their minds. "Jake Campo," Wally said.

"Ever heard the name?"

"No. What is a Jake Campo?"

"He's a warlord. Controls most of this part of Tennessee and up into Kentucky. Has two, maybe three hundred men in his gang. What he wants, he takes. There was ten of us originally. Me and Judy's all that's left. Jake and his men raped and tortured and killed the rest. We've been running for the past two weeks. I'm ... I'm afraid, General, you've stepped right into something that even you can't handle. You see, Jake and his gang have been closing the circle on me and Judy. We figure they're maybe three, four miles from here, and closing fast. They've got every road and path blocked off. They'll be here sometime today, we're figuring. Sorry, General. But you're stuck."

"Oh, I've been stuck before, Wally. But I seem to have this knack of getting unstuck."

"Well," the voice came from behind Ben.

"Let's see you get unstuck from this, mister."

Chapter 2

Ben took Judy and Wally with him, the woman in his left arm, the man in his right. He jumped and sent all three of them crashing through the rotted railing of the porch. Rolling, he did not look to see who or what the man behind the voice might be. He just came up with his .45 in his right hand and shot the man twice in the chest.

Movement and a slight sound from the far corner of the cabin spun him around, the Colt .45 barking and bucking in his hand. The slugs caught the second man in the throat and face, blowing off part of his jaw, sending bits of jawbone and teeth spinning wetly through the air.

"Jesus God!" Wally said. "You are quick, General." Ben rose to his booted feet and reached for his Thompson, holstering his Colt. "A person had damn well better be quick, Wally. Or get dead. Check the surroundings and shoot anybody you don't know that even looks like they might be hostile. Learn that right now, up front-if you want to stay alive."

Wally looked at the man, a curious glint in his eyes. "I'm a minister, General. I can't kill wantonly."

"I'm not asking you to kill wantonly," Ben said. "I'm telling you that in these times, if you feel any degree of suspicion toward strangers, if they make just one off-the-wall or hostile gesture, if they even say anything that could be construed as hostile, shoot first and worry about it later."

Wally smiled gently. "I will shoot if fired upon, General. Other than that, I can do no more."

Ben nodded his head. "Wonderful," he said. Glancing at Judy, he asked, "You feel the same as your brother."

"No," she said quickly.

"We got a chance then," Ben said.

Ben had stripped the two men of their weapons: two 9mm pistols and two M-16's. Both men had bandoliers of clips for the M-16's around their shoulders, bandit style, and clips for the pistols on their belt. He tossed the weapons and ammo in the bed of his truck and motioned for the brother and sister to get in the cab.

"You have some kind of transportation?" Ben asked.

Judy smiled. "Shank's mare."

"I heard that," Ben said, returning the smile.

"What kind of vehicles does the Campo gang use?"

"One-ton trucks that they've fortified with welded-on sheets of metal," Wally told him.

"They've made light tanks out of them."

"Uh-huh," Ben said with a smile. He dropped the gear selector into D and pulled out.

"But how about underneath the trucks?"

"What do you mean?" Wally asked. "There's nothing under the trucks except what the trucks came with."

"That's their weakness, then," Ben told them.

"Roll a grenade under the trucks and they go sky-high."

"I like the way your mind works, General Raines," Judy said, placing a hand on his thigh.

"Call me Ben."

After consulting his map, Ben took a rutted county road out of Dover, heading south. He connected with Highway 49, then turned east on 147, stopping at a deserted little town called Stewart. The buildings had been looted and all were in bad condition. He pulled in front of an old service station.

"See if the doors of the bays will open, Wally," Ben said. "You might have to put some oil on those old hinges. If so, use it sparingly; we don't want to change the appearance of the building."

"Don't dribble it all over the place, right, General?"

"You got it."

While Wally was struggling with the door, Ben walked around the building. At the rear, he smiled. Around front, he told Wally, "Forget it. There's no back wall to the station. We'll hide the truck somewhere else and we'll use the station to wait for Campo's men to find us. Judy, start rounding up a dozen or so old soft-drink bottles; any long-necked glass container will do."

While she was doing that, Ben used a small portable pump to bring up any gas that might be left in the tanks of the old station. Ben and his Rebels had learned all the tricks of survival years back. He used the old

measuring stick first to check the gas, then to detect water in the tanks. Had there been water in the tanks, the stick would have come out of the tank a pretty pink.

"Water settles to the bottom," Ben told the brother and sister. "Almost any station that was worth a damn would or will have a detection stick around. Good, you found some wine bottles. Fill them up about three-quarters full with gasoline, then stick a rag down the top and set the cocktails inside the old station. Hurry right back, because we're just getting started. I'll rid this country of Campo and his creeps for good."

"You're awfully sure of yourself, Mister Raines," Judy said.

"Yeah, I am," Ben said. He looked at Wally. "You go around to every car you can find in this burg. Remove the batteries and, if possible, dump the battery acid out into a large glass container. Don't get any of it on you. Bring it back to me. Judy, when he gets back, you find a pot and boil that battery acid until white fumes appear. Then remove it from the heat and don't inhale any of the fumes."

Ben prowled the station until he found several cans of antifreeze. "Good enough," he muttered. "Mister Campo, you are about to experience one hell of a lot of big bangs."

When Ben had all the materials at hand, he began measuring carefully. Judy watched him intently. "Ben, what are you doing?"

"Making methyl nitrate dynamite, dear."

You're old enough to remember the United States Army Rangers, aren't you?"

"Yes. were you one?"

"Yes." Before you were born, Ben thought sourly.

"Get some shotgun shells out of my truck and pour out the powder in a dry container. I've got to make some blasting caps."

"You're a strange man, Ben."

"I'm a survivor, honey. Do unto others before they do unto you."

She laughed at that and went off to get the powder Ben needed.

"Wally, prowl the town and find me some iron or steel pipe that has one end capped off. Get a hacksaw- I saw one in the office-and cut me half a dozen. No smaller than an inch. Take off."

With the brother and sister out of harm's way, Ben checked the glass containers. The mixture had settled and separated. Ben carefully removed the top layer and very carefully placed that in another jar. This was the explosive. He added an equal amount of water and began swirling the mixture. He set it aside and once again allowed the mixture to separate. The highly volatile explosive was now the bottom layer in the jar. He removed the top layer and threw it away- carefully. Ben had shredded some cloth and placed that in an old pan. He slowly added the mixture until the cloth had absorbed it and was damp. He now had a form of dynamite.

It took him only a few minutes to construct blasting caps.

"What are you going to use to detonate those things?" Wally asked.

"I'll make regular fuses for some of them," Ben explained. "For the others, find me some clothespins."

"Clothespins?" Judy asked.

"Clothespins," Ben repeated. "Wally, you get me

some copper wire and the finest, darkest wire you can find. We'll booby-trap some of these buildings and lay down a false trail."

Muttering, Wally went in search of material.

Ben stripped the copper wire and wrapped one wire around the top jaw of the clothespin, another raw wire around the bottom part. He took a small, flat piece of wood, punched a hole in one end, and clamped the wire-wrapped jaws of the pin to the other end. He secured one end of the tripwire through the hole.

He talked as he worked, conscious of Judy standing very close to him. "I'll have two wires running from the explosives. One wire is connected to the positive terminal of a battery; the other wire runs to the top jaw of the pin. The wire running from the bottom jaw of the pin is connected to the other terminal of the battery. This piece of wood between the jaws prevents contact from being made until

someone trips it. When the exposed wires come in contact-
bang!"

"I don't think I'd want you for an enemy, Ben Raines," Judy said.

Ben looked up at her and smiled. "Then let's be friends."

"I'd like that."

Ben worked the rest of that morning on his bombs and booby-trapping several buildings on the main drag of town. The buildings he rigged with explosives were located in the center of town, on both sides of the street. After rigging each building, the tripwire located several feet inside the doorway, Ben would clear away the debris that littered the doorway, making it appear that someone had recently used the doorway several times.

"Tell me about this Campo bastard, Judy," Ben said.

"He's a big hulking brute of a man. A giant. Probably six feet, seven or eight inches tall. Three-hundred-plus pounds. While I was a captive of his, several of his men mentioned that he was somehow tied in with a man called Sam Hartline. What do you know about Hartline?"

Ben stopped working and looked at Judy. "That son of a bitch! Will I never be rid of him?"

"You know him?"

"Unfortunately. Sam Hartline is the sorriest bastard God ever put on the face of the earth."

"Well, Campo doesn't work for him any longer. Campo turned out to be too brutal for even your Mister Hartline."

"That's going some. But please. He isn't "my Mister Hartline." I'd like nothing better than to kill that perverted filth."

"Why don't you, then?"

Ben smiled. "He's about as hard to kill as I am, Judy."

"Then make friends and team up with him."

"If you can't beat 'em, join 'em? Would you try to make friends with a rattlesnake, Judy?"

"No. But that's not the same. Hartline is a human being."

"So was Hitler," Ben countered.

Judy cocked her head to one side. "Who's that?"

Judy, Ben learned, was twenty-five years old-she thought. Her parents were killed during the initial wave of nuclear and germ warfare back in '88. That would have made her eleven years old at the time.

She had "taken up with an ol' boy," when she was seventeen. He'd been killed two years later by Hilton Logan's Federal Police. Judy hated and feared cops- of any kind.

"Chances are, Judy," Ben told her, "you'll see very few cops from here on out."

"Good," she said.

Ben had posted Wally on top of a building. He knew that trucks like his-in such good shape and equipped with several antennas-would be extremely rare. And he felt sure Campo would have spies throughout his territory.

Ben was ready. The three of them had worked hard and swiftly for several hours in preparation for Campo and his creeps. Now all they could do was wait.

"Why did we pile all that junk around those fifty-five

gallon drums of gasoline, Ben?"

Judy asked, pointing to the carefully piled materials at each corner of the block.

"Because when I get as many of Campo's people within this one-block area as possible, I'm going to turn this street into an inferno. We toss a cocktail into the debris, then, when it's burning, shoot into the drums of gas. The fumes ignite."

"Where are you going when this is over, Ben?"

"Just wandering. How about you?"

"Wally wants to stay in this area and start up another church."

"And you?"

"I don't want to stay. I'd like to see the country. I'll bet I haven't been three hundred miles in any direction from this point. Not in my whole life."

"How did you avoid Logan's resettlement plans?"

"Paul and me hid out, then we went to live with kin up in Kentucky. That's when I started back to school. Then the rats came."

Ben had learned that most people did not care to discuss that period of their lives. The memories were just too horrible. Those rodents had almost been the final blow against humanity.

"Well, I'm certainly going to ramble around when this is over, Judy. You're welcome to come with me."

"No strings attached?"

"None whatsoever."

"Here they come!" Wally shouted. He scrambled down from the building and took up his position. Ben watched him through worried eyes.

Wally had pointed toward the east.

"You don't think Wally has his share of guts, do you, Ben?" Judy asked.

"I'm sure he is a very brave man, Judy.

But being a brave man and being a survivalist are two entirely different things. Wally has a reluctant trigger finger, that's all. And at times like these, that is a drawback to those who might be depending on his reactions."

"He's killed before," Judy defended her brother.

"When absolutely pushed to the wall and then only after putting his life, your life, or somebody else's life in jeopardy." It was not posed in question form.

"How'd you know that?"

"Wally's about ten years older than you, right, Judy?"

"How'd you know that?"

Yeah, that's right."

"Wally remembers when a person could call a cop. His formative years were in the late '60's and '70's. He probably feels guilty just at the thought of picking up a big, bad gun to defend himself against all these poor misguided souls that roam the country, raping and killing and stealing."

She laughed softly at the expression on his face. "You ever been married, Ben?"

The sound of labored engines was growing louder.

"Yes. A long time ago." Long ago and far away, the line came to the one-time-writer-turned-warrior. "Here they come. Stay very still, Judy."

"Campo won't come in with his men," Judy said. "He always lays back until it's clear. I've watched him do it a half-dozen times."

Ben nodded and watched the lead vehicle turn the corner, its ugly, squat nose poking arrogantly around the corner. The truck was not a one-ton truck but a heavier bob truck. The front and sides had been

fortified with steel plate. Gun slits had been cut into the steel plate. The muzzles of automatic weapons stuck out of the slits.

Ben watched as two more fortified trucks pulled around the corner. "They're going to strafe first," Ben whispered. Whispering was not really necessary. The trucks had no mufflers and were making enough noise to almost cover a gunshot. "You climb down into that bay there. I'll join you very soon, believe me."

Then Ben was alone as the woman scampered into the protective old bay. He heard the metallic sounds of radio speakers barking out their static. Another truck pulled around the corner, then another. He watched as the muzzles of the guns on his side lowered. He slipped into the concrete protection of the bays just as the machine guns opened up, the slugs tearing great jagged holes in the old wooden doors of the service area. Bits of broken glass sparkled in flight, showering Ben and Judy with shards of glass. Several of the big .50-caliber slugs struck the inner frame of the sliding door and knocked the door ajar.

The strafing stopped. "Remember, Jake wants that cunt alive. Fan out and search both sides of the block. They got to be here. They didn't make it to McKinnon and they ain't on the east side of town. Most out."

Ben had tucked his truck into a ravine a half-mile out of the town proper and covered it with brush. The ravine wound around and connected with a dry creek bed that ran just behind the old station. That would be their escape route.

They hoped.

Boots crunched on the broken and littered

street and sidewalks. Ben and Judy tensed as the boots stopped in front of the service station.

"Shit!" they heard a man mutter. "Ben Raines ain't nowhere around these parts. And if n he was, I don't want no truck with him."

"You better not let Jake hear you say that," another man said. "Jake hates Ben Raines."

In the darkness of the bay, Ben felt Judy's eyes on him, asking silent questions. Ben shrugged. So far as he knew, he had never met Jake Campo.

Hell, he'd never even heard of the man until that morning, back at the lake. But Jake may have been one of the many thugs and hoodlums and slime Ben had run out of Tri-States, years back, when he and his Rebels were moving in to start their own country within a country.

"Somebody's been in and out of this building!" the shout reached Ben and Judy.

"Here, too!" another man called, the shout coming from across the street.

"Check 'em out!" the order came down the line.

Judy looked at Ben. The man was smiling. Strange man, she thought.

Two tremendous explosions, one coming only a heartbeat after the other, rocked the old deserted town. Ben ran up the steps of the bay, a Firefrag grenade in his hand. He was pulling the pin before he reached the top of the bay, the spoon pinging away. He rolled the grenade across the street, under the lead truck, and jumped back, unseen, into the bay of the service station.

Shouts of confusion and fear filled the dusty air. Then a huge explosion ripped the air as the Firefrag grenade exploded, the incendiary capabilities of the

grenade blowing the gas tank of the truck. The truck was lifted off its tires and tossed to one side, those inside trapped in the raging inferno. Their screaming echoed up and down the street.

That was Wally's cue. Crouched in a building at the other end of the street, Wally tossed a burning firebomb into the debris piled around the drum of gasoline. He ran to the rear of the store, took aim with his pistol, and fired into the concealed drum. The fumes ignited, turning that end of the street into a firestorm.

Ben tossed a cocktail into the debris at his end of the street and leveled his Thompson at the hidden drum, pulling the trigger.

"Out the back and to the ravine!" he called to Judy.

She was running for the ravine as the gas drum exploded.

Ben tossed cocktail after cocktail into the confusing conflagration. Through the blaze, he could see Wally running for the ravine.

Without a second glance, Ben ran out the back of the station, throwing his last Molotov cocktail into the

station, near where he had placed the materials left over from his bomb-making.

The hot blast almost knocked him off his booted feet. Ben stumbled, caught his balance, and continued running for the ravine and the truck.

"Get in front with Wally!" Judy panted, a rifle in her hands. "I'll get in back and lay down cover fire if they follow."

She knows more combat than her brother, Ben thought.

Ben dropped the truck into four-wheel drive, roared

out of the ravine, and headed across a field. He found a dirt road that ran some distance from, but parallel to, the blacktop road leading out of the town. He stayed close to the woods and circled the town, coming out on the blacktop that would take them to the town of Tennessee Ridge. On the blacktop, he cut out of four-wheel drive and drove as fast as he could on the littered road, weaving and dodging the fallen limbs, and in some cases, entire trees that had fallen across the road.

He bounced onto Highway 13 and followed that for some twenty-five miles, until connecting with Interstate 40. There, he cut west. He didn't stop until they had crossed the Tennessee River. There he pulled off the interstate and they all took a well-deserved breather.

Ben and Judy stood patiently as Wally bowed his head and spoke a short prayer, thanking God for His help in delivering them from the hands of savages.

Brother looked at sister. "Time for us to think about heading back home, Judy."

"Wally," she said gently. "We don't have a home."

"Home is wherever God sends me," he said.

"And I have to go back to spread His word."

Ben stood quietly. He wasn't about to interfere between brother and sister. And he'd seen enough lay preachers-and Judy had told him that's what her brother was-to know that many times they were as stubborn as a mule.

"They'll kill you, Wally," Judy said bluntly.

"Perhaps. But if you go off to live in sin with this man," he looked at Ben, "you'll be worshipping a false god. You know what we've heard about him for years."

Ben stirred as the old rumor flared up once more.

"I am not

a god," Ben said. "I am flesh and blood and bone like everyone else."

"I shall worship, in my own way, the only true God, Wally," Judy said. "The God whose words are contained in the Bible."

Wally looked at Ben. "May I have a small bit of food for my journey, General?"

"Take whatever you need, Wally. But I wish you'd stay with us. At least, for your sister's sake,

until we get further away from this part of the state."

"I have to go back, General. I'm called to do so."

Ben nodded his head in agreement. "I wish you luck, Wally."

Wally smiled. "God is on my side, General."

There was nothing Ben could say to counter that.

Chapter 3

Ben and Judy stood by the pickup and watched Wally Williams walk slowly up Highway 641. He had told them he was only going a few miles, then would cut northeast, toward Eagle Creek on the Tennessee.

He rounded a curve in the road, and was lost from sight.

"I will never see him again," Judy said.

"You can't know that for sure," Ben said.

"I will not see him again," she repeated. She turned and faced Ben. "Let's go, Ben. I want to leave this part of the country. And I don't care if I ever come back."

Ben opened the door to the truck. "Your chariot awaits you, dear."

They spent their first night together at a tiny town just off the interstate. They never did find out the name of the town, for they could never find any highway markers denoting the name.

"Don't you have a tent, Ben?" she asked.

"A pup tent in all that mess somewhere."

"That won't do."

"Oh?"

"Tomorrow, first town of any size we come to, we start lookin' for one of them big pretty-colored tents like I seen in a catalog one time."

"Those and saw," Ben corrected.

"You ribbin' the way I talk, boy?" she asked.

"No. Not at all. I used to be a writer, that's all. It's habit."

"You wrote books!"

"Yes."

"Big books?"

"Yes. If by that you mean a hundred-thousand words or more."

"What'd you write about, Ben? Tell me some stories."

Ben fought to keep a straight face at her childish excitement. "I thought you told me you went to school?"

"Oh, I did. I got to the seventh grade. I can read. But I'm slow at it 'cause I have to skip over the big words."

"All right, then. But first things first. We can't get a bright-colored tent, because the color would stand out and might bring us visitors we don't want. Understand?"

"Oh, yeah. Right."

"But we will get a tent-somewhere. Next we're going to get you some books. Some English books and a

dictionary."

"That'd be great."

"Why didn't your brother ever help you with reading?"

"Why ... I don't know. I guess 'cause I never asked him." Good reason, Ben thought.

"Which way did they go, bitch?" the voice rumbled out of the huge chest, exploding in the air.

"I didn't see them, Mister Campo," the woman said. "I swear to God, I didn't."

"There ain't no God around here but me, bitch," Jake told her. "And you'd best remember that."

"No, sir," the woman told him.

"Huh?!"

"I will not forsake my God and He will not forsake me."

Campo laughed. The woman thought him to be the ugliest man she had ever seen. His head was shaved clean and round as a basketball, and just about as large. His eyes were small and piggy. His nose was large; with the nostrils flared, he looked like a pig. His mouth was wide, the lips thick and constantly wet from saliva. The man seemed to have no neck. Just the head attached to massive shoulders. His arms were thickly muscled. A huge chest and big belly. But the big belly did not quiver and shake like a fat man's. It was solid. His legs were like the trunks of small trees. His feet were curiously small for a man his size.

"No, bitch," Campo said, towering over the frightened woman. "You worship Jake Campo."

She shook her head.

He squatted down beside her with a grunt and squeezed one soft breast. He clamped down hard, bruising the flesh. He laughed as the woman screamed in pain.

Her husband broke free of the hands that held him, and ran to Campo. He hit the man on the bald head with his clenched fist and the sound of the knuckles breaking was loud.

Campo stood up and roared with laughter.

"You do have balls, mister," Campo said. "But nobody hits Jake Campo and gets away with it. Let's see, what shall your punishment be? Should I cut off your balls? Naw! Rip out your tongue and feed it to the hogs? Naw!" Campo's big face brightened. "I know." He looked to his men. "Strip the broad, boys. And tie her husband to that tree yonder."

The man was forced to watch while Campo's men took turns raping the woman.

Campo pulled out a long-bladed hunting knife. He grinned at the man. "You seen Ben Raines' fancy pickup truck, didn't you, pig farmer?"

"No, sir, Mister Campo."

Campo cut the man's worn belt and let his patched trousers fall around his ankles. He cut the man's long-handled underwear and lay the cold steel

of the knife against the man's testicles. "You want your balls cut off and stuck up your wife's ass?"

"No, sir."

"Ben Raines."

"I seen this fancy truck go by just a-sailin'. Two men in the cab and a woman in the back, under a camper. She had a rifle stuck out the open camper winder."

"You done good, boy," Campo told the man, cutting the ropes that held him. "I'm gonna let you and your big-pussied woman live. This time around."

He waved for his men to follow him. The hungry-looking truck farmer jerked up his pants and ran to his wife's side.

"Radio headquarters," Campo told a man.

"I want half the men to come with me, the other half stay in this area and collect our booty. Tell the boys to gear up for a long hard run. Lots of food and warm clothing and winter gear. I'm gonna foller Ben Raines until I catch that prissy, law-and-order son of a bitch. And I don't care if I have to foller him, and that snooty cunt with him, all the way to the Pacific Ocean."

Jake Campo looked to the west. "I'm gonna git you, Raines. And that there's a promise."

Even though the going would be much slower and would sometimes involve backtracking, Ben decided to stay on the secondary roads. They would afford him so many more ways to twist and turn in case Campo and his men were chasing them.

And Ben felt sure they would be.

Ben and Judy pulled out just after dawn, angling more west than north. At a small town in West Tennessee, Ben stopped at the public library-or what was left of it-and found some books for Judy. A book on creative writing, a good dictionary, and Fowler's Modern English Usage.

On the road again, Judy opened the dictionary at random. "Ga-vo-tit," she said.

"I beg your pardon?"

She repeated her pronunciation.

"Spell it, Judy."

"G-a-v-ocommentcomment-every."

Ben hated to admit he didn't have the foggiest idea

what the word meant. "What does it mean, Judy?"

"Well, hell! I don't know. I'm askin' you."

"See all the smaller words to the right of the bold-type word?"

"Huh?"

Ben slowed the truck and took a quick look at the word. "An old French dance," he read. "Since I never wrote the types of books where that word would be used, I am not familiar with it."

"So you don't know everything after all?"

"Who in the world ever said I did?"

"Lots of people have. I seen-was

"I have seen."

She looked at him.

"I have seen

lots of shrines and stuff like that built for you. Lots of the Underground People worship you."

"So I heard," Ben said through gritted teeth.

"I am not to be revered or worshipped, Judy.

I am not a god. Would a god do the things we did last night?"

"They would if they was horny."

"Jesus!"

Ben muttered. "That's not what I mean, Judy."

"I

know

that, Ben. Look! There's the sign pointin' the way to Missouri. Let's go there. I ain't never been to Missouri."

"I have never been."

"Whatever."

Ben drove into Dyersburg, Tennessee, and after carefully parking the truck on the street, enabling them to keep an eye on it, they began their search of the stores. Over the years, though, the stores had been looted many times, and anything of any value was long gone.

"Have you gotten used to the skeletons, Ben?"

They had just opened a broom closet door and two old skeletons had fallen out, clattering at their feet.

"A long time ago, Judy."

A noise from the street spun them around and sent them running through the littered store to the sidewalk. A crowd of ragged men and women had gathered around the pickup.

They were armed with clubs and axes and knives and spears.

"The welcoming committee," Ben said.

"What do you want?" a woman shouted the question at Ben and Judy.

"We don't mean any harm," Ben called.

"We're just traveling through."

"Why did you stop?" a man called. He held an axe in his hands.

"People on the roofs with bows and arrows," Judy whispered.

"I see them. If shooting starts, you take the south side of the street, I'll take the north."

"All right."

"We don't want any trouble," Ben called, as they walked closer to the truck.

"You say!" the woman spokesperson said angrily. "That's what they all say. Then they rape and kill and take away the young girls and boys."

"Who takes them? Where do they take them?"

"Who knows?" the woman said. "We never see any of them again. The attackers

or
our young."

"My name is Ben Raines," Ben spoke softly.

About half of the knot of people drew back in fear. They whispered and muttered among themselves. The spokeswoman stood firm, glaring at Ben, her hands knuckle-white from gripping the spear tightly.

"You lie!" she shouted.

"I do not lie," Ben told her. "I... we ..." he said, indicating Judy, "just killed about twenty-five of Jake Campo's people. Just east of the Tennessee. They're probably only about a day behind us."

"Jake Campo does not bother us," the woman said. "This is not his territory. We pay homage to a warlord called West."

"Do you do so willingly?"

The woman laughed. It was not a pretty laugh. "What do you think, Mr. So-Called-Ben-Raines. West has gathered up all the guns and left us with only clubs and spears and homemade bows and arrows to defend ourselves. He leaves us just enough food to survive and takes the rest. How can we fight him and his men?"

"You could leave here and find guns. There are millions of guns scattered around the country."

"Do you see any cars or trucks or horses or mules?" the woman asked. "No. West has taken them all. If we tried to walk out, the beasts and the mutants would eat us, if West's men did not kill us first. We are trapped here."

An idea Ben had been nurturing for a long time took more solid shape in his mind. "You say people come in and rape and kill. Why doesn't this West person protect you?"

"He does when he's around. But he ain't always around. He has a big territory to look after."

"This doesn't make sense," Ben muttered.

"Have these people lost all will to survive as free people?"

A man stepped from the crowd. "I heard that!" he shouted. "Look, you bastard. I'm a doctor.

Or I was. Now I'm reduced to carrying a spear. There used to be about fifteen hundred of us around here. Now we're only about four hundred strong. If you're really Ben Raines, help us."

"Do you want to help yourselves?" Ben asked.

"Yes!" the man shouted. "But we have to have the means to do so."

"All right, then. I'll see about giving you the means, Doctor?..."

"Barnes. Ralph Barnes."

Ben walked through the crowd to his truck and opened the camper. He handed Judy an antenna. "Take this to the top of that building," he told her. "Then drop this end of the lead-in down to me."

The radio connected, Ben flipped the set on. The frequency was preset. "General Raines to Base Camp One. Raines to Base Camp

One."

"General Raines!" the operator-on-duty's voice snapped out of the speaker. "Yes, sir."

"Get me General Jefferys."

"Yes, sir. It'll take me about one minute."

"I'll be here, son."

"Ben!" Cecil's voice was full of warmth over the miles.

"Cecil. At the chance we're being monitored, I'm scrambling."

"Yes, sir."

"All right. I'm in Dyersburg, Tennessee. Are you aware of the fact the country has deteriorated to the point of warlords terrorizing the people?"

"It doesn't surprise me, Ben."

"Very well. You remember we spoke of setting up

outposts east to west, every hundred miles or so?"

"Yes."

"We may as well start here." He explained the situation. "I want a full platoon in here. As heavily armed as you can get them. Rations for a winter's stay. Enough weapons and clothing for four hundred men and women. Reloading equipment, medical supplies, the whole nine yards. I want them rolling in the morning, Cecil. I'll meet them here."

"Ten-four, General."

Ben clicked off the set and waved Judy down from the rooftop. He turned to the people.

"They'll probably be here in two days. Now let me tell you people something. How many of you know anything about the way the old Tri-States was run?"

Most hands went into the air."

"Then you know how fast my system of justice goes down. I will not tolerate racial bullshit. I will not tolerate laziness or sloppy work.

Everybody in my command pulls their fair share. You do not steal, you do not lie, you do not cheat. Everybody pulls together. Personally," he said with a smile, "I despise gardening. I always have; I always will. I have what is known as a brown thumb. I touch a plant, it dies. Fortunately, those otherwise blessed saw this fact and asked if I would please stop. I have a flair for administration and a passion for order. The point I'm making is this: Do what you are good at and enjoy. We'll talk more tomorrow. For now, how many of you know anything about combat?"

Only a few hands went up.

Ben's eyes settled on a man who looked to be in his late forties. "Where'd you serve?"

"Eighteen years in the Army, sir. I got shot during the assault on Tri-States and was court-martialed because I ordered my platoon to pull back and take no further action against you or your people. Name is Charles Leighton."

Ben handed him one of the M-16's taken from Campo's men. "Well, Charles, you have just been

promoted to the rank of Colonel and placed in charge of security on this outpost. What's your name?" Ben asked another man who had raised his hand.

"Jim Canby, General. Three years in the Marine Corps."

Jim got the other M-16, and the two pistols were given to a Chuck Morris and a Dot Fontana.

"All right, people," Ben said. "Now you level with me. How many contraband guns have you managed to stash away?"

The spokeswoman, Dot, smiled. "Twelve rifles and six shotguns. Four pistols. But we don't have much ammunition for them."

"You will," Ben said. "Soon."

Leaving Judy talking with the others, Ben took those he had just armed off to one side.

"West has to have informers among you," Ben said. "Who are they?"

Dot named four people she was sure of and two more she suspected. The others agreed.

"Place them under guard," Ben told them. "If they're innocent, we'll apologize later. When that is done, I want whoever it is among you who usually contacts this West person, to do so. Tell him you have to see him first thing in the morning. Tell him ... tell him half a dozen women just wandered into town and you don't have

enough food for yourselves, much less a half-dozen more people. The mention of women should bring him on the run. Does he usually come in by the same route? Good, We'll ambush the son of a bitch-or whoever he sends-take their guns and vehicles. Then we'll raid his base camp and steal some more."

Broad grins greeted Ben. Dot said, "Oh, I like the way you think, General."

"So do I, lady," Judy said, joining the group. Her eyes were mean. "And I got first dibs."

"You married to him?" Dot asked.

Judy balled her fists.

Ben stepped between them.

"Get outta the goddamned way!" Judy said.

Ben got.

Chapter 4

There was no trouble between Judy and Dot. Doctor Barnes intervened and the woman stepped back.

Dot said, "I apologize to you both. But men, as you shall see, are scarce around here. I had to test the waters."

"What do you mean, men are scarce?" Ben asked.

"West takes most of the men to work his camps," Doctor Barnes said. "Those he leaves are usually under fourteen or over sixty. The few men you see here are all that are left in town. The rest are too young or too old. The women remaining here are also very young, or over fifty."

"And the other men and women?" Ben asked.

"They're held at the work camps."

"Then we've got our work cut out for us, haven't we?" Ben said.

"Yes, sir."

West, Charles told Ben, always came in from the north. His work camps were located in a half circle, ranging from Union City in the north, extending eastward to Martin, down to Milan, taking in Jackson, down to Bolivar, then in a straight line west to Memphis.

"How many men?" Ben asked.

"It fluctuates," Barnes said. "But I'd say four hundred at any given time. Don't misunderstand, General. The people in the area he controls aren't cowards. Not by any means. He just built his little army and then took one town at a time. Some of the towns might have had fifteen people left when he came, others might have had fifty. He just overpowered them, set up informers, took the guns and vehicles, and left after torturing and killing and raping to prove who was boss."

"Yes," Ben said. "And he also caught the people at just the right time. I've seen it many times before. Beaten down, scared, hungry, and most important, leaderless."

"Leaders, General Raines," Dot said, "are very hard to find."

"Leaders, Miss Fontana," Ben countered, "are very easy to find. Finding the right one is what is so difficult."

Ben spent the rest of that day making more bombs. West had stripped the area of all functioning vehicles, but had left behind those that would not run. Ben ordered the batteries to be pulled from those vehicles and emptied of their acid-if any remained. Many of the batteries were dry.

He showed the people how to properly make and handle Molotov cocktails, and how to construct tin-can land mines, filling them up with gunpowder and nails; how to make wine-bottle cone charges, capable of penetrating two or three inches of armor.

"Special Forces or Ranger, General?" Leighton asked.

"Both," Ben told him. "Then into the old Hell-Hounds. You remember them?"

"Jesus!" Leighton whispered. "I figured all you guys were long dead."

Ben showed the people how to take sodium chlorate and sugar, and by adding one other easy to find ingredient, make a highly volatile pipe bomb.

By late afternoon of the first day in town, Ben had more than a hundred of the people gathering materials for him, and by dusk, he had quite an impressive display of homemade bombs.

"Let's call it a day," Ben said, straightening up. "Tomorrow morning, early,

we'll go over the plans once more, then take out the column this Mister West sends in."

They assembled an hour before dawn, at staggered positions along both sides of the old county road.

Ben had ordered extra precautions taken with the suspected informers under guard, and his suspicions paid off- one man had tried to escape. Under questioning, he admitted he was an informer for West. He had received extra food for that. Ben ordered him hanged.

"He has a wife and family, General," a man told Ben.

"He doesn't anymore."

In the chilly predawn, Ben finally told his plan to those men and women he had armed, before positioning.

"We wondered when you were going to let us in on it, General," Leighton said.

"It's very doubtful we locked up all the informers," Ben said. "I couldn't take the chance of one getting away and blowing it all. All right, here it is. First rule of battle: Keep it simple. The more complicated the plan, the more chance you have of it failing. We have to have the vehicles. That's essential. A roadblock would warn them of danger. So that's out. Notice how I'm dressed? None of you have. Learn to be more observant. Your life is going to depend on it. My clothing is old and dirty. I didn't shave this morning. My hat is different. I found it in an old department store, all rat-chewed. I look like I've been on the road for a time. I'm holding a ragged-looking coat over my arm. The coat conceals the tear-gas grenade in my left hand. When we hear the sounds of West's vehicles approaching this position, I'm going to step out into the road with the pin pulled on this grenade, holding the spoon down. With any kind of luck, the driver of the lead truck will roll down his window and call me over. When that happens, I'll toss the tear-gas grenade into the vehicle and dive for the ditch. That's your cue to open fire on the others. You don't have much ammo, so don't waste it. Never mind broken windshields. They can be replaced; broken skulls can't. You know your positions, now get to them."

The thin line of Ben's newest contingent of Rebels waited in the weed-grown ditches. For many of them, this would be the first taste of actual combat. For despite the collapse of the government of the United States of America a decade after the world had been torn by nuclear and germ warfare, many of the survivors just rolled with the flow, so to speak, obeying blindly the often-times idiotic dictates of a central government that, even in the best of times, had never worked to the satisfaction of a very large and varied minority.

The newly formed Rebels waited. Despite the coolness of the fall morning, many wiped sweaty palms, then regripped their weapons.

The faint sounds of engines sprang out of the morning's mist. Ben stepped onto the rutted blacktop road. He had slipped another tear-gas grenade into the hip pocket of his old field pants at the last minute. His .45 pistol, a round in the chamber, was tucked in his belt

at the small of his back.

He stood alone in the road, waiting.

The vehicles approached slowly, taking their time on the old road. Ben started walking slowly, not wanting to walk past those that lay crouched in the ditches.

The lead truck, a three-quarter ton, stopped, as Ben had hoped it would, only a few yards from him.

"That son of a bitch looks familiar to me," the man on the passenger side said, his words reaching Ben.

"Raggedy lookin' thing don't look like nothing to me," the driver said. He stuck his head out the window. "Hey, skinny!" he shouted, although the distance between them was short. "Get your funky ass over here, boy."

"Yes, sir, boss," Ben said. "I don't mean no harm to nobody. I was just-was

"Shut your goddamn mouth, boy! And don't speak until you're spoken to."

"Yes, sir, boss."

Ben stepped closer to the truck. He could smell the rancid odor of unwashed bodies.

"You new around here, ain't you, boy?" the driver asked.

"Yes, sir, boss."

"You quick with them bosses, ain't you, boy? You ever done prison time?"

"Yes, sir, boss. Down in Texas. Huntsville."

"Well, now," the driver grinned. Surprisingly, his teeth were in good shape.

"The boss might like to talk to you."

"The hell with that!" his partner yelled. "That's Ben Raines!"

Ben released the spoon on the tear-gas grenade, dropped his overcoat, and flipped the hissing grenade into the pickup. With his right hand, he jerked out his .45 and shot the driver of the next vehicle in the face, the slug spider-webbing the old, cracked windshield and blowing away part of the man's jaw.

Ben leaped for the ditch barely in time to avoid being shot by one of the new people. Ben leveled his .45 and shot the man in the stomach, just as Judy shot the traitor in the head with her .30-30 rifle. The slug exited out the right side, blowing out brains and blood and bone and fluid.

Judy tossed Ben his Thompson and he spun to join the fight..

It was over before he could get into action with his submachine gun.

The new Rebels were filled with hate for West's people, and they gave no quarter to his men. Ben did

not try to stop them as they jerked those few left alive out of the vans and trucks and escorted them to the nearest tree for hanging. Ben and Judy stood

silently by and watched as the townspeople strung West's men up with rope and wire and belts and let them swing.

Dot came to face Ben. "That was Ned that tried to shoot you, General. He's been one of our most faithful people. I never would have suspected him." She looked at his body. "I wonder why he did it?"

"We'll probably never know. It doesn't matter now. Come on, let's dump the bodies in the ditch and gather up the weapons and ammo. Get these vehicles back to town and look them over. We've got to get ready for West's counterattack."

Back in town, those who waited were jubilant when their friends drove back into town, cheering and shouting. They now had two dozen more guns and four vehicles.

Ben sat in his pickup truck and watched it all, an amused expression on his face.

"I think it's sad, and you think it's funny," Judy said. "I don't understand you, Ben."

"I'm just thinking how my people are going to have to go from coast to coast, border to border, propping up the survivors. It isn't that I really want to do it, but for our survival, we have to do it."

"Isn't that kind of... of... what's the word I'm looking for?" Judy asked.

"Conceited, smug, arrogant-take your choice. You're correct to a degree."

"You make me mad sometimes, Ben Raines."

"Dogs go mad, dear," Ben automatically corrected. "People become angry."

She got out of the truck and slammed the door. She stalked up the street, her back stiff.

Doctor Barnes had been leaning up against a light pole, only a couple of feet from the cab of the truck. He smiled at Ben.

"I wasn't eavesdropping," the doctor said.

"I was standing here when you drove up."

"I know," Ben said. He got out of the truck and walked to the curb, leaning against the fender, looking at the doctor.

"People confound you, don't they, President-General Raines?"

"Ben. Just Ben. Yes, they do, Ralph. I would have died fighting before I would have allowed myself to become what West made of you people."

"I won't become angry at that, Ben. Some people might, but I won't. I was quite a fan of yours, Ben. Not during your short tenure as President, mind you; but when you were writing books for a living."

"I did my best to warn the people what was coming dead at them."

"Yes, you did. You and a dozen other writers. But we just wouldn't listen, would we?"

"Sure as hell wouldn't," Ben muttered.

"And now the great, indomitable, long-suffering Ben Raines, with a long sigh of resignation, will gather up

all his hundreds of survival experts, and travel the battered nation, setting up little outposts of civilization, kicking the civilians in the butt, jerking them out of their doldrums, saving them from themselves. Right?"

"You're the one talking, Doctor. But you're in a pretty sorry state for a man who has all the answers."

"Oh, you're right. But you enjoy it, General."

"What?"

"Stop running from the truth, General. You wouldn't have conditions any other way. You see, it's always easy for men like you. I envy you: you and those that follow you."

"Barnes, I don't know what in the hell you're talking about."

The doctor studied the man for a long moment. "Maybe you really don't, General. I have all your books, Ben. I really do. St. You could have been a great writer, but you chose to write pulp. Oh, it was good

pulp-contradictory statement, yes."

"Doctor, get to the point of this, will you, please?"

"You're an idealist, General. You refuse to take into account the many weaknesses of human beings. You took what you considered to be the cream of the crop and built your Tri-States-was

"It worked, Doctor," Ben cut him off. "You can't deny that."

"I won't try to deny it. Yes, it worked. How could it fail when you gathered the best around you?"

Ben smiled. "Here it comes. After all that's happened, you're still a liberal at heart." .

"To some degree," Barnes admitted.

"There is no middle ground with you, Ben. Everything is either black or white. No gray in-between."

"Doctor," Ben said patiently. "One can train a dog

to obey basic rules. Now if a dog can be taught the difference between right and wrong, it should be very simple to teach a human being."

Barnes shook his head. "You're a hard man, Ben Raines. But," he sighed, "perhaps it's time for hard men. One philosophy, right, Ben? No taking into account different cultures, backgrounds, early upbringing-anything like that, right?"

"You stick to healing, Barnes," Ben told him.

"Leave the rest for people who have the stomach for it."

"General Raines, you want what never was and never will be: a perfect society. But you cannot build a perfect society when the architects are imperfect human beings."

Ben smiled again. "The man said, quoting Ben Raines."

The doctor's smile matched Ben's. "That's right, you did write that, didn't you? I'll live in your society, General. But I'll do so because of the

safety it affords me, not because I agree with its basic philosophy."

"Then that makes you a hypocrite, doesn't it, Mr. Barnes?"

The doctor chose not to reply. He studied Ben for a moment, then walked away.

Ben noticed the seat of the man's jeans had been crudely patched with a piece of canvas. For all his education and lofty thoughts, the man could just barely keep his ass from showing through.

Chapter 5

"Still angry at me?" Ben asked Judy.

"Mad!" she said.

"Very well. When you get your rabies shot, let me know. I'll be around."

She grabbed his arm with surprising strength and spun him around as he turned to go. "Ben, these people were beaten down-whipped. Now they've had a small victory and they're happy. And you think it's funny."

"Judy ..." Ben stepped closer. "I'm amused, but not in the way you think. My Rebels have played out this same scenario for years. Has it occurred to you that we just might be weary of it?"

"Then why don't you and your people just quit?" she asked hotly.

"We can't. For our own sake, we can't. It's never-ending for us. I see that now. If I- we

comh a destiny, this is it."

"Yeah, you said that-something like it-back in the truck. But you don't have to act so ... so smart-assed about it!"

He laughed at her and took her hand. "Come on, fireball. We've got to start setting up a defense line against West and his people."

"And it annoys you that you have to remind the people to do it, right, Ben?"

"Oh, not really. I guess it's second nature for me." He smiled. "Just one of my many talents."

Judy muttered something extremely profane under her breath.

"You don't know the exact location of West's base camp?" Ben asked.

"Not his main camp," Leigh ton said. "We know where most of his work camps are, though."

They were taking a break from setting up a first line of defense on the north side of town.

"After we arm ourselves better with the weapons taken from the next contingent of West's people, we'll hit the first labor camp and free your friends. By that time, my Rebels should be here with some heavier stuff."

Barnes looked horrified. "You plan to fight West's people before

your troops get here?"

"Sure," Ben said.

"Are you mad or just insufferably arrogant?" the doctor asked.

"Neither one, I hope," Ben said with a smile.

"Look around you, General!" Barnes almost shouted the words. "You have thirty people armed, and not well-armed, at that. West has between four hundred and six hundred well-armed and trained men."

"But he can't send all of them at once," Ben said gently. "That would leave his labor camps unguarded. He can't leave his base camp unguarded; that's probably where he stashes his weapons and ammo. Warlords down through history share many things in common, one of which is a monumental ego. I'm counting on this West person to fit the mold. He will find where we ambushed and killed his people. I'm counting on that. It's kind of hard to miss a half-dozen hanging bodies," Ben added drily. "That's going to make West either awfully angry or awfully cautious. I'm betting on angry. We're going to let him bust through this first line of barricades with very little resistance. See how they're placed close to deep ditches so we can jump into their protection and run screaming and frightened away from the Big Bad West? You notice I have the other teams working just around that curve, one mile down the road. Row after row of drums filled with water, concrete blocks, old junked cars. No way he can get through. When his column grinds to a halt, what's going to be directly over and behind him, Doctor?"

The doctor smiled grudgingly. "An overpass, General. And you and Leighton and Canby and Morris will be up there with automatic weapons and bombs, right?"

"You're learning, Ralph. I'll make a fighter out of you yet."

"I'll stick with medicine," the doctor replied, turning away.

"That man does not have much use for me," Ben told Dot.

"He resents the ease with which you handle things," the woman told him. "We've been plotting and scheming for a year around here, trying to come up with some solution to our problem. Then you walk in and take over. And get it done," she added.

Ben looked at the woman. "Dot, no nation whose citizens were fully armed was ever conquered by an outside force. I might get some argument on that, but in the main it's true. Just as it's true that many nations went from right-wing dictatorships to a democratic form of government. But no nation ever went from a communist form of government to a democratic form of government. The people who control the guns control it all."

She smiled at him. "I'm old enough to remember that the writer Ben Raines was a liberal hater in print. A liberal hater in person, too, it appears."

Judy came to Ben's side, two cups of what currently passed for coffee in her hands. More chicory than anything else. But at least it was hot, and if enough honey was added, not too bad.

"Thank you," Ben said, not sure if Judy was still angry at him, for whatever reason.

"You're welcome." She handed the second cup to Dot. A quiet peace offering from woman to woman. "The lookouts are reporting everything is quiet. No sign of West."

Dot sipped her coffee. "They'll be here. What worries me is what happens if West and Campo join forces?"

"We fight them," Ben said. "My people will be here in the morning; possibly late this evening. Campo doesn't have artillery and no one here has seen any type of artillery in the hands of West. There'll be a mortar

crew with my Rebels and at least two .50-caliber machine guns-maybe four of them. That, plus our discipline and experience, will make up the difference."

"Here they come!" the excited call was passed down the line. "A whole great line of them."

"Get into position," Ben ordered. "You all know what to do. Do it, and we'll come out of this alive. Fuck up, and we're dead."

Ben and those with him, all armed with M-16's, crouched on the overpass and watched and waited. Ben saw the twenty-odd vehicles of the column slow, then stop. Using binoculars, Ben watched the lead vehicle, a van. A man got out and stood with hands on hips, surveying the flimsy barricade that stretched across the road. The bearded man laughed at the obstacle and pointed toward it.

Ben handed the binoculars to Leighton. "Is that West?"

Leighton looked. "That's him." He counted the vehicles in the column. "Figuring five men to a vehicle, I make it about a hundred twenty-five men we're up against."

"Yes," Ben said. He lifted his walkie-talkie. Judy was behind the second, as yet unseen, barricade around the curve. "Judy? Everybody in place and ready?"

"Ready, Ben," she radioed back. The young lady had never seen a walkie-talkie before meeting Ben.

"Stay loose," Ben said.

"One guy got too loose," Judy radioed back. "He messed his pants."

Ben grinned and rehooked the walkie-talkie to his chest harness. "Here they come."

A few desultory shots were fired at the advancing

column by those behind the first barricade. They then jumped into the ditch, running and yelling as if in mortal fear.

A bob truck with a steel grate welded in front of the hood was waved on past West's van. The bob truck slammed through the barricade, the column following.

"So far, so good," Ben muttered.

When the last vehicle had passed the wrecked

barricade, people ran out from the thick weeds and brush on both sides of the highway. They carried concrete blocks, wooden planks with long nails driven through, sacks of broken glass. Others rolled water-filled fifty-five-gallon drums. Still others unrolled barbed wire, securing the ends on both sides of the highway.

They quickly and effectively closed the highway to West and his people.

Rounding the curve, the second barricade looked at first glance to be as flimsy as the first. The bob truck picked up speed, preparing to ram right through the barricade. The bob truck's right front tire struck a series of concrete blocks, tipped to one side, and rolled over, spilling the men riding in the back. The men were shot down before they could rise to their feet. From behind the barricade, men and women darted out, grabbed up weapons and ammo belts, then raced back behind the shelter.

In the van, West realized he had driven right into a well-thought-out trap. He spun the steering wheel, the van slewing around, facing the direction he'd come. On the overpass, Ben leveled his scope-mounted, .30-06, lined up West's ugly face in the cross hairs, and pulled the trigger. The slug slammed through the windshield,

deflected upward several inches, and struck West on the side of the head. The slug blew off the man's ear, taking a thick patch of hide and hair with it. He jumped out of the van, howling in pain, one hand to the side of his bloody head, and tried to run. Ben shot him in the knee, almost blowing the lower part of the leg off. If he could do it, he wanted West alive.

West's men found themselves trapped in an increasingly bloody box. There seemed to be no way out. The rage of the men and women they had brutally subdued and abused and oppressed howled to the surface, erupting like a savage trapped beast. When the men attempted to surrender, they were hacked to pieces by axe- and machete-wielding men and women. The blood and gore slicked the old highway.

"Cease fire!" Ben yelled. "Cease fire! Back off, people! Back off! It's over, goddamn it!"

Silence settled over the smoky, bloody carnage-filled highway. The men and women looked at what was left of that which they had so feared for so long.

"Doctor Barnes!" Ben yelled, standing up.

"Here, General."

"See to West's wounds. We want him alive for barter. The rest of you gather up the weapons and tear down the barricades. Get the road clear of nails and glass."

"We did it!" a woman cried, crying tears of joy and relief and disbelief. "We really did it!"

Ben looked down from the overpass, his eyes touching

Doctor Barnes.

"Might rules once again, right, General?" the doctor called.

"An armed, disciplined, organized people cannot be enslaved, Doctor. were I you, I would keep that in mind."

"Still the writer, aren't you, General?" Barnes said, his voice carrying to the top of the overpass. "Still carrying your liberal-hating message to the masses, right?"

"Somebody damn well better continue doing it," Ben said.

The doctor turned away. The canvas patch on the seat of his trousers had worked loose.

His ass was showing.

Chapter 6

One hundred and fifty of the town's residents were now armed, with plenty of ammunition for the weapons. Only a handful of West's men made it out of the ambush alive, and two of those died during the night. West's leg, from the knee down, was amputated by Doctor Barnes. It really was not that tough an operation, for Ben's bullet had done most of the work. When Barnes complained that he had nothing to knock the man out with, Ben looked at the doctor as if he were an idiot.

The doctor got the message.

"It's going to be very difficult closing all this off," the doctor bitched.

"Cauterize it," Ben said.

The doctor finally lost his temper. "You're a fucking savage, Raines! Goddamn it, the man is a human being."

Ben met the man's hot eyes. "West has killed, in cold blood, no telling how many hundreds of people. He has raped, tortured, mutilated, degraded, enslaved, and

God only knows what else, to countless hundreds more. If you're expecting me to feel any degree of pity for that scum, you're going to have a long wait, doctor. Like forever!"

"Now I know why the Tri-States was virtually crime-free!"

"That's right, Doctor. We just didn't tolerate it."

West lay on the table, tied down with ropes, and cursed Ben.

Ben looked at the man and spoke quietly.

After his words, West shut his mouth and kept it shut.

Ben had placed the muzzle of his pistol against West's temple and said, "I can put you out of your pain permanently, West. The choice is yours."

Doctor Barnes said, "God, Raines! I'd hate to have to live with your conscience."

"I don't have any problems with it at all, Ralph," Ben replied.

The contingent of Rebels rolled in just after first light. They were commanded by a Captain Chad.

"You made good time, Captain," Ben told the

young officer.

"We took shifts at the wheel, General. Only had to detour three times and then not too far." He looked around at the looted and nearly destroyed city. "This going to be our first outpost, General?"

"One of the first, I suppose. I'd like to set up at least two more between Base Camp One and here. We'll see how this one works out."

The Rebels were introduced all around. The men and women of what was left of Dyersburg could only stand and stare at the healthy, well-dressed, and fit Rebels. A young woman, dressed exactly like her Rebel counterparts, walked up to Ben. She wore a .45 belted at her waist and looked very comfortable with it.

"I'm Doctor Walland, General. We met briefly back at Base Camp One."

"Yes, I remember, Doctor," Ben said, shaking the woman's hand. He waved for Doctor Barnes to come over. He introduced them and said, "I'll leave you two alone. Doctor Barnes doesn't care for my company."

Gloria Walland looked at Ben and smiled. "You're joking, of course, General."

"According to Doctor Barnes, I am a barbarian and a savage," Ben said bluntly. "He doesn't care for the Rebel system of justice."

Doctor Gloria Walland, a captain in the Rebel Army, faced Doctor Ralph Barnes.

Ben leaned over to see if the doctor had changed trousers. He had.

"Let's clear the air, Doctor Barnes," Gloria said.

"That would probably be best, Doctor Walland," Ralph said.

"Captain Walland," Gloria corrected.

"But of course."

"I am a physician, Doctor Barnes. If you bring two wounded people to me, one a member of the Rebel Army, the other a prisoner of war, I will check to see which person is the more severely wounded. But I would not, and will not, allow a member of the Rebel Army to die in order to save the life of the enemy. Is that clear, Doctor?"

"Perfectly clear, Captain," Barnes said stiffly.

"One more thing, Doctor Barnes," Gloria said. "Two

years ago I was seized at gunpoint by armed men. Scavengers, looters, scum. They raped me. One of them made a mistake and turned his back to me when he had finished. I grabbed his pistol, a .38-caliber revolver, took very careful aim, and shot the bastard squarely and precisely in his asshole. He was still screaming as I killed the other two and drove away. Does that give you some insight as to what I think about criminals, Doctor?"

"I get a very clear picture, Captain

Walland."

"Fine, Doctor Barnes. Now if you'll help me with my equipment, we'll see about giving everybody here a checkup and see where we have to go concerning vitamins and diet."

"With pleasure ... Doctor," Ralph said. As Walland walked away, Ralph looked at Ben and smiled. "Very ... ah, forceful young woman, General. I think we're going to get on splendidly."

"I hope so, Ralph. I'm told she's an expert shot." When Ralph had gone, Captain Chad said, "General? I've known Gloria for five years. She never was raped."

Ben smiled. "Yes. I've read her file. She's just telling Doctor Barnes how the show is going to be run, that's all."

Leaving half the newly arrived contingent of the Rebels behind, Ben took the mortar crews, the machine gunners, and one hundred of the newly armed citizens with their newly acquired vehicles and led the column toward the first of West's labor camps. Ben's heavily armed force rolled up to the gates of the forced labor

camp, located some twenty-odd miles from Dyersburg.

A strange silence greeted them. There were no guards in the crudely built towers, no guards to be seen behind the high barbed wire that surrounded the camp.

"I don't think we're going to like what we'll see in those barracks, General," Captain Chad said.

"Nor I, Captain," Ben replied. "Blow the gates and let's take a look."

Several of the civilians lost their breakfast and many more turned green around the mouth.

The prisoners in the labor camp had been machine-gunned in their barracks. The rough wooden floors were slick with blood. The stench of loosened bowels was nearly overpowering.

"Why, General?" a man asked. "Why did they do this?"

"Revenge. West must have had observers behind the main column yesterday. They reported back, and this," he waved his hand, "is their reply to us." Ben turned to Dot. "You know where the other camps are located?"

"Most of them. But... what about the dead here?" she asked.

"You have no earthmoving equipment, Dot. And I didn't bring any body bags with me. So unless you people want to spend several days digging holes for the bodies-which the dogs and other wild animals will dig up as soon as you're gone-I suggest we put all the bodies in one barracks and burn them."

"And ... then?" Canby asked.

"We go wipe out what is left of West's operation."

The smoke from the controlled burn poured black

and greasy into the morning sky. The unmistakable odor of burning human flesh filled the still air.

The scene was nothing new to the small contingent of Rebels that stood impassively by and watched. Many of them had been with Ben for years; they had seen much worse than this during the years of traveling.

But to the civilians of Dyersburg, the scene was awful.

"Got a long way to go to make these folks fighters, General," Captain Chad said quietly. "If it's possible at all."

"I'll opt for the latter, Captain," Ben said. "And I'm not downgrading them for it. I think we can train them to become a pretty good militia force, as long as some of us are around to lead."

"And that's up to me and my troops, right, General?" Captain Chad asked.

"That's it, Captain. This outpost idea was just a thought. We'll review what's happened next spring. Take it from there."

The captain thought about the small city. "First thing we do is clean up the town. Got to give the people some purpose; keep them busy. Elect a leader and set up work teams. But the people will have to think they're the ones who thought of it and implemented the plan."

"The chief of security will be Charles Leighton. Let him pick his own security people; he'll do a good job. Watch Doctor Barnes, Captain. The man is living in a dream world." Ben was thoughtful for a moment. "I believe Barnes is a good man. But he's no Rebel and never will be. He's going to question every decision you make, Captain."

"What you're saying, sir, is that the man is going to be a pain in the ass."

"Very aptly put, Captain."

Ben sent out scout teams of his own people, with Charles Leighton guiding them, to reconnoiter the largest of the forced work camps. While that was being done, he sent a jeep back to get West.

"Doctor Barnes isn't going to like that, General," Canby told Ben.

"He probably won't," Ben agreed.

Ralph Barnes returned with West. The man was clearly upset and made no effort to conceal his ire.

"I

demand

to know why you ordered this man taken from his bed and brought here, General?" he said. "Can't you see he is clearly in pain?" The doctor sniffed several times. "What is that smell?"

"Burning bodies," Ben told him. "Several hundred of them." He told Barnes what they had discovered at the camp.

Sitting in the Jeep, under guard, West laughed. Barnes flushed at the taunting laughter.

"Real nice fellow, isn't he?" Ben asked.

"Has the milk of human kindness flowing strongly through his veins." Ben looked at West. "You'd

better hope your men think enough of you to swap you for the prisoners, West. "Cause if they don't, you won't be laughing when I put a noose around your dirty neck."

West's laughter ceased as quickly as it came. He sat in the jeep and glared at Ben.

The woman Rebel manning the radio called to Ben. "All the prisoners have been grouped together at one camp, General. They're still alive. Our scouts have made contact and are keeping the camp under visual."

"Tell them we're on the way," Ben told her. He turned to Doctor Barnes. "Coming with us, Doctor?"

"You couldn't keep me away, Raines."

"I wouldn't bet on that, Ralph," Ben told him.

The doctor met the Rebel's eyes. "Just a figure of speech, General."

"Uh-huh," Ben muttered.

"What's the procedure, West?" Ben asked.

Ben stood by the jeep where West sat. The outlaw was clearly in pain, his face slick with sweat and pale. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and looked at Ben.

"I don't know," West finally said. "Nothing like this ever happened before."

"Then I'll tell you," Ben said. "We'll make an even swap. You for the prisoners."

A sly look came into the outlaw's eyes. "You know damn well you ain't got the people to overrun my boys, don't you, Raines?"

"Maybe. But we could sure put one hell of a dent in your number."

"Yeah," West admitted.

"Think about it, West. You'll have to shut down your labor camps, but you'd be alive."

"And you'd keep your word?" the outlaw asked, suspicion in his eyes and voice.

"Yes."

"You got a bullhorn?"

"No. But we have walkie-talkie's."

"Gimme one."

A field radio was brought to the jeep. West checked the frequency and called in. He spoke for a moment, listened, then his voice became harsher. He turned to Ben.

"The guys don't trust you, Raines. Hell, I don't trust you. But it's the only game in town, so I gotta play it."

"When the last prisoner walks free of that camp," Ben said. "You're free. That's it."

"Hey!" West protested. "That ain't worth a shit, man."

"You said it, West. It's the only game in town. Take it or leave it."

"Awright, awright." He lifted the walkie-talkie, and spoke for a few seconds.

He again turned to Ben. "They's comin" out now." His

eyes shot hate at Raines. "This ain't the end, Raines. You takin' a hell of a chance turnin' me loose. You know I'm gonna be comin' after your ass."

"A lot of folks have tried, West. I'm still around," Ben told him.

"You ain't never had me

on your ass, Raines. I'll get you for this. And that's a flat promise, buddy."

Ben smiled, thinking that his newest odyssey would prove quite interesting.

Chapter 7

Ben's Rebels and the newly armed civilians ringed the big camp, keeping the outlaws penned until the last of the prisoners were being safely trucked away back to Dyersburg.

Ben lifted his walkie-talkie. "You and your men are free to leave, now, West. Lay down your weapons and start walking."

"What?"

West screamed, the word bouncing out of the walkie-talkie.

"You heard me," Ben radioed. "Start walking."

"No goddamn way, Raines. We take our guns and vehicles."

"Captain Chad," Ben called. "Put ten rounds of mortars, H.e., into that camp."

"Yes, sir," the captain grinned.

A long barracks-type building went first, the high-explosive round sending bits of splintered wood flying. A guard tower was blown all over that part of Tennessee; another building was blown, then a mortar round shattered the big front gates of the labor camp.

"All right, goddamn it!" West screamed.

"All right, you bastard. Cool it!"

"Cease firing," Ben ordered.

"I cain't walk outta here, Raines,"

West's voice whined out of the speaker. "Gimme a break, man."

Charles Leighton whispered into Ben's ear. Ben grinned and lifted his walkie-talkie. "All right, West. You can ride out. On a mule."

West did not need a walkie-talkie. His cursing could be heard for half a mile.

"You got anything to say about that, Doctor Barnes?" Ben asked the man.

"Would my opinion make any difference, General?" the man asked.

"Not a bit, Doctor. But this being a democratic society, I thought I'd ask."

"We need more medical people in here," Doctor Barnes bitched to Ben. "The prisoners are in extremely bad shape. We need

more doctors."

Ben was tempted to tell the man that a frog probably wished it were more beautiful; people in Hell

wished they had ice water, and that if Barnes' aunt had been born with balls, she'd have been his uncle.

Ben was getting awfully weary with Doctor Ralph Barnes.

Ben held his temper. "In addition to Doctor Walland, there are two fully-trained medics with the Rebel platoon. I can't pull any more people in here from Base Camp One."

"Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute."

"Guns and butter," Ben countered. He walked away.

He found Judy helping in the makeshift hospital. "I'm pulling out in the morning," he told her. "If I stay here any longer, I'm going to end up beating the shit out of Doctor Barnes. And that's not going to do either one of us any good."

"Ben ..." She faced him.

"I know. I know. You're staying. I think you should, Judy. You're needed here. I mean that, kid."

She kissed him, then smiled up at him. "I'm going to make you proud of me, Ben. I'm going to study and learn how to write books."

"I think you will, Judy. We'll say good-bye, now."

"Bye, Ben."

He walked away.

Ben was surprised to see Doctor Barnes leaning against his truck in the just-breaking light of dawn. Ben tossed his kit into the protection of the camper and walked around to face Barnes.

"I hope you're not leaving because of me, General," Barnes said.

"You're part of the reason," Ben said truthfully. "But the real reason is I'm no longer needed here. Captain Chad and his people will handle it. So it's time for me to be pulling out." Ben stuck out his hand and the doctor shook it.

"I was thirty-five years old when the bottom dropped out, General," the doctor said, speaking softly as dawn broke. "I had a family, a fine practice, and everything that went with that. I looked up the next day, and the entire world had gone mad."

"And you bet your whole roll on Hilton Logan," Ben said.

"Am I that transparent?" Barnes asked.

"Let's see if I can peg you, Ralph," Ben said, leaning up against the fender and lighting one of his horrible, homegrown, homemade cigarettes. He offered one to the doctor and Ralph took it.

"It's bad for your health," the doctor grinned.

"I heard that," Ben replied with a laugh. "You were what was known as a Yuppie. You belonged to the country club locally. You were politically and socially aware and active ..."

He paused while the doctor inhaled and went into spasms of coughing. "Damn, that's good!" Ralph said. He took another drag and said, "Reasonably accurate. Continue, please. You're a very astute man."

"You were a democrat, politically. You were opposed to the death penalty and loudly in favor of gun control. You bemoaned the state of the nation's health care for those who could not afford the skyrocketing medical costs, but you were against any type of socialized medicine. And you lived in a two-hundred-thousand-dollar home and your wife drove a Mercedes or BMW. How close am I, Ralph?"

The doctor went on the defensive, as Ben had thought he would. "And what did you do about health care for those who could not afford it, General?"

"Nothing," Ben said. "I didn't have lobbyists in Washington, Ralph."

"And you weren't paying fifty thousand dollars a year for malpractice insurance, either, General."

"Want to jump on the back of lawyers, now, Ralph?" Ben said with a laugh.

Barnes joined in the laughter. "No. I don't believe so.

We'll save that for your return trip." He stuck out his hand and Ben shook it. "See you, General. Good luck to you."

"Luck to you, too, Ralph. See you on the back swing."

His scouts had reported that West and his people had last been seen trudging up Highway 51, heading north toward Kentucky. Ben headed west, taking 155 toward the Mississippi River and into Missouri. The bridge over the Big Muddy was clear and the river rolled beneath him, eternal and silent. Ben stopped on the center of the bridge and got out of his truck, gazing down into the muddy waters.

As he watched the swirling, ever-rushing waters of the Mississippi, a passage from the Bible came to him:

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever.

"But what kind of men and women will the next generation give the earth?" he asked the cool winds of late fall.

Like the river, the winds swirled and rushed, speaking in a language only they could understand.

With a sigh, Ben got back into his truck and headed west.

He stopped at Hayti and looked around. There was no sign of life. But he knew there was life. Almost every town of any size at all held two or ten or twenty survivors. But most, instead of organizing, pulling together, working together in a cooperative effort, for safety and defense and productivity's sake, were instead lone-wolfing it, and by doing so, were helping

to drag down what vestiges of civilization

remained.

"No good," Ben muttered. "It can't be allowed to continue. The outpost idea must be implemented-and soon."

He smiled as he drove on west. "That's right, Ben. Set yourself up as a modern-day version of Don Quixote." Or perhaps you're playing the role of Sancho Panza, he thought.

Either way, what right do you have to play God, rearranging peoples' lives? Who named you the Great Overseer? Nobody came down from the mountain and whispered in your ear, Raines.

He shook away those thoughts and concentrated on his driving.

But his mind refused to stay idle; the outpost idea kept jumping to the fore. The outposts would, out of necessity, have to start out small. Because of the recent revolt within his ranks, his Rebel number had been cut by forty percent.*

They could not, as yet, stretch coast to coast; there weren't that many Rebels left. Perhaps a thousand miles without strain. From Base Camp One in Georgia to the middle of Colorado. Maybe. Just maybe. But due to the aftereffects of the limited nuclear strikes, the jet stream had shifted, so he needed to get some people down south, to where the growing season was longer.

"Shit!" he said aloud. "Raines, this is supposed to be a vacation for you. You're supposed to be doing some writing."

But he doubted that would ever happen. Something always came up to keep him from paper and pencil.

*

Blood in the Ashes

Suddenly, one of those "somethings" reared up from the left side of the road. Ben braked and stopped. He checked both mirrors. It was clear behind him. He was still a good hundred yards from the man with a gun in his hands. Ben got out of the truck, taking his Thompson with him.

The hood of the truck protected him from the chest down. Ben clicked the Thompson off safety as the man slowly raised his rifle.

"I want your truck," the man called. "Gimme it here and there won't be no trouble."

"Why do you need my particular truck?" Ben called. "There are thousands of vehicles for you to choose from."

"'Cause yours is runnin'," the man said.

"Sorry, friend. Find your own mode of transportation."

"Then I'll just kill you," the man said.

Ben stepped from behind the door. Holding the Thompson waist-high, the muzzle pointed at the man's legs, Ben pulled the trigger and held it back.

A hundred yards is straining it for a Thompson, and the first six or eight rounds whined off the road in front of the man. But as the powerful old

.45-caliber spitter roared and bucked, the muzzle pulling up and right from the weapon on full auto, a dozen or more rounds struck the man, starting at his ankles and working up, stitching him from ankles to head. Part of the man's skullbone flew out into the field behind him as the man was knocked backward, dead before he hit the ditch.

Ben quickly ejected the drum and slapped in a full thirty-round clip. Crouching beside the truck, Ben did

a slow sixty count before moving out. He ran to the body and crouched down in the ditch. The back of his neck was tingling with suspicion. Something was all out of whack here. Working quickly, Ben jerked the web belt off the man. The man was loaded down with M-16 clips, all full. Ben grabbed up the M-16 and inspected it for damage. None of his slugs had struck the weapon. He looked at the dead man. The man wore new boots, reasonably fresh trousers, and clean- discounting the fresh blood stains and bullet holes- shirt and jacket.

"I don't know what your problem was, buddy," Ben said, walking back to the truck. "But you've been relieved of it."

He stowed the M-16 and extra ammo in the camper and drove on, thinking it was another mystery that would never be solved.

Ben drove on into Kennett, Missouri, stopping at the edge of town. He could see smoke from fires pluming into the sky, but as it so often was, the smoke was not centralized, but widely separated, as if the people wanted no part of each other.

"You're making a mistake, folks," he said aloud. "Now is the time to come together, not drift apart. Black, white, red, yellow, tan; we all bleed the same color."

At the crossroads, Ben flipped a silver dollar he had carried for years into the air. "Heads, I go right; tails I turn left," he said.

The coin came heads up.

Ben cut the wheel right, heading north.

He did not see another living soul, nor any sign of

human life for the next twenty miles. At Campbell, Missouri, sitting out front of a long-unused service station, Ben spotted a man leaned back in a cane-bottomed chair. The man waved in a friendly gesture and Ben pulled over."

"Howdy, neighbor," the man said.

"Hello," Ben returned the greeting.

"Been waitin' for you to show up," the man said.

"Folks over to Kennett radioed you was headin' this way."

"I see. Then they are a bit more organized than I thought."

"We're pretty well organized around here.

They told me you was travelin' alone and didn't appear to be hostile. Damn, you look familiar

to me, mister."

"Ben Raines."

The man turned several shades paler.

"The

Ben Raines?"

"I guess so. Is the world ready for two of us?"

Ben kidded.

"Well, I'll just be damned! Well, come on out and let's talk some. Let me get on the radio and get the folks together. Not that there's that many of us, mind you."

"How many?"

"Oh, 'bout two hundred and fifty. And that number is made up of about twenty different bands and knots of folks."

Ben decided to keep his mouth shut about the man he'd killed on the road.

"I know what you're thinkin", Mr. Raines," the man said. "Are we under one leader, right? The answer is no. There's about sixty or so of us that would like that, but

the rest of the folks are against it."

"Then get them together," Ben said. "I'm not interested in speaking to or meeting any of the other people."

The man smiled. "I heard you was a hard, hard man, Mr. Raines."

"So I've been told, sir. So I've been told."

Chapter 8

Ben liked what he saw when the group of people was assembled in the old gym. There were sixty-eight adults gathered, their ages ranging from early twenties to what used to be called the Golden Age.

But, Ben thought with a smile, this bunch of elderly folks looked fit and hard.

Ben had met and shaken hands with them all. He'd met a couple of musicians, several farmers, mechanics, former small business people, accountants, two doctors, several lawyers ... a pretty good cross-section of small town America.

Briefly, Ben explained his idea of outposts stretching across the land. He explained the advantages to that plan, and then let the people talk about it among themselves for a time.

"And we can count on help from your Rebels, General Raines?" he was asked.

"Once you people are committed to the plan, yes," Ben said. "But I'm not going to send my people in here to waste their time and yours if you're not ready for organization and law and order. I think you're all familiar with how the Tri-States operated. That's the way I'll expect you to run your community. You people have the beginnings of a good operation here. All you need to do is break away from the dissidents among you and set it up. And you don't need my help to do that. You're well armed and you look fit. I've given you the frequency of our Base Camp One. If you hit a snag, contact them. The next outpost is just across the river, in Dyersburg. Why

don't you send someone over there to look around, compare ideas. All I can tell you is, "good luck."

Ben pulled out, alone, early the next morning. For some reason he could not fathom, Texas was pulling at him, and he wanted to get there and spend the winter there, exploring and writing and being alone. He had been surrounded by people for more than a decade, training and fighting and organizing and being pushed and prodded into something he had never really wanted to be: A leader.

He just wanted to be alone for a time.

Ben headed straight west, or as straight as the road would allow after he took a county road down to Highway 142. At Neelyville, Missouri, he filled his gas tanks and prowled the deserted town-and this town was definitely deserted. He sat for a time in an old barber shop and thumbed through what was left of an old Field and Stream magazine he'd found stuck up under some hair tonic behind the closed doors of a cabinet. He leaned back in the old chair and muttered, "A shave and haircut, please."

Then the old chair collapsed and dumped him to the floor.

Laughing at himself-something Ben had always been able to do-he continued westward.

Just outside of Gatewood, Missouri, he found the highway blocked by a fallen tree. Using his chain saw, Ben cleared the road and drove on for a few more miles before deciding it was time to hunt a place to spend the night.

He stopped on the west side of the Eleven Point River and caught a mess of fish for his supper, cooking them on his camp stove on the closed porch of a once-fine old home.

When he awakened the next morning, dawn was breaking and the ground was white with frost.

He was also looking down the muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun.

"Well, now, if that ain't the sorriest lookin' sight I ever did see," Jake Campo said. "A one-footed warlord ridin' a goddamned mule, and a-leadin' a pack-rat bunch of whupped rednecks."

The big outlaw lifted his ugly face to the sky and howled with laughter.

"Laugh, you lard-assed son of a bitch!" West snarled at the man. "I got more men than you have, and if you want a fight you damn sure got it."

"Now, now," Jake said, wiping tears from his eyes. "Don't get your bowels in no uproar, West. How in the hell did you lose your foot?"

"That bastard Ben Raines shot it off!"

"It appears Raines not only took your foot, but your

ear and cars and most of your guns as well,"

Jake observed. Campo helped West down from the mule and to a camp chair in front of his tent. He poured the man chicory coffee.

West slurped his coffee and sighed. "Good," he said. "Warms my belly but don't do nothin" for the hurt in my leg."

"That'll pass, I reckon," Jake said.

"Or else you'll die. One of the two. Tell me what happened."

West tried to ease his aching stump by propping it up. He told Campo what had happened, greatly embellishing the heroism of himself and his men against overwhelming odds.

"Uh-huh," Jake said, slurping his coffee.

"Now that we got the bullshit outta the way, tell me the truth."

"I just tole you!"

"No, you didn't. You told me a bunch of lies. Raines probably pulled together a gang of civilians and then proceeded to kick your ass. He's good at doin' things like that. Now, West, ain't that what really happened?"

West slumped back in his chair. His face still silently expressed the ache in his severed stump. "Yeah," he said. "That's just about it. Jake? You reckon they's any truth in all them stories about Raines?"

"Bout him being a god, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know," Jake admitted, all humor leaving his eyes. "I've given that some thought. Hartline is probably the best soldier I ever served with. Hartline couldn't take Raines. The Russian couldn't take Raines; Raines whipped him good. The goddamned United States Government couldn't even whip Raines back in '97 or so. Man's been shot a dozen or more times, blown up, stabbed-can't kill him. But he's got to have his Achilles heel."

"His what?"

"I always forget what a dumb son of a bitch you are," Jake said contemptuously. "His weak spot."

"Why didn't you just say so? I'm gonna get him, Jake," West said. "I swear on my mother's grave, I'm gonna get Ben Raines."

"Well, he's headin' west, that's for sure. You ready to pitch in with me, now?"

"Yeah."

"I wish I knew what Raines was up to," Jake said. "He was travelin' by himself 'til he hooked with that brother-and-sister team. You ride with me from now on, West. We'll get him, boy, don't you worry none."

The double-barreled shotgun was just about as big as the boy holding it. Ben cut his eyes upward and could see the shotgun was an old side-hammer type. And the hammers had not been cocked.

"Oh, my," Ben said. "I guess you got the drop on me, son."

"I sure do, partner," the boy replied. "So don't you try nothin' funny."

"Oh, I won't. Could I ask a favor of you before you shoot me?"

"What is it?"

"You mind if I fix some breakfast? I hate to get shot on an empty stomach."

"What you got to eat?" the boy asked. "I ain't et in two, three days."

"Oh, I have bacon and beans and crackers. How about it?"

The boy backed up and lowered the muzzle of the shotgun. "I reckon that'll be all right, mister. Just be careful."

The shotgun, Ben concluded, was at least a hundred years old. An old Damascus steel barrel. If the boy tried to fire any type of modern ammunition in the ancient weapon, he would probably end up killing himself, the twist barrel exploding and folding back.

Ben smiled as he laced up his boots and pumped up the stove. "You don't need to hold that shotgun on me, son. By the time you could cock that thing, I would have taken it away from you. And even if it could fire, you'd hurt yourself with it."

The boy's shoulders sagged. He propped the shotgun against a wall of the porch. "You knowed all along, didn't you, mister?"

"Yes. But I can't short you on courage, son. You from around here?"

"I don't know where I'm from, mister. I'm just... just here."

"You travel a lot, then. Right?"

"All the time. I been on my own since I was..." His face screwed up in thought. "Since I was real little. I seen four season goings and comin's since then."

"I'd guess you about ten."

The boy shrugged.

"You have a name, son?"

"Jordy."

Ben stuck out his hand. "I'm Ben Raines."

Jordy recoiled backward as if struck by a rattlesnake. "You ain't, neither!" Jordy hissed.

"Yes, I am, Jordy."

"You kilt a Beast with your bare hands! Cain't no human do that."

"I used a knife, Jordy, after I shot the thing with a .45. Besides," he smiled, "Daniel Boone kilt a b'ar, too."

"Who?" the boy asked.

Ben sighed. "Sit down and eat, Jordy. We'll talk. Looks like I found me a traveling companion."

The boy's pinched face wrinkled in a broad smile. "You mean that? Truly?"

"I truly do, Jordy."

The boy looked at the knife, fork, and spoon in his tin plate. "What's them things for?"

"It should be an interesting journey," Ben said. "Very interesting."

Ben had sat, fascinated, listening to the boy talk. While he ate with his fingers, stuffing his mouth with food as if it might be his last for days, Jordy told of people who lived in caves, deep underground, only venturing out during the night to hunt for food. There were others who lived in caves who would only venture out during the day, for they believed the night held evil spirits. He told Ben of a dozen warlords between the big river to the east and the flat ground to the west.

The Mississippi River and Kansas, Ben assumed.

Jordy told Ben of the many shrines he had seen, all erected toward the god Ben Raines.

"I am not a god, Jordy. And it's wrong for people who believe that I am."

The boy fixed young-old eyes on him. "You fell off a mountain and lived, didn't you?"

"It was a small mountain."

"You been shot a hundred times, ain't you?"

"Not quite that many times."

"The rats couldn't kill you. The Beasts couldn't kill you. Nobody can kill you. You're a leader of people. People do what you tell them to do. You knew my shotgun wouldn't fire, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"You just don't wanna be a god, that's all. That's all right with me, if that's what you want. I'll play like you're like everybody else."

Ben sorted out Jordy's rush of words and said, "Thank you."

Jordy had not ridden in many vehicles and he was fascinated by the truck and all its gadgets.

"What happens if I turn this thing?" the boy asked.

"The radio comes on," Ben explained.

"The what?""

Ben's smile was very sad. Jordy would have been about five years old when what was left of the U.S. collapsed. He would have absolutely no memory of television, and would have to have lived near a populated center to have any knowledge of radio.

"I know what a radio is!" Jordy blurted.

"I think."

"Tell me."

"Voices come outta them things from a long way off, right?""

"That's... a reasonable assessment, I suppose. Jordy, do you have any memories of your parents?"

He shook his head. "No. But I had a sister. She was older. I haven't seen her in a long time. That was four seasons ago."

"How did you two separate?"

"Huh?""

"What happened to your sister?"

"Some men grabbed her. She yelled for me to run. I took off. When I went back, she was gone and so was the men."

No point in asking where it happened, Ben thought.

"Can you read or write, Jordy?"

"No, sir. I never had no schoolin"dis"

But you can survive, Ben thought. He thought of the young people who had joined his command, some of them as young as six. But already woods-wise, and not hesitant to kill if faced with danger.

Quite a generation we have upcoming, he thought. Just a step away from being savages.

"Town called Thayer just up ahead, Jordy.

There should be some people in the town."

"Yes, sir. A pretty good bunch of them. And they all got guns, too."

"Have they tried to hurt you?"

"Oh, no, sir. But they have tried to catch me a time or two."

"Why did they want to catch you?"

"They said they wanted me to live with them. Go to school and all that shit. But they said I'd have to take a bath. With soap," he added, disgust in his voice.

"Well, Jordy, I hate to tell you this, but you're going to have to take a bath if you want to travel with me. Son," Ben said, scratching himself, "I think you have fleas."

Chapter 9

Ben was conscious of eyes on them as he drove through the Missouri town. But no one tried to stop them or harm them in any way.

Jordy seemed relieved to get through the town and Ben smiled at that. "Were there lots of kids back there, Jordy?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I used to slip in there and talk to some of them. I never could figure out why they were happy all the time. They had chores to do. They had to take baths. They had to go to school and do lots of figurin" and such. Don't sound like much fun to me."

Wait, Ben cautioned himself. Don't tell the boy that is exactly what's in store for him later on.

It was rough going for the next thirty miles, with Ben and the boy having to stop a dozen times to clear the road of debris. At the tiny town of Bakersfield, Ben decided to call it a day. He inspected a dozen deserted homes before he found one that was even halfway presentable. The home had a brick barbecue in the back yard, and Ben built a fire and began heating water

in all the pots he could find in the house.

"What you gonna do with all that water?" Jordy asked suspiciously.

"We

are going to take a bath, boy."

"Shhit!" Jordy said.

While Jordy was bathing, Ben boiled the boy's

clothing and hung it up to dry. "Have to get him some clothes soon," he muttered.

"I'm done!" Jordy called from the house.

"Did you wash your hair?" Ben called.

"Shhitt!"

Ben had thought the boy's hair was brown. As it turned out, it was blond. The boy also had scars on his back and legs. Ben asked him about the marks.

"Warlord caught me two seasons ago,"

Jordy explained. "Wanted me to be his servant-person. He beat me with a whip. I finally got my chance and run off. I'll kill him if I ever see him again."

Ben suspected the boy had also been sexually abused. But if he did not wish to talk about it, Ben would not force him to relive those memories.

"I ain't got no last name, you know, Mr. Raines?" Jordy said.

"Call me Ben. I know, Jordy."

"I thought of one."

Ben smiled, knowing what was coming. "Oh?"

"Raines. If you don't mind."

"I don't mind a bit, Jordy. Jordy Raines. Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir-Ben."

Ben cut north on Highway 101 the next morning, connecting with U.s. 160. He turned west. He stopped at every house along the way, searching for clothing for Jordy. He found a winter jacket in a cedar chest at one house, some jeans packed in a trunk at another, underwear and shirts at another home. At the last house, Ben found a .22-caliber pistol and several boxes of long rifle ammunition for the weapon. There was a holster and belt with loops for the weapon. Ben rubbed oil into the old leather and gave the weapon to Jordy.

"I'll teach you how to use this, Jordy. You're young, but you need to be armed."

Jordy smiled and stepped out onto the porch of the home. He skillfully loaded the weapon and took aim at a box in the yard. He put all six slugs into the small box.

"Well, now," Ben said with a smile. "Looks like I found a backup, partner."

The next few days passed uneventfully, with Ben and Jordy traveling slowly westward, staying on Highway 160 until reaching the junction of State Highway 76. They took that through the Mark Twain National Forest, and it was slow going, for the road was badly deteriorated, with many downed trees and limbs that had to be removed. Ben began playing a game with Jordy, teaching him his ABO'S

by associating each letter with an object. Ben was feeling proud of himself until he pointed out a "possum.

"Opossum," Ben said.

"Huh?"

"The letter

O.

Opossum."

Jordy looked at him. "Sir, that there is a plain of 'possum."

"Get the dictionary, Jordy."

"What for? I can't read the damn thing."

"Perhaps there will be a picture beside the word and I can point it out to you."

Jordy reached for the sack on the floorboard.

"That's the Bible, Jordy."

The boy's eyes took on a funny glint.

"Something the matter, Jordy?"

"The Bible. That sure means something to me. But I can't quite figure it out."

"I'm sure you went to church with your parents, Jordy."

"You can say that again. A bunch."

"Maybe your father was a minister-a preacher?"

"I don't know, Ben. Maybe so. I just can't remember. Let me think about that for a little bit, huh?"

"All right."

It was almost an hour later when Ben realized with a grin that Jordy had skillfully and smoothly conned him, escaping the task of learning his ABC'S.

"Pretty smooth, Jordy," Ben complimented the boy.

They were on Highway 90, nearing the Oklahoma line, just south of the Huckleberry Ridge State Forest.

Jordy smiled. "What do you mean, sir?"

"You know what I mean." He pointed to the north.

"Pineville is that way. What letter of the alphabet does the word begin with?"

Jordy laughed.

"PI

Like in Possum!"

They were on Highway 59 heading south through Oklahoma when they had their first real trouble. Just before they reached the junction of Highway 10, Jordy pointed.

"Roadblock up ahead, Ben."

"I see it." Ben braked the truck some distance from the blockade. "Stay in the truck," he told Jordy.

Ben got out and stood behind the open door. He waited for whomever, or whatever it was behind the blockade to make the first hostile move.

"Why don't you just bust right through?" Jordy asked.

"Because I don't know if they're unfriendly or just cautious. People have the right to be cautious, boy. But their rights end when they get unfriendly, or dangerous."

He turned back to the blockade. "We're just passing through!" he yelled. "We don't mean anyone any harm."

"Leave the truck and start walkin" back toward where you came!" the voice called.

"Fuck you!" Ben muttered.

"Right!" Jordy said.

"You weren't supposed to hear that, boy."

"I've heard worse."

Ben jumped back into the truck, banged his knee on the steering wheel, said a few very ugly words, and dropped the truck into reverse, swiftly backing up a couple of hundred yards. He pulled off the road, around a slight bend in the road, and got out, walking to the rear of the truck. He took out his .30-06, slung a shell belt over his shoulder, and sighted in the blockade through the scope.

He waited for them to open the dance.

"Get the son of a bitch!" a man called, his voice faint.

"I want that fancy truck and the kid. Kill that tall bastard."

"Scoot out of the truck and bring me that M-16, Jordy," Ben said. "Lay it in the seat with some extra clips."

An old Ford barged its way onto the road from behind the blockade. Ben sighted it on the driver and pulled the trigger. With no front window, the slug went true, hitting the man in the face. The Ford swapped ends in the road and slid into the ditch. A man jumped out and Ben shot him in the side, spinning the man around, jerking and cursing in pain. The man fell to the road and was still.

A second vehicle roared onto the road and Ben put two fast rounds through the windshield. The car slewed to one side and the driver fell out, a hole in his throat.

Ben ran to the camper, jerked out his rocket launcher, and cocked the hammer of the RPG. He inserted the rocket and rolled it until the grenade was locked in, mated with the U-cut. He stepped out from behind the truck, dropped to one knee, and sighted through the telescopic sight with its built-in range-finding scale. There was no wind, and the distance was three hundred and fifty meters. Ben's first shot hit true. The 85mm rocket grenade, capable of penetrating up to thirteen inches of rolled steel armor, exploded the blockade in a burst of flames and debris and human bodies.

There was a hole in the blockade large enough to drive a tank through.

Not wanting to waste his rockets, Ben stowed the RPG and the M-16 back into the camper, along with his sniper rifle, and waited outside the truck, listening

to the fading moans of the badly wounded.

Ben dropped the truck into four-wheel drive and skirted the burning, smoking ruins of the blockade. He left the carnage behind without so much as a second glance.

"Reckon why they wanted to kill you, Ben?" the boy asked.

"I don't know, Jordy. But I just don't like unfriendly folks."

"Yes, sir," the boy replied solemnly.

"I picked up on that right off."

Ben took a county road and skirted the town of Tahlequah. There had once been a university there, but Ben did not want to see the place in ruins. He had personally witnessed too many institutions of higher learning in ruin. It was depressing.

He and Jordy made camp on an eastern finger of Tenkiller Ferry Lake and fished for their supper. Jordy had never sport-fished before, but he was a fast learner. Once he got the hang of casting, he was all smiles, especially when he hooked what was at least a five-pound bass and fought him to the shore.

"Supper, Ben!" the boy yelled.

"Supper, Jordy," Ben replied, smiling at the boy's happiness.

And his own.

They slept that night in a deserted old fishing cabin, with Ben getting up twice in the night to add wood to the fire.

"Cold as a witch's tit," Jordy spoke from his sleeping bag on the floor.

"We are going to have to do something about your language, Jordy," Ben told him. "It isn't right for a ten-year-old to speak like you do."

"Why?" the boy asked.

"It just isn't."

"OK, Ben. Whatever you say. But all the kids my age that I know talk like that."

"Do you hear me talking like that?"

"No, sir."

"Bear that in mind."

"OK. Does that mean when you cuss, I can cuss?"

Ben smiled, tossing another log on the fire. The wind had picked up, howling around the old cabin.

"No, it doesn't. But I'll try to watch my language, too. Deal?"

"Deal."

They had just crossed Interstate 40, heading south on Highway 2 when Ben's CB radio suddenly popped into vocal life, almost scaring the piss out of Jordy.

"Son of a bitch!" the boy yelled.

Ben fixed him with a stern look. "I'll forgive that. This time." He reached for the mike. "Come on," he said to the unknown caller.

"You in the fancy pickup," the voice said.

"Pull it over and you won't get hurt. We got you blocked front and back."

Ben glanced at his map and cut the wheel hard to his right, heading west on a badly rutted old blacktop road. "Hang on, Jordy," Ben told him. "And keep watch for me."

"Yes, sir."

Ben drove as fast as he dared, but had a sinking feeling that it wasn't going to be fast enough to elude his unknown pursuers.

"Trucks and motorcycles comin' up fast behind

us, Ben!" Jordy called.

Eufaula Lake was looming up large in front of him, but Ben didn't want to get caught on the long bridge with no place to run.

Ben slid onto a dirt road with a farmhouse and falling-down barn, brought the truck to a halt, and jumped out, Thompson in hand. He leveled the old submachine gun and pulled the trigger, fighting the rise of the weapon as the bolt worked at full auto.

A windshield of a truck exploded in a shower of glass and two motorcyclists were flung backward as bloody, smoking holes appeared in their jackets. The motorcycles slammed into a car and the car slewed sideways, ending in a ditch. Ben riddled the car with .45-caliber slugs, took time out to change drums, then jumped back in the truck and backed out onto the rutted road. He pulled the pin on a Firefrag grenade and tossed it under the bullet-riddled truck. Ben was a hundred yards up the road when the grenade did its work. The truck exploded, sending burning metal and parts of human bodies all over the place.

"Slocum!" Ben's CB radio squawked.

"What's happenin', man?"

"The son of a bitch has blocked the road on us!" the voice of who Ben guessed was Slocum yelled over the air. "Cut him off at the bridge."

"10-4."

"We got to hunt a hole, Jordy," Ben said. "Hang on, boy."

Ben chanced a quick look at the map and made up his mind. He cut off the road the first chance he got, dropped the truck into four-wheel drive, and drove for

a mile straight north. He then turned back east, keeping the black smoke from the burning truck to his right. He fought the steering wheel as the pickup dug and spun through the brush-covered ground. When the smoke was at least two miles behind them, Ben cut south, both he and the boy bouncing up and down in the seats as they roared on.

"Fasten your seat belt, Jordy!" Ben yelled.

"My what?" Jordy yelled over the roaring of the engine.

"Forget it, boy. Just hang on."

The road appeared just in front of them, but a deep ditch was between them and blacktop. Ben raced along, the road to their right until he found a place where he could try. He spun the wheel, goosed the engine, and they were across, the rear tires on rutted blacktop. Ben slipped the truck out of four-wheel drive. At the junction of Highway 2, Ben cut north, driving as fast as he dared until intersecting with Highway 266 and Interstate 40. He elected to stay with 266, turning west once more.

"The bastards got away!" the CB squawked.

"But I got 'em in sight. They're on 266

headin" west."

"Keep them in sight. We're about fifteen minutes behind you."

"We have to make a stand someplace, Jordy. And this interchange right up here looks just dandy for it."

"What are you goin' do, Ben?"

"I'm going to ambush them, boy." He turned off 266 and tucked the truck behind an old service station. Ben grabbed his rocket launcher, told Jordy to grab a couple of rockets, and took his M-16 and sniper rifle, draping a bandoleer of ammo over his shoulder for

both weapons. Jordy stuffed his jacket pockets with hand grenades without being told. Ben grinned at the boy.

They both were panting when they reached the top of the overpass.

Ben hurriedly loaded the RPG, checked to see that Jordy was out of the way of the back-blast, which could be lethal, and sighted in the lead truck that had been following them.

Ben sighted in the truck at six hundred meters, but he knew he had to hold his fire until they were within three hundred meters, maximum. There was a slight wind blowing, and firing the RPG would be tricky, since the finned rocket grenade could be thrown off course by a crosswind. Several of Ben's Rebels, unfamiliar with the RPG, had found this out the hard way.

Ben triggered the round and the truck exploded in a ball of flames. The explosion literally tore the truck from its wheels, leaving the smoking frame, with its melted tires, welded to the concrete.

"Holy shit!" Jordy said.

"I'll agree with that, too, Jordy," Ben said. He looked at the slender boy. "Can you fire a rifle, Jordy?"

"Yes, sir. That warlord that grabbed me? All his men had M-16's. I know how to work them."

"Well, get ready, son. 'Cause here they come."

Chapter 10

The chase vehicles were on the interstate, paralleling 266. Ben smiled, for the first time thinking he and the boy might get out of this box without too much trouble.

The vehicles were coming at them in a knot, all bunched up, and rolling very fast. Ben sighted in the RPG, tracked the lead vehicle, a king-cab truck, through the range-finder, and triggered off a rocket.

The rocket struck the truck dead center, the aftereffects turning the interstate into a flaming hell for those in the vehicles behind the truck. They could not brake in time and a monumental pile-up was created. Ben reloaded and fired, adding more burning hell to the confusion and death below them.

Jordy's M-16 began barking, the boy coolly firing the weapon, picking his targets and

hitting them a good two out of three times.

Ben picked up his .30-06 and joined the boy, with Jordy taking the left side of the interstate, Ben the right side.

More vehicles began exploding as the flames reached the gas tanks. Men and women began running from the wreckage, human torches screaming as flesh cooked and sizzled.

"Back to the truck, Jordy," Ben called.

"Now's the time to split."

The man and the boy ran for safety as black smoke poured into the sky. They roared off down the interstate, leaving behind them the foul stench of burning human bodies and the howling of the soon-to-be dead.

If there were any survivors in Henryetta, Oklahoma, Ben didn't stop to check them out. He stayed on the interstate all the way to the junction of Highway 99, and there cut south. Ben began to breathe a little bit easier when they crossed the Canadian River. He bypassed Ada and turned west on 19, staying on that highway until they were halfway between Pauls Valley and Chickasha. At a clump of trees by the Washita River, Ben cut off the highway.

"We'll spend the night here, Jordy. I think we deserve a good hot meal and some rest, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," the boy replied. "But I got to change clothes first."

"What's the matter? Your clothes don't look that dirty."

The boy blushed. "I peed my pants back there, Ben."

Putting together bits and pieces of information gathered along the way, plus the reports from their scouts that had fanned out north, south, and west, Jake and West tracked Ben's movements. But they were always three to four days behind.

Jake Campo stood looking at the ashes of a campfire for a moment. Then he checked the tire tracks left in the earth.

"He picked up company," West said, hobbling up on his crutch. "Got him a woman."

"I don't think so," Jake said. "More like a small kid. Some underwear over there in the bushes. Boy's drawers." He was thoughtful for a moment. "That's good, West. Goddamn punk will slow him down. He'll be worryin' about the boy; might drop his guard."

"The man who kills Ben Raines," West mused aloud, "will be able to just about write his own ticket. You know that, Jake?"

"Yeah, West. I know it. Or the men who kill him."

"That's what I meant, Jake."

"Uh-huh," Campo said. Campo was an outlaw, and a man with few principles. But West was even worse than Jake. Jake knew the man had put his own sister into a whorehouse back in '95.

Low was low, but that was the pits.

Have to watch West, Campo concluded.

Jake Campo was a no-good bastard, West was thinking. Would shoot a man in the back if given half a chance. Jake had teamed up with men over the past. His partners always met a very bad end. Son of a bitch was just no good. Killed his best friend, West recalled. Back in '97 or '98.

Have to keep an eye on Jake, West concluded.

"Somehow I got it in my mind Raines was headin' to Texas," Jake was speaking. "He ought to be cuttin' southwest; but he ain't. What the hell is the man up to?"

"Scouts callin' in, Jake!" a man shouted.

Jake took the mike. "Yeah?"

"Big shoot out just west of Siloam Springs, Jake," the scout reported. "Man and a kid in a fancy, duded-up pickup truck raised hell at a local roadblock. Scouts south of us reported a lot of smoke and flames around Eufaula Lake."

"Ten-four. Keep on his tail and call in every day. Jake out."

"Now the bastard is headin' southwest," Jake said with a smile. "Roll 'em, boys! Let's go get Ben Raines."

She couldn't let the children know it, but she was scared-plenty scared. Her old bus had broken down and she didn't know Jack-shit about fixing engines.

She crouched in the old warehouse in Lubbock, Texas, and looked at the kids. An even dozen. The youngest was three, the oldest, twelve. She had started out from north Oklahoma with fifteen. One had died of something along the way. She never had known what it was, except that the boy had coughed a lot and had finally began spitting up blood and running a very high fever. He had died ten hours later. They'd gotten caught in a storm between Dalhart and Interstate 40. That's when the little girl had wandered off.

Hadn't turned my back for more than a minute, Rani thought. And the kid was gone. Just like that. Called and called. But she couldn't leave the others to go and look. She had thought there were no more tears left in her. But she'd found more when she had to drive off after waiting a full twenty-four hours.

Then in Amarillo she'd lost the oldest girl to those goddamned outlaws. And the human filth had wanted

the young boys, too. Perverted bastards. Somehow she had managed to elude them, the rattletrap old bus on its last legs. Just south of New Deal, the old bus had finally given up the ghost. She and the kids had walked to the outskirts of Lubbock, seeking shelter at the old Lubbock International Airport. There was a bob truck behind some crates in the building next to where she'd hidden the kids. The empty crates looked like they'd been deliberately placed around the truck, but a long

time back. She had replaced the battery-she knew how to do that much-and she'd found some drums of what she hoped was gasoline, carefully hidden in the far side of the warehouse, or whatever the hell this building used to be. In the morning, she'd prime the carburetor and try to start the damn thing. She knew she had to get south for the winter. The kids already had colds, and without any medication at all, she'd have cases of pneumonia on her hands.

And there was the not-so-small matter of that goddamned self-proclaimed warlord who called himself Vic.

Crazy Vic.

And his men were just as nutty. She thought they were all escapees from a nuthouse.

She had started her little orphanage up in north Oklahoma, taking in wandering kids. Some stayed with her, though most had left, the lure and pull of the road having been all they'd ever known. She'd worked very hard on her little wayside home for kids. And at one time she'd had almost forty kids to care for. She loved doing it.

Then Vic and his men had arrived.

They had taken her guns, and then raped her.

Vic

had told her if she didn't become his woman, he'd pass the kids around to his men and Rani could damn well have what was left of them after his boys got done butt-fucking them.

Rani had endured Vic's perversions for a week, until she got her chance to escape. Most of the kids had already run off.

Now she had Crazy Vic and his bunch following her.

But she also had a pistol and a rifle she'd found in a house along the way, and lots of ammunition. And Rani was a good shot.

If that truck will just start, she thought, we might make it.

If.

"Crossing into Texas, Jordy."

"I never been so far, Ben. But I sure am glad we got away from them outlaws."

"You running out of underwear?" Ben kidded him.

Jordy blushed.

The pair had stayed not one night, but four nights, camped along the river. The weather had abated, actually turning rather warm. They fished, rested, and Ben told the boy stories of how it used to be, back when the Tri-States had been in operation.

"You really mean nobody went hungry and you wasn't always scared somebody was goin' to get you?" the boy asked.

"Nobody went hungry, Jordy. Not if we knew about it. And no, you didn't have to be scared. We didn't have crime in Tri-States,

Jordy. The cost to the criminal was just too high.

Besides, everybody that wanted to work, could work. There was no need to steal."

"That must have been a nice place to live,"

Jordy said wistfully.

"Oh, it was, if a person obeyed the law and respected the rights of others."

"What happened if they didn't?"

"There was somebody around to bury them."

Ben and Jordy had rambled around on county roads, picking up Highway 62 at Lawton and taking that into Texas. They turned south and headed for Childress, crossing the Red River.

This was an area of the once-proud-and-mighty nation the rats had hit hard. Ben had not expected to see many survivors, but he hadn't thought it would be this bad.

There just wasn't anybody.

Or anything.

"What happened around here, Ben?" Jordy asked. "There ain't a go.a ... darn thing alive."

"Rats, Jordy. For some reason-and I don't know why-the rats hit this part of the country hard. Very few people made it out alive."

The boy looked nervously around him. "We ain't stoppin", are we-, Ben?"

"Not even to pee, Jordy."

At Paducah, Texas, Ben spotted the first human being he'd seen in a hundred miles of absolute desolation.

He pulled off the highway and drove slowly up to the small group of people. Ben let a white handkerchief flutter from his left hand, held out the window.

Ben called, "We're friendly, folks."

A man smiled and waved at him. "Then come on out and sit and talk, friend."

"The last hundred miles looked a little grim," Ben said, accepting a cup of coffee-or what presently passed for coffee.

"To say the least," a woman said. "The rats have been long gone, died out, but everybody in that area was killed. We try to stay out of that part of the country."

"What's your name, friend?" a cowboy asked.

Jordy grinned.

"Ben Raines."

The knot of people grew still and silent. The man who had first waved and spoken to Ben shuffled his booted feet.

"General

Ben Raines?"

"Yes. But why don't we just keep it Ben?"

"Mr. Raines," a woman stepped forward, "you like stew?"

"I sure do, ma'am."

"Then let's eat."

Rani looked at the body of the man she'd just shot through the head. She recognized him as one of Crazy Vic's men. And she knew Vic and the rest of his gang would not be far behind.

"Robert, Kathy!" she called to the two oldest of her adopted brood. "Help me drag this body over there and hide it."

She gave Robert, twelve years old, the man's pistol, and Kathy, also twelve, the man's rifle. Rani was working so fast she wasn't thinking properly.

"Rani?" Kathy said. "This man had to get here somehow. He sure didn't fly. He probably hid his car or truck."

Rani gently ruffled the girl's hair. "Good thinking, Kathy. Pray it's a truck."

It was a king-cab pickup. And best of all, the pickup started at the first touch of the ignition. Rani put her forehead on the steering wheel and said a little prayer.

"Prayin" ain't gonna help none, cunt!" the man's voice said.

Rani raised her head and looked into the mean eyes of a man.

"You kill Harry?" the man asked.

Rani nodded her head.

The man grinned. His teeth were no more than blackened stumps. "Didn't lak him noway. Git outta the truck, bitch, and take me to that fine-lookin' little big girl travelin' with you. I want me a taste of young pussy. Then I'll get to you."

The man's entire lower jaw disappeared in a roaring boom and gush of blood and bone. He was flung to one side, the blood from his wound staining the concrete floor.

Rani, temporarily deafened by the gunshot, looked around. Kathy was standing by the rear of the pickup, the .30-30 rifle in her hands. She had shot the man from a distance of no more than six or seven feet.

The man flopped on the floor, his boot heels drumming in agony. He tried to speak. Only horrible bubbling sounds came from his ruined face.

In normal times, the child would have probably been sick after what she'd done. But these were not normal times.

Normal times

would probably never come again. At least not in her lifetime. Kathy looked at the jerking, bleeding man.

"Get his guns and bullets, Miss Rani," she said. "We got to stay ready for Vic when he comes. And you know he'll be comin' after us."

"Yes," Rani came out of her fog of shock.

She took several deep breaths, calming herself. The kids had gathered around. God! she thought. What a pitiful looking crew. Her eyes touched Robert. "Robert, you find all the gas cans you can round up, start filling them with gas from those drums." She looked at eleven-year-old Jane, pale and too thin, always susceptible to colds. "You help Robert, honey."

"Yes, ma'am." The kids scurried off.

Sarah and Becky, the three-year-olds, stood off to one side, eyes big as they looked at the dying man on the concrete. "Lisa," Rani said.

"You look after Sarah and Becky. Come on, kids, we've got to get busy."

"Is Crazy Vic gonna get us, Rani?"

Six-year-old Danny asked.

"No!" Rani said. "I swear to you all-no!"

Chapter

"Be like my great granddad," one of the men said, after Ben touched on his outpost idea. "Back when they was fightin' the Indians."

Another man, obviously with strong Indian blood flowing in his veins, looked at the spokesman and smiled. "But now we're all in it together. Right, Frank?"

"Thank God," his friend said, returning the smile. "I'd hate to think we had to fight you heathens, too, Roland."

A woman said, "Don't pay them no mind, General. They've been friends for forty years."

The man jerked his thumb toward the Indian.

"His ancestors scalped my ancestors."

"Your ancestors stole our land," Roland retorted. "Besides, Indians didn't invent scalping. They got it from the white man."

"And away they go," the woman said.

"Been doing it for forty years," another man said.

"I think the Indians are winnin'," another man said.

"If we have enough time," Roland said. Then he laughed. "And enough Indians."

The people in the small town warned Ben that there were outlaw gangs roaming about everywhere, and that they were vicious, cutting another page from the dark history of the Texas Comancheros, the band of Mexicans, half-breeds, and Caucasian Americans who had looted and raped and killed until finally being wiped out when the citizens of Texas and Mexico got their guts' full of the outlaws.

Ben and Jordy pulled out early in the morning, heading south on Highway 83.

Guthrie was a ghost town, with anything of value having been looted long ago.

Without having any good reason to do so, other than the fact Ben was on no timetable, he cut west at Guthrie, heading for Lubbock. He did not see one human being until reaching the town of Rails, and his curiosity almost got them both killed.

"Yeah," Campo said, surveying all the carnage Ben had left behind. "Raines was here, all right." He laughed, an ugly bark of derisiveness. "These pecker-woods thought ol' Ben would be an easy touch. I could have told them different."

"Me, too," West said sorrowfully, looking at his stump. "I don't know, Jake. Sometimes I get a plumb spooky feeling thinkin' 'bout Raines." He looked around at the charred bodies lying on the Oklahoma highway. "You know what I mean?"

Campo didn't want to admit it, but he knew

very well what West was talking about. He just didn't like to think about it.

Campo chose not to answer West's question. He turned away from the scene and walked back to his van. He told one of his men, "Somebody who lives around here saw something. You get some boys and scatter. Find out what you can; especially which direction Raines went from here. G."

Standing by his van, Campo looked toward the west. "You may think you're a god, Raines. But I'm gonna prove people wrong. 'Cause I'm gonna kill you, mister. I'm gonna kill you and hang your scalp on my belt buckle. Bet on it."

Rani got as far as Lamesa before running into trouble. But she had vowed the next time she was confronted with trouble, she would shoot first and take her chances with her conscience later.

There was a CB radio in the truck, along with some sort of military-looking short-wave radio. She was amazed at the traffic on the CB radio, most of it very unfriendly and extremely vulgar.

And it was the CB radio that warned her of impending trouble.

"Blue king-cab rollin" south on 87," the voice sprang out of the speaker. "Fine-lookin' cunt behind the wheel. Truck's packed with kids."

"Stay out of this," a man's voice blasted the cab, obviously pushed by a booster. "That's Vic's woman."

"Vic who?"

"Cowboy Vic. Warlord of the West."

The first voice laughed. "Never heard of the son of a bitch. Tell him to keep ass out of this part of Texas or we'll feed him to the rattlers."

Rani pulled off the highway and drove behind a falling-down old farm and ranch complex of buildings.

"Lost her!" the first voice said. "She's somewhere between O'Donnell and Arvana."

"Keep lookin'," a new voice was added. "She won't be that hard to find."

Another voice was added to the growing number of voices. "If you're hiding, lady," a man's voice spoke, "stay down. We're sending out a patrol from Lamesa to help you. Don't reply to this transmission. Just stay quiet."

"It's them Christian mother-fuckers," the first voice said contemptuously.

"Yeah," yet another voice said. "You asshole Jesus freaks come on. We'll run your psalm-singin' asses back to Lamesa."

"You've tried that before, Red," the calm, steady voice replied. "The Lord will forgive me for saying this, but this time I intend to kick your worthless ass all the way up to the Red River."

"You the warlord called Texas Red?" Vic's man asked.

"Yeah."

"Pull it over, Red. Let's talk. We

might stand a better chance if we joined forces. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah. Mayhaps you're right, friend. Me and my boys will meet you on the south side of O'Donnell. Be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Ten-four."

Rani sat it out, watching the highway from behind a shattered window in what had once been a nice home. She saw a dozen vehicles pass by her position, all heading north. She did not move for several minutes. Then she smiled as she saw a dozen more vehicles drive slowly past, heading north. The second line of cars and trucks, she concluded, belonged to the folks from Lamesa.

It was not that Rani didn't want good homes for those kids in her car. It was just that she didn't trust people. She'd been burned too many times by people professing to be this, that, or the other.

Her thoughts were interrupted by an excited Robert.

"Miss Rani!" the boy said. "They's cases and cases and cases of food down in the basement of this place."

"What were you doing in the basement?" she spoke, more sharply than she intended.

"Exploring," the boy said, hanging his head.

She went to him and put her arms around his slender shoulders. "I'm sorry, Robert. I didn't mean to be cross with you. Let's look at this food." She kissed his cheek. "I'm proud of you, Robert."

Ben caught the movement to his right and twisted the steering wheel just as the man fired. The slug whined off the camper of the truck. Ben floor-boarded the truck and ducked behind a building. Grabbing his Thompson, he said, "Shoot anybody that sticks their head up, Jordy. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. I'll blow their ass off."

"That's as good a place as any to shoot them, I suppose," Ben said, not able to hide his grin.

Ben slipped along the rear of the old store. He heard

boots scraping the pea gravel near the corner and smiled, raising the Thompson, finger on the trigger.

"Easy, now," a voice came to him. "I don't want that fancy truck all shot up. And take the kid alive."

"Yeah," a second voice said in a hoarse whisper. "Clean-lookin' kid lak "at's worth a lot of guns."

Ben's smile turned savage at the vocal implications of what lay in store for Jordy if the men took him. The men rounded the corner and Ben pulled the trigger, firing at almost point-blank range, and he deliberately held the muzzle low, at crotch-level.

He took the men's guns and ammo, and left them screaming and bleeding on the gravel. Here were two who would molest no more children. And Ben hoped they would live a long and totally sexless life. Pissing through a

hose.

Dumping the guns and ammo in the rear of the camper, Ben picked up an M-16 and a pouch of clips. Slipping to the front corner of the building, Ben located a gun in the second story of an old building; the glint of cold sunlight flashing off a stainless steel barrel gave the man's position away. Ben flipped his M-16 to semi-auto and sighted the man in. He shot the man in the center of his face, the man dropping his rifle to the ground. The fancy rifle landed butt first and went off, discharging half a clip of ammo, the lead slamming into trees and buildings and into the air.

"Lennie got 'im!" came the excited shout.
"Come on, boys."

Ben slipped his M-16 to full auto and waited. A knot of men came charging around a corner. They stopped, confused looks on their faces. They stood all bunched up, standing over Lennie's carbine.

"Lennie didn't git him, neither," a man said.

That was the last thing any of them would say or hear, except for the stuttering of an M-16 on full auto.

And they would hear that only briefly.

Ben let them flop on the ground for a few minutes, then he slipped the M-16 onto select fire and put two rounds into each of the bodies. He waited another full minute before zigzagging across the street to gather up their ammo. Only one of the men had been carrying an M-16 that looked worth a shit, and Ben took that. Each man was carrying several full clips of 5.56 ammo. Ben tossed the rifle and ammo in the camper and looked at Jordy.

"How's it going, little man?"

"Hangin" in, Ben."

Ben checked his map and took a county road out of Rails, heading south. He flipped on his CB radio and was startled to hear all the chatter jumping out at him. He listened carefully, knowing those CB radios must have been jacked up with boosters, giving them a tremendous range.

What he heard was disturbing. Someone named Texas Red, a warlord, was teaming up with another warlord named Cowboy Vic, or some such stupid name.

"Like I said, Ben," Jordy said. "Warlords is everywhere."

"Yes. But who, or what, is Rani?"

"Sounds like a dumb girl to me."

"Listen."

"... and I hear tell that Jake Campo is headin' this way, too," the voice spoke. "He's teamed up with some guy named West."

Ben grunted. "I knew I should have killed that bastard when I had the chance."

"West?" Jordy asked.

"Yes. He's scum."

"They chasin' General Ben Raines, so I hear," another voice offered an opinion.

"Raines and his Rebels are in Texas?"

"No. Way I heard it, it's just Raines and some snot-nosed punk kid he picked up along the way."

"Fuck you!" Jordy said to the radio.

"How would you like for me to wash your mouth out with soap, boy?" Ben said, looking at him.

"Yukkk!" Jordy said.

"Then watch your language."

"By hisself, or with a bunch," a man said, "Ben Raines is a bad one. I don't want to fool with him. Not none at all."

"You don't believe all that shit about him being some kind of god, do you?"

"I don't know," the man's voice was serious.

"I heard too many tales about him for some of them not to be true."

"Well, then, you just tuck your tail between your legs and scamper on back home, then. Carry your boys home with you if none of you's got the guts to face up to one skinny, middle-aged man. I'll break that son of a bitch in half like a toothpick."

Ben looked at the radio. "Fuck you!" he said.

Jordy shook his head. "For shame, for shame," he said with a grin.

Chapter 12

Ben wound around dirt roads until coming to Highway 84. He took that down to Post and there connected with 669. He stayed on that, constantly monitoring his CB, all the way to a tiny town just north of Big Spring. The traffic on his CB had faded into silence by the time he hid his truck behind a falling-down building and decided to call back to Base Camp. He knew perfectly well that Colonel Gray had bugged his truck-and probably some of his personal gear as well-so he could keep tabs on Ben, but Ben had expected that. It was rather a comforting feeling, Ben had to admit.

"General!" the radio operator almost knocked Ben's head off with the shouted word. "It's good to hear from you, sir."

"How are things back home, son?" Ben asked.

"Hello, you old bastard!" Ike's voice boomed out of the speaker. "You been behavin' yourself?"

Ben decided to level with his old and good friend.

"It's rough out here, Ike," he admitted.

"Damn warlords are everywhere."

"And naturally you've been avoiding them whenever possible?"

Ben could not have possibly missed the sarcasm in Ike's voice. "Of course, Ike."

"Bullshit. You always was a terrible liar. I won't pull your leg, brother. You must know we've got a full combat platoon tracking you. Captain Nolan commandin'."

"I expected as much." Nolan was part of Colonel Gray's Scouts. Nolan and his people did not believe in taking prisoners.

"Contrary to what you believe, Ben," Ike said, "we can't track you from here. But Captain Nolan can from his position. He's giving us daily radio reports on how you and that little boy been kickin' ass along the way. Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas. Ben, you got some rough ol' boys trackin' you. Three-four hundred strong. And pickin' up more along the way. Don't get yourself overloaded."

"Give me Nolan's frequency just in case," Ben said. "I promise if I get in a bind, I'll yell for help."

"I'll believe that when I see pigs flyin'," Ike said to the radio operator. He gave Ben the frequency and the mike to Cecil, who had been summoned by a runner.

"I don't like what I've been hearing, Ben," Cecil said. "Let me send just a squad to your location. They won't get in your way, I promise."

"I won't be nurse-maided, Cec," Ben said. "Bring me up to date on what's happening at home."

"Told you," Ike said to Cecil, after making sure the mike was off.

"That hard-headed bastard!" Cecil said. "Ike, get in touch with Colonel Gray. I want a fully equipped

combat company of Gray's Scouts, with Dan leading them, on the way to Texas by first light."

"Done." Ike left the radio room at a lope.

In the truck Ben winked at Jordy. "They're plotting something, son. I can feel it over the miles."

"If they are," the boy replied, "it's because they love you."

That sobered Ben. "I guess so, Jordy."

Cecil brought Ben up to date on the building of a new community and how things were progressing in Dyersburg. He said the people from Southeast Missouri had contacted the Base Camp and had requested a team of Rebels in. He had sent them. There had been no serious trouble to speak of.

"All right, Cec," Ben said. "You take care."

Before Cecil could respond, Ben clicked the set off.

"How come you're runnin' away from them people, Ben?"

"I'm not running away from them."

"You sure could have fooled me," the boy replied.

The house had obviously belonged to a practicing survivalist. Rani found cases of freeze-dried foods, and as many cases of military canned rations. The canned C-rations were dated 1996, with an expiration date that had years to go before running out.

She founds cans of water and purification tablets, tents and sleeping bags and blankets and clothing. She turned to Robert.

"How did you find this place, Robert? It obviously was well-concealed."

"The floor didn't sound right when I walked over it,"

the boy said. "Then I noticed that some of the tile didn't look right." He shrugged. "I pulled them up and there was the trapdoor."

She hugged him. "Thank you, Robert. You've probably saved our lives."

A more careful inspection of the bunker-type room below the house revealed a steel locker set in concrete. They looked all over the already ransacked house for the keys. Sandra, the seven-year-old, finally pointed to the keys, hanging on a peg by the side of the locker.

The locker was filled with rifles, shotguns, pistols, and boxes of ammunition.

"God bless survivalists," Rani said.

Cotton, a four-year-old boy, came stumbling down the steps, dragging a radio antenna behind him.

"Did you take that from the truck, Cotton?" Rani asked.

"No, ma'am," the cotton-headed little boy said. "Got it from the ground."

"You got it from the ground?" Rani asked. "Show me, Cotton."

They trooped up the stairs and back into the sunlight. Cotton marched the group to a barren spot in the back yard.

"Weeds and grass everywhere else," Rani said. "But none on this spot. This is the spot, Cotton?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The area he had pointed out was shoebox shaped, about twenty feet long and ten feet wide. And it was barren of grass or weeds.

Rani walked across the spot several times. The ground felt soft beneath her shoes; it had a completely different feel from the ground around it.

"Get me a shovel, somebody," Rani said.

She began digging and soon struck something solid. Further investigation revealed a sheet-metal top of some sort.

"Help me, kids," Rani said.

The sheet-metal top covered the entire pit, and it took all of them to pry it up and tip it over. Rani started laughing at what the sunlight revealed.

"The man actually buried a small truck," Rani said.

The compact pickup was covered with sheets of thick plastic. It sat almost-new-looking inside the wooden walls of the boxlike hole, concrete blocks holding the tires off the ground.

Rani found a jack and took the truck down from its blocks. She checked the oil and battery and gas. The keys were in the ignition. She pumped the pedal a few times, once more for luck, then turned the key. The engine fired, caught, then

died. She tried again. This time it roared into life. She dropped the truck into gear and went up the gradual incline the man had built.

"We're gonna make it, kids," she said to herself. "We're gonna make it. Please, God, let us make it."

"Yeah, tell 'em OK," Campo said, speaking into his mike. "The more the merrier."

"What's up?" West asked.

"More fodder for the fire," Campo told him. "Some ol' boys named Cowboy Vic and Texas Red want to link up with us. We're gonna meet tomorrow between Plainview and Lubbock, on the interstate."

"Not a bad idea," West agreed. "We can cover a hell of a lot more ground this way. Send teams out all over

the place. Then when we find Raines, we kill him-or maybe take him alive for trade-and get rid of the new guys."

"Sometimes you can make sense, West."

While Rani and the kids, with Robert driving the small truck, wound around county roads, finally coming to 669 and taking that south, Ben and Jordy bypassed Big Spring and set up camp for the night just a mile or so from the junction of Highways 669 and 350. Rani and the kids decided to spend the night at the deserted town of Luther.

Ben and Rani, two of the most hunted people in Texas, were camped just six miles apart.

"What do we head for next, Ben?" Jordy asked, warming his hands over a small fire.

"Oh, I think we'll head southwest, Jordy. Get on Interstate 20 and see where it takes us. That sound all right to you?"

"Yes, sir."

Man and boy retired to their blankets early, both of them staring up into the starry skies.

"Reckon what's up there, Ben? You think they's other people up there?"

"Yes, I do, Jordy. I always have. Maybe not like us, but other life-forms."

"If there is, reckon what they think about us? I mean, what we done to this world?"

"They probably think we're a bunch of damned idiots."

"I 'bout got the hang of drivin' that truck, Miss Rani," Robert said. "Where do we head for in the morning?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "But I do want to get us down into south Texas for the winter. Get you kids healthy again."

"We'll make it, Miss Rani," the boy assured her. "What did you make of all that talk on the radio about Mister Ben Raines, Rani?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine General Raines out traveling by himself. I thought he and his people were in Tennessee or Georgia, setting up a new government out there."

"Well, even if he is out here, can't nothing

hurt Ben Raines," Robert said.

"He is flesh and blood, Robert," Rani tried to dispel the rumors about Ben. "He is a human being. Not a god."

She knew what was coming next, and the boy did not disappoint her. "Then how come we seen all them shrines and things to Mister Raines?"

The other children had gathered around, listening. For all except the very youngest had heard of the exploits of Ben Raines and his seemingly undefeatable Rebels.

Rani had just completed her second year of college when the bottom had dropped out back in 1988, and for a moment, she was flung back in time.

She had awakened that morning with a terrible headache. She was disoriented and unsteady on her feet. She looked across the bedroom she was sharing with her sister, and a scream boiled out of her throat.

Her younger sister was on the floor, stiff and cold in death. Her face was twisted and blackened in death. She looked as though she had been dead for some time.

Rani got to her feet and promptly fell down, her legs unable to support her. She crawled from the room, down the hall. The house was so still and quiet. She staggered to her feet and lurched into her parents' bedroom. She had steeled herself as to what she might find.

Both mother and father were dead, lying in bed. Blood had poured from nose, ears, and mouth, staining the whiteness of pillow.

She backed out of the room, fear gripping her like a band across her chest.

She jerked on a housecoat and stumbled into the living room, then out onto the porch. The scene that lay before her eyes was something out of a sci-fi thriller.

Men and women and children lay scrawled on the street, all twisted in various shapes as death struck them and dropped them.

Rani ran back into her house and, keeping her eyes averted from her sister's body, she slipped into blue jeans, tennis shoes, and blouse. She backed her parents' car out of the drive and slowly drove the streets. She could find no one alive.

She still, after all these years, was not certain exactly what happened after that first day. Not for some time. She remembered driving until she ran out of gas. Then she wandered for days, maybe weeks; she still wasn't certain. The death that lay in stinking heaps around her had numbed her mind. Perhaps that was the most merciful thing that could have happened to her. She

had only very dim memories of being raped and abused. And she had no idea how she arrived a thousand miles from her home. But she did. Only then did she begin to be aware of her surrounding.

And she never fully understood why she was spared when so many others died.

"People lost faith," Rani said quietly. "They just couldn't believe that God would do something this awful

to the human race. Many of them needed someone

...

something

they could see to worship. They found Ben Raines. This one human man that rose up out of the ashes and built a nation within a nation. Against all odds, he did it. He fought mutants, warlords, outlaws, and the entire central government of the United States ... and won. A lot of people thought him blessed, so to speak. But he is not a god, children. He is flesh and blood and bone. Just like us."

But she could tell by the expression on the children's faces they were not convinced.

"Have you ever met Ben Raines, Miss Rani?"

Paul asked.

"No." She shook her head.

"Then you don't know for sure, do you?"

"No," Rani admitted. "I don't know for sure."

Chapter 13

For just a fleeting moment, Ben thought of turning off the interstate and checking out Webb AFB at Big Spring. But he knew from experience what he would find. Nothing. The place would have been picked over a hundred times. And, he smiled, more than likely, most of the gear taken by my own people.

Was it Webb AFB that Sergeant Buck Osgood and his small band of men had barricaded themselves in a concrete bunker against the hordes of mutant rats8*

Ben couldn't remember. He knew it had been someplace in Texas.

He drove on past the exit sign for Webb AFB.

"Got anyplace in particular you'd like to see, Jordy?" he asked.

"Don't know no place, Ben. Don't make no difference, long as I'm seein' it with you."

Ben grinned. "OK. Now say your

ABC'S

for me."

*Fire in the Ashes

The boy got them all right-first try.

Already, with three squares a day, the boy was gaining weight, filling out. The pinched look of poverty was leaving his face, and the boy was smiling more.

"We make a pretty good team, don't we, Jordy?"

"Sure do, Ben. Are you gonna keep me?"

"Am I going to what?"

"Keep me."

Ben laughed. "Why, I haven't given anything other than "keeping you" any thought, Jordy. What did you think I was going to do-toss you out by the side of the road?"

"Naw. I didn't figure you'd do that. But nothing good ever lasts long. Not for nobody livin' out here, anyways."

"Well, we're going to last, Jordy. You and

me. We'll hole up this winter and I'll teach you how to read and write-as best I can. Then, in the spring, we'll head on back to Georgia and you'll have a permanent home."

"With you, Ben?"

"With me, Jordy."

"Is that a promise, Ben?"

Ben ruffled his hair. "That's a promise, boy."

"Close to five hundred men, Jake," West said. "With more comin' in. With five-six hundred salty ol' boys, we could rule half of Texas if we played our cards right."

"That's what I'm thinking, too," Jake said.

"And I know where to get more."

"Oh?" West looked at him.

Jake motioned for his radioman to come over.

"Get

on the horn, Emmett. Tell the boys back in Tennessee to pack it up and come on out. Bring everything with them. We'll set up a base camp right here and wait for them."

"The big push, boss?" Emmett said, an ugly smile on his face.

"The big push, Emmett. And when we're done using Ben Raines' ass to wipe the sidewalk, we're gonna rule Texas."

Rani and her bunch avoided the main highways, electing to stay on the secondary roads. They took Highway 33 south, but only managed to make about thirty miles the first day. A tire had blown out on the small truck, and Rani was forced to call a halt until she could locate a spare, then a hand pump to inflate the tube.

Then bad gas forced them to spend a full day blowing out gas lines and siphoning the tanks dry. They were a weary and discouraged little band of travelers when they pulled into the outskirts of Ozona, Texas, to make camp for the night.

Rani was very wary of towns, preferring the open skies for a roof whenever the weather permitted. Even though the nearby town appeared deserted, Rani was not going to take any chances. Not when they were this close to their final destination.! She had made up her mind where they were going to winter. She had absolutely no idea what she might find there. But she was betting on one thing: there would be no people.

And the winter would be mild. She picked up her map and looked at it.

"Yes," she said aloud.

"You know where we're goin' now, Miss Rani?"

Robert asked. "Terlingua," she said.

"What's them things, Ben?" Jordy asked, pointing to a group of skeletal objects in what had once been a productive field.

They were on Interstate 10, just outside of Fort Stockton, Texas.

"Irrigation systems, Jordy. Not enough rainfall in this area, so the farmers brought water up from the ground for their crops."

"Why didn't they just move where there was enough water?" the boy asked.

"Lots of reasons, Jordy. This was their home, for one thing. And nobody likes to be forced from their home. For whatever reason."

"Even now, Ben? With all the land and houses just there?

Would that still be true?"

"Even now, Jordy."

The man and boy saw no one. Not one living human being. Not for miles and miles. It was as if this part of the country had been abandoned. Ben knew this part of the state had been hard hit by the disease-bearing rats, but he had not expected anything like this.

At the junction of Highway 17, Ben turned off the interstate and headed north, toward Pecos. Ben traveled warily now, for he knew that even before the great war of '88, the land west of the Pecos had been filled with the last of the truly tough, old-fashioned folks; good people, but secure in their beliefs and self-

sufficient. They were of pioneer stock, and were boot-tough when pushed.

Before Ben reached Pecos, a sign suspended over the highway pulled him up short:

IF YOU'RE FRIENDLY, WELCOME, FRIEND.

IF YOU WANT TROUBLE, YOU GOT X.

Ben clicked on his CB and keyed the mike.

"I'm Ben Raines," he said. "I'm traveling with a small boy. And we're friendly."

Someone on the other end of the airwaves laughed. "Come on in, General. We've been trackin' you since you cut off the interstate. Ya'll just in time for lunch."

"Son of a bitch!" Colonel Dan Gray cursed. "Now what?"

"Road is blocked, sir," a scout radioed back to the main column. "And someone has blown the bridge. We're gonna have to cut farther south; go across Mississippi and Louisiana."

"All right," the Englishman radioed.

"Backtrack. We'll wait for you here."

Gray's Scouts had been attempting to move across the top of Alabama on Highway 72. They had been forced off that highway after only fifty or so miles. They had wound around country roads until linking up with alternate 72 at Huntsville. That had ended just before reaching Decatur.

When his recon teams had returned, Gray ordered the column south on Interstate 65. They knew from other reports that 278 west was closed; someone had blown the bridge over the East Fork.

"Find us a way around Birmingham," Dan told his

recon teams. "I don't want to get in a fire-fight unless it's absolutely necessary. The KKK has taken over that city, and it would be terribly difficult for me to restrain myself if

confronted." It was a typical understated British remark from Dan. "We'll hook up with 20/59 and take that into Mississippi. We'll stay with 20 all the way across Louisiana. Recon teams-go!"

"Way we're movin'," a young Rebel said sadly, "time we get to West Texas, General Raines will have already killed all the outlaws."

"Quite," Dan replied.

"Sure you won't stay with us, General?" a cowboy asked Ben. "You're sure welcome to."

"I thank you, but I'm traveling; showing Jordy the country."

"And getting away from the reins of leadership while you're at it, huh, General?" a silver-haired man said with a grin.

"Sounds like you know about the headaches, too?" Ben said.

"Very much so," the man said. "I was elected leader of this hardy little band. I'm stuck with it. Ben, we like your idea of outposts. When you've got it all worked out, come back. You can count on us."

"I'll be back," Ben assured. "Or someone from my command will."

"Be careful out there." The man jerked his thumb. "The outlaws, warlords, and assorted scum have tried to move in on us many times. They finally quit early this year. We were killing too many of them. But they're still roaming around like packs of scavengers."

"How well I know," Ben said. He shook hands with a few of the people and pulled out onto Interstate 20.

The people of Pecos had warned him that south of Interstate 10 was no-man's land. The only holdouts were a few people at Alpine, Fort Davis, and Marfa. South of those towns?... He had only shaken his head.

Ben and Jordy drove as far as Van Horn. It was a ghost town, having been looted and ravaged many times, and then burned. The burning of the small town seemed to Ben to be more an act of vandalism; senseless, pointless.

He turned north on 54, heading for New Mexico. Halfway to the border, Ben found the highway impassable and was forced to backtrack to Van Horn.

Ben checked his map. He was hesitant about going to El Paso, for he had heard many stories about the destruction there. He looked at Jordy.

"Where to, little Man?"

"I'm with you, Ben." The boy smiled. "But I've already seen where we've been."

Ben laughed. "It's too dangerous to head south, Jordy. We-was

A bullet whined off the top of the cab. Another slug slammed into the camper. Ben twisted the steering wheel, pointing the nose of the truck west. A bullet ripped through the windshield, just missing Jordy's head.

"Get on the floorboards, Jordy!" Ben yelled, spinning the wheel, heading south. West and

east were blocked with unseen snipers; north was impassable.

"That doesn't leave us much choice, boy," Ben muttered.

Slugs clanged and slammed into the rear of the truck as Ben floor-boarded the pickup, the big engine roaring, back tires biting into the road. The pickup fishtailed, then straightened out as Ben found the highway marker for 90 and headed southeast, toward Marfa.

"Going to get tough, Jordy," Ben said, as the boy crawled off the floorboards and back into the seat.

"We'll make it," Jordy said. "I been in tougher spots than this."

Ben didn't doubt that at all.

Chapter 14

Rani carefully checked both trucks as best she knew how. She had filled the gas tanks of the vehicles and had ten five-gallon gas cans filled and stored. In Ozona, she had found a small, two-wheeled trailer, and that was now loaded with food, blankets, clothing, and cans and bottles of water. She would pull that behind her truck.

"Who's Davy Crockett?" Robert asked, pointing to the monument of the man.

Rani snapped her fingers. "Books!" she said. "Got to get some books and pencils and paper so you kids can study and do homework."

But she had seen scurrying shapes of humans ducking in and out of the ruined stores of the town, and did not wish to linger long in the town proper.

"Later," she said. "But I've got to do it."

She breathed a little easier when she was outside of the town, on the interstate. She had carefully plotted her route, writing the directions down and pinning them to the sun visor.

Interstate 20 west to Sheffield. Highway 349 south to

Dryden. 90 west to Marathon. 385 south, then west to Terlingua.

She said a silent prayer the roads would all be open and no outlaws would spot them.

If there was a God, that is, she thought.

She shook that blasphemy from her mind. Of course there is a God.

And it wasn't Ben Raines.

Was it?

Twelve miles out of Van Horn, at the tiny deserted town of Lobo, Ben pulled off the highway.

"Close back there, Jordy."

"I must be gettin" used to it, Ben."

"Oh?"

"I don't need to change underwear."

Ben laughed and he and Jordy got out of the truck. Ben lit one of the few cigarettes he allowed himself per day. After a few moments of silence, man and boy enjoying their closeness and the

silence of nature, Ben stirred.

"I think I got us in a box, boy. I have a bad feeling about that."

Jordy stood and looked at the man.

"Folks back there where we stopped told me the town of Valentine was deserted; all the people there having moved to Marfa. They've formed a sort of a triangle of safety. You know what a triangle is, Jordy?"

"No, sir."

Using his map, Ben showed Jordy the rough triangle, with Fort Davis at the top, Marfa and Alpine at the bottom corners.

"The folks are shooting first and asking questions later, boy. And I don't blame them. So we're not going to risk getting shot. See this county road here, Jordy, just before you get to Marfa?" The boy nodded his head. "We're going to take that all the way to the Mexican border and link up with 170, gradually work our way out of this mess." I hope, Ben silently added.

Ben radioed in to Captain Nolan and informed the captain of his route.

Ben looked at his map. "I'll meet you boys at Terlingua," he said.

"Ten-four, General."

Nolan's radio operator tried to contact Colonel Gray, but for some reason she could not get through to the column. She really didn't think too much of the difficulty, for any traffic of late had been scratchy. The belt of radioactivity that had encircled the globe since the wars of '88 had affected weather and communications. The winters were getting much harsher and longer," and the growing season shorter.

She reported the difficulty to Captain Nolan.

"First high range we come to, try again," he told her. "Right now, we've got to move and move fast. The general's getting in even over his head."

He turned to his command, who were gathered around.

"We roll," Nolan said flatly. "Day and night, we roll. If you're not driving, sleep. We're not going to fuck around with anybody or anything. Move out."

"What the hell do you mean, you can't get in touch with Colonel Gray or Captain Nolan?"

Ike asked, an

edge to his voice. "Goddamn it, we have the finest communications equipment in the world!"

The communications expert backed up a step. The ex-Navy SEAL'S abilities as a cut, slash, and stomp guerrilla fighter were almost as much a legend as General Raines. "I'm sorry, sir. But it's impossible to reach them. At least for the next couple of days. Maybe longer than that."

"Why?" Cecil Jefferys asked, in a much calmer tone of voice. The black man possessed the ability to remain calm under the worst of circumstances.

"Radioactivity, sir. The only way I can explain it is like this: The belt of radioactivity that has surrounded the earth since the bombings of '88 appears to have tightened, firmed, become more of a mass."

"I understand tightened, son," Cecil said. The ex-teacher and former Green Beret had been with Ben since the outset. During Ben's short tenure as President of the United States, Cecil had been sworn in as Vice President. The first black vice-president in the nation's history.

And the two of them had almost pulled the nation further still out of the ashes of war. They came very close. But the gods of fate had chosen that time to laugh and howl at the efforts of those who chose democracy over anarchy, freedom over slavery, enlightenment over ignorance.*

"Keep trying," Cecil told the communications technician.

"Yes, sir." He left the room.

Cecil and Ike walked to the big window of the

*Fire in the Ashes

commanding general's office and looked out. People were working dawn to dusk rebuilding and renovating the once-deserted town, building schools and clinics, stores and warehouses.

"All we can hope is that short-range transmissions are getting through," Cecil said.

"Yeah," Ike said glumly.

Cecil looked at the man. "Don't start getting it in your mind that you're hitting the rescue trail after Ben. I need you here, and you know it."

"I know that, buddy," Ike said. "But that don't keep me from worryin'."

"You're not alone in that," Cecil said.

Ben and Jordy prowled through what was left of Valentine, Texas. Ben knew he was about to take them through an area of the country that was often short of water. Ben told Jordy to start looking for containers.

Ben found an old two-wheeled open-topped trailer and spent the rest of the day working on it. He found two tires in fairly good shape that would fit and a spare that looked as though it might have a few more miles left on it. Using his siphoning pump, Ben brought up enough gas to top his tanks and refill his cans. In a ransacked store, he found some cans and bottles of food. Most of the cans were swollen with contamination, but he found about two cases that still looked good. He wondered, after all the years, how much nutrition remained in the food?

Ben used some water to prime a hand pump, and after a few futile tries, out came water, clear and cold and good tasting. They filled up every can and bottle

they had with them and those they could find among the ruins, carefully wrapping the bottles with rags to prevent breakage.

In the entire once-thriving little town, Ben and Jordy could find only six blankets and two

big tarps that had escaped the ravages of looters. Ben found a few articles of clothing that would fit Jordy, and a good pair of boy's lace-up boots.

Several times during the afternoon, Ben would look up and catch the glint of sunlight from lenses of binoculars from the hills. He knew they were being watched, but the question was: by whom?

As dusk began spreading purple fingers over the land, creating shadows throughout the town, Ben pulled his truck and trailer behind a store on the west side of the town.

"I'm hungry, Ben," Jordy said.

"No fires, Jordy," Ben told him, handing him a can of C-rations. "Eat this. We'll be pulling out as soon as it's full dark."

"You think we got trouble?"

"Yes."

At full dark, Ben cranked his truck. Running without lights, he drove carefully and slowly out of the town. He drove almost ten miles without headlights. He found a dirt road leading off to the southwest and took it, driving almost a mile before pulling over.

"We'll camp here, Jordy. No fires. We'll have our big meal at noon while we're traveling. That way the fire won't be so noticeable. We'll gather dry wood that makes little smoke. You go on to sleep now. I'll stand guard for a few hours."

The boy was asleep a few seconds after he slipped into his blankets and closed his eyes. Ben began his lonely vigil.

Rani heard the men coming, walking as quietly as they could through the night. She reached for the AR-15 she had taken from the survivalist's basement cache and slipped it off safety. She cut her eyes to Robert, just a few feet away from her. The boy held a shotgun in his hands, ready. To her left, Kathy was alert and waiting, the lever action .30-30 ready.

The outlaws had tracked her little convoy all day; she had listened to them talk back and forth on the CB. And the things they said had been perverted, ranging far past filthy.

She had told the kids that when she opened fire, to do the same. She had absolute faith in them to do just that. With the exception of the very youngest, they all knew what lay in store for them should the outlaws take them; all of the older kids were victims of sexual abuse from adults.

The shapes of the men became more distinct, looming ominously out of the night.

Rani waited.

When they were no more than thirty yards away, she raised her weapon and opened fire. The booming of the shotgun and the bark of the .30-30 joined the crack of Rani's AR-15. Muzzle flashes lashed and leaped into the night.

"Kill them all!" Rani screamed.

Each of the three had a spare weapon on the ground beside them. As the weapons they were using ran out of ammo, they dropped their empties and jerked up the spares.

Rani, Kathy, and Robert gave no mercy to the outlaws. They didn't delude themselves into believing they killed them all, but they knew they had inflicted heavy losses upon the men.

The sounds of engines cranking up and the spinning of rear tires in the dirt and sand came to the woman and the kids.

"Take all the guns and bullets!" Rani shouted. "And be careful. Some of them might still be alive."

The weapons and ammo collected from the dead and dying, Rani yelled for the kids to head for the trucks. By the road, they discovered another truck and a Jeep wagon. Both vehicles were filled with gas, with spare gas cans front and back, in frames. The vehicles held food and blankets and other gear she could not identify in the dark.

"Kathy, Jane! You're going to have to drive these vehicles. We need these supplies. Can you do it, kids?" Rani asked.

The girls nodded their heads.

"Let's go. I'll take the lead. Robert, you bring up the rear. Kathy and Jane, you'll be in the middle. We've got to get out of here."

The girls—really already young adults, for their lives had been hard, with little time for the joys of youth—got behind the wheels of their respective vehicles, adjusted the seats, and cranked the engines.

"We're ready, Miss Rani," they called.

The short convoy pulled out into the darkness.

Rani led them for thirty miles before pulling over behind a farm house. There, she set up guards while the rest slept. At first light she would inspect their newly acquired booty and travel on. According to her old map, they had a hundred and seventy miles to go.

A hundred and seventy miles.

She shook her head. God, she was tired.

Chapter 15

Ben and Jordy hit Highway 2810-96 it could still be called a highway—an hour after first light. With any kind of luck at all, they would make Ruidosa before dark. Or, correcting that, the outskirts of the town, for Ben wanted to drive through towns during the day. At least during the day he could see what he was shooting at. And who was shooting at him.

They were traveling through desolate country, and the going had been slowed considerably by the trailer they were pulling. Damn thing wasn't tracking properly, wobbling and wriggling behind them. But at least it was still with them.

No sooner had that thought passed through Ben's mind than a tire blew on the trailer.

Thinking some extremely vulgar phrases, Ben

changed the flat and silently prayed the old spare would hold until he reached a town and could search for another tire.

They reached Ruidosa with plenty of daylight left them; to his surprise, Ben located a tire in the looted,

burned, and deserted little town that would fit the trailer.

Something about this part of Texas was jogging memories in Ben's mind, but as yet, he could not bring them to the fore. He knew it was something he'd found doing research years back, when he had made his living as a writer.

Then it came to him.

Near Redford, still many miles away, there was a huge private library. If he could just recall where it was. If he could bring the location to mind, he wanted to visit the place; hopefully, it had escaped looters. He knew that people who looted were not interested in literary flights of fancy; theirs was a much more baser regard.

Ben and Jordy made camp during the daylight hours just outside Ruidosa, ate dinner, and then moved on to a different location to camp for the night, halfway between Ruidosa and Indio. Ben had spotted no one, but the short hairs on the back of his neck were beginning to stand up-or so it seemed to Ben-like the hair on a dog's back upon sensing danger.

Ben would sleep lightly this night.

"Got about a platoon of Raines' Rebels bearing down hard south," one of Campo's scouts reported in. "They're travelin' in a hell of a hurry."

"How you know they're Rebels?" West asked.

"Tiger stripe," the scout replied.

"Huh?"

"Raines' people wear tiger stripe," Campo told the man. "Black berets." He looked at his scout. "Leave

them be," he ordered. "Tanmlin' with sixty of those people is like tanmlin' with six hundred other folks. Fuckers are crazy. And they travel with enough mortars and artillery to cause a lot of trouble."

Campo was quiet for a few moments, slurping at his coffee. Then he smiled.

West caught the smile in the light of the camp fire. "What is it?"

"Even short-range transmissions are gettin' pretty scratchy, right?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"Asshole! Think about it. If we can't get through on the radios, then neither can Raines or his people. They don't know where he is neither."

West grinned, the light from the fire giving his face an evil cast. "Oh, I got it. Right." He rose from his chair and hobbled off to his tent.

"He ain't the sharpest fellow I ever met, Jake," a man said.

"Yeah. Did you guys round up any women?"

"Found a half a dozen."

"Bring me the best-lookin" one. Then you pass the others around to the boys."

And the screaming began in the outlaw camp. It would last all night long.

The night passed quietly and uneventfully for Ben and Jordy. At first light, Ben tried his radio. He could reach no one. The air was filled with static, overpowering all else.

And that left him with an uneasy feeling. Not for himself, but because of Jordy. Ben was not afraid of fighting one, or ten, or a hundred; he had been in so many fire-fights over the years since the collapse of the government, it was second nature to him. But he didn't want any harm to come to Jordy.

He pondered his options.

He could hunt a hole and stay down. But smoke from campfires would eventually be spotted by some sharp-eyed outlaw. And he didn't know how long this radio interference would continue.

He made up his mind.

"We're pulling out, Jordy. We'll take our chances on the road."

Rani had reached the outskirts of Marathon and was desperately searching for a road that would bypass the town. She found an unpaved road leading off to the south and turned on it. After only a short distance, that road connected with the old scenic route. A few miles down that road, and she came to the bodies.

The naked men and women had been staked out on a flat rise. Wild dogs and coyotes were feasting on the cadavers. Using her binoculars, she viewed the ugliness. She could tell the bodies had not been dead for very long.

She reached for her CB mike, then pulled back her hand. Best to warn the kids in person, for even if she could send a clear transmission for no more than five hundred yards, someone else might be listening.

And they were getting too close to their destination to fail now.

She rolled down the window and waved the short convoy on past the hideousness. Leaving the dogs and coyotes to continue their feasting.

Overhead, lazily circling in the sky, ever patient, the carrion birds were waiting their turn at lunch.

Rani and the kids put some distance between the bodies and themselves.

Ben switched over to the scenic route, avoiding the town of Presidio. The going was slower than ever, now. The highway was choppy and littered with the rusting, broken frames of cars and trucks. And there was death in the air. It came to the nostrils of Ben and Jordy clear and pungent.

"Ben? ..."

"Death, Jordy," Ben told the boy. "And that other smell is gunsmoke. Been a battle around

here, and damn recently, too."

"Between who?"

"I don't know. If I had to guess, it was between the good guys and the bad."

"We're in trouble, aren't we, Ben?"

"Kind of, Jordy. But we'll get out of it."

The boy shook his head. "I don't know. I dreamed about that old man again last night."

Ben felt a chill in his guts. He knew, he knew

what old man Jordy was speaking of. But he had to ask. "What old man, boy?"

"I seen this real old guy last year, Ben. God! He looked like he was maybe a hundred years old. Wore a robe and carried a big stick. Had a long beard. He pointed that stick at me and said, "Make good use of the time left you, boy." Then when I looked up again, he was gone."

Ben had seen the old man, too. Back in Little Rock.* He hadn't known what to make of him then, didn't know what to make of him now.

"What do you think that old fellow was trying to tell you, Jordy?"

The boy looked at Ben. His eyes were somber.

"That I ain't gonna live to be very old."

"Nothing?" Colonel Gray asked his radio operator.

"Nothing, sir. Nothing but a solid wall of static, and it's getting worse by the hour."

Colonel Dan Gray's eyes were worried as he looked toward the west. "That belt of radioactivity above us is causing it. And it might continue for weeks. It might never clear up."

The young Rebel looked up. "I hope that shit stays up there."

Another Rebel said, "I hope it goes away. Will it, Colonel?"

"Yes," Dan said. The Rebel's face brightened. "In about five hundred years." The young Rebel looked stunned.

The convoy was on the interstate, just outside Meridian, Mississippi, waiting for scouts to report back. Radio contact was impossible.

"You're sure Nolan's last broadcast said the general was heading for West Texas?" Dan asked.

"Southwest Texas, sir," the radio operator corrected. "I'll bet my life on it."

"Or General Raines is betting his," the Englishman said softly.

*Fire in the Ashes

Chapter 16

Rani and her kids called it a day about twenty-five miles inside the Big Bend National Park, with Croton Peak to their west, Sue Peaks to their east. The Tornillo lay to the north. If their luck held, they would be in Terlingua the following day.

Ben and Jordy pulled into Redford in the middle of the afternoon. The town was, to Ben's eyes, amazingly

intact. For some reason, it had escaped the greedy, lawless hands of looters, those shiftless, lazy people who would rather steal than work-whether there is a working civilization or not.

Then the elusive memory became fresh in Ben's mind, and he drove up to the general store, got out, and entered the store. The front door had been broken in, but still swayed on one hinge.

First impressions had been incorrect. The store had been looted. But the hundreds of books in what had probably been the largest private lending library in the state were still on the shelves.

"So much for the mentality of looters," Ben said.

He selected a dozen or so books. Several classics for him, some works of history and English, and, with a smile, a book on civics.

"Nothing like reviewing the past-that didn't work," he said.

"What didn't work, Ben?" Jordy asked.

"Democracy, socialism, communism-none of it. Those were forms of government, Jordy," he added, seeing the confusion in the boy's eyes. "Here in the United States, we practiced a form of democracy. It didn't work, either."

"Why, Ben?"

"That, Jordy, will be argued and debated in homes and caves and what-have-you for years to come."

Man and boy went back outside into the light, and sat down on the front porch of the old general store.

"We were too ..." He started to say "diverse," then bit the word off. Jordy would not understand and Ben wasn't sure diverse was the right word. "Jordy, I'm not sure I can even explain why it didn't work. Too many wanted too much from the central government-and they wanted it for nothing. For free. And there were a few who wanted to run everybody else's business. Oh, Jordy, it was a complex thing. People kept demanding more money for less work. Our personal way of life and living went up, while our moral values went down." Ben laughed and looked at the boy, sitting on the steps, looking at him.

"Jordy, do you understand what I'm talking about?"

"No, sir."

Ben laughed again and stood up. "Come on, Jordy. We'll put off discussing shoes and ships and sealing wax. Of cabbages and kings. And why the sea is boiling hot. And whether pigs have wings."

The boy laughed and walked along beside the man.

"You're funny, Ben."

"A regular clown-that's me."

"What's a clown, Ben?"

At midmorning, Rani and her kids reached the old mining town of Tres Lenguas-translated, it meant three tongues-the name had been shortened to

Terlingua by an unknown party. With the exception of a caretaker, it had been a ghost town since about

1950. Once boasting a population of over two thousand people, the quicksilver mining boomtown had quietly died out.

For a number of years, however, on a Saturday in the fall of the year, as many as five thousand contestants, jokers, hecklers, and spectators had converged on "downtown Terlingua" for what they called the World's Championship Chili Cook-Off, a mostly unpredictable event. This yearly event had lasted as long as the nation was whole, and was one big party.

But now the silence was all that greeted Rani and the kids.

The hundreds of wooden shacks were long gone, crumbling into and once more joining the earth.

But the imposing mansion on the hill overlooking the once-bustling mining town still stood, as silent as the rusting equipment and memories that drifted through the ruins. There were dozens of open holes dotting the area; an old sign that held the ominous warning of dangerous, open shafts. The holes dropped for hundreds of feet—sure death for its victims.

Ordering the kids to stay in the vehicles, Rani made a walk-around inspection of the mansion and the land immediately around it. It was clear of holes. Then, rifle in hand, she inspected the home for outlaws and rattlesnakes, something she considered to be of the same breed.

There was not a window remaining in the mansion, not even a shard of glass to denote there had once been any windows. But there was a fireplace in the rooms.

And there was enough rotting wood in the old town to insure a comfortable blaze against the chilly nights of winter.

She got the kids out of the vehicles and onto the brick-lined breezeway on the east side of the mansion. She ordered them to stay put, doing so with enough warning in her voice that she knew they would obey. They were good children, and Rani was all they had to cling to.

She dug into her supplies and found a hammer and long nails. With Robert's and Kathy's help, she nailed tarps over the windows in one huge room, then another. One room for the boys, one for the girls.

She had no broom, so she and the kids used rags to clean the rooms of dust and dirt. Then they tackled the upstairs. There would have to be a lookout up here at all times. The view was commanding, and she could see for miles.

She off-loaded the supplies from the trucks and hid them, then removed the distributor caps from the trucks, carefully storing them in the mansion. Then she and the kids took handfuls of sand and sprinkled the sand over the tracks left by the tires. Rani and Robert and Kathy spent the rest of the afternoon gathering wood and stacking it in one of the rooms of the mansion. Smoke was going to be a problem, she knew, but they had to have heat and something to cook over. She would have

to chance it.

She gathered the kids around her and began setting down the rules.

Ben and Jordy loafed that day, driving awhile, then

stopping and getting out, viewing the countryside. The tiny community of Lajitas now existed only on maps. Whatever had been there had been burned.

They drove on, finally deciding to make camp for the night a few miles west of Terlingua. Long after Ben had extinguished their campfire and Jordy had fallen asleep, he walked around their area; something was bothering him. Then he stopped and sniffed the cool night air. There it was.

Smoke.

Campo and West and Texas Red and Crazy Vic had gathered their bands of misfits and crud and assorted assholes and sent-out five man teams to comb the countryside, west, east, and south. Hundreds of outlaws were now on the trail of Ben. Their orders were to take him alive if at all possible. If they had to kill him, bring back the body for public display.

West had tried to wear a peg on his stump, but the leg was still too sore for that. He hobbled around on his crutch, filling the air with curses, all of them directed toward Ben Raines.

Big Jake Campo sat in his camp chair, just moments before dawn broke, and dreamed of being king of America. He would be, too, if he could just get Ben Raines. He laughed in the predawn darkness.

Texas Red squatted by the fire and warmed his hands. Getting colder, he thought. And it was that fact that prompted him to believe it was stupid sending men in any direction other than south. But Big Jake was known throughout the country as a man who had some smarts. Best not cross him. Yet.

Crazy Vic paced the sands in his high-heeled cowboy boots. He was dressed as he believed an old west gunfighter must have dressed: ten-gallon hat, red silk shirt, fringed buckskin jacket, wide belt with an enormous buckle, and dark jeans. He wore two six-guns, Colt .45's, around his waist, hanging low for a quick draw.

He mumbled to himself as he paced. Slobber leaked from his mouth. He was glad when the country finally went down back in '98 or '99. Whenever the hell it was. Got him out of that fuckin' nuthouse for sure. People didn't have no right to stick him in there with all them crazies. Vic ain't crazy. Just different. Now Texas Red, he thought.

There

is a real crazy.

Texas Red,

he thought, his musings silently sarcastic. What a stupid name. All that goddamn red hair on his head must have cooked his brains.

"All right!" Campo's yell cut into his thoughts. "Break camp, boys. We're moving out."

Tents were jerked down, blankets and sleeping

bags folded and rolled up, and stored.

Fires were doused. The sounds of many engines cranking up, roaring into life, filling the air with smoke.

"West," Campo said. "You and your boys head west to Carlsbad and then cut south to the greaser border at Presido. Texas Red, you and your bunch will turn south at Seminole. That'll take you all the way down to the Big Bend. Vic, you and your boys will work your way over to San Angelo and then cut south down to Del Rio. Me and my boys will head straight south from here. Work fast, but right. Radio contact is shit, so we'll be on our own for about a week. We'll all regroup in the Big Bend, on Highway 385, just west of

Marvillas Canyon. If none of us has got Raines by then, we'll know he's down there and we'll have him boxed. Everybody got all that? Good."

"How 'bout when we meet other warlords?" his

Texas Red asked.

"Ask 'em to throw in with us," Campo said. "If they don't wanna, kill them."

"How 'bout women?" Vic asked, pulling at his crotch.

"Gather up all the decent-lookin' broads you find," Campo said. "Especially young girls. I like young girls. Kill the old cunts. They ain't good for nothing. Take as many slaves as you possibly can. We'll need a lot of workers for the farms. Everything from San Angelo west is gonna belong to us, boys. The whole goddamn enchilada. Move out and good huntin'."

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

The frumious Bander snatch!

Chapter 17

The gunfire jerked Ben out of a deep, dreamless sleep. Bright sunlight flooded his eyes as he opened them, looking around. He motioned Jordy back into his blankets and held a finger to his lips, silently telling the boy to be quiet.

Ben slipped out of his blankets, rubbed his eyes and shook his head to clear away the fog of sleep, slipped his boots on and laced them up. He put on his field jacket and picked up his Thompson, clicking the submachine gun off safety.

They had camped behind an outcropping of rocks, just off the highway, effectively concealing themselves from any passersby on the road side of their camp. Ben slipped up to a natural notch in the rocks and silently cursed at the sight before him.

A young boy, no more than nine or ten years old, lay still in the center of the road. The child was dressed in rags, and was, or had been, painfully thin. From malnutrition, Ben was sure. Four men stood perhaps two hundred yards from the dead child, west and

slightly south of Ben's location. Too far away for Ben's Thompson. A hundred yards was

straining it for the Thompson, even though Ben's Thompson was a newer, more rapid fire model than the old 1921 Chicago Piano, as the gangsters used to call them. The older model Thompson spat out between 40 and 50 rounds a minute; a person could almost take a breath between rounds. Ben's newer submachine gun was capable of about 60 to 70 RPM'S.

Ben looked behind him at Jordy, and once more motioned for the boy to lie very still and not make a sound.

Jordy nodded his head.

The men began walking toward the body of the child. They were all armed, and were laughing, as if a dead child was a big joke to them.

"You shot that little shit right square in the back of the head, Also," a man complimented the rifleman. "Damn good shootin'."

"Yeah. But I'm gonna miss the little bastard. He sure had some tight asshole."

"Shore did," another man said. "But what the hell. We'll find us some more kids."

Ben silently cursed the perverted bastards for what they were and slipped from the notch, working his way closer to the boy, keeping the rocks between himself and the road. He closed the distance to about sixty yards and waited until the men reached the boy.

Then he stood up, the rocks partially protecting him from the two-legged filth.

The men spotted him and pulled up short. They wore confused looks on their faces. Then the man who had shot the boy grinned.

"What the fuck do you want, buddy?" he asked. Before Ben could reply, the man added, "And what the fuck are you lookin' at us so funny for, you skinny bastard?"

Ben's frame often fooled people. Those so inclined to do so, usually guessed him a full thirty pounds under his actual weight. Ben smiled a grim grimace. "What I'm looking at is a quartet of horseshit, sorry, trashy mother-fuckers," he replied, his voice low, but carrying to the men.

The men stirred. The bearded rifleman said, "I don't know who you think you are, mister, to talk to me like that. But you about five seconds away from dyin'."

Ben met the man look for look. He shifted his eyes for a second to the dead child. "Why did you kill that boy?"

The man laughed and looked at his friends. The four of them stood almost shoulder to shoulder, facing Ben. "Cause he were my slave and my private fuck mate. He heared about that there Rani havin' lef Oklahoma and maybe comin' this away. He run off tryin' to find her. I kilt him. My right to do so. He belonged to me. He were my property to do with as I seen fit."

"No human being has the right to enslave another human being," Ben said. "Not even if the person being enslaved is filth like you. I've heard the name Rani. What about her?"

"You ask a lot of questions for a man about to die, mister."

Ben stood quietly, meeting the man's gaze.

"Rani's a broad that takes in homeless kids. Used to be up in Oklahoma 'til some warlord got to want to fuck her steady-her and the kids." He grinned. "We

think she's took up livin' over to Terlingua. Now me and my boys are goin' over there and git her and them sweet young kids of her'n."

"No," Ben said softly.

"No!

Whut the hell you talkin' 'bout now, boy? Huh?'"

"I said no."

"Well, just how in the hell are you figurin' on stoppin' us, mister?"

Ben smiled. "When you human trash meet the devil, tell him Ben Raines sent you."

"Ben Raines!" one man shouted.

Ben stepped from behind cover and lifted the Thompson, pulling the trigger, working the weapon from left to right, spraying the filth, fighting the natural rise of the powerful submachine gun.

The .45-caliber, hollow-point ACP slugs slammed the men around in the road and sprayed blood into the air and onto the sands. The men fell to the highway, dying in their own blood.

Ben inspected the bodies and took two of their M-16's and two of their pistols. He removed all their ammo belts and left them where they had fallen, their features twisted in that one last hot moment of dying.

He pulled the boy off the highway and then went to find the men's vehicles. The trucks were about five hundred yards up the road. Using one of his blankets to wrap the boy (ben could not bear the thought of wrapping the boy in one of the outlaws' blankets; he could give the boy that much, anyway), Ben dug a shallow grave and covered it with rocks to keep the coyotes and dogs from digging up the remains and eating them.

He and Jordy broke camp and loaded up, driving back up the road to the dead men's pickups. There, Ben found boxes of ammo and cans of water; several cases of food and five five-gallon cans of gasoline.

Ben looked at Jordy and grinned. "Think you could drive one of these trucks, Jordy?"

"I reckon I could if I set my mind to it, Ben."

"Well, all right, then. Let's just spend the morning having you practicing, then. How does that sound?"

"Better than a kick in the ass with a steel-toed boot, Ben," the boy replied with a grin.

Just after the sun had broken Over the horizon, Rani had thought she heard the faint sounds of gunfire. She thought they came from the west, but she couldn't be certain of either the shots or the direction.

Rani ran her fingers through her light brown hair, cut short. She was glad there were no mirrors in the old house; she must look like the devil.

She walked outside and stood for a time on the breezeway of the home.

Where have the years gone? she silently questioned. It seemed to her that she had been fighting for survival all her life—even though she knew that wasn't true. She turned her green eyes toward the west and wondered how many times she had left?

That's stupid! she thought. No one has the power to know that.

In her early thirties, Rani was more beautiful now than when she had been a cheerleader in high school. Only now, hers was a mature woman's beauty. She was, she often thought with a smile, just vaguely

remembering the old TV commercial, a full-breasted woman. She leaned her five foot, four inch frame against one of the columns of the old house and once more looked out over the quiet ruins, her arms folded under her breasts.

She thought: I still don't have enough books or paper and pencils for the kids. Have to make do with what I have. I can't chance another run outside this area.

She shook her head and walked inside to make a pot of tea. Tea, it seemed, was still relatively easy to come by. People would pass up the little tins of tea in their search for coffee.

The kids were still asleep.

She quietly fixed her tea, and with a handful of crackers, walked back outside to sit on the porch.

She was certain she had heard gunshots. And that made her very uneasy.

Jordy practiced for several hours behind the wheel of the smaller truck. For a kid who had never driven in his life, the boy caught on very fast. He, of course, was no expert, but he could keep it between the ditches. And the going was very slow, anyway, the highways in such bad shape. Averaging thirty mph was doing very well.

They pulled out at eleven o'clock that morning. Terlingua was only about three miles away.

On the outskirts of the ghost town, Ben pulled over and told Jordy to stay in his truck while he prowled a bit. Smiling, Ben thought the warning a bit unnecessary. It would have taken a team of mules to forcibly

remove the boy from behind the wheel.

Ben's trained eyes soon picked up on someone's attempts to hide vehicle tracks. It had been a pretty good job, but not done by an expert. And after fifteen minutes of looking, Ben straightened up, a puzzled look on his face. The footprints he'd found were all small.

He searched the ruins, suddenly sensing he was not alone. His eyes kept drifting to the big house overlooking the ruins. He walked toward the house.

Just the faintest finger of smoke came from the chimney.

The small footprints led straight to the house.

Standing beside a crumbling old adobe building, Ben called, "Hello, the house. I'm friendly. Anybody home?"

A bullet whined off the adobe, sending chunks of it flying. The slug missed Ben's head by only a couple of inches. He ducked back.

"Now, Vic!" a woman's voice came to him.

"Now, I've got you. And this time I'm going to kill you."

Chapter 18

"Madam," Ben called. "My name is not Vic. If you will put away that cannon you're firing at me, I'll sling my weapon and step out with my hands in the air. I'm traveling with a small boy named Jordy. He's with the trucks about a quarter of mile west of here. My name is Ben Raines."

"You're a goddamned liar!" Rani yelled.

"General Raines is a thousand miles east of here."

"Is your name Rani?" Ben called.

"Yes." This time, the reply was softer.

Briefly, Ben told her, from his hiding place behind the adobe, the events of that morning. He ended with, "... I killed the men who had kept the boy enslaved. They were thoroughly despicable types."

"Oh, God!" he heard her say. "The whole world's gone mad."

"Not all of us, Rani. Believe me, there are pockets of civilized behavior still to be found."

"Step out, Mr. Raines."

Taking a deep breath, Ben slung his Thompson and

stepped out from behind the old building, his hands in the air.

A very shapely lady stepped out onto the long porch. She held an AR-15 in her hands.

"Ben!" Jordy called. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Jordy," Ben called. "Stay where you are until I come for you."

"Yes, sir."

Rani lowered the rifle. She walked from the porch to the old stone fence around the mansion and stood looking down at Ben. "I'm Rani Jordan, Mr. Raines. Nice to meet you."

"You might change your mind, Miss Jordan. I think I've got about half the outlaws and warlords in the southwest chasing me."

"I think I know the feeling," Rani told him.

"I don't know the other warlords after me, but I do know Crazy Vic. Cowboy Vic. And he is crazy. Dresses like Sunset Carson, or one of those old-time cowboys. But don't sell him short. He looks stupid with those six-guns hanging left and right; but he's rattlesnake quick with them, and a dead shot with rifle or pistol. Do you know how many men we have chasing us?"

"I'd say about six hundred," Ben informed her.

Rani paled under her summer tan. "Six hundred?"

"Are you serious?"

"Oh, yes. So I would suggest we join forces and try to stay alive."

"But there's only two of us!" she protested.

"We can't fight six hundred men."

"Sure, we can," Ben said brightly. "Unless you want to surrender to them."

"No way!" she said grimly.

"Then we fight to stay alive and free. There is no other way."

Colonel Gray and his company of Rebels were literally fighting their way across Mississippi, then into Louisiana. It seemed they were in a firefight every twenty-five miles.

And race had once more reared up.

Everybody, or so it seemed, was fighting everybody else.

"Madness!" Colonel Gray said. "If there was ever a time for everyone to work together, this is it. Why can't they see that?"

Every thirty or forty miles, the heavily armed convoy of Rebels would enter some new warlord's territory, and the fighting would begin anew.

So far, the Rebels had suffered no deaths among their ranks; but several had been wounded, one seriously. About thirty-fives miles inside Louisiana, scouts reported a pocket of resistance; a group of people just trying to survive and get on with the business of living. The wounded Rebel was left at the small clinic there and Colonel Gray and his company moved on westward.

Captain Nolan and his platoon were dug in, fighting what appeared to be several hundred outlaws. Nolan was not worried about being overrun by the outlaws, for they appeared to be disorganized and very undisciplined. The Rebels were occupying a half block of brick buildings in a small Central Texas town. They

had plenty of food and water and ammo. But they were stuck.

"Nothing?" Cecil asked the radio operator.

"Not a thing except heavy static, sir. Nothing from General Raines, Colonel Gray, or Captain Nolan."

"Does the wall of static appear to be worsening?" Ike asked.

"Yes, sir. I can't even reach our guard towers."

"Shit!" Ike said.

"My sentiments exactly," Cecil said.

Ben repositioned the trucks Rani had hidden, this time putting all of them into the building to the side of the house.

"We may have to make a break for it," Ben explained. "We'll want the vehicles as close as possible."

Ben studied the town and the surrounding terrain. "We're in a good defensive position," he finally said.

All the supplies except for a three-day supply of food, water, and gasoline were removed from the trucks. Ben and Rani, with the bigger kids helping, began stockpiling wood, finally filling up one room of the house with fuel.

Ben left four M-16's and plenty of ammo for each upstairs, one rifle at each end of the house, another at the front and one at the back.

"I don't know why," Ben said to Rani, "but I have yet to see a warlord who had any artillery of any sort."

"It could be," Rani said with a wry grin, "that they can't find any. Probably due to the fact your Rebels took it all."

Ben returned her grin. "Now you just may have a point there, lady. We have been known to commandeer certain items necessary for survival and self-defense."

"Uh-huh."

Both felt that tiny elusive spark begin bouncing around between them. And with personalities as volatile as those of Ben and Rani, that spark was sure to ignite something. Very soon.

While Ben and Rani were cooking supper, Jordy sat with the other young people. Jordy was held in young awe by the others for being the traveling companion of Ben Raines.

Ben and Rani both noticed the kids were conversing in very low tones.

"Talking about you, Ben," she said.

"Yes. And I can just imagine what they're saying."

"They think you're a god, you know?"

"I know. I have some among my own people-adults-who believe that. I've done everything I know to do to dispel that crap."

"You haven't seen the shrines that were built in your name?"

"No. And if I ever do, I'll tear the goddamned things down."

"The people might shoot you if you try that."

"Not me," Ben said with a laugh. "I'm a god, haven't you heard?"

"Get serious!"

Ben did not tell her about the old man he-and many others-had seen. The man who called himself The Prophet. Rani, Ben felt, had enough to occupy her

mind without that added mystery.

Unless she had already encountered the old man. If she had, though, she wasn't mentioning it.

Ben pitched his tent in a clear spot between the house and the storage shed. He left Jordy to spend the night inside the house, with the other kids.

In his blankets, before sleep touched him with a soft

velvet hand, Ben reviewed the situation. There was always a chance they would not be found hiding out in the old ghost town, but those chances were slim. He guessed correctly that Jake Campo and West had teamed up with other smaller bands of outlaws and warlords and had spread out, searching for them. It might take them several weeks, but they would eventually reach the ghost town.

He turned in his blankets, listening to the wind sing around the canvas.

There wasn't a town within a hundred miles of Terlingua where he could go to find materials to make more bombs. So that was out.

Ben smiled in the darkness. It was a warrior's grim upturning of the corners of his mouth as a plan came into his mind.

Maybe he could even the odds a bit more. Yes. He'd get on that first thing in the morning.

He closed his eyes and let sleep gently take him into that long dark slide. The face of Rani stayed with him in sleep.

Lovely.

"Both of us will have to stress the importance of staying within the area outlined," he told Rani.

They sat on the edge of the porch; there were no chairs in the ghost town. They ate cold beans and crackers and sipped hot tea.

"You have a strange mind, Ben," Rani said.

"And I suppose mine is, too. Here we sit, sipping tea and discussing how best to kill-hideously-several dozen men."

"Get used to it, Rani. Civilization as we both knew it is gone. Probably forever. From now on, for as long as we live, for as long as those kids in the house live, it will be pure survival of the strongest. Those who are best prepared-mentally and physically-will have the better chances for a long life. The others will die. It's just that simple."

She shuddered beside him.

"Cold?"

"No," she said. She cut her green eyes and stared at Ben. "You enjoy it, don't you, Ben?"

Ben knew what she meant. He had been asked the question many times before, by many other women he was either involved with, or about to be. "Enjoy what, Rani?"

Shades of Jerre, Rosita, Gale, Dawn
... how many others?

"The fighting," she said simply.

"When I was a young man, Rani-not even out of my teens-back during the closing days of the Vietnam War, I, along with many other men, discovered there is a high, so to speak, to be found in combat. Yes, I suppose I do enjoy the fighting, in a perverse sort of way. I am a man of order and discipline, Rani. I have no patience with those who steal, loot, rape, molest, kill wantonly. And, to make a contradictory statement,

I will do my best to dispose of those types of people whenever I find them."

"When this is over, Ben, if we come out of this alive ..."

"We will," Ben assured her.

"... I want to join your people."

"You'd certainly be welcome, dear. You and the kids."

She again stared at the man, sitting calmly on the porch, munching on a cracker. "You're not even worried about our ... our problem, are you?"

"Worrying puts gray in the hair, dear. I have enough of that. No, Rani, all we can do is prepare for what's coming at us, then lay back and stay alert. Chewing our fingernails won't help a bit."

"You're incredible!"

"Thank you," Ben said with a grin.

Chapter 19

With Rani carefully mapping out each open pit Ben covered, the two of them-with Jordy, Robert, and Kathy helping-began rigging his deadly traps.

First, Ben spent two hours gathering thin poles and strips of wood, just long enough to cover the yawning holes. Then, using bits of canvas, rags, old newspapers-whatever he could find to serve the purpose- Ben covered the support poles. He then sprinkled those with a very thin layer of sand and pebbles. When he was finished with each hole, it looked as natural as the terrain surrounding it.

"Robert, Kathy, Jordy," Ben said. "This is no-man's-land out here. It'll be up to you three to see that the other kids don't come near here. You all understand that?"

They did.

The five of them spent the next two days gathering material for Ben to make his booby traps. They worked from dawn to dusk, taking few breaks. When they had finished, they had covered the opening of dozens of deep shafts.

"How far do these things go down into the ground, Ben?" Jordy asked.

"Some of them might drop for as much as a thousand feet, son," Ben told him. "Now that this is done, I've got to find and map out a bunny hole."

"A what?" Rani asked.

"No animal has just one hole to run into, Rani," Ben explained. "They'll have several more holes, escape routes, all camouflaged."

Leaving Rani to guard the kids, Ben packed a small rucksack with emergency gear and began his exploration of the terrain around the ghost town. He worked in an ever-widening circle until he found a narrow ravine running northeast from the town, toward Highway 118.

Back at the house, Ben packed up several sacks of food, water, blankets, and groundsheets. With Jordy and Robert helping, he cached those supplies and several spare weapons near

the ravine, carefully hiding them. He then took the small truck the survivalist had buried and Rani had found, and tucked it into the ravine, with spare cans of gas in the back. The truck was brown, and dirty from road use, and it blended in with the surroundings.

With Rani walking with him, Ben showed her the location of the supplies and the truck. "See that small ridge beginning just behind the house?" he asked, pointing.

"Yes."

"If I sense the situation is turning bad," he said, "I want you and the kids to head out. Get the truck and head in the direction it's pointed. It'll be rough, but

you should make it to Highway 118."

"Ben?..."

"Listen to me! We have no radio contact at all. None. We're in a very bad situation. We're going to be outgunned a hundred to one. At least. I don't know where Captain Nolan and his platoon might be. But they know I'm here. They'll fight through hell to reach me; that's our only hope. But if and when I say
Go,

you and the kids go. You understand?"

She slowly nodded her head.

"All right. That's settled. And I don't expect any argument from you when I give the word." He faced her, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Now listen very carefully to me, Rani. Forget all vestiges of civilized behavior. They no longer apply. You cannot afford the luxury of mercy or pity for those two-legged filth coming at us. I do not take prisoners, Rani. And neither do any of my personnel." Her eyes widened at this, but she said nothing. "I have neither the time, facilities, nor inclination for attempted rehabilitation. For the most part, it didn't work back when we had a civilization, and could spend millions of taxpayer dollars fucking around with criminals, when the biggest part of them should have been put up against a wall and shot to begin with. If you ever fail to shoot, and that action results in our position being overrun, I will find the time, believe me, to put a bullet in your head."

Her summer tan paled at his words. "You ..."
she stammered. "You don't mean that!"

"The hell I don't, honey."

"We're stuck!" a sergeant said to Captain Nolan.

"It appears that way," Nolan replied. "And it looks like it's being done deliberately."

"Our people on the roofs say we're pretty well evenly matched, person for person. I don't think they want to meet us nose on."

"I get the same impression. But we may have to force the issue. But if we do, we're going to take some losses. Those people are well placed. I think our best bet is to keep our heads down for a

couple more days. See what develops. But we're not going to set around with our thumb up our ass while we wait. We command the high ground. And that's going to defeat those assholes out there. Have your mortar people start ranging in the key locations. Make goddamn sure our trucks in the alley behind us are protected at all times. When we decide to go, we're going to do it fast and hard. Take off."

Jake Campo was traveling fast, only giving the area he assigned himself a perfunctory once over at best. No, Jake was in a hurry, for he wanted Ben Raines all to himself, and he thought he knew where Raines might be holed up.

West was highballing it south, cursing and hollering for his driver to hurry up. Raines had headed south; he just knew

it. And he wanted that son of a bitch all to himself.

Texas Red had studied Raines' movements up to when those other assholes had lost him, and had reached the conclusion Ben had headed due south. That would put him right smack in the Big Bend

National Park. And Texas Red was going to get there first.

Cowboy Vic had said, on the second day out, "Fuck Del Rio!" He had ordered his people to head for the Big Bend. He didn't want Ben Raines nearly as bad as he wanted Rani and them tight little cunts with her. Gettin' Raines would just be some icin' on the cake.

Colonel Gray studied the maps and made up his mind. With the roads as bad as they were, those stupid warlords popping up all over the place, like crazed jackrabbits, it was going to be a hard four to five day push to southwest Texas.

"Dallas to Abilene to Pecos, and then we'll cut south," he gave the orders. "Two squads out ranging a full twenty miles ahead of the main column. Clear the way for us. No quarter, no prisoners. Move out."

Ben ordered every available container of water inside the house. He then began boarding up ground-level windows. He cleared the area around the house of any object that might afford the enemy protection from bullets, leaving the scrub bushes as they were, still giving the place a long-deserted look.

"Now comes the hardest part," he said.

Rani looked at him.

"Waiting."

Ben looked around him and had to smile. He had commanded some ragtag troops in his lifetime, but this bunch would have to take the cake. Robert and Kathy, twelve years old. Jane, eleven years old. Jordy and

Paul, ten years old. All armed. All grim-faced. All ready for a fight.

Two adults and five kids against five or six hundred outlaws.

On Ben's sixth day in the old ghost town, the first band of outlaws hit them.

Chapter 20

"We're breaking out of this box, Sergeant," Captain Nolan said. He looked at his watch. 0630. It would be full light in twenty to thirty minutes. "Are the troops ready?"

"Yes, sir. Chompin" at the bit to go."

Nolan lowered his binoculars. "Very little movement from the other side. Most of them are probably still sleeping. Tell the mortar teams to start laying down fire."

"Yes, sir!"

the sergeant said with a grin.

The mortar barrage caught the outlaws by surprise. For several days the only reply from the trapped Rebels had been some small-arms fire. The HE and WP rounds from the Rebels caught the outlaws with their pants down-in many cases, literally.

The white phosphorus hit just after the high explosive rounds, searing through leather and steel and flesh and bone. The outlaws did not have time to recover from their initial shock before looking up into

the hard faces of the Rebels as the tiger-striped men and women charged the outlaws' positions. In most cases, that one look was their last look at anything pertaining to this life.

Captain Nolan's people took no prisoners.

The Rebels suffered two dead and five wounded. Of the wounded, only one was serious, but she was on her booted feet, refusing to be left behind.

Raines' Rebels broke out of the small town, barreling south. They still had several miles to go before reaching the General.

"A lot of dust coming from the west, Ben!" Jordy shouted from his post on the second floor of the old house.

"How many vehicles, Jordy?" Ben called, then realized the boy still could not count past ten.

"Bunches, Ben." The boy looked through the binoculars Ben had given him. He laboriously counted to ten, made a mark in the dust of the floor, and started again. "Ten and seven, Ben!" he called.

"Good boy!" Ben shouted. "Now stay down."

"Yes, sir."

Turning to Rani, Ben said, "Figuring four to a vehicle, we're up against sixty-five to seventy outlaws." He grinned. "That's good."

"That's good?"

she asked.

"Yeah. We have them outnumbered."

She looked at him as if he had gone mad.

Ben called his "troops" around him. "Now listen, kids. Don't fire until I tell you to fire. All the young

people into the room we fixed up for you. Stay down and stay quiet. It's going to be very noisy, kids. But we're going to make it. OK? Take off."

He looked at the remaining kids and at Rani.

"You all know your positions; get to them."

"How come you so damn sure Raines is hidin' out down here?" an outlaw asked West.

"I feel it in my guts, that's why," the stump-legged West replied. "All them people we talked to said he was headin' south. All signs point south. That there Rani cunt was headin' south. Remember that piece of map Texas Red found? It had Terlingua circled in pencil. They here.

I know it."

The outlaw column halted about a half-mile from the ghost town.

"Why we stoppin'?" West was asked by his driver.

"To rec ... recon ... look the situation over, you idiot. We ain't gonna make no rash moves this time around."

"At makes sense."

"Course it do. Gimme them field glasses."

While West was viewing the town through binoculars, he was unaware that Ben was looking at him.

"West," Ben said to Rani. "He's trash, just like the others. Maybe even worse than some. I should have killed him when I had the chance."

"Why didn't you?" she asked.

"I gave my word. And that is something I won't break."

"Not even to an outlaw?"

"Not even then."

"Ben!" Jordy called in a hoarse whisper.

"Right here, son."

"More cars and trucks comin" at us from the east."

"OK. Stay alert."

"Yes, sir."

Ben moved to the other end of the house and lifted his binoculars. That short column, ten cars and trucks, halted their movement about a mile from town. Through the long lenses, Ben caught a flash of bright red hair.

"Has to be Texas Red," he muttered.

"Let me see," Rani asked, holding out her hand for the binoculars. She lifted them to her eyes, focused them in, and said, "Yes. That's him. He's filth."

"Then that makes our job easier, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean, Ben?"

"I don't take prisoners," he reminded her.

"Ben, we're outnumbered, or soon will be, a hundred to one. And you're

talking about taking prisoners!"

Ben grinned. "Always think positive, darling."

She walked back to her position, shaking her head.

"Texas Red and his boys is on the other side of town, West," one of the outlaw's henchmen informed him.

"That was all that dust we seen comin' down."

"Yeah."

"Skirt the town to the south. Make contact with Red. We gotta plan this out. We don't wanna be shootin' each other tryin' to get Raines."

From the second floor, Ben watched the lone man leave West's column and begin his skirting of the town. He picked up his .30-06 and adjusted the scope for range. The man was a good thousand yards away. Too far. Ben let him work a little closer. The ammo Ben was using was, of course, hand-loaded, but this was beefed up to the max by his ordinance people. If the situation had been life and death, Ben would have chanced the thousand-yard shot. But he was in no hurry. He let the man get within seven hundred yards. Ben sighted him in, took a breath, released part of it, and gently squeezed the trigger, allowing the rifle to fire itself.

The man stood straight up in his boots, grabbed at his chest, then fell forward on his face.

"Shot high," Ben muttered. "I was shooting at his stomach."

"The son of a bitch!" West yelled.

"Bastard can shoot," Texas Red said. He turned to a man standing by the truck. "Is them boys part of West's bunch?"

The man lowered his binoculars. "Yeah. I can see that stump-legged bastard sitting in his van."

Ben grinned. He called, "Everybody pick up your spare weapon. Stick both of them out the window and pull the trigger. Half of you east, the other half west. Do it!"

The old dusty littered streets of the ghost town reverberated to the drum of AR-15'S, M-16's, 30-cj's, and AK-47'S.

"Holy shit!" West shouted as the windshield of his van exploded under the impact of a very lucky shot from Ben's rifle. West stared in horror at his driver. The man was slowly slumping down in the seat, a bloody hole in his forehead. Fluid and gray matter oozed out.

Texas Red did not move from his position by his truck. "Relax," he called. "Not even Raines is good enough to make a shot at this distance. He's just showing us he's got enough firepower behind him to make a stand of it."

"Red!" a man called. Red turned at the sound of the voice. "I can't even raise West's people at this distance. Radio has really gone to shit."

Red nodded. "Hull? You head out to West's position. Keep them slag piles in front of you. Or whatever them things are. When you reach the end of that last heap, zigzag into the ruins of them buildings. Stay down and you'll make it. Take off."

Hull wasn't exactly thrilled with his assignment, but he obeyed. He zigzagged and crawled and ran, expecting any moment to feel the hot impact of a slug. When he reached the high-piled waste dumps, he began to breathe a little easier. He stopped to catch his breath and looked

around him.

He grinned, his mouth a mass of rotting teeth. He slipped into a littered alleyway, looked around him, and stepped forward.

His screams seemed to linger in the air of the ghost town, adding to the ghosts of miners who had fallen to their deaths in the long, seemingly endless pits.

Hull bounced from side to side in the old shaft, breaking nearly all the bones in his arms, hands, and legs long before he reached the dark bottom of the shaft. Had he been able to see, he would have seen he

landed among the bones of others who had taken that one long step into nothingness.

"Shit!" Texas Red said, as Hull's screams finally faded away. "Raines has got people scattered around in the town, too. This ain't gonna be as easy as I first thought." The rattlesnakes that lived deep in the old mine shafts began crawling over Hull's broken and bleeding body

...

"I think we better wait for more men, Red," an outlaw suggested.

...

the snakes opened their fanged mouths and struck at the still-warm body, sensing food in their presence. The old mine shafts contained thousands of snakes; they slithered and rattled in the darkness ...

"Who the fuck axed you?" Red snarled at the man.

...

Hull's body was rapidly turning black from the massive amounts of venom being injected into his dead flesh

...

"Jesus!" West whispered. He had banged his still-sore stump getting away from the dead driver. "What was all that hollerin'?"

...

The rattlers, some of them eight and ten feet long, wound and coiled around Hull's body. One stuck its head into Hull's open mouth and sank its fangs into the dead man's tongue ...

"Let's back off 'bout another half-mile, West," a man suggested. "We'll cut 'cross country and link up with Texas Red that away."

"Damn good idea," West said.

...

Hull's body was now completely covered by the rattlesnakes. The swelling carcass seemed to expand with new life. And the snakes waited for yet more food to fall their way.

"One group is pullin' back, Ben!"

Jordy called.

"Good boy. Keep a sharp lookout, kids,"

Ben called. He turned to Rani. "We won the first round."

"The fight isn't over yet," she reminded him.

"Think positive, dear. Think positive."

Chapter 21

Ben watched the column headed by West pull back. Shortly afterward, he noticed dust from the north, tracking east, heading toward Texas Red's location.

"That screaming a few moments ago?" Rani asked.

"Someone stepped into one of the old shafts," Ben told her. "We shortened the odds some the first go-around."

"We're going to need more than that," Rani said glumly.

Ben laughed. "Go tell the kids to stand easy but not to leave their posts. We're going to have a few hours respite."

"And then?" she asked.

"Then all hell breaks loose." He looked toward the east. "Be interesting to know what those crap-heads are talking about," he muttered.

"Jake's gonna be plenty pissed about this," West said.

"Fuck Campo!" Texas Red said. "He don't spell Jack-shit to me."

But West thought, and thought correctly, most of that was pure macho bravado. West had yet to meet anyone who wasn't, at best, leery of Jake Campo-at worst, terrified of the big outlaw.

"We gonna have to approach this usin' some sense," Texas Red said. "I guess them Rebs of Raines must have fire-balled down here to join him. He's got them scattered around the ruins of the town. Problem is, I don't know how many of them they is."

"I can't see how that's possible," West countered. "Our guys was supposed to find them and box them in, wasn't they?"

"Findin' Raines' Rebs is one thing," Texas Red said. "Boxin' them in is something else."

"So what do we do?"

"We wait and think this thing out."

Jake knew what had happened when Red and West were not at the prearranged meeting place. No honor among thieves, he thought.

He looked up at the sound of engines. Cowboy Vic's column roared into view.

"Where's the rest of the boys?" Vic asked.

"I would imagine they've gone on into that old ghost town just west of the Big Bend," Campo said. "That's what you had in mind, too, wasn't it?"

"Yep," Vic said honestly. "I was thinkin' that whoever got Raines first, could write his own ticket. Wasn't you thinkin' the same, Jake?"

Jake laughed. "Sure was."

"Thought so. That's why we all got down here a little early, wasn't it?"

"That's it. Well, maybe this isn't such a bad thing after all," Jake mused aloud.

"How you figure that?"

"We'll just lay back and let West and Texas Red soften up Raines and his bunch. Let them take the heaviest losses. Then we'll move in and pick up the pieces."

"And the glory," Cowboy Vic said, a trickle of slobber leaking out of one corner of his mouth. "Right?"

"You got it." And then I'll kill you, Campo thought.

"Good plan," Cowboy Vic said. And when that's done, then I'll kill you, he thought.

The men looked at each other. Vic said, "You got anything to fuck with you? We picked up a few cunts but they give us so much trouble we kilt them."

"Yeah," Campo said absently. "We picked up a shit-pot full of women. Help yourself."

"Here they come, Ben!" Jordy shouted from the second floor. "A whole big bunch of them."

"Hold your fire!" Ben called. "We have to let them get into town."

"There ain't nobody in this damn old place!" Ben heard the voice drift faintly to him. "The goddamned place is deserted."

"Hull fell in a hole in the ground!" another man shouted. "Hell, there ain't no Rebs here."

"Charge the house!" Texas Red's voice ripped the air. "There ain't nobody up there 'cept Raines and the woman and kids. Go, boys, go!"

A dozen or more outlaws, thinking they had victory in the palm of their hands, came charging from the southeast. Ben waited until the panting, out-of-shape men were just beyond the stone fence before yelling the orders to fire.

The dozen went down under a hail of lead.

"Finish them!" Ben yelled.

The yelling of the wounded was silenced by single shots to the head.

West looked at Texas Red. "Thought you said this was gonna be easy?"

"Shut up, West. If you had any sense, you'd have been counting the rifles that was firing. I did. I figure no more than seven or eight people in there firing. Nine at the most. Shit, man! They's two hundred and fifty of us." He waved his hand, signaling the others to gather around him.

"Harrison, you take your bunch to the back of the house. Lee, you and your boys take the near side. Jess, take the far side. Rest of you follow me, we're takin' the front. We can't burn them out, so we're gonna have to shoot them out of there. Just keep up a steady fire. We get enough lead in there bouncin' around, we'll drive them out. Move out."

Ben picked up on their plans before the outlaws had a chance to put it into full operation.

"Don't let them surround us!" he called.

"Stop them now!"

Texas Red's plan was only half accomplished. Both ends of the house were covered, but the intense fire from the house kept the front and back open, the gunfire driving the outlaws back time after time.

Roaming from top to bottom, one end of the house to the other, Ben counted thirty-five dead lying around the old house on the hill.

He told Rani, "If we can hold on through the night, this bunch will have a lot of quitters in it. These men won't put up with losses like we've given them. They're not soldiers; they're trash, undisciplined gutter-slime. We've got to hang on."

Rani stuck out her chin. "My kids will do their best."

"I'm damn proud of them. Every last one of them," Ben told her. Then he surprised her by leaning down and kissing her mouth. "And I'm proud of you, Rani. I'll soldier with you anytime, anyplace."

She touched her lips with her fingertips. Kneeling there, in the dust of the floor, her face blackened by gunsmoke and dirt, she smiled at him.

"We'll have to continue this later on, Ben."

"Looking forward to it, Rani."

"Here they come, Miss Rani!" Robert called.

The lines of men that ran at them were not nearly so full of bravado this time around. Ben could sense that many of the outlaws had already had a gutful of this fighting.

"Adjust your fire!" Ben yelled. "Shoot them in the guts. Aim for the center of the belly!"

The house rocked with gunfire; the air became smoky and hard to breathe; involuntary tears sprang into the eyes of the defenders, young and older alike.

The lines of men wavered, then broke completely and ran back to safety.

"Reload!" Ben called. "Reload all empty clips and stand ready."

Rani came to him. "Why did you tell us to shoot the men in the stomach, Ben?"

His smile was not pretty. "Listen closely, Rani."

The soul-wrenching screams of the gut-shot men on the outside were hideous to hear. They lay in pools of their own blood and howled in agony. Some were calling for mother to help them; others called for God to put an end to their suffering; others lay dying and cursed God.

Still others cursed Ben Raines.

"Can you imagine how demoralizing that is to their buddies?" Ben said, grim satisfaction in his voice.

"I never want you for an enemy, Ben," Rani told him.

"Why, darling," Ben replied. "I'm just doing what Uncle Sammy taught me to do-years ago."

Dusk began draping purple curtains over the land. As the first fingers of darkness touched the old ghost town, Ben carefully checked each child's position. He checked each weapon, making sure every available clip was full. He talked with each young warrior for a few moments, patting them on the shoulder, reassuring them. With several, he stood their post while they went to the bathroom.

He told Rani, "You take the upstairs and I'll take it down here. The kids have got to get some sleep. Keep changing positions but do so staying low. I think they'll be sending in commando teams tonight to get inside the house. So if you see anything moving, don't shout the warning. Come to the stairs and tell me. OK?"

For a reply, she kissed him and then was gone in the gloom of the old house.

Ben laid the M-16 aside and picked up his Thompson. He was almost certain a few of the outlaws would get inside the house this night. While he really had nothing against the M-16, he knew the big, slow .45-caliber slug packed more of a wallop than the smaller, lighter, but faster 5.56 round. He knew that if the .45 slug hit a man, anywhere, that man was going down.

Full dark came suddenly, almost too quickly. One second it was still light enough to see, the next instant darkness had completely enveloped the ghost town.

The outlaws wasted no time in slipping around the house on the hill. Those badly wounded outlaws that lay moaning and crying and dying around the house gave their buddies away.

Rani whistled softly for Ben. He looked up through the gloom of the old stairs.

"They're slipping in all around us, Ben," she said softly.

"The kids up?"

"And ready."

"Pick your targets and open fire."

It was rock-and-roll time around the house on the hill overlooking the ghost town. The night became pocked with muzzle flashes, punctuated with yelling from the now-discovered outlaws, and filled with the screaming of the wounded as the young defenders of the house found their targets and opened fire.

Over the banging and roaring of gunshots and bolts slamming back and forth, Ben heard the faint sounds of boot heels on the old brick of the front porch. He stepped back into the darkness until his back touched the wall. He lifted the Thompson as his eyes found the

shapes of men slipping quietly up to the sightless empty windows that faced the porch.

He cleared one window of three dark shapes, the Thompson jumping and bucking and roaring in his hands. The men were flung backward as the lead struck them in belly and chest.

Ben quickly changed positions, moving from one end of the room to the other. He heard one of the young people

yell. He had no way of knowing if the cry was out of fear or if the young person had been hit by gunfire. Ben suspected the latter.

He looked up just in time to hurl himself to the floor. Gunfire ripped the dark room, the slugs striking where Ben had been. On the floor, Ben lifted the Thompson and pulled the trigger, clearing yet another window of outlaws.

Someone was in the room with him. No! More than one person. Two, maybe three men. Ben lay on the floor and listened. A boot scraped the floor. Ben crawled noiselessly away, lifted the submachine gun, and poured the lead toward the sound.

As the muzzle flashes from the Thompson gave sparking light to the room, Ben saw three men jerk and dance grotesquely as the .45-caliber equalizers hit flesh and bone. The odor of piss and shit and vomit and sweat was strong in the room, as dying bladders and bowels emptied.

"Back, back!" someone from the outside called. "Fall back."

"Fuck this crap!" a man yelled. "I've had it. I'm cuttin' out."

"Yeah," another voice said. "Me, too."

"I'm with you, guys," yet another voice was added.

"Let's get the hell out of here," a fourth voice said.

Those voices were joined by others.

"You yellow mother-fuckers!" a man screamed. "You bastards runnin' away from kids and cunts and one man!"

"You goddamn right!"

"I'll see you dead first!" the commanding voice shouted.

Then what Ben had hoped would happen began taking place.

Gunfire ripped the night. But the fire was not directed toward the house. The outlaws were fighting among themselves.

The sounds of heavy gunfire coughed out of the night. Trucks and cars and vans cranked up, and headlights cut the dust and gunsmoke that had settled over the ghost town.

The gunfire died away. The sounds of roaring motors faded into the night. Only the moaning and howling and screaming and cursing of the wounded could be heard.

Ben crawled around the room, making certain all of the outlaws were dead. Ben found one still alive. Using his long-bladed knife, Ben cut the man's throat.

He crawled to a window and looked out. Far in the distance, he could see the light from escaping vehicles.

Against all odds, the small band of defenders, alone in the ashes, had won this fight.

Chapter 22

Robert had been hit in the arm. The wound was painful, but not serious. Miraculously, that was their only casualty.

At first light, with everyone giving him cover if it was needed, Ben slipped outside and began gathering up weapons and ammo.

He counted ninety dead. He smiled amid the gore and dead and shook his head. If ninety had been killed, at least that many more had been wounded.

"Lucky," Ben muttered. "We were so very, very lucky."

"Oh, goddamn it, Ben!" Rani said, when Ben told her what he planned to do.

Ben stood firm. "You going to help me, or do I do it myself?"

Her green eyes touched him. They were emotionless, unreadable. "I'll help you, Ben. If you think it's necessary, then let's do it. But I think it's the most hideous thing I have ever heard of."

"When they start soaking up the bullets meant for you and me and the kids," Ben countered, "you just might change your mind."

They began stacking the bodies of the dead outlaws around certain parts of the yard, and closing in the porch with them.

It was grisly work, and Ben didn't like it any more than Rani-although he would never let on to her that he didn't. But he knew the grisly sight would make a lot of outlaws very uneasy, and would probably cause a few of them to give up the fight altogether. Also, most of the outlaws would be very reluctant to climb over the stinking, stiffening dead to get onto the porch.

He told Rani that.

"I still think it's barbaric!" she snapped at him.

Ben met her hot eyes. "Would you prefer to see eleven-year-old Jane held down on the ground and butt-fucked?"

She shut her mouth and continued working.

Colonel Gray's column got as far as west central Texas before they started hitting any further major trouble. There, more small bands of looters, outlaws, and warlords began popping up, slowing down Gray's advance. Almost always, when the outlaws saw what they were up against, they pulled back and let the column go through.

But it was slowing their progress considerably.

Captain Nolan's platoon advanced to midway between Fort Stockton and Marathon. They had all refilled their water containers back at the Imperial Reservoir, but were in such a hurry they did not check the water for impurities. Dysentery laid them all down

flat. They carried the proper medication to treat the illness, but that was small comfort to the suffering Rebels, who all knew it would be a full twenty-four to thirty-six hours before any of them would be able to do anything other than moan and squirt.

West and Texas Red had managed to gather some sixty-odd members of their outlaw band together. The rest had split for parts unknown, all vowing they would not be back.

It was a sorry-looking bunch that met Cowboy Vic and Jake Campo on the east side of Study Butte at midmorning.

Jake started laughing when he saw who it was. West and Texas Red flushed with anger, but wisely kept their mouths closed.

Jake waved the leaders to one side and said, "All right, tough-boys. What happened?"

Jake stopped laughing as the story unfolded. He began getting madder by the second. Finally he waved the men silent.

Jake glared at the outlaws. "Do you mean to tell me-honestly-that

one

man, and

one

woman, along with a handful of snot-nosed brats, managed to beat back two hundred and fifty grown, fully-armed men?"

"That's about it, Jake," West said.

Texas Red said, "All that talk about Ben Raines being some sort of god, Jake. I don't know. But something is damn sure spooky about him, and those that follow him."

"I don't believe that shit!" Jake snapped. But after this? ... He shook that thought away. "You boys look

like crap. Get some food in you and some sleep. We hit that skinny son of a bitch, that uppity broad, and them kids at first light."

Ben and Rani sat in the yard of the old mine owner's home. Rani did her best to keep her eyes from the piled-up bodies in the yard and on the porch.

"And you really think you and your followers can bring a return to civilization?" she asked him.

"The way it was?" Ben looked at her. "Oh, no. Never in our lifetime, Rani. Probably not even the grandchildren of those kids in the house will know civilization the way we knew it. But those of us who believe strongly enough can carve something out of the ashes. We don't have to be alone in that, either. Sometime within the next few months, we'll start setting up the outposts I told you about. It's a start," he said philosophically.

"Where would the dream have been if you had not come along?"

"Oh, Rani, don't give me more credit than I'm due. Believe me when I say I didn't want the damned job to begin with."

"You mean you tried to get out of it?"

"I sure did."

She sat by his side on the stone fence and stared out at the emptiness around them. "Where will you go if ... when," she corrected, "we get out of this bind?"

"Wandering, probably."

She abruptly stood up. "I've got to check on the kids."

And you'd like to go wandering, too, Ben thought.

Like me, you're tired of the responsibility. But you're also tired of hunger and danger and of the feeling that you are the only person in the entire country who gives a damn about the kids.

"When we get out of this," Ben muttered. "You were right, Rani. If it is the word."

Ben spent the rest of the day checking weapons. He unpacked his rocket launcher and checked the grenades. Then, with a shovel in his hand, he prowled the area around the house, digging a dozen and a half punji pits, rigging the bottom of the pits with sharpened stakes, then camouflaging the opening the same way he'd done the shaft openings.

Using old wire he found, he rigged another dozen and a half ankle traps.

He emptied out several boxes of shotgun shells and made some crude bombs, filling them with rusty nails and the shot from the shells.

It was nearly dusk when he finished. He could not think of anything he'd missed in his preparation for war.

Other than wishing he knew of some way to keep the piled-up bodies from stinking.

"Nothing?" Ike asked, standing in the door of the communications building.

"Nothing, sir," the young woman told him. "But for some reason, the static is not as bad as it was yesterday." She looked at a chart. "It's down by twenty percent."

Gale and Tina entered the room.

"What's the word on Dad?" Tina asked.

Ike shook his head.

"Ike," Gale said, "you look like an old hound dog. Come on! You've known Ben for years. You know he's an expert at getting out of tight spots."

Ike grinned. "Gettin' into

them is a speciality of his, too."

"Why does this Mississippi redneck always have to make something sexual out of everything people say?" Gale asked, winking at Tina.

"What'd I say?" Ike asked, rolling his eyes. "What'd I say?"

"Uncle Ike," Ben's adopted daughter said, "you're impossible."

Cecil stepped into the room. "We have a revival in here?" the black man asked.

"Yeah," Gale said. "With preachin' and singin' and dinner on the grounds. That'd be a first for me, let me tell you."

Ike put his arm around Gale's slender shoulders. "I'll make a Baptist outta you yet, darlin'."

Gale looked at him, feigning great horror. "Do I look like a yold

to you?" she asked him.

"Say that in American, darlin'," Ike

grinned. "My French never was very good."

Ben opened his eyes and looked at the luminous hands of his watch. Four o'clock. He could not believe the night had passed without an attack from the outlaws.

He rolled from his blankets and pulled on his boots.

He climbed upstairs and relieved Kathy at her lonely lookout, sending her to bed.

Ben checked the dark terrain surrounding the house. He could not see any movement in the inkiness, but his senses were working overtime.

Something, or somebody, was out there. Waiting. Watching.

He didn't need anyone to step down from the Mount to tell him who it was and what they were about to do. He waited and watched until five thirty.

He shook Rani awake. "We have company," he told her. "Get up and very quietly wake the kids. Get them to their posts. I think they're going to hit us-for some reason-at first light."

The last thing Ben had done before calling it a day the afternoon before was to take the belts from some of the dead men and rig suspended harnesses for the M-16's. From the ceiling, the harnesses would hold the M-16's at the right height for the young people manning them; from the floor, the harnesses would prevent the weapons from jumping out of their young hands on full auto, and still keep the weapons aligned-more or less.

The gun slits Ben had built had been constructed with each young person in mind; just to the right height to afford the maximum protection from bullets.

Now, each person, with Ben being the exception, had twin M-16's suspended and ready to go.

Ben was ready with his homemade bombs, his RPG launcher, and his stack of fully loaded automatic shotguns taken from the dead men; along with several automatic weapons and, of course, his old faithful .45-caliber Thompson.

Rani joined him on the ground floor with a cup of steaming hot tea. Together, they sipped tea and watched the horizon begin to lighten in the east.

Ben was impassive as the sky grew brighter, allowing them to view what lay before them.

Rani sucked in a hard gulp of air and let it out with a hiss. She clutched at his arm.

"I see them," Ben said.

They were totally surrounded. Cars, trucks, vans, and motorcycles lined the area around the ghost town. What seemed to be hundreds of men stood quietly in a circle, facing the house from all conceivable directions.

"I've tracked you across five states, Raines," Jake spoke through a bullhorn, his electronically magnified voice booming out of the dawn.

"Four states," Ben calmly corrected.

Rani looked up at him. "Please excuse him," she said sarcastically.

"But I'm open to a deal," Jake said.

"I can just imagine what it might be," Ben muttered.

"Yes," Rani said.

"You hear me, you skinny son of a bitch!"

Jake roared.

Rani looked Ben up and down and with a smile, said, "You could stand to put on a few more pounds."

"I'm very comfortable the way I am, thank you."

"You hear me, you asshole!" Jake roared.

"Yes, I hear you, fatso!" Ben yelled. "No deals."

Some of Campo's men giggled and Jake frosted them silent with a hard look.

"I'm gonna skin that son of a bitch alive!"

Jake growled. "After I make him watch while I fuck his woman and

all

them kids, right in front of his eyes. Boys

and

girls."

"Jesus, Jake!" one of his men yelled. "Them ain't sandbags he's got piled around the house.

Them's dead

bodies."

West lifted his binoculars and looked, as did Texas Red and Cowboy Vic. The three of them exchanged uneasy glances.

Even Jake swallowed hard after viewing the scene through field glasses. He shook his head. "Some people just ain't got no class at all," he said.

"That's unholy. He'll go to hell for that."

Even Crazy Cowboy Vic looked at Jake oddly after that remark.

Many of the outlaws standing in the circle around the house shuffled their feet and exchanged glances of indecision. It would not take much for some of them to split the scene and say to hell with Ben Raines.

"Your life for them kids and the woman!" Jake lied.

Ben looked at Rani. "I wish I had a 81-mm mortar," he said. "I'd give that lardass an answer he'd never forget."

"Without taking anything away from your request, Ben," Rani replied. "I'd like to see that platoon of your Rebels come riding up."

"Well, yes. I suppose I'd settle for that."

Those Rebels of Ben's were on the way, but about half of them were in no condition for a fight.

Using a range-finder, Ben plotted the distance at nine hundred yards. He picked up his bolt-action rifle and thumbed it off safety, adjusting the huge scope. Campo stood with an open van door in front of him. At this range, a head shot would be nearly impossible to make.

But one outlaw, with more guts than sense-or maybe he was just plain stupid, that was probably it-was standing on top of the cab of a pickup truck. Ben

sighted him in.

"If you make that shot, Ben," Rani said, "I'll give you a present."

Ben looked at her and waggled his eyebrows. "Oh?"

She grinned and patted him on the arm. "Calm yourself, old man. Heavy breathing will throw off your aim. Besides, are you sure you can handle me?"

Ben gave her his best lewd grin.

"Uh-huh," she said.

Ben propped the rifle on the sill for support, took aim, and gently squeezed the trigger. The outlaw flew off the top of the cab, a bloody hole in the center of his chest.

"Now come and get us," Jordy yelled from the top floor. "You fat-ass!"

Chapter 23

The circle of outlaws moved as if controlled by one mind. The outlaws were growling and snarling like the animals they were. They were shouting obscenities at the house and its occupants.

"Hold your fire!" Ben called just loud enough for the kids to hear.

The bolts of the twin M-16's were pulled. The kids gripped the pistol grips, pressing the stocks against young shoulders, getting ready for the jar and slam of double-16's on full auto.

The circle drew nearer.

Ben noticed that Campo, West, Texas Red, and Cowboy Vic had stayed back, well out of conventional rifle range.

"True leaders of men," Ben muttered.

He picked up his .30-06 and clicked it off safety, lifting the stock to his shoulder and sighting in one particularly ugly outlaw.

The part of the circle that had gathered at the rear of the old town had vanished into the ruins of the ghost town.

Ben smiled, thinking: Only a few more seconds before one of them takes that one last long step.

A hideous scream cut the air as an outlaw stepped into a mine shaft and went tumbling into eternity, howling as he fell.

Ben pulled the trigger and blew off a man's jaw. The man was flung backward, landing on his ass in the sand.

"Fire!" Ben yelled.

Twelve M-16's, all older models, all fully automatic, began singing their death songs, yammering and spitting out lead.

Ben was firing an AK-47 on full auto, the 7.62 ammo cutting great holes in the now-broken circle of outlaws.

A man stepped into a punji trap, the sharpened stake driven through his foot, trapping him on the sands. He howled and beat his fists on the ground, all the fight gone from him.

Ben let him howl.

Behind Ben, on the other end of the first floor, Rani was manning her twin 16's, the 16's jumping in their harness, the floor around her twinkling with

brass.

Over the rattling and cracking of gunfire, the pinging of brass bouncing off the floor, Ben heard the faint screams of another man as he stepped onto the thin covering over a deep shaft. The man went howling into his frightened death.

The circle of outlaws broke, splintering like an egg shell, leaving a half-dozen men trapped on the porch, their hands slick with the gore from the bodies they were forced to climb over getting to the porch.

Ben dropped the empty AK and jerked up a sawed-

off shotgun, an automatic that held nine three-inch magnums.

Ben cleared the porch of all living things, the shotgun roaring in his hands.

"Cease fire!" Ben yelled.

The house fell silent. Now, only the moaning and crying and cursing and screaming of the wounded outlaws could be heard.

"Sound off!" Ben called.

A couple of the kids had scratches and splinters from the wood barricades in front of them; all had sore shoulders from the pounding of the twin 16's, but again, against all odds, no one was seriously hurt.

The area surrounding the house was littered with the dead and dying. The screaming from men caught in the punji traps was now hoarse, more animal than human.

"Take the upstairs, Rani," Ben said.

"Tell the kids to go to the bathroom, get some water and food in them, and then you do the same. I'll look after things down here."

Ben reloaded clips and checked his AK. He reloaded the sawed-off shotgun and then, with one eye toward the outside, he checked Rani's twin M-16's and reloaded some clips for her. When Rani returned from the upstairs, Ben went up and checked out the weapons, patting each young person on the shoulder, speaking calmly to them, complimenting them, and assuring them that it was almost over. Just hang in there, he told them.

"Will we get to go back to your people when this is over, Mr. Raines?" Kathy asked.

"You sure will, kids," Ben told them. "And when you're there, you'll never have to be afraid again. And that's a promise."

Jake Campo didn't want to admit it, but the first tentative fingers of fear were lightly touching him. It was not a feeling he liked. Fear was almost unknown to the man. He had had his way all his life; even back in grade school, he had taken whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted it. The laws of a liberal society being what they were-when there was a government, with laws (as silly as many of them were), many of them catering to the punk, the lawless, the bully-boys like Jake had a field day with other kids less inclined to bully.

Even when Jake had received three to five in prison for rape, he ran the joint (back when joint

was jail and not something to smoke). Jake did that time (he was out in eighteen months) with ease. When he was charged with almost killing a man with his fists-he never did go to jail for that crime, the jails, at that time, being too crowded and federal judges not wanting to tax the sensitive criminal psyche-he began to have nothing but contempt for the legal system of America.

Jake wasn't alone in that contempt. Almost any law-abiding citizen with a modicum of intelligence felt nothing but contempt for America's legal system.

Jake looked at the house on the hill and knew, he knew, for the first time that he could remember, raw fear.

West sat on a broken down chair and rubbed his aching stump. Would the goddamn thing ever heal?

West hated Ben Raines. Loathed him. But he was afraid of Ben Raines. Scared to death of him. West wished they could just call this thing off and go on back to Tennessee. Jesus Christ! He couldn't get over the sight of those bodies piled around the house and on the porch. And Raines had booby-trapped the town, too. West shuddered at the thought of falling into one of those mine shafts.

God, what a way to die.

He bet there were snakes down there in them pits, too. Snakes and rats eatin' on the bodies.

"Shit!" he muttered.

Texas Red ran his fingers through his long red hair. He sat off by himself and engaged in, what was to him, heavy thinking.

This whole operation was screwed up. Everything about it was screwed up. But he wasn't gonna give up. No way.

If any of them did that, word would get around the whole southwest that they let one man, one woman, and a handful of kids kick the shit out of three or four hundred men. Couldn't let that happen.

"So," Red muttered, "that only leaves us one choice. Kill them all."

Crazy Cowboy Vic wasn't scared of Ben Raines. Cowboy Vic wasn't afraid of nothing. Cowboy Vic didn't have sense enough to be afraid of anybody. He grinned as he pulled at his crotch. Thought about all them young girls in the house. Smooth tight pussies.

Vic liked to hear the girls holler when he hurt them. That's when he really got his rocks off. And Vic liked to kill. Didn't make no difference to Vic who or what it was. Human or animal. He liked to kill; liked to torture.

Far back as he could remember, he liked to torture animals. Skin them alive. Cut the paws off dogs and cats.

Of course his parents knew about his aberrations. Of course his parents didn't report him to the authorities. Victor was their darling little pride and joy.

Not even when Little Victor buried the neighbor's pet up to its neck and ran over it with a power mower did his parents report it. They concealed the fact. Heaven forbid anyone should learn they had a nut for a kid.

They thought they were doing Victor a favor by keeping quiet about his ... strange behavior.

There are a great many stupid parents in the world.

Vic slobbered on himself as he thought about the kids in the house. And Ben Raines. He'd like to torture Ben Raines. Make him holler.

Yeah! Good fun!

"I wonder what they're thinking?" Rani asked.

"A lot of them are thinking about quitting," Ben told her. "But the majority of them know they can't quit. Word would get around that they were whipped by a handful of kids and one man and one woman. They can't allow that to happen. They have to try to kill us to shut our mouths."

"We must have killed half of them," she observed.

"Or a lot of them have run away."

"We've wasted quite a few. But you're right. A lot of them have hit the air."

Ben sat eating a can of cold beans, washing it down with water from his canteen.

Rani looked at him, calmly eating amid the gore, and shook her head.

"Hungry?" Ben asked.

"No. How can you just sit there, with dead bodies all around us, and eat?"

"Because I'm hungry," Ben answered simply.

"You know what I mean."

Ben jerked his thumb toward the outside. "Because of them, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I don't view them as human beings, Rani.

It's very doubtful any of those dead men ever, in their entire lives, did one decent thing-even back when we had a civilization. They were thieves, bully boys, thugs, rapists, muggers, street slime, rednecks, white trash, racists-you name it. If they had their choice between stealing and working, they stole. They beat their wives and girlfriends and abused their kids. They cheated on their income tax-if they even bothered to file-and the rest of us paid for it. To a man, they considered themselves smarter than the law and above obeying the laws the rest of us lived by. They filled every cheap honky-tonk in the country whenever they had a few bucks in their pockets and were looking for trouble. Their idea of fun was stomping somebody's head in; usually somebody who just happened to come in for a quiet drink and hadn't bothered a soul. They were loud-mouthed, profane, obnoxious, ignorant, crude, and rude. And when they died, if the undertaker would shove a tube up their rectum and

give them an enema, they could have been buried in a matchbox. I don't give any more thought to killing them than I would stepping on a roach or kicking a dried piece of dog shit off the sidewalk. That answer your question, dear?"

She looked at him for a long moment before speaking. "There is a lot of arrogance in you, Mr. Ben Raines. Are you aware of that?"

"A lot of people confuse a desire for order and discipline with arrogance, Rani. I went for a good many years in the Tri-States without firing a shot at anything other than a paper pop-up target. We who made up the Tri-States proved that a society totally void of crime is not only possible but very easy to attain."

"By trading one type of fear for another, Ben?"

Ben smiled at that. "It's a funny thing, Rani. But in all my years, I've never been afraid of the cops. If one obeys the law, there is no need to be fearful of authority."

She turned around, scanned her perimeter, and looked back at Ben. "And I bet you drove 55, too, didn't you, Ben?"

"Yes, I did. I didn't like it; thought it was a stupid law. But it was the law, so I obeyed it. I never got a ticket, either."

She once more turned around, looking at the body-littered area around the house on the hill, overlooking the ghost town. With her back to Ben, she said, "You people in the Tri-States got a lot of negative publicity."

"Yes, we did, Rani. Our system of justice was harsh. It was a one-mistake society. But no one went hungry

in the Tri-States. Not one person. No one was denied proper medical care. Everybody had a job. The taxes were fair. We didn't allow huge corporations to swallow up the small farmer. We had damn few complaints from the people who chose to live in the Tri-States."

"You people also had quick trials, too, Ben."

"We sure did," Ben said, giving his perimeter a once-over. "The legal profession, as you knew it, wasn't the same in Tri-States. But there again, I don't recall a single complaint from any legal resident of the Tri-States."

She shook her head. "What's the point of arguing, Ben. It will never be again."

He looked at her, surprise on his face. "Of course, it will be, Rani. Not as big as before. But it will be."

"You really believe that, don't you, Ben? God, you're a dreamer, you know that?"

"If we don't put it back together, Rani, I firmly believe civilization will die."

She looked around her and reached for her twin 16's. "If we don't start paying attention, Ben, we're going to die. Here they come again."

Chapter 24

This time the outlaws were much more cautious in their attack. They did not attempt to overwhelm the house by sheer numbers, electing to reach the crumbling buildings of the town and settle in.

"War of nerves," Ben said. "They're going to try to wear us down."

"Mr. Ben!" Jordy called in a whisper from upstairs. "Your radio is talking!"

On the second floor, Ben listened to his radio. The static was still there, but he was able to understand the transmission.

"This is Eagle One," Ben said. "Repeat, please."

"Eagle One, this is Captain Nolan. We're two hours away from your location. Colonel Gray is less than a day from your position. Our forward scouts have you in visual. Do you copy this, General?"

"I'm copying five by five, Captain. We can hold until you reach us."

"Dysentery hit us hard, General. I'm at no more than half strength. How do you want me to launch my attack?"

"Get as close as you can and set up mortar teams. We're holed up in the big house overlooking the town."

"Ten-four, General. Hang on."

Ben winked at Rani. "Didn't I tell you to think positively?"

"I got a bad feelin" 'bout all this, Jake," Texas Red said. "I think we're damned if we do, and damned if we don't. Know what I mean?"

Jake felt the same way. But before he could reply, one of his men raced to his side, sliding behind the old building.

"We're bein" watched, Jake!" he panted. "I've caught sunlight off field glasses to the northeast." He pointed.

The three leaders (west was behind the lines, sitting it out by his van) looked. Jake grunted as he caught the glint of light off lenses.

"It don't make no difference," Cowboy Vic said. "There can't be no more of them than there is of us. Right, Jake?"

Jake looked at the screwball. It was then he realized just how stupid the man appeared. He looked like a cross between Tom Mix, Gorgeous George, and the Rhinestone Cowboy. Fuckin' idiot!

"And I suppose you have a plan?" Jake said.

Before Vic could reply, Texas Red said, "I do. Get the hell out of here. We won't be losin' no face by doin' it. Not with Raines' Rebels breathin' down our necks."

Jake nixed that. "Then, go, goddamnit. If you and your boys ain't got the balls for this, take off. And to hell with you!"

"You can count on me, Big Jake," Cowboy

Vic said.

"Wonderful," Jake muttered.

"Think about it, Jake," Texas Red said, not taking umbrage at Jake's anger. "Ben Raines ain't gonna stay holed up in there forever. Soon as his Rebs come-and they ain't far away-he'll be sprung. He'll stick around for awhile, then he'll hit the trail again. All we got to do is set up outposts on the three roads leading out of this place, then ambush the son of a bitch."

Jake looked at the man. "For a person that's redheaded and ugly to boot, you got some sense. That there's a right nice plan. Let's do 'er. Tell the boys to fall back."

"Damn, Ben!" Jordy called from the upstairs. "They's pullin' out. Shit!"

Rani laughed. "That's quite a little tiger you have there, Ben."

"There's no back-up in him, that's for sure." Ben lifted his binoculars and watched the outlaws begin their bugout.

T. S. Eliot came to Ben's mind. He muttered, "Not with a bang but with a whimper."

"Did you say something, Ben?" Rani asked.

"A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year."

"What?""

Ben shook his head. "Nothing. Just recalling some verse from a long time ago."

Ben again lifted his binoculars, watching the outlaws haul their asses. "Tell the kids to stand down, Rani. I think it's over."

But it was not over. Not quite. Crouching in one of the old crumbling buildings, Crazy Cowboy Vic

waited, slobber dribbling down his chin. He had refused to leave with the others. He was gonna get Ben Raines, and have all of them young cunts for hisself. And when that was done, he'd be king of the west. That's what Big Jake and Texas Red promised him when he said he was staying behind. He didn't want them boys; just the girls. He'd kill them boys. He shifted positions carefully and lifted his rifle.

"You know Raines is gonna put it together, don't you?" Red asked Jake. "I mean, he's gonna know we set Cowboy Vic up to kill that kid Raines has been traveling with."

"Yeah," Jake grinned. "I know it. And that's gonna make Raines so goddamn mad he'll come buckin' and a-snortin' after us, revenge in his eyes. That's what I want him to do."

"I gotta hand it to you, Jake. You got some smarts."

"Thank you," Jake said modestly.

For the fifteenth time Ben scanned the old town through binoculars. For the fifteenth time he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Still, he hesitated in letting the kids out of the house.

He had kicked over the pile of bodies around the porch, clearing the way. He could see the dust from the approaching Rebels, but something bothered him.

He lowered his binoculars when Rani came to his side.

"I don't want to stay here, Ben," she said. "I want to go with you when you leave. Can we send the kids back to your base camp?"

"Sure. I think that would be best. Colonel Gray and his wild bunch will be here by midnight. I'll make arrangements with him."

"That surprised your people when you called in and told them the outlaws had pulled out, didn't it?"

"Not really, Rani. My people have a reputation for being rough in any kind of a fight. But this isn't over. The outlaws might have monitored our radio transmissions; they might have had scouts out who saw the Rebels coming in. Either way, they found themselves in a no-win situation and pulled out. But it isn't over."

Captain Nolan and his platoon pulled in. "Jesus, General," the captain said, eyeballing all the bodies, "you folks did a number on them, didn't you?"

Ben gave a sergeant the map of the town, showing where the camouflaged open mine shafts were located, the trip wires, and the punji pits. The sergeant sent a team out to neutralize the traps.

The bodies of the outlaws were dumped down a mine shaft and the opening sealed.

The harnesses and the twin M-16's were taken down and stored in the back of a truck.

And the kids were finally freed from the old house overlooking the ghost town.

"General!" Captain Nolan's radio operator called. "Colonel Gray just called in. He's about two hours away."

"Thank you," Ben said. Ben longed for a hot tub of water and a long soak. The smell of gunpowder, sweat, and death clung to them all.

Jordy stood by the stone fence around the old house.

"A damn gutsy bunch of kids, General," Captain Nolan said.

"They are that," Ben agreed.

Jordy thought he detected some movement in one of the old broken-down buildings in town. He looked again. Nothing. Must have been mistaken, he thought.

"You kids don't leave the immediate area," Ben cautioned them.

There it was again! Jordy thought, looking at the old building. He turned around. "Ben!" he called.

"Yes, son?"

A rifle cracked. Jordy was flung forward, a hole in his chest.

Roaring with rage, Ben ran to the boy's side and knelt down in the gathering blood. The bullet had cut the spine, angled off, and exited out through a lung. Pink froth bubbled from the boy's mouth.

"Take that son of a bitch alive!" Ben growled at Captain Nolan.

"Ben?" Jordy said.

"I'm right here, son."

"What's my name, Ben?"

"Jordy Raines." Ben could not keep the tears from spilling out of his eyes.

"Told you I didn't have very long to go, didn't I, Ben?"

"Yes, you did, boy."

"But I done good, didn't I, Ben?"

"You done good, son."

"It don't hurt none, Ben. I'm just cold."

The boy closed his eyes and died.

Chapter 25

Ben covered the boy with his jacket. He stood up, looking down at the boy he had grown to love in just a short time. Waves of emotions splashed over him.

Ben took several deep breaths, calming himself. He turned to Captain Nolan. "Wrap the boy carefully, Captain. Assign a burial detail. There is a Bible in my truck. Have someone get it for me." His words were tiny bits of chipped ice flying from his inner soul, steaming the air.

"Yes, sir. What name goes on the marker?"

"Jordy Raines. Age ten."

"Yes, sir."

Ben looked toward the knot of Rebels gathered around a small crumbling building. They had captured Cowboy Vic.

No one spoke; no one made any attempt to stop Ben as he walked to the house, got his Thompson, and walked down to the building. He stopped in front of Cowboy Vic.

"Got the little son of a bitch, didn't I?"

Cowboy Vic

yelled. "Just like Jake and Texas Red tole me to do." Slobber ran in ropy rivers from both sides of his mouth. "I knowed what they was up to all the time, Raines. Kill the kid, says they. Be shore to kill the kid travelin' with Raines. Well, I done "er." He laughed in Ben's face.

Ben resisted an almost-overpowering urge to smash the butt of the Thompson into the man's face. He turned his head and looked at the head-frame of the structure that supported the old cable system that operated the cages into the mines.

"Hang him from that!"

Ben said, pointing. "Now!"

Ben read a passage from the Bible, and then remembered a passage from Pilgrim's Way.

He thought it appropriate.

"Our roll of honor is long, but it holds no nobler figure. He will stand to those of us who are left as an incarnation of the spirit of the land he loved. He loved his youth, and his youth has become eternal."

Ben sat alone for a time on the stone fence around the house. He watched as Colonel Gray's company of Gray's Scouts pulled in. But he did not leave his place on the fence.

Captain Nolan brought the colonel up to date.

"Filthy swine," Dan Gray said.

"To cold-bloodedly kill a child." His eyes found the dangling figure of Cowboy Vic. "Is that the bugger?"

"Yes, sir."

"The general will be wanting revenge," Dan said.

"And I don't blame him. I have to find out what's going on."

Dan walked to Ben's side.

"General."

"Dan. How's it going?"

"Very well, sir. Do I stand the men down for a rest?"

"Yes. Tell them to pitch their tents and relax. We'll be here for a couple of days."

Dan knew what was next, but he had to ask.

"And then, sir?"

"We are going on a search-and-destroy mission, Dan. We are going to deal with the enemy with extreme prejudice."

"We track down the warlords and outlaws and kill all the fuckers."

"Precisely."

Whom unmerciful Disaster Followed fast and followed faster.

Poe

Chapter 26

"Your plan ain't workin' for shit!" Jake told Texas Red. He had shaken him out of a deep sleep and jerked him out of the blankets.

"Huh?" Red asked, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"All them damned Rebels is still in the town. Scouts report they're eating and sleeping and resting. They're checking equipment and getting ready to move out."

"Well, goddamn! That's what we wanted, wasn't it?"

"Raines is leading them. Two squads of Rebs pulled out yesterday with the kids. They're headin' back east. Boy, we got big

troubles."

"Maybe," Red said, pulling on his boots.

"What about Cowboy Vic?"

Jake snorted derisively. "Raines hung the bastard from a tower. He's still hangin' there."

"Way I see this thing, Jake, we ain't got but one option left us."

"Oh? And what's that?"

Texas Red met the man's hard look.

"Run!"

Ben lingered for a moment in the cold dawn, his eyes on the cross above Jordy's grave. "There is nothing left to say, Jordy. Nothing at all."

He turned away from the grave.

"Colonel Gray?"

"Sir!"

"Are your forward teams in position?"

"Yes, sir. Ten miles out and holding."

"Radio contact with the team holding east with the kids?"

"Yes, sir. Making good progress and reporting no trouble."

Ben nodded. He removed his beret and ran his fingers through graying hair. He looked at the beret and smiled. He walked to the grave of Jordy and hung the beret on the cross. "You were a good soldier, son. I never served with any better."

Rani stood and watched Ben, tears running down her cheeks.

Colonel Dan Gray cleared his throat and wiped his eyes. "Damn dust," he said.

Ben broke the sad spell.

"Move out!"

"Dan says Ben is calm," Ike said to Cecil. "To use his words, "Too damn calm.""

"You've known Ben as long as I have, Ike. You know that when Ben gets this way he's killing mad. This campaign will be a scorched-earth policy. He'll kill anybody who gives any type of aid to those outlaws."

"Not only that," Tina said, walking up. "Dad will burn the damned towns down. You remember how he was up in Missouri."

"Only too well," Ike said.

Cecil turned to the young woman manning the radio. "And what was Ben's last transmission, again?"

"He said, when I gave him your message to please return to Base Camp One, quoting George Bernard Shaw, "Not bloody likely!""

Tina summed up the feelings of them all. "Oh, shit! Dad is really pissed!"

"Scouts report a little town just up ahead has given sanctuary to some outlaws, General," Dan called in on the CB. "It's some sort of hippie place. To use a very outdated word."

"You're certain the ... hippies gave them sanctuary voluntarily?"

"Yes, sir. With open arms."

"Any kids involved?" Ben asked.

"Therein lies the rub, sir."

"Shit!" Ben said. "All right, Dan. Surround the town and we'll play it by ear."

"It's not exactly a town, sir," a scout broke in. "It's a ... a commune."

"Haven't heard that word in a good many years," Ben said.

The column was traveling north on Highway 169. What was left of a tiny village just south of Cienega Mountain had been taken over by a new

generation of Love Children. Most of the "Flower Children" were about Ben's age-at least. It was the most ludicrous sight Ben had witnessed in a long time.

A man who had to be at least sixty years old approached Ben's truck. He was dressed in a dress.

"Is that man dressed in a dress?"

Rani asked.

"Sure looks that way to me," Ben said.

"Baby killers!" the man yelled, waving a plastic flower at Dan Gray.

"I beg your pardon!" the Englishman said.

Another group of Love Kids appeared. Average age, mid-fifties. They were chanting as they marched. "Hell, no. We won't go. Hell, no. We won't go!"

"I think they have the wrong war," Ben said.

"Ben, they're pitiful," Rani said.

"No," Ben said. "They're just middle-aged dropouts, that's all."

Ben got out of his truck and walked to the group of men and women. There were a few younger people mixed in, some of them with children by their side. It was the damndest mish-mash Ben had ever seen.

"What the hell is with you people?" Ben asked.

"Impeach Nixon!" a man cried. "Make love, not war."

"Jane Fonda for President!" a woman yelled.

"You people are hiding some outlaws," Ben roared, quieting the group of ... whatever the hell it was.

"They are under a protective shield of the Children of the Orb," a man informed Ben. "They have renounced their evil past and wish to partake of nature's blessings. Now take your baby killers and child rapers and destroyers of the land and leave!" The man stamped his foot on the ground.

"Folks," Ben said, "I don't want to hurt any of you ... citizens. Just hand over the outlaws and we'll be on our way."

"One, two, three, four!" a woman who had to be in

her late sixties yelled. "We don't want your fucking war!"

Dan Gray turned his back so Ben could not see him laughing.

A man wearing pink pedal pushers and a see-through blouse ran up to them. "Stop acid rain!" he screamed. He ran back into the crowd.

"Colonel Gray," Ben called.

Wiping his eyes, his face red from suppressed laughter, Gray turned around. "Sir!"

"Send a team into the ... commune. Find the outlaws and bring them out. Do not-repeat-do not hurt anyone of these ... people."

"Yes, sir. Sergeant Morse, front and center."

The sergeant ran to Gray's side. "Sir, these people are

whacko!"

"Quite right. What puzzles me is why the outlaws have left them alone for so long."

"Shit, Colonel. They ain't got nothing for them to steal."

"That's probably it. Bring the outlaws out, sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

"Sir!" a voice called. "They're slipping out the back way."

"Watergate sucks!" a man yelled.

Even Ben was grinning as he got back into his truck and slipped it into gear. Rani had her face turned so Ben could not see her grin.

Composing herself, she said, "Is there a lunatic asylum close by?"

"Surely there must be. Either that or they all came from California."

"Oh, Ben!"

It did not take the Rebels long to round up the outlaws. They caught up with them a few miles outside of the commune, heading north.

They were a sorry-looking, shifty-eyed, and scummy bunch.

"You have two choices," Ben informed them bluntly. "Either way, you die. Tell me where Jake Campo, Texas Red, and West are hiding and what they're up to, and you get a bullet-fast and quick. If you don't cooperate, I take you to the next town and hang you. You have one minute to think about it."

"Fuck you, Raines!" a burly, pus-gutted man said.

"Sergeant!" Ben said. "Take that man," he pointed. "And tie him securely. Toss him in the back of a truck for hanging."

"I'll make a deal with you, Raines," another outlaw offered.

The toughness that had enabled Ben to build a thriving Tri-States out of the ashes of total world war surfaced. "No deals. You have all heard my only offer."

"That ain't much of an offer, Mister Raines," a third outlaw spoke.

"It's about the same as you people offered us back in the ghost town," Ben countered.

"I ain't no snitch," the man said.

He was tied up and tossed in the back of a truck with his buddy.

One outlaw broke and ran. Ben lifted his Thompson and stitched him to the ground.

"I'll tell you all I know," another outlaw said. "But it ain't much."

Fifteen minutes later, the column pulled out. The

dead outlaws were left for the coyotes and wild dogs and vultures.

At a long-deserted ranch, Ben hanged the so-called tough boys ... and left them dangling at the final end of their rope.

Once more on the road, heading for the first group of outlaws who were bunched up, waiting to ambush Ben and Rani, Rani looked at him.

"You're a hard man, Mister Raines," she said.

"Hard times, Miss Jordan."

"Approximately a hundred outlaws holed up and hiding out in the foothills of the Davis Mountains," Dan told Ben. "Scouts report they're dug in for a long fight." He put a fingertip on the map. "Right here, sir."

"Any idea what bunch it is?" Ben asked.

"Man with one foot seems to be the leader."

"West. Tell your mortar teams to go in and begin setting up. We'll start softening them up at first light."

"Yes, sir."

Rani came to Ben's blankets that night. But as soon as she did, she realized that sex was not on Ben's mind. She was far too intelligent a person to think it was something she had done, or to believe that sex was the answer to every problem. She was content to lay in Ben's arms.

"This may sound like a foolish question, Ben. But how long do you think this ... this campaign will last?"

"This particular one won't last long. Funny you should ask that, Rani."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Dan Gray said something very interesting to me just after we bivouacked. I had thought of it several times, but never with much enthusiasm. It appears, Rani, that the Rebels are the only organized force currently operating in North America with anything other than the looting and raping and killing of innocents in mind. It looks like my Rebels have yet another job facing them."

"Clearing the land of warlords and outlaws and the like," Rani said, not putting it in question form.

"Yes."

"Why, Ben?" she asked, raising up on one elbow to look at him in the darkness. "Why does it always have to be Ben Raines and his people?"

Ben was silent for a time. "Rani, after the war of '88, my people were the only ones who had the courage to stand up to the central government and say to them: No! No, you will not take our guns. No, you will not dictate terms to us. No, we will not bow down and kiss your ass. We were the only ones to build something constructive out of the ashes of war. The only ones, Rani. Our kids grew up with a different set of values. We stressed order and discipline and obeying the laws of our Tri-States. We didn't stifle free speech or forbid a free press-as a lot of people accused us of doing. Instead we simply imposed a new set of guidelines. If a newspaper in the Tri-States printed something about somebody, you can bet they researched their facts very carefully. Sly innuendo and half-truths and "protected sources" were not allowed. Everything was open and aboveboard, clearly

visible for all to see. I think you know more about the Tri-States than you let on. You know what we did out there."

"Yes," she said softly.

Ben sighed. "Well, Rani, those kids that we took in to raise, hundreds of them, back in '88 and '89, are now grown men and women. We proved

that a body of government can effectively teach young people to obey the law. I don't know how historians will treat what we did, and to tell the truth, I really don't care. But thousands of men and women came together, and together, we erased bigotry and prejudice and most other manmade sins, and proved it could be done. I suppose, Rani, that's why it's up to us to take on this new job."

"And you're going to take it on, aren't you, Mister Ben Raines?"

"I don't think Mister Ben Raines has a choice in the matter, Rani."

Chapter

Ben stood on a rise and viewed the terrain where the outlaws were dug in. Lowering his binoculars, he said, "They know we're not taking prisoners, Dan. Either way it goes, they know they're dead men. There won't be any offer of surrender from either side. And I will not lose good men and women fighting these scum."

"No, sir."

Ben reached down and pulled up a handful of grass. Sparse grass, at best. What there was of it was bone dry. "Ring the area with gasoline and kerosene," Ben said. "As much as you can find. Burn them out and shoot them."

"Yes, sir."

The Rebels began lobbing in heavy mortar fire, using HE and WP rounds. The Rebels were as expert with the mortars as any organized fighting force presently operating anywhere in the world. They dropped in the rounds with deadly accuracy, walking them in behind the outlaws, driving them out of their holes, sending them running toward the thinly burning fires.

Then the Rebels opened up with heavy .50-caliber machine guns, continuing the deadly fire until not an outlaw could be seen standing.

"Finish them," Ben ordered, lowering his binoculars. Turning to Dan Gray, he said, "That's one for Jordy."

"West and his people is finished," Texas Red told Jake.

The men had had scouts watching the action from a distance.

"West was a fool," Jake said. "We maybe could have whipped them if we'd all stayed together."

Both outlaws knew that statement was a crock of crap.

"Now what, Jake?" Texas Red asked.

"Straight out?"

"Straight out."

"We tuck our tails between our legs and carry our asses just as far away from here as we can. That's what we do."

"What are we waitin' for?"

"If Jake Campo and Texas Red are in Texas, General," Dan said, "they've found themselves a hell of a hideout."

Ben shook his head. "They've gone. It's been ten days since we finished West and his bunch. I think the others heard the news-probably had people watching it- and hauled out. No telling where they went."

"That's my philosophy, too, General. Well, we've found something else, though. There are warlords and

outlaws cropping up everywhere we look. A great many people have asked us for help in dealing with them. I told them I would take it up with you."

"I won't order you to do it, Dan. Not without taking it up with the folks back at Base Camp One."

"You know what Cecil and Ike would say, Ben," the Englishman said, calling Ben by his first name, something he rarely did. He was British born and British military trained. Familiarity with superior officers just wasn't done.

"It's up to you, Dan. I'm pulling out in the morning, taking Rani with me."

That did not come as any surprise to Dan.

"May I assign a squad to accompany you, sir?"

"No, you may not, Dan. But I'll tell you where I'm going. Back to the old Tri-States. We'll winter there." He outlined their route on a map. "I won't say we won't deviate from that route, but it'll be close most of the way. The static has eased considerably, so we'll be able to keep some sort of communications open between us."

Dan opened his mouth to protest, and Ben waved him silent.

"If we hit a snag, I give you my word we'll head for cover and call in for help." Ben stuck out his hand. "And we'll shake on it to seal the bargain."

The men shook hands, and that was that. But Ben knew he wasn't fooling Dan Gray. He knew that Dan knew Ben was going headhunting-alone. But Dan also knew that if Ben said he'd call in if too much trouble faced him, he would do just that.

"Take care of yourself, General," Dan said.

"And good hunting to you, Dan."

You, too, General, Dan thought.

Ben and Rani pulled out the next morning, early. They took two trucks, Ben pulling a small trailer behind his. The pickups were loaded with supplies. And this time Ben was going to be ready for almost anything that might come their way. He carried a mortar and several cases of rounds; an M-60 machine gun; and enough C-4 to blow up anything he might feel like blowing up-with timers and detonators.

Between them, they had enough food to last several months. Gray's communications people had installed a military radio in Rani's truck and checked out both of their CB'S. They had installed boosters in both of them. The CB'S could be operated at three different levels: extremely low power, with a range of no more than a mile, for use when they felt transmissions might be monitored; normal range; and with a flick of a toggle switch, jacked up to four hundred watts, giving them an enormous range.

Ben had watched, amused, as Colonel Gray surreptitiously- so he thought- checked out Ben's and Rani's trucks.

Ben slipped up behind the Englishman and touched him on the shoulder.

"Great God!"

Dan roared, almost separating his feet from his boots.

"Do you have a guilty conscience, Dan?" Ben asked.

"Heavens, no, General. You just startled me, that's all."

"Uh-huh," Ben said. "Certainly."

Ben knew he had been planting fresh bugs in their

trucks. He let it ride. Humor the man.

With Ben leading the way, they drove first to Hobbs, New Mexico, then took state roads east to Artesia, spending the night just north of the small city. It was then that Ben made love to her, and she could not help but think how incredibly gentle the man was.

When she awakened the next morning, she awakened to the sounds of pecking. She opened sleepy eyes and saw Ben pecking away at his portable typewriter. He was sitting by a window, the sunlight managing to penetrate the dusty glass.

"Are all writers crazy?" she asked.

"It helps to be," Ben admitted, not looking up from his labors. "It sure does."

The two of them pattered around that day, first exploring the few deserted towns they found between Artesia and Roswell, then viewing the looted and ruined remains of the museum and art center in Roswell.

"Why?" Rani asked, looking at the desecration.

"No reason," Ben told her. "Just like all vandalism- mindless."

It was afternoon when they began the lonely drive between Roswell and Vaughn, and they found it slow going. The highway was littered with deserted cars and trucks, now no more than rusting hulks blocking the way. They could see the shining bones of skeletons in a few of the cars. Ben got out to inspect some of the vehicles and their gruesome contents.

"Shot through the head," Ben told Rani. He pointed. "That car is the mausoleum for an entire family. Man,

woman, and two small kids. All shot through the

head."

"I wonder why?" Rani asked.

"We'll never know."

They stopped for the night at what remained of the tiny village of Ramon. The place had been picked clean, and done so with deliberate care, Ben noted.

"It's ... eerie," Rani said.

"No," Ben answered slowly. "I don't think so. Most of what we've seen so far, since leaving Aftesia, reminds me of what my people did back in '89. I think there just might be a group of people, probably a large group, doing what we did—setting up a community, somewhere."

"Mormons?"

"Probably. Most of what we've seen I would not call looting. It wasn't done with damage in mind. But done carefully."

"I hope you're right, Ben."

"So do I. And that might explain why we haven't seen any thugs or outlaws or bandits since we entered this state."

"I don't understand."

"The Mormons are extremely fine people; very self-sufficient. I'm told that during the great depression—and that happened years before you or I made an appearance on this earth—the Mormons really took care of their own, without, for the most part, government assistance. And they also won't put up with a bunch of crap from people. They are deeply religious, but will defend to the death what is theirs." He shrugged. "So I've been told."

They pulled out early the next morning and were in

Vaughn an hour later. The town was empty and still, and it had been systematically taken apart. Even down to the last drop of gasoline in the storage tanks.

Ben smiled, looking around him. "I think we shall avoid Utah," he said. "Unless we just absolutely have to enter the state. I will leave those people alone if they'll do the same for us."

Ben stopped on the outskirts of Santa Fe, pulling off the road. He studied maps, trying to determine the best way to avoid the city. There was something disturbing about the quiet of the place, something that set the hairs on the back of Ben's neck to tingling.

Rani walked up to his truck. "What's wrong, Ben?"

"Too quiet. I feel eyes on us. Whether they're friendly or unfriendly, I don't know. But I don't feel like taking any chances. Cities have always been a problem since the Great War. They seem to attract the scum of the land."

"So we do what?"

"Backtrack and take 41 until we reach this county road, which we take over to 14. We head south until we hit this other secondary road that will take us over to Interstate 25. We'll connect with Highway 44 there and take that northwest

to Aztec. It's going to be slow going, so let's be careful not to get separated. I don't like the feel of this country. If we're stopped, Rani, be ready to shoot first and apologize later."

"I finally got that message through my head, Ben."

They backtracked on 285 until coming to their cutoff. Then the going was slowed down to no more than a crawl. The road had deteriorated badly, and was littered with junked vehicles.

Their radios on low power, Ben said to Rani, "If a

paved road is this bad, Rani, an unpaved road will probably be impassable. So forget the road over to Interstate 25. We'll stay on this all the way down to Interstate 40 and then try to plot a new route."

"One thing about it, baby," Rani radioed back. "We're sure going to see some new country."

"That's a big ten-four," Ben said with a grin.

"It worked, Jake," Texas Red said, smiling. "Our scouts just pulled in. Raines and the cunt left the Rebels, travelin' in two pickups."

The one hundred and fifty-odd outlaws were camped along the banks of the Conchas Lake, west-northwest of Tucumcari. Jake and Red had ordered their men to keep their heads down and stay quiet.

"Which way the Rebs heading?" Jake asked.

"Scouts report they're goin' to help some folks up around Odessa. Something about settin' up outposts."

"Raines and the broad?"

"They headed west for a time, then cut toward the north."

Jake's grin broadened. "OK. I know where he's heading, now."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Back to his old stompin' grounds. The Tri-States. Him and the cunt is plannin' on wintering there. Bet on it."

"So we take them now?"

"No, you dummy! We send out scouts-our best people. Haircuts, shaved, clean clothes-a good appearance in case they accidentally run into Raines. But they don't have to do that." He spat on the ground.

"We can track them."

"How?"

Texas Red asked, exasperation in his voice.

"Cause, my good man," Jake said, smiling, patting his fellow outlaw on the back, "that goddamn Englishman didn't change the frequency on them bugs he put in Raines" pickup. And our radioman just figured it out."

"Oohhh," Texas Red said. "That's slick, Jake. Real slick."

"So in about a week, we move out in teams, real

quiet like. No more than four or five guys at a pop. By then, we'll have a pretty good idea where Raines and Rani is going. Then we'll just slow-like gather up there in the old Tri-States, and do it real professional-like."

"And then we kill Raines," Texas Red said.

"Yeah," Jake said dreamily. "I want you to send out some boys. Find two-three cameras and lots of film."

"What you gonna take pitchers of, Jake?"

"Raines. He thinks he's a god, so I'm gonna treat him like one."

"Huh?"

"I'm gonna crucify the bastard."

Chapter 28

Ben and Rani stayed on Highway 41 all the way south to Highway 60. There they cut west over to Interstate 25. Just before reaching the interstate, they pulled off the highway and made camp.

"Ben?"

"Uh-huh?"

"I thought New Mexico had a lot of Indians in it?"

"Probably still does. But they're keeping their heads down. Like a lot of other Indians. You see, Rani, back when we were building the Tri-States, we-the Rebels-helped many of the Indian tribes, too. We helped them move out of and off of those goddamned disgraceful reservations and onto better land where they could farm and build and grow. Then when the government decided to move against us, they went against the Indians first. Thousands of Indians were killed-slaughtered. Men, women, kids. It was senseless. Totally senseless. My God, but there was plenty of land for everybody." Ben sighed. "It was my fault."

"How in the hell was it your fault!"

"President Logan had a hard-on for me.

He hated me. Just about as bad as I hated him. I wouldn't kowtow to him; him or the Supreme Court or that august body known as the Congress of the United States. If the Indians hadn't thrown in with us, maybe there wouldn't have been a slaughter. I don't know."

Rani smiled at him. Then she laughed. "I guess all the things I've heard about you are true, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I heard that when the Supreme Court ruled that everything you and your Rebels were doing out in the Tri-States was unconstitutional, you wrote them a letter and told them all to kiss your ass."

"That is correct. I did just that. That was after the first threat from the central government. We were not guilty of harming any

law-abiding citizen. Not one. What we did was take a mixing bowl full of people of all races, all religions, and make it work. We had some of the toughest laws anywhere in the world and stuck to them. And

ninety-nine point nine percent of the people of the Tri-States liked it that way. That one-tenth of one percent who didn't, left. They went back to a society where, if they stole, they usually got away with it. Hell, if they broke any law, the odds were they would never serve any time for it. We just viewed matters in a different light, that's all."

"So the government sent troops in to destroy the Tri-States."

"Yes. And split the country in half by doing so." Ben looked far into the distance. "We will rebuild. We will rise out of the ashes and rebuild. We've got to."

She put her hand in his and gently squeezed.

South of Albuquerque, they turned northwest, bypassing the city. An hour later, after twisting and turning and dodging obstacles in the old road, they rolled onto Interstate 40 and continued westward. They made camp for the night halfway between Albuquerque and Gallup.

Ben had been driving the nation's highways for the past few years; he was accustomed to the strain of backtracking, detouring, and winching fallen trees and junked cars out of the way. Rani was not. She was so tired she was trembling from exhaustion.

Ben pitched camp, made a quick supper over a low fire, and fed Rani. She fell asleep before she was finished eating. Ben led her to the tent and got her into the big, double sleeping bag. They had packed their blankets away, for it was turning colder by the day, and the down-filled sleeping bag was warmer and easier to handle.

Ben sat by the little fire, sipping hot tea and listening to the night animals prowl the land in search of food. Soon the cold drove him into the tent, to crawl in beside Rani. They reached for each other in the darkness.

Now there were two alone in the ashes.

"I would like to take a bath!" Rani said. "I feel grimy."

"Well," Ben said with a smile. "I figure it's about 30dgth morning, and getting colder. There's a stream back a few miles. Want to bathe there?"

She flipped him the Rigid Digit.

With the silence of the Cibola National Forest their companion to the south, Ben and Rani traveled the interstate, stopping at every small town along the way. At Thoreau, they found an old service station whose tanks had not been drained. Using his pump, Ben filled their tanks and topped off their spare cans.

Both had been monitoring their CB'S, listening to the increasing chatter. Gallup, it appeared, had been taken over by half a dozen gangs of punks, thugs, and various gangs of what appeared to be Hispanics, all fighting each other for control of what was left of the small city. And ambushing and

killing anybody else who happened to blunder onto their "turf."

Rani could see that Ben was getting angry. She questioned him about it.

"I'm getting tired of detouring around street gangs who seem to possess shit for brains."

She put the needle to Ben. "You don't like Hispanics, Ben?"

"Don't be stupid! Colonel Hector Ramos was one of the best friends I ever had. He was killed fighting the IFP. I don't like street gangs no matter what nationality they might be."

"I'm only kidding, Ben," she said softly.

"I know. Sorry I spoke harshly to you. But if I have an overriding hatred of anything in this world, it's punks. Secondly would be the goddamn liberals who made excuses for the behavior of street gangs-for years."

She looked confused.

"Liberal is probably not a word you're familiar with, right, Rani?"

"I've heard it. But I'm not sure what it means."

"It was going out of vogue about the time you got out of high school. I guess the simplest way to say it would be that a liberal made excuses for the criminal while a conservative punished the criminal. While neither one made any great effort to pursue a middle ground. Now it's too late."

"You are a confusing man, Ben. I can't peg you." Ben smiled. "You are not the first person to say that to me, Rani."

"So what road do we take to bypass Gallup?"

"We don't," Ben said, a hard glint in his eyes. "We go right through."

"Why am I not in the least surprised to hear you say that?"

"You will pay a toll," the hard-eyed young man said to Ben. "And we will take what we like from your truck."

"Oh, my!" Ben said, feigning great shock and fear, keeping his left hand hidden from the young punk. "Do you do this to all visitors to your lovely city?"

"At's right, pops. And if they're lucky, we let them live."

Ben smiled at the street hood. "You know what?"

"I know I don" like you."

"Oohhh," Ben said. "You're hurting my feelings."

"I don' care. I think I keel you."

"I don't think so." Ben released the spoon of the grenade he held in his left hand and reached out the window, stuffing the live grenade down the front of the punk's open shirt. The street-slime recoiled in horror, tearing at his shirt in vain. Ben lifted his right hand

and emptied his .45 into the knot of garbage gathered around the truck, all of them grinning and

scratching themselves.

They stopped grinning when Ben started shooting.

Grenades being what they are, the punk's body absorbed most of the impact. It spread him all over the littered street as Ben and Rani raced through the punk blockade.

Ben picked up another fully loaded .45 from the seat beside him and shot at anything resembling a punk as the pickups roared through what remained of Gallup. Ben had a pile of loaded pistols on the seat beside him. Driving one-handed, both windows down, Ben cleared the streets of all living things-if they had two legs, greasy hair, fruit boots, rings full of fingers, tight jeans, and jackets with a club name on the back.

Rani spent most of her time just keeping up with Ben and screaming at him. She called him every uncomplimentary name in her vocabulary. And made up a few new names she felt applied to this particular situation.

Just outside of Gallup, Ben whipped off the interstate and roared up onto an overpass. Jumping out, Ben grabbed his RPG and quickly inserted a rocket into the tube, and locked it in place. He looked around for Rani.

"Stand over there," he told her. "The back-blast from this thing is dangerous."

"You're fucking crazy!"

she screamed at him.

"I believe we settled all that the other morning, didn't we?"

The street punks came roaring up the interstate in their low-rider cars. Ben felt sure the interiors would be of crushed velvet, red or black. And the drivers would

have one hand on the wheel, the other holding a comb. They came in a knot of fancy machines, hubcaps gleaming in the sunlight.

The rocket welded the first two macho cars to the concrete, those behind slamming, sliding, crashing, and exploding into the mass of burning fancy metal.

Those who did not become part of the burning interstate did their best imitations of a State Trooper turn-around and carried their asses back to Gallup. Wiser, but not a damn bit smarter.

Picking up his M-16, Ben shot any survivors who staggered from the inferno.

He stood up and looked at Rani. "Now we can continue with our journey, dear."

"And what the hell do you think you accomplished by doing this?" she demanded.

"Making the world a little bit safer for innocent travelers, darling," he told her. "And I got rid of a lot of crud."

"You could have been killed!"

she squalled at him. "Now I see why your people think you need a keeper!"

"The world would have been in a hell of a shape if the

Rangers on D-Day and the Marines on Wake Island had shared your sentiments."

"What the hell is Wake Island?" she asked.

Chapter 29

Ben managed to calm Rani down and get them once more pointed west, heading toward Flagstaff. They could see the smoke from the burning pyre in their mirrors for miles.

And Rani didn't let him forget it, yapping at him over the CB.

Ben took it good-naturedly, with a lot of "Yes, Dear's," and "No, Dear's," as they drove along. He also agitated a lot.

"I bet you thought Hilton Logan was cute," Ben needled her.*

"Stop changing the subject! And no, I didn't think President Logan to be cute.

And by the way, what part did you have in the death of that man?"

"I ordered his death by our Zero Squads. A very brave young man gave his own life to kill that bastard."

The CB was silent for a few miles. When Rani again

*

Out of the Ashes

transmitted, she had wisely changed the subject.

"How far is it to the Tri-States, Ben?"

"Well, we're going to see some country first, Rani. We'll be there in a week or ten days. I'm going to lead those following us on a goose chase for a time."

"Those following us?"

"Sure. Campo and Texas Red. I read those two like a good book. They pulled their people out of Texas and let us rush around like crazy, looking for them. All the time they were probably holed up three or four hundred miles away, getting information on us from scouts. All the time waiting for you and I to pull out. They're behind us."

"And they would know you were heading for the Tri-States?"

"I'm sure."

"Ben?"

"Yes, Rani."

"Is the story true? Did you really kill a mutant with your bare hands?"

"No," Ben said flatly. "I shot the damned thing seven times with a .45 and then split its skull with a Bowie knife."

"I see."

I wonder.

"Ben?"

"Yes, Rani."

"You don't seem the least bit worried about the outlaws following us."

"I'm not in the least worried. Let me put your mind at ease, dear. I know the old Tri-States like the back of my own hand. We

left enough bombs, guns, ammo, and materials cached out there to outfit a small army.

And I know where it all is. Relax, Rani. They'll probably find us, but they'll wish they hadn't."

"I do wish I could share your confidence, Ben," she said, the dryness coming through the speaker.

Ben just chuckled and kept on driving.

It took them the rest of the day to travel between Gallup and Flagstaff. Ben had never seen an interstate so cluttered with junked vehicles.

"The first thing we have to do," he said aloud, "is to clear the highways. That will give the people something to do; take their minds off their troubles. Or are you just kidding yourself, Raines?"

Probably, he concluded.

He knew people only too well. Ten out often would volunteer at first. Two out of ten would end up doing most of the actual work. The others would find some excuse not to work. They would bitch and moan and eventually walk away.

Not even the most destructive war known to humankind had changed that undesirable aspect of human nature.

A few miles outside of Flagstaff, Ben began monitoring his CB closely. There was some air traffic coming out of the city, but unlike Gallup, this chatter wasn't, or at least did not appear to be, hostile.

Ben slowed and pulled off onto the shoulder, Rani right behind him.

He got out and walked to her truck. "You been listening to the chatter on your CB?"

"Yes. It sounds friendly."

"Yeah. A Tasmanian Devil is cute, too. But have you ever tried to pet one?"

"I've never even seen one, Ben."

Ben nodded absently and reached across her for the mike. "Hello, Flagstaff. Anybody copying this transmission?"

After a brief quiet pause, a voice replied. "You 'bout blew my doors off with that transmission, friend. You wanna cut it down some? You're distorting real bad."

Ben adjusted his output, flipping the switch, putting his CB on normal power. "That better, Flagstaff?"

"Much better. Which direction you comin' from?"

"East."

"How'd you get through Gallup?"

"Quickly and shooting at anything that looked like a punk," Ben told the voice.

The voice laughed. "Well, I hope you got a bunch of them, friend. Come on in, we're friendly. We'll meet you on the outskirts of town."

"Ben Raines," Ben said, holding out his hand to the man.

"The

Ben Raines?" the man asked, pumping Ben's hand.

Ben could never get used to that reaction from people. "I guess so."

"Thank God!" a woman said. "Where is your army?"

"Most of them are back in Georgia," Ben told her. "I've got one company still in Texas, helping the law-abiding folks in that state hunt down outlaws and warlords."

The woman looked horrified. "You mean you and this lady are out traveling alone?"

Ben smiled at her. "Yes. But doing so carefully."

"I heard that," a man said. "You're lucky you got through, Mr. Raines. Outlaws working all over the damn place. Good folks up in Utah cleaned up that state, but it seems the scum they didn't get just moved south. They've been giving us fits around here."

"Get organized and hunt them down," Ben said.

"Easier said than done, Mr. Raines. You ever tried to ...?" He grinned sheepishly. "Yeah. I guess you have at that. Good Lord, folks! Where did we misplace our manners? Come on, Mr. Raines, ma'am. Please." He motioned Ben and Rani toward the town. "Spend some time with us. You'll find Flagstaff a lot different from Gallup."

Like between daylight and dark, Ben mentally noted as they followed the local vehicles into the small city. The streets had been cleared and cleaned. Most of the stores had no show windows, but there was no broken glass sparkling on the sidewalks and streets. Ben could not see any rusting, junked cars, which were not only an eyesore, but a hazard.

As the small caravan wound out of the city proper and into the suburbs, Ben could see what remained of many large gardens. The homes they passed had been properly maintained, the lawns kept up and clean.

Ben guessed about five to six hundred people were living in the city. The adults were all armed-and well armed, at that.

At the home of the man and woman who appeared to be the spokespersons for the group, over coffee-real coffee-Ben complimented the gathering.

"It wasn't easy, and it wasn't pleasant,"

Jim Blanning

told Ben. "I guess there was probably over a thousand of us starting out. About four hundred left when we really started getting tough with the punks and street gangs and criminal element."

All those gathered in the large home shook their heads in agreement with that statement.

Carolyn Blanning said, "We did try the old way, Mr. Raines ..."

"Ben, please."

"Ben. Good. You know what I mean by the old way. We began making excuses for the gangs, not

coming down hard on them; mouthing all the old B.s. from before the Great War. Well," she said with a shrug, "it didn't work back then, and it wasn't working for us now. Finally, and this only happened about... oh, fifteen months ago, we banded together and formed our own police force." She smiled. "We put your ideas in play. The ones you used up in the Tri-States. We weren't going to tolerate lazy, sorry, good-for-nothing people; especially the gangs and the thugs and the punks." She paused, shook her head, and looked at a tall, rangy man sitting across the huge den from her.

"Evan Reynolds," the man said. "I guess I'm in charge of the militia here, General Raines. I was the first one to shoot to kill. We had spent months cleaning up the town. Hard, back-breaking work. All the while certain ... types, stood around and jeered at us, refusing to work. After we'd cleared and swept one particularly filthy block-where the crud lived, by the way-we came back the next day and they had trashed it. They ..." He struggled with his emotions for a few seconds. "They dared us to do something about it. There was this one ... person.

A big, swaggering,

dirty-looking type. You know the type."

Ben nodded his head. "Only too well."

Evan said, "He was called Stud. A gang leader. He told me we couldn't make him or his people do a goddamn thing. Spat at my feet." Evan paused and rolled a cigarette. He lit it and smoked in silence for a few seconds. "I looked at him, walked back to my truck, got a shotgun, and blew his goddamn worthless head off."

Ben and Rani waited, each of them knowing it was a terrible memory for the man to dredge up.

"It turned bloody after that," Evan continued. He looked at another man.

"What was so ridiculous about it," the Mexican-American said, "was them accusing us of being bigots and anti this, that, and the other thing." He laughed bitterly. "As you can see by looking around the room, General Raines, we are a real mixing bowl of people here. Dan," he said, pointing, "is Apache. Mrs. Yee is Chinese. You have eyes, you can see. We just took all we were going to take of it. Following the initial shooting, it was a bloody week. But we made this community a nice place to live." He inspected his fingernails for a moment, silently reflecting. "I won't say that innocents did not die needlessly. That would be a lie. But there comes a time when one must choose a side, a cause, if you will, and stand by it. While it is not safe once one ventures ten miles outside the city, it is quite safe in the city."

"And if you were stronger, better armed?" Ben asked.

"Let us say," the man who would be later introduced as Mr. Reyes continued, "we would not be adverse to carrying the message outside the city."

The group all smiled.

Ben got the message. He returned the smile. "Well, then," he said. "I believe we can work something out that would be mutually advantageous." He told the gathering of his idea of an outpost system.

"It could be the start of a return to civilization," Mrs. Yee said. "And just in time, too. We're having a difficult time getting schools started for our children."

"It isn't easy," Ben said, and for a flashing moment, his thoughts were full of Jordy.

"To use a cliché, General," Evan said.

"Nothing worthwhile is ever easy, right?"

"You're going to take losses," Ben brought them back to reality. "I've lost many good friends along the way."

"As we all have, sir," a woman said. "My husband died fighting the street punks."

Ben stood up. "I'll contact my base camp, get the ball rolling."

Ben and Rani once more set out, once more alone in the ashes.

Chapter 30

Ben and Rani headed north out of Flagstaff, on Highway 89. They swung west at Cameron and camped in the Kaibab National Forest. The following morning, Ben gave Rani her first glimpse of the Grand Canyon. As it does with anybody who does not possess the soul of a grub-worm and the imagination of a corpse, her first sighting took her breath away.

"It's ... it's ..." she stammered.

"Magnificent. Awesome. Indescribable,"

Ben finished it.

"Yes," she said, taking his hand and holding on tightly. "You've seen it before?"

"Probably a dozen times. It evokes something quite new and different within me with each sighting."

"I can see why." She was thoughtful for a moment, gazing down into what had once been described as the greatest example of erosion and the most sublime spectacle in the world. "Wasn't there a song or something written about this place?"

Ben got a good laugh out of that, then spent the next

few minutes calming Rani, assuring her he wasn't laughing at her, just at what she said.

"Ferde Grofe wrote the Grand Canyon Suite; just one of his many works. By golly, I just might have that cassette in my truck. I think I do. You'll love it."

Back at the campsite, which had not been used as such for many years, Ben found the old cassette and played it for her. She sat enthralled as the loveliness rolled and soared from the speakers.

"It's so lovely," she whispered. "I

remember it now, from listening to it in high school. I didn't like it then."

Ben elected to keep his mouth shut at that. Beginning about 1970, Ben had refused to listen to commercial radio, except for news and weather when traveling. As far as he was concerned, what passed for music- except for classical- from that period up until the Great War, had gone from bad to worse to the pits.

Rani looked at him and smiled. As if having the power to read his mind, she said, "I gather you didn't think much of the music I grew up with, right, Ben?"

"That is certainly one way of putting it, dear."

She laughed. "Looking back, I don't think much of it, myself."

"That's a relief. There is hope for music lovers yet."

A roar came from the deep and tangled forest to the south of the camp site. Rani jumped about half a foot off the ground.

"A new rock-and-roll singer," Ben said drily. "Give him a mike and a dress and you'd have a rising new star. For sure."

"Ben, Jesus! Don't joke. What in the name of God was that?"

"Mutant, probably. That one, and the others like it in the woods around here, have probably never seen a human. We'd best move into one of the Ranger cabins for the night. Unless you'd like to wake up in the middle of the night with one of them looking at you."

A minute and a half later, Ben was complimenting Rani on the swiftness with which she could pack.

No mutants had made an appearance during the night, but they let Ben and Rani know they were around, and not liking the human intrusion into their territory. At first light, Ben and Rani left the park area, connecting once more with Highway 89, following that up to alternate 89, turning west across the Colorado River, traveling through the northern area of the Kaibab National Park, and skirting the now deserted Kaibab Indian Reservation.

"I wonder what happened to them?" Rani asked over the CB.

"Slaughtered," Ben told her. "They were one of the tribes that joined us. In the hopes of achieving a better life standard. And I got them killed."

"I wish you would stop blaming yourself, Ben. I doubt that you forced them to join you at gunpoint."

Ben was grim as he said, "I'm pulling over and backtracking. We'll take 389 through the reservation. I want to see if the government troops left anything standing."

It was even worse than Ben had imagined. The stories of the Old West he had read as a child came into his mind. Big government's vindictiveness had been awesome. There was not a building left standing that Ben or Rani could see as they drove slowly through the reservation.

"It's terrible," she said in a whisper.

"Yes. I think you'll say the same thing when you see what they did to the Tri-States. And while I'm thinking about it, Rani," Ben radioed, "when we get to the Tri-States, don't leave my side. We booby-trapped almost everything we left behind: houses, barns, vehicles, buildings. You name it, and we wired it to explode. So when we get there, stay close to me."

"Thank you for remembering," she replied.

They made camp that evening in what remained of the small town of Colorado City. The town had been stripped clean, right down to the doors, windows, screens, and anything else that wasn't nailed down or welded in place.

But, as in so many other places, using his pump, Ben managed to fill their gas tanks from underground reservoirs.

"How long will this gas remain good?" Rani asked.

"Years, if water doesn't get into it. Even then, we have the capacity to separate water from gas-so my engineers tell me. We're going to build a small refinery come next spring. We-was

A bullet smashed into the side of the building, just missing Ben's head. Bits of broken brick struck Rani in the side of the face, drawing blood. They both hit the ground, weapons at the ready.

"Take the broad alive!" a hoarse voice shouted. "We can use her and then swap her ass for something."

Rani burned half a clip in the direction of the voice. A man yelled, his voice echoing throughout the emptiness. Whether from shock or pain, Ben couldn't tell.

"You OK, Elgin?" another voice was added.

Ben pinpointed the location of that one.

"Yeah. Circle around. We got 'em in a box."

"You think," Ben muttered. He carefully shifted positions, slipping into the deserted, windowless service station, pulling Rani in behind him.

"The trucks?" she whispered.

"They won't bother them. They want them running. Take the front. I'll handle that guy slipping up behind us."

Slugs began slamming into the building, but Ben sensed they were carefully placed; whoever was firing at them wanted Rani alive and well. ,

Ben spotted movement in the alleyway. He lifted his Thompson, exposing as little of himself as possible. He waited.

He heard the quiet crunch of boots on gravel. Then a man's leg was exposed, from upper thigh to foot.

Ben stitched the leg, the big beblede-caliber slugs shattering knee, ankle, and foot. The man screamed in pain and fell forward, losing his shotgun, the weapon clattering to the ground.

"Dave? Dave? Did you get him?"

"Yeah," Ben hollered. "Come on."

The man named Elgin ran out of a building, zigzagging across the street. He got halfway before Rani cut him down. He flopped in the street, both hands holding his lead-punctured belly.

He screamed in pain.

"Shoot him in the head and shut him up," Ben told Rani.

Before she could raise her M-16, a woman came running out of the building that faced the old service station.

"Damn you!" she squalled. "You kilt my old man." She lifted a rifle.

Ben leveled his Thompson and cut the woman down. She landed only a few feet from the wounded man in the street.

Ben slipped out the back way and ran to the man he'd shot in the alley. The man's face was shiny with shock and pain. He had taken at least six .45-caliber slugs in the leg, and in falling he had broken his right arm, the bone sticking out, stark white in the cold light of December.

"Least tell me your name 'fore you kill me," the man panted.

"Ben Raines."

The man forced a laugh. "We shore can pick 'em. All the folks travelin' 'bout, and we got to pick on Ben Raines. Shit! I'm bleedin' to death, General. Finish me."

Ben shot him between the eyes.

Back in the service station, Ben squatted down beside Rani. "Stay put. I think there might be one more."

The minutes ticked by. Ben and Rani waited in silence. Finally, impatience drove the last outlaw of the bunch to yell.

"Lemme go!" he yelled. "You go your way, and I'll go mine. How 'bout it?"

"You got him spotted?" Ben asked.

"Almost directly across the street," Rani said. "But he's staying low."

"Start putting fire into the building," Ben told her. "I'm going to circle around and drop a grenade in on him. Start now."

With Rani laying down a slow, steady fire, Ben ran

down the alleyway and came out on the far end of the street, crossing over until he was by the open windowless storefront. He motioned to Rani, pulled the pin on a grenade, and dropped it in, ducking back.

The grenade must have landed directly on top of the man, for when the dust had settled, Ben looked in and could see bits and pieces of the man scattered around the store.

He walked to the center of the street and stood looking down at the man and woman, sprawled near death in the street.

"What's your name?" the woman gasped.

"Ben Raines."

She laughed, exposing stubs of broken and rotted teeth. "Know'd our luck would run out some day."

"How many travelers have you and your men ambushed and killed?" Ben asked.

"Fifty. Two hundred. Five hundred.

Hell, I don't know," she said matter-of-factly. "Had a lot of fun for awhile, though."

Ben looked at her wounds. She might live another two hours, at best. He just didn't feel like wasting a bullet on her. He kicked their weapons away from the man and woman and left them in the street.

"Hey!" the woman gasped as Ben walked away. "Ain't you gonna do nothin' fer us?"'

Ben's laugh was short and ugly. He did not reply to her question. Just kept walking.

She began cursing him, her mouth spewing out more filth than a sewer contained.

Ben motioned Rani into her truck. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Hartline's gonna get you, Raines!" the woman squalled at them.

Ben turned slowly and looked at the woman. "What did you say?"

Her laughter was taunting. "Sam Hartline. He's who we work for. We take women to him and that uppity Russian."

"Where are they?"

"Northern California. They got some kind of real fancy hospital there. Hartline meets us up in Reno. 'At's where we deliver the women to him."

"What kind of women?" Ben asked, a sick feeling in his stomach. He knew. Oh, God, he knew only too well.

"Niggers, spies, Jews, all the inferior breeds, you know?"'

"When are you supposed to meet Hartline again?" Ben asked.

"What'll you gimme to tell you that?" the woman asked, a sly look in her beady eyes.

"A bullet in the head to put you out of your misery."

"'At's fair, I reckon. Better'n dyin" slow. Next spring. Don't know when. We just wait."

"You have any women you're now holding prisoner?"

The woman coughed up blood. "Naw. We jist got back from deliverin' a load of greasers."

Ben walked over to her, pulled his cocked and locked .45 from leather, and shot her in the head.

"You going to tell me about Sam Hartline, Ben?" Rani asked.

"Later. It's a long story."*

*Fire in the Ashes

Chapter 31

"You mean they're

experimenting on human beings?" Rani asked, horror in her voice.

"Among other things," Ben said. He then told her of the Russian general, Striganov, and the battles they had fought, hammering away at each other along a mile-long no-man's-land.

"Hideous!" she said, looking at her plate of food and electing not to eat.

Ben and Rani had traveled a few miles outside of Colorado City and re-pitched their camp, in extreme southern Utah.

Ben stared moodily into the dancing flames of the small fire.

"And you and this Hartline have been enemies for a long time?" Rani asked.

"It seems like forever. But only for a couple of years, actually." He sighed. "I may as well make up my mind that until Striganov and Hartline are dead, we can't even begin to think of a return to civilization. I suppose that had best be our first priority of business next

spring. I guess we-the Rebels-have been kidding ourselves; putting the horror back in the dark reaches of our brains; trying to delude ourselves that Striganov and Hartline were out of sight, so therefore they didn't exist."

Ben tossed a few more sticks into the circle of rocks containing the campfire.

"Ben?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Hadn't we better rearrange things so we can carry a load of wood with us?"

He looked at her in the flickering light. "I beg your pardon?"

"For the campfire and the cooking fires," she said.

Confusion swept across Ben's face. "Have I been asleep? I seem to have missed something terribly important here."

"Nevada," she said.

"Yes. What about Nevada?"

"Well, damn it, Ben, it's all desert, isn't it?"

"Oh! I see what you're getting at. No, Rani, it isn't all desert. There are a few trees in the state. We don't have to carry firewood with us." He opened his map case. "We'll be heading out on Highway 59, connecting with the interstate here," he said, pointing, "then south to 18. That will take us over to 56 and 319. We'll pick up U.S. 93 here, and follow that all the way up into Idaho. After that, we're home free."

"Except for Jake Campo and Texas Red," she reminded him glumly.

"Piece of cake," he said with a grin.

Both were conscious of eyes on them as they traveled through southern Utah, eyes that followed and tracked their every movement.

"Don't make any hostile moves," Ben

cautioned her over the CB. "I think we'll be met at St. George. The people will be cautious, but not unfriendly. We'll know in a few minutes."

The two-vehicle convoy hit a barricade on the outskirts of St. George, with armed men stationed behind the barricade.

The men were neatly dressed, and for the most part, clean shaven. They were not ugly or hostile in their movements with their rifles-just cautiously curious.

Ben got out of his pickup, his hands empty and held away from his body.

"My name is Ben Raines," he called. "The lady in the other pickup is Rani Jordan. We mean no harm to any law-abiding people. We are traveling up to the old Tri-States."

"Then pass on through, General Raines," a man said with a smile, motioning for the barricade to be opened. "With all the godless outlaws roaming the land, you understand our caution."

"Very well," Ben said.

Past the barricade, the spokesman said, "Do you need food or other supplies, Mister Raines?"

"No. But thank you. We're well equipped for our travels. There might be a company of my soldiers pass through this way. They'll be commanded by a Colonel Dan Gray. They mean you no harm."

"Then they will not be harmed," Ben was assured.

When Ben and Rani made camp at the Echo Canyon State Recreation Area, just inside Nevada, Rani said,

"I feel sorry for anybody who tries to ride roughshod over those people back in Utah."

"They won't try it but once," Ben said. "Those folks won't put up with any

crap. And I sure want them on our side if and when any shooting starts."

"They looked very ... competent."

"Believe me, they are."

Jake Campo and Texas Red knew to stay out of Utah. Too many stories had drifted back to the warlords about what happened to outlaws who foolishly ventured into that state. They began moving their people out, in small teams of five and six. All the outlaws had cleaned up their vehicles and themselves. They sported fresh haircuts and clean clothes. All carried side-arms, but that would attract no attention; almost everybody with any sense went armed.

The outlaws moved out slowly, first heading straight north, up through the panhandle of Texas, then crossing the panhandle of Oklahoma into Kansas. Once there, they veered northwest, into Colorado. They took their time, for they were in no hurry. They would travel through Colorado, into Wyoming-giving Utah a wide berth-and then the final leg into Idaho, finally fanning out, encircling what had once been the capital of Tri-States.

Both Jake and Texas Red had heard about the

man called Sam Hartline; heard that he paid well for men and women of the inferior breeds. Hartline paid in gold and guns.

And they had heard the man Hartline worked for, the Russian General Striganov, was offering sacks of gold for the head of Ben Raines.

So this time they would not go in with bluff and bluster against Raines. This time they would be much more cautious, with carefully thought-out plans.

And they would get Ben Raines.

"We're not going to Las Vegas and play the slot machines?" Rani asked, her lips curving into a smile.

"Nothing left," Ben told her. "Oddly enough, the place was among the first to be looted. Whiskey and money. Even though the people didn't know whether the money was any good or not, they took it. Wrecked the place in doing so. Lots of infighting among the looters. We'll avoid that place."

"It must have been grand when it was going, though," Rani said.

Ben said nothing in response. He had never cared much for the place. Not knowing day from night had never appealed to him.

The one-hundred-mile jump up to Ely took all of the next day. The highway was blocked in a dozen places, causing detours and backtracking and delays. Ben had not expected this highway to be so cluttered with junked vehicles. When they finally arrived in Ely, the place was a mess.

"My God!" Rani said, viewing the destruction. "What happened here?"

The town looked as though a giant child had slapped it in youthful frustration, tumbling the buildings about like huge playing blocks.

"I don't know," Ben admitted. "But I'm getting some strange vibes about this place."

"Shall we leave?" she asked.

"With all deliberate haste."

A few miles outside of town, Rani radioed, "We're being followed, Ben."

Ben glanced in both his mirrors. He could see nothing. "You sure?"

"Positive. I double-checked. Wait until we're around this next curve. Maybe the road will straighten out for a time. Uh-oh. Here they come, Ben. Four or five cars and trucks."

Ben chanced a quick glance at his road map. Pulling a trailer, he had no hope of outrunning those following him. He figured another six or seven miles to the town of McGill. Couldn't make that, either.

"Hang on and follow me, Rani," he radioed. "We're cutting off on this road to the left. Watch my brake lights and be ready for a quick stop. Get out ready to shoot."

Ben and Rani whipped off onto the dirt and gravel road in a cloud of dust. A quarter-mile down the road, Ben braked, motioning Rani to come around him. He backed up until

his pickup was blocking the road. He got out on the passenger side, choosing an M-16 for this fight, since the weapon had much more range than his Thompson.

The vehicles, three pickup trucks and two cars, stopped some two to three hundred yards away from them.

Ben laid the M-16 on the seat and got his .30-06, checking to see if the weapon was fully loaded. It was.

Ben jacked a round into the chamber and, using the hood for support, sighted in the lead truck. A man's face leaped into view through his powerful scope.

Dirty, unshaven, mean-looking, and ugly.

"That son of a bitch could sit behind tombstones and raise ha'nts," Ben muttered.

"Hey, you!" the man shouted, his voice just carrying to Ben and Rani.

Ben did not want to take him out of sight.

"Ask him what he wants," he said to Rani.

She did and the man shouted, "Whatever you got, missy. Give us your due for passin" on this road and you can head on out."

"You believe him?" Ben asked,

"Hell, no!"

Ben shot the man in the center of the chest, the slug knocking him backward, sprawling on the dirt road.

"Get me my RPG and a rocket," Ben said.

"I'm not going to jack around with these road scum."

Amid a ragged hail of gunfire from the outlaws' vehicles, Ben locked a grenade in place, checked to see if Rani was clear of the back-blast, sighted in the trucks, and fired.

The lead truck must have been carrying several hundred pounds of explosives, and the trucks behind it must have also been loaded with dynamite, for when the rocket struck, the force of the explosion knocked Rani to the ground and flung Ben to his knees.

The blast momentarily impaired hearing, and the two of them could only stand and stare in awe and utter silence as bits and pieces of cars and trucks were tossed literally hundreds of feet into the air.

Ben and Rani stared at the destruction that lay in front of them. Burning metal and mangled bodies littered the road in smoking heaps. There were no survivors among the outlaws.

"Can you hear?" Ben asked her, shaking his head.

"In a hollow, echoing sort of way," she replied. "It's weird. Ben, what in the world was in those trucks-an atomic bomb?"

"Whatever it was, we sure can't go back the way we came." He looked at his maps. "This road makes a half circle and then connects with 93, some miles north of McGill. We'll take it and chance it. Check your truck; see if any lead hit anything vital."

Ben's truck had taken most of the bullets from the outlaws' rifles, none of them doing any real harm to the truck. They headed out, driving slowly up the

bumpy road. It took them almost two hours to make the run on the rutted road. When they once more pulled onto Highway 93, it felt like a superhighway. They made camp and spent the night out in the open, far from dead towns with unblinking empty windows that seemed to remind Ben that life and love and hopes and dreams had once lived behind those silent walls.

Even after all these years, the feeling was disconcerting.

The eastern part of Nevada seemed to be void of human life—at least human life that longed for a productive, orderly, civilized society.

The empty trend continued as Ben and Rani pulled up to the outskirts of Wells. Silence greeted them. It was also very cold.

"Idaho going to be colder than this?" Rani asked.

"Somewhat," Ben said, in classic understatement.

"Ben, what happened to all the people?"

"I can't answer that, Rani. I just don't know. I've

never seen it this desolate. Hopefully, the people banded together and moved out, probably to the west, where the climate is more conducive to growing gardens. But that's just a guess. They might all be dead."

She shivered in the cold wind. Ben put his arm around her shoulders. "How many people lived in this state before the bombings, Ben?"

"Oh, seven or eight hundred thousand, I would imagine."

"Where in the hell did they all go?"

she once more flung, the question to the winds.

Ben let the winds take it. He sure didn't know the answer.

Chapter 32

They rolled through Jackpot, Nevada, at midmorning. A short time later, Ben radioed back to Rani.

"The old Tri-States, Rani. Welcome to a bit of history."

"Jesus, Ben! It's cold."

"It's also something else," he reminded her.

"What?"

"Christmas."

She was silent for half a mile, the tires humming on the concrete. "You're right. My God, I had completely forgotten. Merry Christmas, darling."

Ben knew they would encounter few, if any, people in the old Tri-States. While many had tried to move into the area, almost all had either left very quickly or been killed, for the Rebels had booby-trapped hundreds, thousands, of cars, trucks, homes. They had mined the timber and placed explosives in empty buildings. They had blown bridges and overpasses, poisoned a lot of the water sources.

The
Rebels
knew what had been rigged to blow. The
Rebels
knew what water was safe to drink. The
Rebels
knew what to touch and what to leave alone. The
Rebels
knew where guns and ammo and explosives were cached.

No one else did.

Ben led the way north at a fast clip. He was home. He had masterminded the Tri-States, and knew the highway system as well as he knew his right and left hands.

When they crossed Interstate 86, Ben traveled some twenty-odd miles and pulled over at a house he remembered. A close friend of Ben's had lived in this ranch-style home. He, his wife, and their three kids had been killed by government troops during the assault of the Tri-States.

"Stay in the truck," Ben told Rani. "And I mean, stay in the truck."

She did not have to be told again.

Consulting a thick ledger, Ben moved around the home, neutralizing the traps. He cautiously entered the home and cut the trip wires. He lifted the top of the range in the kitchen and removed a half-pound of explosives. Smiling, he walked back outside and waved Rani in.

"It's safe now," he assured her.

"Everything's been neutralized."

She looked at the mass of explosives in his hands. "Are you sure?"

He laughed at her. "Positive. Go on in and start setting up for the night. Firewood is stacked by the fireplace. It's dry, but it'll give us a good, quick, hot fire. I'm going to find us something."

"What?"

Ben grinned. "A Christmas tree, darling."

The first of Jake Campo's teams arrived in the old Tri-States.

"Spooky," one of the men observed. "Where the hell is all the people?"

"Yeah," another outlaw said, looking around him.

"Man, we ain't seen nobody since crossing the state line."

"Weird," the leader of the team agreed. He spotted a nice home sitting just off the highway. "We'll bunk over there for tonight. I ain't never seen so many nice houses."

"I was told that in the Tri-States you had to keep your place lookin' good. If you didn't mow the lawn, people would come in and mow it for you--then send you the bill!"

"It don't make no difference, no more," the

leader said. "There ain't no more Tri-States and pretty soon there ain't gonna be no more Ben Raines, neither."

He opened the front door. It was not locked, since the former residents of Tri-States had never locked their doors or taken the keys out of their cars or trucks (remember, folks, always take the keys out of the ignition. Don't let a good boy go bad)!

The opening of the door tripped an acid-delay switch, tipping the glass vial to allow the acid to eat through a thin wire.

The entire team of Campo's outlaws crowded into the den of the home.

"Nice place," one said. "Lookie there!" He pointed. "Farwood all stacked up and ready for us to burn."

The wire parted with a soft ping.

"What the hell was that?"

"Your imagination, probably. Come on. Let's get settled in and fix some grub."

Fifteen pounds of high explosives blew. One entire wall collapsed on the outlaws; beams fell from the ceiling, crushing the life from two of the outlaws. One man crawled out of the wreckage of the home, pulling himself along with his hands. Both his legs were broken.

He passed out from the pain.

He would be frozen stiff by morning.

Another team rolled into what had been southern Wyoming before Ben Raines and his Rebels renamed the entire area the Tri-States, years back.

The outlaws spotted a lovely rock home sitting on a hill. That would be ideal for a headquarters. Or a grave. They settled in and built a roaring fire in the fireplace. Had they been just a bit more observant, they might have noticed the logs were too heavy for wood that had been allowed to dry, inside, for almost two years.

The logs had been hollowed out and packed full of extremely high explosives. The explosives would detonate after reaching the temperature of ninety degrees.

When the fireplace blew, the impact scattered debris-wood, brick, stone, and various parts of human bodies-all over the small hill.

Another team of outlaws came down from the north, into Montana. They thought it would be amusing to spend the night in what had once been Ben Raines' residence.

Their amusement was very short-lived.

Ben had deliberately left sealed tins of what was labeled pure water on the kitchen counter, along with sealed tins of emergency rations. The water was poisoned and so was the food.

Ben and his Rebels, just before the government assault on Tri-States had begun, had warned the government that if they chose to interfere with a peaceful way of life, they would soon discover what Hell

must be like.

The outlaws ate and drank their fill, and then died horribly, their bodies and faces and hands swelling and blackening in death.

Another group of Texas Red's boys found a small, very intimate cocktail lounge where, by golly, the bar was still stocked with sealed bottles of booze. They had a high ol' time and got rip-roaring drunk. They didn't notice the slight sweet fragrance coming from the bottles of whiskey.

Poison.

One by one they closed their eyes. One by one they went to sleep. One by one they slumped to the floor. One by one ... they died.

"Anything?" Jake asked his radio operator. "Nothin', Big Jake. Not a peep. And they was callin' in regular 'til yesterday."

Again, Big Jake Campo felt a shiver of fear touch him. He knew, he knew

the boys were dead. But how in the hell had Raines managed to do it? How had he found them out so soon? And how in the hell could one man and one woman kill so many so quickly?

Jesus Flipping Christ!

Jake looked into Texas Red's eyes. He saw open fear there.

"We can't quit now," Jake said, after taking the man's elbow and leading him away from the other men.

"We got to go on."

"I don't like it," Texas Red honestly admitted his fear. "I'm scared, man. And I mean, really, fucking scared!"

"Get a grip on yourself. Goddamnit, he's just one man. One man!"

"Is he?" Red asked.

"Is he what?"

"Is Ben Raines just a mortal man?"

Jake Campo opened his mouth to cuss the outlaw, then closed it. He walked away. Dammit it to hell-he didn't know. He just plain didn't know!

Ben had found some old popcorn and, together, they popped the corn and dyed it all different colors, using food coloring from the kitchen pantry.

Rani found some thread and strung the brightly colored popcorn around the small tree Ben had cut.

But something was missing.

Rani said, "You take that end of the house, Ben. And I'll take the other. You find something for me, and I'll find something for you. We have to have some presents under the tree."

Giggling and laughing like children, they went their ways and each returned with a gift, Rani's wrapped in a piece of old grocery bag, Ben's wrapped in a piece of newspaper.

They put them under the tree and began preparing dinner. They ate C-rations by candle light and then opened their gifts.

Ben had found a pair of diamond earrings for her, and she had found a pocket watch for him. She fitted the earrings and Ben wound the old watch.

"Perfect Christmas," Ben said.

Chapter 33

Jake Campo sat straight up in his blankets. He knew what had gotten his boys, and it hadn't been Ben Raines.

Throwing his blankets aside, he jerked on his boots and ran to the communications truck, startling the sleepy man.

"Get the boys on the horn!" he snapped.

"Right now."

His teams contacted, Jake said, "Stay out of the homes, the bars, the buildings. Don't touch nothing.

Everything is booby-trapped. I remember somebody telling me about it. You guys copy all this?"

"Yeah. When you gonna get here?"

"Soon," Jake radioed. "Real soon. For now, you guys hunt a hole and stay put."

He told Texas Red what had gone down. "You see, Red. Raines ain't no god. But I tell you what he's gonna be, real soon."

"What?"

"Goddamn dead!"

The morning after Christmas, Ben and Rani pulled out and headed north. Before leaving, Ben had loaded both trucks with as much emergency gear as possible, including ammunition and explosives from one of many hidden caches.

"Where are we going, Ben?" Rani asked.

"Into the wilderness area. We'll winter there and set up traps for Campo and his crud."

"Are you going to call Colonel Gray and ask him to send in help?"

"Nope."

"We were awfully lucky down in Texas, Ben. But you know luck has a nasty habit of running out. Usually at the worst of times."

"This is something I have to do by myself, Rani. If you want to help, fine. If not, I can call in and have a team come and get you. It's all up to you."

"You know I'm staying with you right to the end, Ben. But why is this so important to you?"

"Call it macho, male pride, stubborn, stupid; it's probably a mixture of all those things. It's ..."

Ben seemed to be at a loss for words.

"It's for Jordy, isn't it, Ben?"

"Yes."

She took his hand. "Then we'll do it together."

They drove until the paved roads ran out. Then Ben off-loaded the supplies from Rani's

truck and carefully hid the vehicle and his small trailer. With Rani by his side, Ben drove deep into what had been known as the Boise National Forest, to the southern branch of the Middle Fork Salmon. It took them three days to get all

the supplies to the cabin deep in the timber.

She noticed Ben kept looking up at the sky.

"Ben, I know you're checking the skies for snow warnings. But even if it snows ten feet, you're leaving a trail a blind man could follow. Broken limbs and marked trees that the truck has rubbed against. You've deliberately tossed crap on the ground. You

want

them to find us, don't you?"

"I want them to know I've gone into the deep timber, yes. Finding our exact location is something else, though. You've seen the placement of that cabin, Rani. You know a person could walk within fifty feet of it and not see it unless they knew exactly

where to look. Ike built it, years ago. Well, that's not entirely true. He found what was left of it and renovated it. I'm going to stash you in the cabin and leave the truck some miles from the cabin. While I'm backtracking to the cabin, I'll begin setting up traps."

"Ben," she said with great patience, "you could call in Colonel Gray and his Scouts and be done with this matter in no time."

"Of course I could." He smiled grimly.

"But it's much more personally satisfying this way."

"And men say women are complicated."

The snug little cabin was built against a rather large hill, or a small mountain, as Rani called it. Only a small part of the cabin showed; the rest was part of the terrain itself, with the back rooms built into the earth. Ike was convinced that outlaws had built the place, back during the wild west days. Trees hid the cabin, the trees so close to the small porch they could be touched while sitting on the porch.

The cabin had a large combination den and kitchen. One big bedroom with a small fireplace. The smoke from both fireplaces was angled out into the rear, toward the cave at the back of the cabin, finally filtering out only-God-knew-where-probably miles away.

Part of the cave was used as a storage area. Ike had followed the cave for, as he put it, "One hell of an uncomfortable distance." He had followed it until it branched off in three different directions, becoming so narrow and small a cat would have trouble getting through.

So Ben and Rani were safe from the rear, from both sides, and from above.

Ben and Rani worked three full days cutting and hauling and stacking wood for the fireplaces, most of the wood coming from downed trees. They only cut green wood when absolutely necessary. They filled up the

storage area with enough wood to last them the winter, for the cabin was very snug, built as it was into the hill.

Ben killed two deer and dried most of the meat, storing it. For the first time in weeks, he and Rani enjoyed fresh meat, Rani fixing a roast for several meals, and a stew out of the rest.

The first of the new year, the weather turned rough, with cold winds and rain that quickly turned into sleet and then snow.

When they awakened on the second day of January, they were snowed in tight.

Chapter 34

Jake Campo stood in the blowing snow, his big hands balled into fists. He stood looking first to the north, then at the obvious clues standing out like neon signs.

"He's baiting us," Texas Red said. "He's daring us to come after him."

"That's the way I read it, too," Jake agreed. "Throwing down the glove and challenging us to pick it up."

"Huh?" Red said.

Jake looked at the man. Dumb son of a bitch! he thought. "All right, boys. You start cuttin' sign," he ordered a dozen men. "Rest of you make damn sure the trucks and jeeps are ready to go. Can't nothin' but a four-wheel make it in there. This weather ain't gonna last. They'll be blizzards and then it'll warm up enough for us to move. We might be able to move one day and be holed up for a week. But we're gonna get Ben Raines. This time, we're gonna get him."

Ben radioed in to Base Camp One and gave Cecil his map coordinates on scramble.

"Ike's hidey-hole," he told them.

Ike grinned at the message. "Man, he's way

back in the timber. It'd take a full battalion to dig them out of there. Shit. I stashed enough ammo back there to fight a whole war."

"I think we should contact Colonel Gray," Gale said.

"No," Cecil nixed that. "If Ben wants Dan in on this, he'll contact him. I get the feeling this is, well, personal with Ben."

None of them liked it, but that was the way it was going to be.

Ben told them about Sam Hartline and the Russian.

Gale tensed at the news. Her dark eyes filled with hatred at Ben's report.

Tina put her hand on the smaller woman's shoulder.

"We're going to have to do something about that situation," Ben concluded his report. "Just as soon as I can pinpoint the location, we'll begin making plans to put an end to the obscenity. Raines out."

Ben turned his set off before Base Camp One had a chance to say anything else.

"It's a vendetta," Gale said. "It's for and

because of that little boy."

"I hadn't thought of that," Ike said. "But you're right. Some of the people who brought that bunch of kids back said they'd never seen anything like the sight of those bodies Ben piled up around that old house. I'd hate to be in those outlaws' boots when they do catch up with Ben."

Ben stepped out on the small porch. Under a clear blue sky, the land lay white and cold before him. Ben's lips curved in a warrior's smile as he lifted his eyes above the tree line.

Smoke from half a dozen fires plumed into the sky. They were miles away. But there they were, lines of silvery gray lancing into the blue.

He called Rani outside and pointed to the smoke.

"So they're here," she said.

"No," Ben corrected. "They're there.

A long way from finding this place." He smiled.

"They'll be stumbling around the deep timber for a week. And taking heavy losses as they do."

"From your traps?"

"And from me. Did you finish with those sheets yet?"

She sighed. "Yes. But I don't like it, Ben."

"I used to fish in this area, Rani. Back when we knew some semblance of peace. Before the central government elected to make war against us. I fished up here many times, with Ike and Pal and Cecil." And with our wives, he thought in silent memory. Salina, Lila, Valerie, Megan. All dead. Most of them never buried. Their monuments the majesty of the timber where they lay. "I know this land, Rani. Know it well."

She had picked up on Ben's hesitation. She opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it. Sometimes old memories are best left alone.

"Come on," she said, tugging at his arm. "Let's see how good a seamstress I am."

Rani had taken insulated coveralls and cut and sewn a snow suit over the coveralls, making it out of bed sheets. Using white shoe polish, Ben had made snow boots out of insulated hunting boots. His small pack

was also covered with white fabric, as were his web belt, canteens, and ammo pouches.

"When are you leaving, Ben?"

"An hour before first light in the morning. I want to watch the smoke today, try to judge where they're going."

She smiled despite her fears. "Then let's make it a memorable evening, General."

"Delighted, Miss Jordan."

"Ms."

"But of course."

Jake Campo squatted in front of a roaring fire, trying his best to get warm while his men struggled with tarps and tents. He looked over at Texas Red. They touched glances and understood each

other.

Both knew coming into the snow and deep timber after Raines had been a terrible mistake. But they couldn't back out now. That would cause them the loss of respect from their men. The outlaws couldn't afford that. They had to finish this thing once and for all.

Forty men, Campo was thinking. We lost eight teams of men and Raines didn't have to fire one lousy shot. And the desertions.

Jesus.

Guys were just quitting them left and right.

He looked around him at the cold camp.

Maybe, maybe if they were lucky, there was a hundred and twenty, maybe thirty guys left.

But he knew these were the hardcore men. Murderers and rapists and nut cases. Most didn't have enough sense to quit.

This would be the base camp for a week, maybe longer. They would search every square inch of these woods, chart it on a map, and then, if they didn't turn up Raines, move on. Jake knew they had plenty of food and sleeping bags and ammo. It was just a matter of finding Raines.

They would start in the morning.

Ben walked some twenty miles from the cabin before he began head-hunting. It was going to snow again that night, so he wasn't worried about tracks.

He drew close to the smoke that made up the western edge of the outlaws' perimeter and squatted down, uncasing his binoculars. Very carefully and slowly, he scanned the area that lay before him. He picked up the movements of a few men. He focused his binoculars and brought the men in closer. They were walking with their heads down, searching the snow for sign.

Ben eased back into the deep timber, watching the men walk through the small valley. He was careful to shield his field glasses so the sun would not bounce off the lenses, giving away his position. He watched them draw closer, then fan out, several hundred yards between each man.

He waited by the edge of the forest. He was not aware of it, but he was smiling.

The man working the most eastern area drew closer. He was talking to himself. Obviously, he was not happy with his job.

"Son of a bitch," the man muttered, his voice carrying to Ben. "I'm gonna enjoy watchin' Jake nail that bastard to a cross. I hope it takes him days to die.

Jesus!

it's cold out here."

So Jake has plans to crucify me, Ben thought. I don't

think I'd like that very much. I'll just see if I can't put a crimp in Big Jake's plans.

The outlaw came to the woods' edge and stood for a moment. The deep timber gave him some relief from the cold winds singing around the valley.

"I sure would like to take a piss," the outlaw muttered. "But I'm afraid my pecker would

freeze and fall off."

Then he cursed Ben Raines loud and long.

Ben hoped he enjoyed cursing him, for it was to be the last sound he would ever hear.

Ben was silent and deadly with his knife, slicing the man's throat with the heavy, razor-sharp blade. He dragged the man into the timber and dropped him in the snow, his warm, pumping blood staining the whiteness scarlet.

"Halp!" Ben hollered, disguising his voice.

"Halp! I'm stuck, boys, Halp!"

"Leroy, you stupid ox!" a man's call drifted over the valley. "What the shit is the matter with you now?"

"Caught my foot in a wedge!" Ben hollered.

"Come help me."

"All right, all right! Just don't pee on yourself.

We're

a-comin"dis"

Ben heard the man say, "You two keep on a-lookin'. Simmons, you and Bobby come with me. Let's see what that dumbass's got hisself into now."

The three outlaws approached Ben's position, walking clumsily through the snow.

"Leroy, you spastic bastard!" the point man said. "Sing out. Where is you?"

"Ooohhh!" Ben groaned.

"You hurt bad, Leroy?"

"Ooohhh!"

"Hang on, boy, we's comin'."

The point man was the first to step into the dimly lit timber, and for a few seconds, he was unable to see.

Ben took him out silently, plunging his knife into the man's chest, feeling the blade grind and grit through and past bone, driving into the man's heart.

Standing up, Ben reversed the dead man's sawed-off shotgun and used it for a club. He smashed the butt into one man's face, hearing bones crunch and splinter under the impact. Before the third man could unsling his weapon, Ben shattered the man's skull with the butt of the shotgun, hitting him so hard the butt broke off.

Ben dropped the broken shotgun, grabbed his .30-06, and uncapped the scope lenses. Quickly, he sighted an outlaw and pulled the trigger. Without bothering to see if he hit the man-Ben knew he didn't miss, not at this distance-Ben had sighted the last man in and had downed him before the echoing report of the rifle had died away.

Ben slipped quietly back into the timber, heading for the next plume of smoke. He was not aware of it, but his smile was still locked in place, giving him a death's-head look.

A look of hard-taken revenge.

Jake's head jerked up at the sounds of the gunfire. A tiny bit more of confidence ebbed within the man. He somehow knew the shots had not come from any of his men. He somehow knew that Raines had struck again.

He sat on a log before the fire, waiting for the pot of coffee to boil. Not coffee, really. But a mixture of tea

and coffee and chicory. Tasted like shit, but at least it was hot.

Seemed like it was taking forever for the crap to boil.

One of the warlord's men came and squatted down by the fire, rubbing his gloved hands together. "Reckon one of our boys got Raines, Jake?"

"Could be."

"Hope they didn't kill him. I wanna see how much pain Raines can take. I hate that son of a bitch."

"Why?" Jake heard himself ask. The one-word question surprised him, leaping from his mouth. He really didn't know why he'd asked it. Or, he mentally corrected that, didn't want to admit why he asked it.

"Huh?" the outlaw asked, looking at Campo.

"Why do you hate Raines?"

"Wai, shit, Jake! "Cause the man is ... the guy is ... all he is is ...
Shit!

I don't know. I jist do, that's all."

"Don't you, Jake?" another outlaw asked quietly.

Without taking his eyes from the just-bubbling liquid in the battered old pot, Jake said, "No. I don't hate him. I just wish to shit all this crap was over."

"You wanna quit, Jake?" yet another man asked.

Jake shook his big shaggy head. "No. Can't none of us quit, and you all know why. We got to see this thing through."

Jake leaned forward, reaching for the pot. Ben squeezed the trigger. The slug that was meant for Jake Campo struck the man squatted next to Jake, the force of the impacting bullet slamming the man forward, into the fire. His fur-lined parka caught fire, and was quickly blazing. The odor of cooked human flesh filled the air.

The camp panicked.

Ben fired again, the slug striking an outlaw in the center of the back, pitching the man into the snow, face down. Another outlaw went down, the bullet entering the left side of his head and exiting out the right, blowing brains and fluid and bits of bone out with it.

Ben hurled a grenade into the camp, the shrapnel-filled little bomb exploding next to a pickup truck that was stuck in the heavy snow. The gas tank of the truck blew, sending flames billowing in the air, adding more confusion to an already chaotic situation. Men were running awkwardly in the snow, shouting and screaming in fear and panic, slamming into each other, knocking one another down, kicking and squalling in the snowy cold of the timber.

At the sound of the first shot, Jake had thrown himself to one side, scurrying like a big crab for cover. But as the situation worsened, Jake realized that there

was no cover safe from the revengeful barking of the rifle and Raines.

Then, as quickly and savagely as it had begun, the firing stopped. Jake lay behind a log, listening for some sound,

any

sound, of Raines leaving.

Nothing.

The damned man moves like a ghost! Jake thought.

And that thought did nothing for Jake's mental state.

Chapter 35

Ben slipped through the green and white forest like an armed avenging ghost. He was paralleling the second team of outlaws that morning, waiting for one of them to get careless.

Finally one did.

He called out, "I'm gonna step in them woods yonder and take me a piss. I'll catch up with ya'll directly."

"Don't let it freeze off!" an outlaw called.

"Yeah," another yelled. "You ain't got enough dick now to do no woman no good."

He stepped into the timber and Ben swung the heavy knife. The cold metal suddenly turned hot with gushing blood, the big blade cutting through bone, muscle, and tendons. The head plopped to the snow, the eyes wide open and staring in shock and disbelief. The headless torso flopped and kicked on the snow, blood squirting from the severed neck.

Ben didn't want to try the same ruse twice in the same day. He lay behind a log, using the fallen timber for a rifle support. He sighted in the man who was furthest

away, and squeezed the trigger. The force of the slug knocked the man off his feet, the slug catching him squarely in the center of the chest. Ben shifted the rifle and shot another in the stomach. He managed to drop one more before the remaining two hit the snow and burrowed in like frightened rats.

Ben rolled away from the log, rolling backward, deeper into the timber, and began easing his way out of that area.

He was still smiling.

It began snowing heavily long before Ben reached the warmth of the cabin. The snow would hide his tracks, but he didn't believe Jake or Texas Red or any of the outlaws could be stupid enough to venture out in this weather.

The sky had changed from a brilliant blue to a dirty gray, and Ben suspected a blizzard was building. If that was the case, more of the outlaws would be leaving, pulling out, deserting the warlords.

And some of them would probably freeze to death.

Ben was still smiling as he stepped up on the porch.

Jake's fear had left him, as it had left Texas Red and many of the outlaws. The numbing cold had chased the fear away, replacing it with pure raw

savagery. A dozen outlaws had given up the chase, quietly packing their gear and pulling out, with Jake and Texas Red hurling obscenities and threats at them as they left.

The outlaws that remained had finally wised up, building lean-to's and crude shelters against the freezing winds and blowing snow. To a man, they all realized they had to kill Ben Raines and the woman, for those men who had left would surely spread the word, and the outlaws would be the subjects of much ridicule and scorn if they gave up the chase now.

No, Ben and Rani had to die. The outlaws had no choice in the matter now. None at all. It was fish-or-cut-bait time. And that was that.

The blizzard raged and howled and roared down from Canada with all the fury it could muster. The weather prevented the outlaws from moving against Ben, and kept Ben at home.

But while Ben and Rani were warm and dry and well-fed-indeed, both of them picking up a few pounds from no activity and hearty eating-the outlaws suffered during the extreme weather, many of them catching colds, which turned into pneumonia. Frostbite became infected, and turned gangrenous. Dispositions turned surly and fights broke out, then fistfights turned to gunplay.

Just as Jake was ready to pack it in and call it quits, and to hell with what other warlords and outlaws might think, the weather broke.

Jake awakened one morning to the sounds of water dripping. He lay in his blankets and tried to figure out what in the hell was going on.

Then he realized he was actually warm.

Warm? How could that be?

He stepped out of his crudely built one-room shack and looked around him in amazement.

The sun was shining brightly and the temperature, even this early in the morning, was in the upper forties, at least.

"All right!" he said. "All right!" he shouted.

Men began pouring out of lean-tos and shacks and tents, to stand and stare in confusion at the sudden change of weather.

"OK, boys!" Jake shouted. "Let's go get Ben Raines and the broad."

Ben kicked out of his blankets and walked to the window of the shack, throwing open the shutters. The chinooks were blowing. Andwiththe unusually warm winds, would come the outlaws. In full force.

"My God, Ben," Rani said. "It's the middle of winter and it feels like spring."

"Chinooks," Ben said. "They won't last. But it might last three or four days-maybe longer. But the outlaws are going to be crawling all over the damned place. It's time for me to get moving. I've got to rig more traps around the place. And

I've got to do it now. While I'm getting dressed, honey, would you get me those bear traps from back in the storage area, please?"'

Making several trips, Rani carried out several dozen of the heavy, cruel-jawed, long-outlawed bear traps. The jaws were capable of crushing a man's leg if he was unfortunate enough to step into one, and Ben was planning on breaking a lot of legs with the traps.

Ben was gone within the hour, loaded down with equipment. He was back in two hours, gathering up the last of the traps and packing enough emergency rations to last several days.

He kissed Rani and said, "They can't burn you out of

this place. And it would take a battering ram to knock down that door. You know how to use that M-60 machine gun. I'll try to have this thing over and done with in two days. Three max. You be careful and don't

go outside for any reason. OK?"

"You come back to me, old man, OK?"

"Yes, Miss Jordan."

"Ms."

"Right!" Ben grinned. He was gone into the timber.

Rani locked and barred the heavy door. She sat down to wait.

Ben lay on a ridge and watched the outlaws approach. The outlaws were in a good mood, the break in the weather having buoyed their spirits, filling them with a false confidence.

And he noticed their ranks had been thinned considerably. But still they were in a good mood, many of them laughing and speaking very profanely as to what they were going to do to Rani when they caught her.

Ben put an end to the party spirit by shooting an outlaw in the stomach with his M-16. That seemed to take all the joy from their moment.

"On the ridge!" an outlaw shouted. "I seen the bastard. Get him, boys!"

Ben had moved back into the timber before the sound of his shot had died away. He deliberately held his fire, wanted the man to step into the timber. He had some nasty surprises waiting for them.

The outlaw in the lead lumbered into the timber, not watching for sign. He tripped the first of many swing traps, the eighteen-inch sharpened stake driving into his stomach. He hung suspended on the stake, howling out his agony, screaming for someone to please help him.

Ben let him howl. It was good for his morale and very demoralizing for the outlaw's buddies.

The outlaws continued their headlong rush into the timber, all caution tossed to the wind, with one central thought: Get Ben Raines!

Ben heard the sickening sounds of the bear trap spring, the man's leg breaking and crushing under the impact of the heavy jaws. The outlaw fell forward, screamed once, and then passed out from the intense pain.

Another outlaw failed to see the wire strung

ankle-high in the timber. The wire tripped him, throwing him face forward into the snow, the sharpened stake imbedded in the hard ground driving all the way through the man's chest, the sharpened end tearing out the man's back.

Ben raised his M-16 and dropped three more outlaws before the men got it through their heads that the chase was not working out to their advantage.

"Fall back!" the command was shouted. "Jesus Christ-get out of these fuckin' woods. The man's a damned army all by hisself."

Ben was moving before the words left the man's mouth, moving deeper into the woods and circling, angling toward the edge of the clearing to the outlaw's southern position.

A burly, unshaven, smelly outlaw was running wildly, his mouth open, gasping for air in the cold thinness. Another thug who had had quite enough of one Ben Raines. Ben decided to give him one final taste of combat, for this man was one Ben recognized as having said some perfectly disgusting things about what he wanted to do to Rani.

Ben shot him in the knees, pitching the man howling to the snowy, muddy ground.

Ben pulled back into the timber, leaving the man yowling for help.

Ben waited for that help to arrive.

"Garfield!" the shout came drifting to Ben.

"Luther Garfield! Where are you, man?"

"Here!" Luther yelled, his voice pain-filled.

"The bastard shot me in the knees. Oh, Jesus, man. It hurts."

The outlaw's buddy came running, staying close to the timber's edge.

Ben slipped forward, his big Bowie knife in his hand. "Here, asshole," Ben called, then moved to one side.

The man slid to a halt, his shotgun raised, the muzzle pointing toward where Ben had been. "Come out and fight like a man, you sneaky son of a bitch!" the outlaw said, panting and gasping for breath.

Ben came up behind the man and drove the big blade into the man's skull, the blade penetrating halfway through the man's brain.

Ben see-sawed the blade out and ducked back into the timber. He looked out into the small clearing. Those outlaws remaining had given up the fight and were running across the clearing, heading out.

The taste for battle had left this bunch. They wanted no more of Ben Raines.

Ben squatted in the mud and snow. His battle-tested and proven grin was still firmly locked in place.

Chapter 36

"Take your campaign and shove it up your ass, Jake!" the big outlaw's second-in-command told him bluntly. "I've had it!"

"All right," Jake said calmly. "Carry your asses on out of here, then."

More than half of Jake Campo's men-those that were

left-walked to their vehicles and pulled out.

"We're leavin', Red," Texas Red's second-in-command told him. "Right now."

The warlord nodded slowly. "OK. Just don't ever let me see any of you again, though. "Cause I'll sure kill you if n I do."

"Screw you, Red!"

The battered and hobo-looking base camp of the outlaws became quiet as the men began pulling out. Jake Campo and Texas Red looked around them at the men remaining.

Jake had fifteen men left. Texas Red had ten who had elected to remain with him.

"There's a pattern to Raines" movements," Jake

said. "I been thinkin' about it. And the circle keeps gettin' smaller." He looked at a tattered and greasy map. "They ain't too far from this river," he said, poking at the map with a big, dirty finger. The others gathered around. "Our boys was ambushed here, here, here, and here. Then right here." He jammed a hole in the map in his frustration. "You boys get some food and rest. We'll take him tomorrow, for sure."

Ben knew Jake was not stupid. Texas Red was the next thing to a cretin, but Jake was intelligent. Ben guessed, and guessed accurately, that Jake would have very nearly pinpointed the cabin. Ben began removing and resetting his traps. He spent all the rest of that day relocating the bear traps, tearing down and rebuilding the swing traps, removing and resetting tripwires.

He spent that night some four miles from the cabin, then used part of the next morning finalizing his trap locations. He guessed, and once more guessed accurately, that most of the outlaws would be hightailing it out of the state by now. At best, Ben felt, Jake and Texas Red would be able to fluster no more than thirty-five to forty men.

By noon, he was finished and standing on the small porch of the cabin.

"Getting down to the wire now, isn't it, Ben?" Rani asked, looking at him.

"They'll be here in three or four hours, probably. I'm going to clean up and take a nap. By this time tomorrow it'll be all over."

Once again, Rani was astonished at the calmness of the man. There was no more emotion in his voice than a man discussing the price of apples.

Jake looked at the boot print in the mud. It had frozen in place during the night, and had thawed under the heat of the winter sun. It was the fifth track the outlaws had found, along with a few broken branches, a carelessly moved small log, and a wrapper from emergency food rations.

The obvious signs did not fool Jake. He knew Ben had deliberately left them; was deliberately leading them straight to him.

And Jake knew-
knew

-Raines was going to win the final battle.

Well, the man thought with a suppressed sigh, at least it'll be Ben Raines killing me. Not some goddamned housewife with a shotgun.

"More sign up here, Jake!" the call echoed through the woods.

Jake walked up to the man and looked, a small smile creasing his ugly face. But it was not a smile of victory; more a smile of resignation.

Raines had deliberately stepped into a muddy spot and walked for ten or fifteen yards.

Jake sat down on a log and took a can of beans out of his jacket pocket. Using a military can opener, he opened the can and began calmly spooning beans into his mouth. His men looked at him, not knowing what to make of this.

"Better eat while we can," Jake said. One last meal, he thought bitterly. Should have stayed east of the Mississippi, he thought. Should have never set Cowboy Vic up to kill that punk kid. That's what all this is

all about. All this shit is about that skinny little kid. Raines has destroyed everything I built over that one goddamned little kid. Christ! What kind of man is he, anyway?

Ben opened his eyes and swung his feet off the bunk, pulling on his boots. "Get some rest," he told Rani. "I'll wake you in an hour. Go on. We might not be able to sleep tonight."

While Rani slept, Ben munched on biscuits and sat looking out the one window of the cabin. Soon, he thought. They'll be here soon.

Ben cut his eyes to look at the sleeping shape of Rani. I feel something for this woman. Something I thought I would never feel again. When this winter is over, and we've been alone for several months, I will know if this woman is the one I choose to spend the rest of my life with. I think so. Even now, I believe she is the one. Those eyes can hold me; she has an inner strength that I find appealing. Maybe, just maybe, this is the one.

He shook those thoughts away and returned his attention to the window.

The sound of a trap springing shut slammed through the quiet air. The horrible howling of a man with a crushed leg ripped the afternoon.

Rani came off the bunk, grabbing her rifle, coming to Ben's side.

"Goddamn, Jake!" a man yelled. "Looke there. A damned cabin built into that rise."

"They're here," Rani said.

"I believe that would be an accurate statement, dear," Ben replied.

Chapter 37

"We're gonna blow you out of there, Raines!" Jake's voice came through the timber. "This time, we got explosives."

"But first you have to get close enough to use them," Ben said to Rani.

"You hear me, Raines?"

"Yeah, I heard you, fat-ass," Ben shouted.

"Don't stand out there and brag about what you're going to do-do it!"

Jake flushed. He turned to his men and said, "Charge the fuckin' house. Stay in the timber; it leads all the way up there." He turned to Texas Red's men. "You boys lay down a covering fire. Now go!"

Jake and Texas Red had indeed brought several cases of grenades with them. But grenades are useful only if one gets close enough to throw them. And what none of the outlaws knew was that Ike had stashed several crates of deadly Claymore mines in the cave behind the cabin-and Ben had brought enough wire to battery-activate them from the house.

That smile was on Ben's lips once more as he sat behind the shuttered window, looking through a peephole, the detonator box in his hand. The shadowy figures of the outlaws flitted from tree to tree, approaching the cabin.

Ben pushed the switch activating the THIS SIDE TOWARD ENEMY mines. The TSTE warning had always amused Ben.

The Claymores were not amusing to the outlaws. Before the reverberating sounds of the explosions had died away, the mangled bodies of half a dozen outlaws lay on the ground. Ben hit the second switch, and Jake was almost out of personnel.

"Jake!" an outlaw slid to a stop in the snowy, muddy ground. "Them's Claymores. I remember them from "Nam. He's got 'em all over the damn place. Think about this situation, Jake. We can't win. You know how Raines plans things out. The guy's like a screwin' computer or something. He don't miss nothing. You know?"

"Get to the point, Jimmy." But Jake knew what the point was. He'd already thought about it.

"We can't win, Jake. Look at that damn place. No way we could burn them out, even if we could get close enough to do it. It's built into the hill. Raines has probably got food in there to last for months. The guys is afraid to go on, afraid to do nothing "cept go back exactly the way we come. Raines has them traps everywhere.

I-was

Texas Red's insane yelling startled them all. The outlaw jumped to his feet, a grenade in each hand. He had pulled the pins and was holding the spoons down. "Cowards!" Red screamed. "You're all cowards. Ever

damn one of you. "I'll take Raines out.

Me!

People will talk about me around campfires for centuries to come."

"Son of a bitch is crazy," one of Red's own

men muttered.

"I heard that," a buddy said. "I'm gettin' the hell outta here. You comin'?"

"Right behind you, partner."

And two more were gone, slipping quietly away, unnoticed.

Texas Red charged the cabin, yelling and cursing as he ducked from tree to tree. He took his last step in this life and stepped into a bear trap, the jaws clamping shut, dropping him to the ground, his left leg crushed.

He fell hard, his hands under him, and for a moment was stunned. Then the pain hit him, the grenades forgotten. They were under his chest, the spoons gone.

"I hate your guts, Raines!" Texas Red squalled. "I hate you so bad I-was

Two grenades exploded within a millisecond of each other, the blasts shredding the outlaw, flinging bits and pieces of him all around the timber. The blast tore his crushed leg free of the jaws, tearing it off at the knee. All that remained of Texas Red was part of a leg and one boot, still trapped in the jaws.

"Jesus Christ!" an outlaw said. "That's it for me, boys. I'm gonna go be a farmer or something."

Jake sat behind a thick tree and watched and listened to the men leave, running for their lives. After a time, he knew, without looking around him, he was alone.

Ben looked at what was left of Texas Red, and the remains of him, splattered all over the ground. Parts of him hung from low branches. "That's two for Jordy," Ben called.

"That's what it's all about, ain't it, Raines?"

Jake called, still hidden behind the tree.

"All these men dead, just for one lousy punk-ass kid. You're crazy, Raines. You know that? Crazy!"

"Jordy was worth more than the whole bag of you filth," Ben called.

"You're probably right," Jake muttered, not loud enough for Ben to hear. He shouted, "Just you and me, now, Raines. How's it gonna be?"

"Call it," Ben said.

"I'll think about it some, Raines. You and the broad ain't going nowhere long as I'm out here."

Ben said nothing to that.

"You was a writer, wasn't you, Raines?" Jake yelled.

"That's right."

"Yeah. I read some of them. You wrote pretty good adventure stuff. I used to be a school teacher. Did you know that?"

"A school teacher?" Rani said to Ben.

"I didn't know that, Jake," Ben said, raising his voice. "What'd you teach?"

"I was a coach."

"That figures," Ben muttered. He didn't know whether to believe the outlaw or not. He decided

Campo was lying. "You're stalling, Campo!"

"Sure, I am, Raines," came the almost-cheerful reply. "Hell, nobody wants to die."

"But everybody wants to go to Heaven," Ben said with his grin still locked in place.

Jake laughed at that. "You believe in all that shit, Raines?"

"I believe in a higher power, yes." Ben looked up at

the sky, checking the sun. It would be dark in about an hour. He wanted this over with before dark.

"I don't believe in God, Raines. Too many different versions of it around for me to accept. Catholics believe one thing, Jews believe another. Islam, Hindu. Hell, even the Indians believed in a Higher Power. Too much dogma bouncing around for this ol' boy, Raines."

Hell, Ben thought. Maybe the guy had been a school teacher.

"So what do you believe in, Jake?" Ben reached for his Thompson.

"Myself, Raines. And maybe you," he added, almost reluctantly.

"Me?"

"Yeah. Maybe there is something to all those stories. I don't know. I do know this: You don't behave like a normal man. No normal man would even think of taking on a hundred and fifty men. Much less winning."

"His speech has improved," Rani observed.

"Yes," Ben agreed. "So?" he called.

"You're not going to fight me fair, are you, Raines?"

"Not likely."

Jake once more laughed. "Yeah. I damn sure believe that."

"Get on with it, Campo," Ben said, growing tired of the dialogue.

"OK," Jake said. "One more thing, Raines. You believe gods are fair?"

"What do you mean, fair?"

"Well, not possessing dishonesty or injustice. Behaving in a proper manner."

Ben's eyes grew cold. He knew then what Jake was

going to do. And Jake—all three hundred pounds of him—was going to be in for a very ugly surprise.

"Not always, Jake."

"But you do, Raines. You do."

"I do what, Campo?"

"I read about you, Raines, when you was fronting the Tri-States. You're a man of honor, and

order, and discipline, right?"

"To a certain degree, Jake."

Jake laughed. "Yeah, you are, Ben. That's why I'm going to win this fight. I just figured it out, boy."

But Ben was one step ahead of the outlaw.

"You see, Raines." Jake stood up and stepped away from the protection of the tree. He unbuckled his web belt and let it fall to the ground. "I'm unarmed. And you won't shoot an unarmed man. Not Ben Raines. Ben Raines has too much macho pride in him to do that."

Jake stepped closer, into the very small clearing in front of the cabin.

Ben moved to the door and opened it, stepping out onto the small porch.

"Oh, you disappoint me, Ben," Jake said, his eyes on Ben's Thompson.

Ben laid the Thompson on the porch and stepped onto the ground.

Jake laughed. "I'm gonna tear your fuckin' head off, Raines." He lifted his big fists. "Just you and me, boy. A stand-up, duke-it-out, fistfight. Just you and me."

He moved closer to Ben. A hard glint of victory was shining in his eyes. He spat on the muddy, snowy ground and shuffled his booted feet in some semblance of a prize fighter.

Ben lifted his fists and stepped closer.

Jake grunted, then laughed. He stepped in and swung a huge right fist.

Ben ducked and side-stepped. He kicked out with his boot and caught Campo flush on the knee, knocking the bigger, heavier man to the ground. Campo shook his head and crawled to his knees. Ben kicked the man in the face with the toe of his jump boot. Teeth popped out of the man's mouth and rolled around on the ground. Blood dripped from a smashed mouth.

Jake lifted his head, disbelief in his eyes.

He tried to rise to his feet. Ben kicked him in the side, hearing ribs break under the heavy toe of the boot. Jake screamed and fell to the ground, white-hot pain lancing through him.

Ben kicked him twice more in the head, one savage kick tearing an ear from the man. Blood streamed from the man's head.

"Fight fair, you son of a bitch!" Jake spoke through his ruined mouth, the words mushy, pushing past torn lips.

"No such thing, Campo," Ben told him. "Just a winner and a loser."

Jake rushed Ben, scrambling to his feet. Ben stepped aside and the man ran headfirst into a tree, splitting his head wide open. Blood stained the man's face, pouring from his badly mangled head.

Ben picked up a wrist-sized stick from the ground and brought it down hard on Campo's back, the force of the blow driving the man to the ground.

"Seems like I ain't been able to do nothing right the past few months," Jake said. He suddenly rolled and came up with a knife in his hand.

Ben had never lost his savage, cold grin. He pulled his .45 from leather, cocked it, and began pulling the trigger. One in the chamber, six in the clip. He put all seven rounds in the big man's chest, each round knocking the huge man backward. Jake Campo, outlaw, self-styled warlord, died with his bloody eyes wide open and staring.

"That's three for Jordy," Ben said.

Chapter 38

The warm spell broke on the third day, with winter locking Ben and Rani in. Before the new snows came, the pair had worked, dragging off the bodies of the dead outlaws and dumping them into a deep ravine, shoveling dirt and gravel over them.

Now, as the cold winds howled around the snug little cabin in the deep woods, and the snow piled up around them, they sat in front of a fire and played chess.

With Rani regularly beating Ben.

"I don't know how you're doing it," Ben grumbled. "But you're cheating. I just know you are."

Rani laughed at him. "Checkmate," she said.

"Crap!" Ben said.

"How did you learn to fight like you did, Ben?" she asked. "The way you fought Jake Campo."

"There is no such thing as a fair fight, Rani. Not outside the ring. I've never believed in those so-called fair fights. One goes in to win. Period. The trick is knowing you're right and sticking by your convictions."

"Did you always fight like that, Ben. I mean, even when things were ... normal?"

"Yes," he said, putting away the board and getting a deck of cards. "Strip poker, maybe?" he grinned.

"You're going to look awfully funny sitting there on the cold floor, stark naked."

"You have a point." He put away the cards.

"Were you a loner as a boy, Ben?"

Ben wore a reflective look for a moment.

"Yes. I guess I was. I never followed the usual drummer. I think I marched to my own beat even when it was socially unacceptable. Looking back, I guess I really enjoyed being alone. I know

I did. I tried not to bother anyone, and didn't want anybody bothering me. Didn't always work that way, though."

She was curious about this man, this founder of the Tri-States, the man that so many chose to follow.

"You had a normal childhood, though?"

Ben laughed at her serious expression.

"Oh, sure. I played baseball and basketball. But I never took them very seriously. How does one take a game

seriously? I spent most of my time working and chasing girls."

"Were you successful?" she asked, a twinkle in her green eyes.

"Well, I spent more time working than catching the girls," he admitted.

"But you caught your share of the girls?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "Looking back, I'll have to say I did. I wasn't a jock, so that was a definite minus for me. But I had a happy, very normal childhood, I guess. I've never been a person who sought many material things, Rani. I've always been content with just enough to get by, and perhaps a tiny bit more. I never cared much for

a lot of pomp. I was never a joiner. Never belonged to a country club; never cared much what people thought of me. Like I said, I guess I marched to the beat of another drummer."

"Where have I heard that before?"

"Henry David Thoreau," Ben said, his memory working hard to recall the line. "I didn't agree with all that Thoreau said, but I loved much of it."

"Say it."

"The line?"

"Yes."

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

She looked at the man for a long moment. "I guess that fits you rather well, Ben."

"I guess it does, Rani."

"I think I'm in love with you."

"Be sure, Rani."

"I'm sure, Ben."

"Yes. I guess I am, too."

The days spun and drifted and wound into weeks, while the two in the cabin grew closer, mentally, emotionally, and physically. To them, it was as if the world gone mad around them did not exist. They built snowmen, had snowball fights, explored, and fell in love.

January drifted into February and February became March, but Ben and Rani really didn't notice the passing months. March whispered into April, then

began roaring with the last major winter storm of the season. As the storm abated, howling eastward to blow itself out, Rani lay in Ben's arms before the fireplace. Both of them were nearly asleep.

Rani stirred and said, "It'll be full spring soon, Ben."

"Uh-huh."

"Hadn't we better be thinking about pulling out pretty soon?"

Ben opened his eyes and looked around. "Did you hear anything?"

"What?"

"I don't know. It was an ... well, it wasn't a natural sound for the woods."

"You're imagining things, old man."

"I guess so. About pulling out. Where do you want to go?"

"You have to start making plans about setting up those outposts, right?"

Ben groaned and stretched. "Don't remind me of that, please."

"And you have to start thinking about your plans for the Russian and Hartline, right?"

"Yes, dear."

There was that noise again. Ben cut his eyes toward the door. He was sure the mutants knew they were in the deep woods, but so far none had shown any willingness to attack.

Was that a mutant out there? Ben wasn't sure.

He listened. The noise-whatever it was-was not repeated.

Ben looked at his watch. Two o'clock in the afternoon. The winds had ceased, and the temperature was once more on the rise. He looked at Rani. She was

looking at the closed cabin door.

"Something wrong?" Ben asked.

"Something's out there, Ben," she whispered. "And it isn't an animal."

Ben pulled on his boots and picked up his .45, jacking back the hammer. "I'll go have a look around."

The cabin door splintered open. Men filled the room. Ben cleared the room of the invaders, the booming of the .45 almost deafening in the closed space. Ben didn't know these men; they weren't outlaws, for they were dressed in military field clothes, and they were disciplined.

Ben felt the shock as a bullet struck him in the left shoulder, knocking him backward. He fell heavily and grabbed his Thompson. Holding it one-handed, he pulled the trigger.

The heavy weapon bucked and roared in his hand. The slugs knocked and tore great chunks of wood out of the walls and ceiling. It also cleared the doorway of uniformed men, splattering blood and brains and bits of bone all over the porch and small yard.

Ben got to his feet just in time to catch a bullet in his leg. The shock and force of the slug knocked him sprawling. He lost his Thompson. He grabbed a shotgun leaning against the wall in a corner, and lifted it just as Sam Hartline stepped into the doorway. The mercenary saw the shotgun and jumped to one side as Ben pulled the trigger. Most of the buckshot missed the man, but enough hit him to knock him off the porch.

Rani's screaming had, for some reason, stopped echoing around the cabin. Ben cut his eyes, frantically searching. She was gone.

"Kill the son of a bitch!" Sam Hartline's voice yelled

the command. "Take the woman and get the hell

moving out of here."

A bullet struck Ben's side, once more slamming him to the cabin floor. He hit the floor and rolled, coming up firing the sawed-off shotgun. The full load struck a man dead-center in the head, taking his head off his shoulders. The man flopped on the floor, half in and half out of the cabin.

Ben saw the grenade come flying through the doorway. It landed on the floor and rolled. Ben dove for the storage area, hit hard and bleeding. The grenade exploded just as Ben reached the cave, the force of it throwing him into the cave, shrapnel peppering his legs and back.

Something struck Ben on the back of the head, dropping him into darkness just as the front part of the cabin collapsed, sealing him in.

Chapter 39

Cold. Ben was cold. And confused. And hurting. All six feet plus of him was hurting. He opened his eyes and found darkness surrounding him. Slowly, tentatively, he moved the fingers of his right hand. They worked. At least he was alive. He tried moving his left hand. Pain shot white-hot through the arm. He cut his eyes and looked at the luminous hands of his wrist watch. One o'clock. He struggled to remember ... remember something very important. But what was it?

Yeah. It had been two o'clock when the attack came. So Ben had been out for ten or eleven hours.

But where was Rani?

Hartline. Sam Hartline had taken her. He remembered the man's shout about them having the woman.

Slowly, cautiously, Ben moved all his extremities. His left arm and right leg hurt. But it was the pain in his stomach that worried him. Then he remembered. Not his stomach, but his side. The bullet had hit him just as he was turning. He remembered the bullet entering and exiting. All right, he could deal with that.

But do it quietly! Survival leaped into his mind. Take one thing at a time, Raines.

Warmth. Got to get warm to reduce the chances of killing shock.

He lay very still, mentally reviewing every corner of the cave//orage area. He put out his hand and felt shelves to his right. OK. He knew where he was. He pulled a tarp from the bottom shelf and wrapped it around him. He lay for a time, listening for any alien sounds. Nothing. He felt sure he was alone.

Painfully extending his arm, he felt on the third shelf for candles and matches, knocking everything on the shelf on top of him. He fumbled around and found the candles and matches. He lit a candle and placed it on the floor. Even that simple action exhausted him. He lay still, gathering more strength.

Food! As nauseous as it sounded, Ben knew he had to have food-and liquids.

He felt himself fading. Just before he passed out,

he blew out the candle.

Then he dropped into unconsciousness.

"You're a fine-looking cunt, lady," one of Hartline's men told Rani. "OP Sam get on his feet, he's gonna have a fine time with you."

Rani spat in the man's face.

The man drew back his fist.

"You hit her and Sam'll have your ass roasted for breakfast, Denning," a man warned him.

The man dropped his fist. "My turn will come, bitch!" he told her.

Rani looked around her. She had no idea where she

was. She had been carried out of the woods and dumped into the back of a truck, bound hands and feet. But she knew one thing for certain: she was in trouble.

Ben opened his eyes, turned his head, and looked at his watch. Seven o'clock. Should be daylight out. But where was the light?

Then he remembered the grenade, the explosion, the walls caving in.

Was he trapped?

He didn't know. First things first. He had to tend to his wounds and get something to eat.

Summoning all his strength, Ben pushed the tarp from him and sat up, his back to the shelving behind him. The movement hurt him, the wound in his side opening up. Couldn't be helped.

He lit a half-dozen candles, placing them in spots where, if he did pass out, they would not trap him in fire. He found a large first-aid kit and took off his shirt. He poured raw alcohol on the wound in his side, front and back, then crudely bandaged it. It wouldn't win any prizes for neatness, but it was firm. He treated the wound in his arm, bandaged it, then went to work on his leg. That was the wound that worried him the most. The lead was still in his leg. And he knew it had to come out.

He drank some water from a tin and ate several hard crackers. He poured iodine on the wound and began probing with his fingers, outside the wound, searching for the bullet.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he found the slug. It

was just under the skin, on the outside of his upper thigh.

He heated the blade of a knife in the flickering flames of a candle. Taking a deep breath, Ben carefully sliced open his flesh and popped the slug out. It bounced on the floor.

With pain-sweat popping out and dripping from his face, Ben fumbled in the first-aid kit and found a bottle of penicillin. He took a half-dozen of the pills, washing them down with sips of water. He coated the wound with iodine and carefully bandaged it.

He dozed for a few moments, resting, gathering his strength.

Opening his eyes, he felt better, a bit refreshed. He began his crawl out of the storage

cave. He crawled carefully, for he had no idea how much structural damage the large grenade had done to the cabin. He didn't want a beam falling on him.

The shrapnel in his back irritated him, but there was no way he could do anything about that. He had poured raw alcohol down his back, and that would have to do for the moment.

The going was very slow. He would crawl a few inches, carefully move lumber out of the way, then inch forward. He found his Thompson, checked it, and found it unharmed.

Then he saw daylight. A thin line of sunlight seeping through the ruined cabin's front wall. Or what was left of the wall.

But before he could reach the light, he passed out.

It was a few minutes before noon when Ben opened his eyes. He knew then that he was hurt much worse than he had thought at first. Have to take it very easy, he cautioned. Very easy.

He saw the pot hanging above the cold ashes in the fireplace and inched toward it. Using his fingers, he dug into the cold stew Rani had fixed and ate greedily. He cleared the fallen lumber from around the fireplace and built a fire. The warmth filled him, soothed him, seemed to lessen the pain from his wounds. Pulling a blanket over him, Ben lay on the floor for a few moments, resting. He began drifting in and out of consciousness. His mind was filled with old memories. He tried to fight them away, but they persisted.

"What are your plans, Ben?" Salina had asked him on that cool, misty morning outside the motel in Indiana.

He told her all his plans, his dreams, his schedule he had worked out in his mind. He told her of his home in Morrison and how he had literally slept through the horror after being stung by wasps.

"The stings probably saved your life," she told him.

They talked for a few moments more, than she unexpectedly kissed him. She turned and walked away.

Ben had looked up into the face of Kasim, the face filled with raw hatred.

"I'll kill you someday," Kasim hissed the hate at him.

"I doubt it," Ben had replied.

But Salina was dead, along with their child. Killed by government troops during the assault on Tri-States.

Later, Ben had seen the first of many billboard signs:

BEN RAINES-IF YOU'RE ALIVE AND
READING THIS, OR IF ANYBODY KNOWS
THE WHEREABOUTS OF BEN RAINES, HAVE
HIM CONTACT US ON MILITARY 39.2.
KEEP TRYING. WE'LL BE LISTENING. WE
NEED ORDERS.

But Ben didn't want to be anybody's commanding

general. He just wanted to be left alone.
To travel the ruined nation, to write his journal.

It was not to be.

Jerre. He had found her wandering alone on a highway in Virginia. She had traveled with him for a time. Finally left him to join others her own age. To save the world from itself. A sort of after-the-bombs flower child.

When they parted she had left him a letter. Ben still had it. He remembered the last paragraph.

You've got places to go and things to do before you find yourself-your goal, preset, I believe-and start to do great things. And you will, Ben. You will. I hope I see you again, General.

Jerre.

Ben had found Ike amid a bevy of bikini-clad lovely young ladies in Florida. The ex-navy SEAL had built a radio station-of sorts. KUNT, Ike called it.

Ben had been the "minister" at Ike and Megan's wedding.

But now Megan was dead. Killed when the government of the United States had grown vindictive and mounted their deadly assault against the Tri-States.

Juno, Ben's big husky, growled deep in his throat.

"We're friendly," the voice came out of the brush.
"I have some children with me."

"Come on in," Ben said, keeping one hand on the butt of his pistol.

A black man and woman, with four kids, walked up to the cabin porch by the lake. Pal Elliot, Valerie, and the kids. Two blacks, one Oriental, one Indian.

Pal had been an airline pilot, Valerie a top NYC fashion model. They had picked up the kids, homeless, along the way.

Now they were all dead. Part of the earth. Part of Ben's dream of a society where all were truly equal. Where medical care was denied to no one. Where all had a job. Where crime was virtually non-existent. Called Tri-States. And it worked.

Ben moaned in his pain-filled coma-like sleep as the memories kept coming, and coming, and coming.

Cecil Jeffery's New Africa never got off the ground before the government crushed it, killing it, grinding it under the heel of democracy turned authoritarian. Cecil and Lila, and a handful of others, had joined Ben's Tri-States.

Lila was dead, with their children. Dissolved into the earth of Tri-States.

And when it was all over, and the nation had once more been torn apart, and Tri-States lay smoking from the massive government assault, Ben had gathered a few hundred survivors around him.

Ike, Ben's adopted daughter, Tina, Judith, Doctor Chase, Jerre, and James.
Ben had looked at the handful of survivors, his

Rebels, the people ready to die for what they felt was right and just. And looking at them, Ben knew the dream would never die. Tri-States would live again. Ben had picked up his Thompson.

"All right, people," he'd said. "Let's do it."

Chapter 40

Ben awakened once more that day, to eat what was left of the stew and drink water. Lots of water. He knew then that he was getting feverish. He began taking aspirin along with the antibiotics. He dropped back into his painful, coma-like sleep.

All during the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours- Ben didn't know for sure, losing all track of time-he drifted in and out of consciousness. He would awaken just long enough to keep a small fire going, and to force himself to eat and drink something. Then he would fall back into blackness.

When he awakened on what he thought was the third day after the assault on the cabin, he knew he was going to make it. He was weak as a sick baby, but his fever was gone and his wounds showed no signs of infection.

But he knew he was not strong enough to make it to where he had hidden his truck. Not by a long shot.

For several days he was virtually helpless. Just strong enough to keep a small fire going, feed himself, and change the dressings on his wounds. He was not going to chance the deep timber yet. He knew it was cold-blooded on his part, but maybe, just maybe, he could help Rani alive. Dead would do her no good.

A week after the attack, Ben tried for his truck. He gave up before he got any distance at all, and returned to the cabin.

The bodies of Hartline's men were stinking, fouling the air. But he was too weak to try to move them.

Then, as it so often happens, it seemed like Ben began gaining strength hourly. His wounds were healing well, and he was eating like that much-talked-about horse.

He had been walking around the woods near the cabin daily, each day increasing the distance. Now he felt he was ready to try for the truck and the radio.

He packed a very light rucksack, with rations for two days, just in case he didn't make it, and a ground sheet and blanket.

He set out for his truck. He wondered what was happening with Rani.

"My, you are a pretty one, aren't you, dear?" General Striganov said, stroking Rani's cheek.

She tried to bite his hand, the Russian jerking it back just in time to avoid those strong white teeth. Striganov laughed at her.

"I'm glad you think it's funny," Rani said.

"Oh, I do, dear," the general said. "But unfortunately, poor Sam isn't in any condition to find anything amusing. Your Ben Raines almost killed him."

"Where is Ben?"

The Russian's smile was ugly.
"I'm really not sorry to say he's dead, Miss Jordan. My last formidable enemy in the late great country of America. Now I can make plans to enlarge my ... ah ... operation."

"Who was your idol as a boy, General-Hitler?" Rani snapped at him.

"He did have some good ideas, I will admit that. He just didn't carry them far enough."

"God, you're a monster!" she hissed the words at him.

Striganov laughed at her.

"And if you think Ben Raines is dead, you're badly mistaken. It would take a hell of a lot better man than Sam Hartline to kill Ben Raines. And I think you know it."

The Russian's eyes clouded. "So you thought the man to be a god, too, eh?"

"No. I never did. There is but one God."

"There is no God, you stupid woman! As you shall soon discover. I don't believe I shall allow Sam to have you, Miss Jordan."

"Ms."

"Umm."

"Forget it."

"Ms? Oh-yes. Of course. I do so enjoy a strong-willed woman. I enjoy breaking them. I didn't used to. I suppose my association with Hartline is responsible for that change. A most welcome change, too. Although I don't carry it to the extreme as my friend Hartline does."

The Russian reached out, fondling Rani's breasts. She slapped his hand away.

"I do so enjoy a big-breasted woman," Striganov said.

She spat at him.

He knocked her off the chair.

Through a red, teary haze, Rani screamed and kicked at the man.

He stepped back and removed his wide leather belt. "The first step is submission," Striganov said, swinging the belt. "The very first step toward total submission."

The leather cracked across Rani's jeans.

"Take off your clothes."

"Fuck you!"

"Oh, that will come later, my dear. I assure you of that."

"Not if I can help it, it won't!"

The leather cracked again. "Take off your clothes, bitch!"

"No way."

The Russian raised the belt. "I believe you shall, dear," he said with a smile. "I really believe that you shall."

When his arm had grown weary, and Rani's screams were reduced to a pitiful whimper, the Russian stepped back and looked at the woman, huddled on the floor. "Strong-willed," he said.

"But I'll break you, dear. Body and mind,
I'll break you."

Ben! Rani thought. Where are you, Ben?

Chapter 41

Ben scrambled the upcoming transmissions and
picked up the mike. "Eagle One to Base
Camp. Eagle One to Base Camp."

"This is Base," the voice cracked. "We've
been trying to reach you for days, General. Are you all
right?"

Before Ben could reply, Ike's voice roared through
the speaker. "Where in the goddamn hell have you been,
Ben?"

"Under attack," Ben radioed. "Rani and I
fought the outlaws and won. Then Hartline and his people
showed up. Caught us by surprise. I
got lead in Hartline, but he got more in me. He
took Rani. I'm hard hit, Ike, but I'm
going to make it. It was touch-and-go there for awhile.
Ike, I believe I can make it out of here, now.
So I'm going to head for the old capital of Vista.
You get the troops ready and-was

The set went dead, the ON light blinking off.

"Shit!" Ben said. Ben could make a bomb out of
almost anything at hand; he could gather great armies
together and command them to victory against
overwhelming odds; he could take chaos and confusion
and turn it into calmness and order.

But he didn't know a damn thing about radios.

He sat on the tailgate of the truck and
cussed, turning the warm spring air blue.

"Goddamn it!" Ike roared, after doing everything
except kicking the set at Base Camp.

"Calm down, Ike," Cecil said. "Ben's
all right."

"I'm calm, I'm calm!" Ike yelled,
scaring the young radio operator. his
You
calm down. I'm
calm,

he roared.

"Yes," Cecil said with a smile. "I can
certainly see that." He turned to the operator.
"Get Dan Gray on the horn, please."

Cecil brought the Englishman up to date on
Ben's situation, concluding with, "Drop whatever
you're doing and get out to Vista. Make certain
everything there is secure. Check out the old
airport. If it's suitable for prop landings,
I'll airlift a battalion out with others
to follow in trucks. Do that for me, will you, Dan?"

"Moving within the hour, General," Dan radioed
back.

"I'm leading the airborne troops," Ike
said. Cecil knew there would be no point in arguing
with the man.

"All right, Ike. Of course. Get your people
together and equipped. It will probably be several days
before we get a report from Dan. Be ready to go."

Ben did not return to the cabin. He had emergency supplies in the pickup and knew where more were buried. The pickup started at the first touch of the key

and Ben pulled out, driving slowly, careful to avoid as many bumps as possible, not wanting to open his healing wounds.

He made it to the paved highway that first day. There, he made camp and rested. By afternoon of the second day, he was in the old Tri-States capital of Vista.

He did not look at the split-level home he and Salina and Tina and Jack had called home for many years. He deliberately kept his eyes from the home. Too many memories there. Too many.

It was in that front yard that Ben had killed his own brother in a gunfight, after his brother had joined a Nazi group and had tried to ambush Ben.

Too many memories.

The littered and ruined town just held too many memories for Ben.

He drove to the old airport.

There, Ben set up camp in a small building just off the strip. He rested, and began a walk-around of the strip. Surprisingly, it was in fairly good shape.

He had a strong hunch that Ike had called Colonel Gray after their own transmissions had abruptly ended. Dan would break all records getting here, Ben felt sure. And Cecil had probably ordered someone, Ike, he felt sure-he had probably insisted-to lead some sort of airborne assault. As soon as Dan and his people arrived, they would begin clearing the strip for the Rebels' old prop planes.

But for now, Ben could do nothing except wait.

"Are you certain General Raines is dead?" the Russian asked Hartline.

Sam Hartline was in the hospital, his, side and chest bandaged. The operation had been long, with the buckshot from Ben's shotgun almost killing the man.

"I'm ninety-nine-percent certain," the mercenary replied. "He was hit three times before the grenade was tossed into the cabin. The explosion wrecked the place. I just don't see how anybody could have lived through that."

"Ben Raines is not just anybody,"

General Striganov reminded his friend and associate. "Far from it."

"Yeah, I know it. But he's dead, General. Or dying. Bet on it."

"We are, my friend," Striganov said. "We are both betting our lives."

Dan Gray and his Scouts pulled in after a grueling two-and-a-half-day forced drive from east Texas, where they had been working with civilians, mapping out plans for the upcoming outpost systems.

"You boys look beat," Ben told them. "Get

some rest. There's nothing happening around here."

The chief combat medic with Gray's Scouts inspected Ben's healing wounds and told Ben he had been very lucky.

"I know that, Sergeant," Ben said.

Colonel Dan Gray was standing about, a frown of disapproval on his face. Ben cut him off before he could speak.

"I know what you're going to say, Dan. But I was just weary of being nurse-maided, that's all."

"General, you

are

the Rebels. You

are

the movement. You-was

Ben waved him silent. "That is what I am trying to overcome, Dan. That type of feeling. And you're wrong. We are

all

the Rebels. The movement cannot, must not, revolve around one man or one woman. I won't

have that. I will

not

have that. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine. Then we won't speak of it again."

"No, sir."

Ike and his patched-up aircraft landed two days later. Ike had brought a battalion of Rebels with him, with another battalion coming in trucks, along with heavy artillery and light tanks. A third battalion would be held in reserve. They would arrive in the old Tri-States within the month.

Ben and Ike shook hands and embraced, Ike saying, "You lucked out again, old buddy."

"Skill, Ike," Ben kidded him. "Just plain ol' know-how."

"Shhittt!"

Ike said. He sobered and said, "Tell me about Miss Jordan."

"Hartline's got her, and I'm going to get her back. It's that simple."

Ben brought the men and women of his Rebels up to date on General Striganov's experiments and Hart-line's involvement with them.

There was silence after Ben finished speaking. Colonel Dan Gray broke the silence. "Our duty is very clear, General. We have to put the Russian out of business."

"That is exactly what I intend to do, people," Ben said.

Chapter 42

General Striganov stepped out of his office and looked toward the east. He did not believe for one instant that Raines was dead. And the scouts he had sent out a week ago should be returning with the confirmation of that suspicion any hour.

The trail-worn Russian scouts of the IPF returned and gave their general the bad news.

"General Ben Raines is alive and doing quite

well," they told Striganov. "He is massing troops in the old Tri-States."

Striganov did not have to have a picture drawn for him to know what that meant.

"How many troops?"

"At least two battalions. Some are airborne. We believe more men and machines are coming shortly."

Striganov dismissed his people. He again looked toward the east.

"So, General Raines," he muttered.

"We shall once more clash. But this time there will be no gentleman's agreement about fairness and the code of honor among fighting men. So be it. One of us will know total victory this time. And one of us will know the taste of death."

Chapter 43

Ben had ordered two more battalions of Rebels to be readied and sent westward. He was planning to move against Hartline and the Russian on the sixth of June. Already he had sent teams of Scouts out to reconnoiter the Russian's position, and first reports indicated the Russian's position was a strong one.

Cecil was furious about being left behind, and Ben knew that someday, somehow, Cecil would figure out a way to get into the fight. Ben smiled. He didn't blame him. He would have done the same thing.

Ben had ordered his people out into the countryside, on the off chance that Striganov might launch a first strike and catch them all bunched up.

Ben turned cold eyes toward the west. He was not aware of it, but he was smiling that wolf's smile.

"This time, Hartline, I'm going to kill you. This time, General Striganov, I will wipe your lousy IPF from the face of the earth. And I will return Rani to me. You're too smart to have harmed her. I'm coming to get you, Rani."

The sighing winds seemed to ask if that was a promise.

"That's a promise," Ben said.

