



BOOK 34

ESCAPE FROM THE ASHES

William W.
Johnstone

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ESCAPE FROM THE ASHES

William W. Johnstone

Historical Fantasy

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ONE

Base Camp One, Louisiana

"No," Ben Raines said. "Absolutely not."

Ben was working in his garden, wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. He was on his knees putting young tomato plants into the freshly turned dirt.

"It's going to happen, Ben. With or without your approval, it is going to happen. You know it is," Mike Post said. Mike was standing just outside the turned earth, so as not to get his shoes dirty. He was smoking a pipe, and the cherry-scented tobacco mingled with the smell of sun on the young tomato plants.

"Raines City, Louisiana? Not in my lifetime," Ben insisted.

"Not Raines City, Louisiana," Mike corrected. "It will be called Raines City, Capital District. Though it will probably be referred to as Raines City, C.D."

Ben looked up from his planting. "Ha. You mean like Washington, D.C. Only we reverse the last two letters and it becomes C.D. Who the hell came up with that idea anyway?"

"Harley Reno."

Ben chuckled. "I might have known. Hell, he doesn't need to stroke the old man to get to Anna. She's crazy enough about him as it is. He ought to know that."

"It has nothing to do with Harley stroking you to get to your daughter. It has everything to do with you being the father of our country."

"Look, the airport has already been named after me. And the middle school. Isn't that enough? I'm not comfortable with that shit, Mike, and you know it," Ben said.

"Of course you aren't. Nobody except megalomaniacs really wants something like this. Fortunately, this doesn't need your approval. Though those of us who would like to see this come about would appreciate, if not your blessing, at least your acceptance."

"I've got work to do with these tomato plants," Ben growled.

At the Ben Raines Middle school, the bell was ringing for lunch and Miss Tremont, a pretty, young black teacher, had lunchroom duty. She stood just on the dining-room side of the serving window and looked over at the lunch that was being served today.

"Meat loaf and gravy?" she asked. "Haven't you ever heard of eating healthy? Salads? Vegetables? Baked fish? Goodness, if I ate here every day, I would weigh a ton. I'll just have an apple."

Doney Wheeler, one of the kitchen cooks who, by her girth, showed that she obviously enjoyed food, laughed.

"I swear, Miss Tremont. You're so skinny now that if you turned sideways you wouldn't even cast a shadow. You've got to put some meat on those bones if you ever want to attract a man."

"What are you talking about, Doney. Miss Tremont already has more men sniffing around her than there are bees to clover," one of the other teachers said, and the others laughed.

The doors to the cafeteria opened and scores of children came running in, shouting, laughing, pushing, and shoving.

"Children, children, don't crowd," Miss Tremont said. "From what I can see in the kitchen, they prepared plenty. There's enough for everyone."

"Broccoli? Yuk! We've got broccoli," one of the boys said.

"Broccoli is good for you," the girl behind him advised.

"Well, I ain't going to eat it."

"I'm *not* going to eat it," Miss Tremont said, correcting him.

"See? She ain't going to eat it either, and she's a teacher."

"No, that's not what I mean," Miss Tremont said.

"She's was telling you not to say 'ain't,'" the little girl said smugly.

A van turned into the alley behind the school. Miner Cain, the driver, maneuvered it carefully around a Dempsey Dumpster, then parked it right behind the delivery door of the cafeteria. Just before he got out of the van, he flipped a small toggle switch and, immediately, a digital readout, in red, began counting down from 5:00 to 4:59, 4:58, and so on. Miner stood just outside the cab of the truck, monitoring the readout for a few seconds to make certain the timer was activated, then walked rather quickly to the end of the alley, where he climbed into a large black Lincoln. Two men were waiting for him in the Lincoln.

"Is it armed?" the driver of the limousine asked. The driver was Cletus Doyle.

"Yeah," Cain answered. "And I watched it for a few seconds to make sure the timer is working."

"Let's get out of here," Glen Burkett said. Burkett was a passenger in the right front seat.

Doyle drove down the driveway, but before he could enter the street, he was stopped by a rather stout, gray-haired woman. The woman was a crossing guard and she stood in front of him, holding up a stop sign, while half a dozen children, who had permission to go home for lunch, crossed the street.

Doyle drummed impatiently on the steering wheel. "Come on, come on, come on, you little bastards," he said under his breath. "What the hell are you doing, going so slow? Get your asses across the street."

"How much time do we have left on the timer?" Burkett asked.

Cain glanced at his watch. "About three and a half minutes," he said.

The last of the children crossed the street and the crossing guard started to let the Lincoln go. Doyle took his foot off the brake and the car rolled forward a few feet, but then another child appeared and started across the street. The gray-haired woman, who had turned to leave, waved the boy across, then turned back to her duty station and held the stop sign up importantly.

"Yeah, yeah, I see your goddamn sign," Doyle said. "Get that little shit across the street, will you?" Again, he expressed his impatience under his breath so the woman couldn't hear.

Halfway across the street, the little boy stopped right in the middle of the road, then bent down to tie his shoe.

"Come on!" Burkett said, sticking his head out the window and calling to the crossing guard. "What the hell is he doing?"

The woman turned toward the boy and, seeing him, blew her whistle, then motioned for him to hurry across.

"Thanks, lady," Doyle said once the boy was across and she waved them on.

Back inside the cafeteria, several of the children were already seated and eating their dinner, while nearly as many were still progressing slowly through the line. Miss Tremont finished the apple, which was all she planned to eat for lunch, and leaned over to throw the core into the garbage scuttle. At that precise moment she just happened to be looking toward the back wall of the cafeteria. As she did so, she saw something that was so strange to her that her brain was unable to assemble the information in any sort of logical way.

What she saw was the back wall moving into the kitchen. At first, it appeared that the wall itself was moving, almost in slow motion, as if in some cinematic effect. Then, the wall broke up, turning into several large black chunks of material, surrounded by a flash of white-hot light.

The rupturing wall allowed the shock wave of the explosion to rush through the kitchen. That had the effect of turning cinder blocks, bricks, stoves, and metal cabinets into massive pieces of shrapnel, rather like a very large Claymore mine.

Miss Tremont didn't see all that, however, for one piece of stone preceded the rest of the blast, and that stone struck the attractive young teacher in the forehead, killing her instantly. In dying as quickly as she did, she was spared the trauma of

watching so many of her young charges killed in the same explosion.

Ben and Mike were sitting on the back patio of his house. Jody, Ben's malamute dog, was sitting beside Ben with her head resting on Ben's knee. The men were eating toasted cheese sandwiches and drinking lemonade. Ben held a glass of lemonade in one hand, while his other rubbed Jody behind the ears.

"I've been thinking about writing a book," Ben said.

"An autobiography?" Mike took a swallow of his own lemonade, wishing it was something a bit stronger. "That would be good."

Ben laughed. "Not likely. Autobiographies are written by retired politicians. I'm neither a politician nor retired. No, I'm thinking about writing a novel. I used to be a novelist, you know."

"Of course I know that. Everybody knows that. You were a good one too," Mike said.

Ben chuckled. "Well, I don't think I was ever in danger of giving Hemingway or Steinbeck, or Herman Wouk, any serious competition. But I'm rather immodestly proud of the fact that I did have my following."

"Yes, you did. And as I recall, you had a loyal following of fans, and a rather concerned following of government officials," Mike said.

Ben laughed. "You got that right. As all the reviews said, some of my novels were considered controversial. I think it was that, the controversial part, that managed to get the attention of the feds."

Mike's cell phone rang before he could respond to Ben, and holding up a finger as if to excuse himself, he flipped open the cover.

"Mike Post."

Ben continued to rub Jody behind her ears, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw the look of horror come onto Mike's face.

"Have emergency services been notified?" Mike asked into the phone. "They have? Good. Yes, of course. I'm with General Raines right now, but I'll get there as quickly as I can." He turned his cell phone off, then looked across the small table toward a curious and concerned Ben.

"What is it?" Ben asked.

"There's been a bombing," Mike said.

"Injuries?"

Mike nodded. "Yes, and dead," he added. "Many dead, in fact."

"Damn. Where was it? Was it a cafe or a shopping mall?"

"Worse," Mike said. "It was a school."

"A school?"

"It was your school, Ben. The Ben Raines Middle school," Mike said gravely. "The bomb went off just behind the cafeteria at lunchtime. Whoever the bastards are who did this, the sons of bitches planned it so that it would inflict the maximum number of casualties. Can you imagine anything that evil? They wanted the bomb to kill as many kids as possible."

Ben was silent for a moment, absorbing the gruesome news. "How many dead, do we know?"

"We don't have a number yet. The only report we have is that casualties are high. I'm going right down there," he added, getting up quickly. "Would you like to come with me?"

"Absolutely," Ben replied. "I'll try and stay out of everyone's way, but I feel I should go."

Helen McLeod walked to the front window of the SUSA National Bank in Base Camp One, and she looked out as yet another emergency vehicle drove by.

"Another one?" Linda Wade asked. Like Helen, Linda was a teller in the bank.

"Yes. That makes seven," Helen said as she returned to the teller counter. "Four ambulances, two police cars, and a fire truck."

"Could you tell where they were going?" Dewey Flowers asked. Dewey, who was president of the bank, had come to the door of his office when they started hearing all the sirens.

"No." Helen replied. "All I know is they were heading east."

"It's a little frightening," Linda said. "It sounds like they are coming from all over town."

"It certainly does. There must be a big fire somewhere."

There were no customers in the bank, but at that moment Doyle, Cain, and Burkett came in. The sound of the sirens increased as the door was opened, then quieted somewhat as the door shut.

"Good afternoon," Helen called to them, smiling at the three.

"Good afternoon," Doyle replied.

"We were just talking about all the sirens that are going outside," Helen said.

"Yes, we hear them," Doyle.

"All I can say is, something very big must've happened," Helen insisted. "Fire trucks, ambulances, police cars have been coming by for the last several minutes."

"Something big did happen," Doyle said. "The Ben Raines Middle School was bombed."

Helen gasped. "Oh, that is awful!"

"God in heaven, who would do such a thing?" Linda asked.

Doyle smiled broadly.

Inexplicably, Helen felt a sudden chill. She wasn't certain why, other than the fact that the man's broad smile in the face of the news of a school being bombed seemed more than merely inappropriate. It seemed evil.

Funny you should ask that," Doyle said. "We did it. "My friends and I." He took the other two in with a wave of his hand.

"My God, what a terrible thing to joke about," Linda said.

"They aren't joking," Helen said, her voice made tight by the constriction in her throat. She wasn't sure how she knew, but she knew.

"You had better listen to Helen, Linda," Doyle said. His evil smile broadened. "She knows what she is talking about."

Helen gasped again. "You know our names? How is it that you know our names?"

"It's called preparation," Doyle said. He and the two men with him opened their jackets then, and pulled out Uzi machine guns. They sprayed machine-gun fire all around the bank. Bullets smashed through frosted-glass panes, ricocheted off marble floors and walls. Helen, Linda, and the

other tellers screamed, shouted, dropped to their knees, and covered their heads with their hands.

"Please stand up," Doyle said.

No one moved.

Doyle nodded at Cain, who fired another short burst from his machine gun.

"I said stand up!" Doyle repeated.

The bank employees slowly, fearfully, stood up.

"What is this?" Dewey Flowers asked, hurrying out of his office. "What is going on here?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Flowers, but your presence here is superfluous," Doyle said.

Doyle turned his gun on Flowers and fired. The bullets caused the bank president to jerk and shake. His shattered heart emptied itself of blood and the front of his white shirt turned red as he went down.

Doyle turned his gun back to the tellers, all of whom were looking on in openmouthed horror.

"Oh, good. We seem to have everyone's attention now," Doyle said. The fact that his tone was light, almost jovial, gave a bizarre overtone to the incident and, somehow, made the whole thing even more evil.

"Now, I want you to empty your vault into bank bags. And I'm going to ask you not to try and give me any bullshit about not being able to get into the vault. I wouldn't like to hear that," Doyle said.

"You just killed the only one who has access to the vault," one of the male tellers said.

"Wrong, Mr. Goss," Doyle said. "I know that you have access to the vault. I asked you not to lie to me. Perhaps I should have warned you, I don't like being lied to." Doyle shot Mr. Goss; he died immediately.

Now there were only female tellers remaining, and they screamed in fear, shock, and horror as they saw their two male colleagues lying on the floor in spreading pools of blood.

Doyle had already carefully cased the bank, and he knew who could get into the vault. He turned his gun toward Helen McLeod. "That leaves you, Helen McLeod. Like Mr. Flowers and Mr. Goss, you have access to the vault. Or are you going to tell me otherwise?"

"No, no, I'm not going to lie to you," Helen said in a voice she was barely able to keep from breaking. She stuck her hands in the air.

Doyle chuckled. "This isn't a Western movie, Miss McLeod," he said. "I'm not robbing a stagecoach. I didn't say, stick 'em up, did I?"

"Stick 'em up," Cain said, laughing, and the other two bank robbers laughed with him.

"N-no," Helen stammered.

"Well, you can't open the vault with your hands in the air, can you?"

Helen stood there for a moment longer, petrified by fear.

"Do it now, Miss McLeod," Doyle said patiently. "Open the vault."

"Y-yes, sir," Helen stammered, hurrying toward the vault.

"You other ladies," Doyle called. "As soon as she gets the vault open, I want you to start filling your bank bags with

money. And if I or one of my friends see you putting anything less than a twenty into the bags, we'll be forced to kill you. Do I make myself understood?"

"Understood."

Nervously, and with hands shaking so badly they could barely put the money into the large canvas and leather zipper bags, the women began scooping banded bills from the vault shelves and dropping them into the bags.

Outside, emergency vehicles continued to speed by, their sirens and horns blasting.

"How are we doing on time, Number Two?" Doyle asked.

Cain checked his wristwatch. "Five minutes," he said.

"Ladies, please do hurry," Doyle said.

As Cain checked his wristwatch, his shirt sleeve pulled up a bit and Linda saw the tattoo. The tattoo was of a skull's head inside a triangle. She fought hard not to show any reaction to what she saw.

The skull's head and triangle was the symbol of Die Kontrollgruppe. Linda knew that because her husband was writing a thesis on the various militia organizations within the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. Just last night, she had helped edit some of his material.

TWO

"What do we know about Die Kontrollgruppe?" Ben asked when Mike brought him the information.

"Other than the fact that it is German for 'The Control Group,' we don't know a whole lot about it yet," Mike admitted.

"I hope the operative word is 'yet,'" Ben said.

"It is. I assure you, this organization has gotten our attention," Mike continued. "And we will know a lot more about it soon."

"Why does our intel have so little on them?"

"Because, fortunately for us, they haven't been active in the SUSAs. In fact, this is the first time they've ever done anything here."

"Somebody knows something about them," Ben insisted. "Hell, the bank teller's husband is doing a college thesis on them. What have we gotten from him?"

"He's doing a thesis on all militant organizations, not just Die Kontrollgruppe," Mike explained.

"Where is he now?" Ben asked. "I'd like to talk to him."

"I figured you would," Mike replied. "That's why I brought him over. He's in a police car out front. You want to see him now?"

"Yeah, bring him in."

A moment later a uniformed policeman brought the young man in. He was of medium height, thin, with blond hair, and was wearing horn-rimmed glasses.

"Mr. Wade, this is General Ben Raines," Mike said.

Wade started to shake hands with Ben, but quickly wiped his palm on his pants leg before extending it. "General Raines," he said. "I can't tell you what an honor it is to meet you, sir."

"I'm pleased that you think so," Ben replied. "Mr. Wade, I understand that you have studied this organization Die Kontrollgruppe."

"Yes, sir, I have," Wade replied. "At least, to the degree it can be studied."

"What do you mean?"

"They haven't been in existence too long. Nobody knows that much about them."

"What is the significance of their name? Do they have a German connection?" Ben asked.

"No, sir, not that I have been able to determine," Wade answered. "They seem to have chosen that name for its psychological impact."

"Would that also be the reason they have a skull and crossbones tattooed on their arms? I understand that's how your wife identified them."

"No crossbones."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The tattoo is a skull ... without crossbones ... inside a triangle. They wear it on the top of their left arm, just above the wrist. That's how my wife happened to see it, when the guy looked at his watch."

"I understand one of the men said they blew up the school," Ben said. "From what you have read of them, do you

think they are capable of such a thing? Or were they just taking advantage of the confusion, and told the people in the bank they did that in order to frighten them?"

Wade shook his head. "Oh, General, I believe they are absolutely capable of it," he said. "And they didn't need to tell them about the bomb to frighten them. They were frightened enough. After all, the robbers killed two of the bank employees right in front of them."

Ben nodded. "They did at that. So what is the purpose of this organization? What are they after?"

"Money," Wade said.

"Yes, I know that, they robbed the bank. But what is their social goal?"

Wade snorted in what might have been a laugh. "General, as far as I can tell, they have no political agenda or social goal," he said. "When I said they were after money, that's exactly what I meant. Apparently, Die Kontrollgruppe exists only as a means of enabling its members to enrich themselves through various outlaw schemes."

"All right, the next question is the key question," Ben said. "Where do you think I might find these sons of bitches?"

"As far as the ones who bombed this school and robbed this bank, I couldn't say," Wade said. "But I do know that they are very active in the Northwest U.S. and Canada. If I had to make an educated guess, I would say they are somewhere in Northwest Canada."

"Thanks."

* * * *

Although Ben considered himself in retirement, he kept an office in the headquarters building and, since the bombing and bank robbery, had been spending more time there than ever before.

"I asked Mike to copy me all intelligence reports, not only on Die Kontrollgruppe, but on any activity that might be going on in the U.S.," Ben said to Cooper, who was in the office with him.

"We have absolutely no evidence that the U.S. is behind this," Cooper said.

"Yet," Ben replied.

Cooper looked confused. "Yet? Do you know something? Have you seen something in the reports that the rest of us may have missed?"

"No," Ben admitted. "Let's just call it a hunch."

Ben continued to pore over all the reports, and was in the middle of one when Mike suddenly opened the door to his office and stuck his head in. He was grinning broadly.

"You look like the cat that swallowed the canary," Ben said.

"We found them," Mike replied.

Ben slapped the palm of his hand on his desk. "All right!" he said. "Damn if you might not wind up being worth something after all. Where are they?"

Their headquarters is in Alberta," Mike said. "Apparently they have taken over Tredway House."

"What is Tredway House?"

Mike held up an old travel guide. "I thought you would never ask," he said. Clearing his throat, he began to read:

"This utterly charming inn is southeast of Edson, in a forested valley of the Athabaska River. The site of an early nineteenth-century trading post, it was completely rebuilt in the 1930s. Large and airy, this lodge is filled with natural light, intriguing colors, and quality furniture. There are many patios and balconies, all with excellent views of the gardens and forest beyond."

Mike closed the book. "Of course, that's the way it was when it was a vacation inn. Now it is a military camp, filled with DK soldiers. About two hundred of them, in fact, which, according to the guidebook, is about the maximum number of people the building will accommodate. By the way, the German name isn't enough. They seem to have borrowed something else from the Germans."

"What is that?"

"Their uniforms. They are exact replicas of the black-and-silver SS uniforms from Nazi Germany. And change the red armband to an orange armband, replace the white circle and black swastika with a white triangle and black skull, and you have Die Kontrollgruppe."

"You've done well, Mike," Ben said. "That's a lot of information in a short time."

"That's not all," Mike said. "We also think we know the names of the ones who actually did the bombing."

"The hell you say!" Ben said excitedly. "Now that is something I really want to hear."

"There were three of them," Mike said. "Cletus Doyle, Miner Cain, and Carl Burkett."

"What do we know about them?"

"They are all from the U.S."

That figures."

"Yes, but apparently, they are no longer connected with the U.S. Doyle and Cain were once members of the FPPS, reportedly booted out for corruption."

"They were booted out for corruption?" Cooper said. He chuckled. "Hell, I thought corruption was a requirement to be a member of the FPPS."

"It does make one suspect, doesn't it?" Mike replied.

"What about the third man?" Ben asked.

"Yes, that would be Carl Burkett. Burkett was a major in the U.S. Army, specializing in domestic operations."

"Domestic operations?"

"That's doublespeak for terrorist acts against their own people," Coop explained.

"Coop is right," Mike said. He continued, "Now all three hold the rank of colonel in Die Kontrollgruppe. In fact, they seem to be the ones who run the DK."

"You say these three run the show?" Ben asked.

"Yes."

"That's funny. If they run the show, you have to wonder why they didn't send someone else down here to do their dirty work."

"Yes," Mike agreed. "That is something to wonder about."

Ben put his hand on Mike's shoulder. "You and your team did well," he said.

"Thanks, but we aren't finished yet," Mike replied. "I am putting together an ops plan now to—"

That won't be necessary," Ben said, interrupting.

Mike looked confused. "What do you mean it won't be necessary? Surely you don't plan to try and handle this through diplomacy?"

Ben laughed. "Hardly," he said. "I plan to handle this myself, and believe me, it won't be through diplomacy."

"No, Ben," Mike said. "I can't let you do this alone."

Ben looked at Mike with a raised eyebrow. "Oh? Tell me, Mike. Just how do you plan to stop me?"

Ben Raines Airport

Mike Post, Harley Reno, Ben's son, Buddy, and Ben's adopted daughter, Anna, plus Cooper and Jersey, were at the airport to see Ben off.

"I've got the VIP lounge closed to all other passengers," Rick Adams said. Rick Adams was the chief of police for Base Camp One.

"Thanks, Rick," Ben said.

"If there is anything else I can do for you, just let me know."

"Thanks, I will," Ben said.

When Ben grew quiet, and nobody else spoke, Chief Adams took the hint that they wanted to be alone in the VIP lounge. He touched the bill of his cap in a half salute, then went back out into the airport to inform the passengers, including those who would ordinarily have had access, that the lounge was closed. There was some grumbling at first, but when they learned that the lounge was being reserved for General Ben Raines, most accepted their temporarily reduced station graciously.

"I know he wanted to stay here with us," Ben said. "But the smaller we keep this operation, the better it will be."

"I agree," Coop said.

"Especially with him," Jersey said, nodding through the window toward Rick Adams.

Anna laughed. "You're still pissed because he gave you a speeding ticket."

"Yes, I am. For one thing, I wasn't exceeding the limit by that much. And for another, what was he doing acting as a traffic cop in the first place? He is the chief of police."

"He said he was on his way to work and you went by him so fast you nearly blew him off the road," Harley teased.

"What was he supposed to do? His job is to take menaces off the highway."

"I'll show you who is a menace," Jersey said, making a fist.

"No, no," Harley said, laughing, and covering his face with his arms. "Not in my good-looking face."

"Ha!" Anna said. "Go ahead and hit him, Jersey. It's bound to be an improvement."

The others laughed at the antics; then Mike turned to Ben. "By the way, we've found one more 'colonel' in their organization," he said.

"What's his name?"

"Not a he ... a she," Mike said. "Her name is Tamara Lynch."

"Any info on her?"

"Yeah, she may be the worst of the lot," Mike said. "She was director of the Social Re-entry Program for Women."

"Concentration camps," Ben said. "Another connection to the Nazis."

Mike nodded. "Closer than you might think. Survival rate for her camp was about ten percent. Nine out of every ten who passed through the barbed-wire gates died."

"Or were killed," Coop added.

"Yes. And more often than not, she handled the job personally."

"This is one mission I am going to enjoy. By the way, do you have a charter flight laid on for me up there?" Ben asked.

"Anna took care of that," Mike replied.

Ben looked at his daughter.

"Your commercial flight terminates at Port Hardy," Anna said. "The charter flight you will take from there is North Star Air Service."

Ben nodded.

"Ben, I wish you would reconsider this crazy idea of going up there alone," Harley said.

Ben chuckled. "What should I do? Take an army with me?"

Harley shook his head. "You don't need an entire army," he said. "A company-sized unit, no more than it would take to fill a C-130, would be good enough."

"No."

"A platoon then. Just a platoon," Harley insisted. "It wouldn't take any time at all to put a platoon together."

"With you as platoon commander, I suppose?"

"Yeah, sure, why not?" Harley asked.

Ben reached out and put his hand on Harley's shoulder. "Thanks," he said. "I know you mean well, but a platoon would be unwieldy for what I have in mind."

"How about a squad?" Cooper suggested. "I could put together a squad of crack men, easy to move and to handle."

"Thanks, but no, thanks."

"All right," Jersey said. "You've shown us what a brave hero you are, and what a stubborn dumb ass you can be."

The others laughed at Jersey. She was carried on the Table of Organization and Equipment chart as Ben's personal bodyguard, and she filled that TO&E slot admirably. And she was possibly the only one besides Ben's immediate family who could get away with calling him a dumb ass.

"Why, thank you, Jersey," Ben said, chuckling. "I love you too."

Although his statement was made in jest, Ben did love Jersey, and all the others who had been with him and had served him so well for so long.

"Then how about letting me do my job, Chief?" Jersey said. "I mean, I agree with you, a company, platoon, even a squad, would be unwieldy for going into the Canadian north woods and finding these guys. But if there was just the two of us? Besides which, I would like to meet this Tamara Lynch. Sounds to me like she's giving women a bad name."

Ben shook his head. "No," he said. He addressed all of them. "Look, I know all of you mean well. But these sons of bitches attacked a grade school bearing my name. They killed a bunch of innocent kids who thought they were safe and secure because they were going to a school that had my

name. Well, by damn, I take that personal. Very damn personal. And that means I have to take care of this situation by myself."

"You'll keep us posted?" Mike asked.

Ben patted the canvas B-4 bag at his side. "I have the satellite phone," he said. "But don't call me, I'll call you."

"General?" one of the airport security guards said, approaching him.

"Yes?"

"The pilot has said it is all right for you to board now."

Ben thanked the guard, then hugged Anna and Jersey. He shook hands with the others, then waved away the security guard's attempt to pick up the B-4 bag and, carrying it himself, walked out across the tarmac to the waiting 737. The others walked out to the airplane with him.

None of them saw the bug that was just under one of the leaves of a large, potted plant.

In the main terminal of the airport, a man took a small listening device from his ear and put it in his pocket. He watched Ben and the others walk toward the plane. Not until Ben started up the steps did the man go over to one of the telephones. He dialed a series of numbers that would give him paid access to a long-distance number.

"Raines's destination is Port Hardy," he said. "From there, he will charter a plane from North Star Air Service."

He hung up without getting a reply.

THREE

Richmond, Virginia

Derek Owen sat in a chair in the back of the conference room watching as Claire Osterman, United States President for Life, conducted her Cabinet meeting. As new head of the FPPS, Owen wasn't actually a member of the Cabinet. But he was granted the right to sit in on the meetings, and sometimes, such as today, would be invited address the Cabinet on a specific subject.

Harlan Millard, the vice president, sat at the far end of the long table from Claire, too timid to open his mouth. He was, Owen thought, the most insignificant cipher in the entire government. Traditionally, vice presidents had small roles to play anyway, but in the case of Millard, he might as well have been a painting.

General Goddard, head of the Armed Forces, chewed on an unlit cigar as he sat back in his chair, arms folded across his chest, listening to the report from Wallace Cox, minister of finance. Cox took his thick glasses off and wiped them with a tissue as he tried to explain to the others why the economy of a nation, once the most powerful in the world, was barely above that of Third World status, due to crippling taxes and excessive welfare rolls. Boykin, the defense minister, and Ainsworth, the minister of propaganda, stared at Cox with ill-concealed disdain. Each believed he would be better suited to hold Cox's job.

Only General Goddard was a formidable adversary to Derek Owen's grand plan. Owen had more real power than any of the others, except for General Goddard. And Owen had just put into operation a plan that he believed would enable him to overtake even the general.

"The bottom line, Madame President," Cox said, concluding his report, "is that we are going to have to cut back on some of our welfare programs."

"No," Claire said. "Our welfare programs are what buy the support of the people."

"We simply don't have enough money in our treasury to keep paying out at the rate we now pay," Cox insisted.

"If we need more money in the treasury, raise taxes on the wealthy."

"We don't have that many wealthy citizens remaining," Cox complained. "We've run most of them out of the country. They are now doing business in the SUSA. And most of the wealthy who stayed are no longer wealthy. They have been bankrupted by our taxes."

"Then tax the ones who are left, and quit bellyaching to me about it," she said. "Now, on to other business. I've invited Derek Owen to sit in with us today because I want a report from him on something that happened in the SUSA the other day. Owen?"

"Five days ago a bomb went off in a school in Base Camp One, Louisiana," Owen said. "While the police, ambulances, and fire trucks were reacting to that bomb, the same people who blew up the school held up the National Bank of the SUSA. They got away with over five million dollars."

"Five million? Whew," Goddard said. "Too bad that wasn't our operation. From the way old Cox here was complaining, we could use that money."

The others laughed.

"There is one more thing," Owen said. "The name of the school that was bombed is the Ben Raines Middle School."

Claire laughed. "I'll bet ole Ben is pissed over that," she said.

Owen smiled. "He is indeed," he said. "He has taken this very personally. As we speak, he is en route to Canada."

"Canada?" Millard asked. "What is he going to Canada for?"

"Apparently, Canada is the headquarters for the organization that detonated the bomb. They are located in the northwest woods in Alberta."

"What organization is this? Do we know anything about it?" Ainsworth asked.

"I am looking into it," Owen replied.

"Are they likely to be a threat to us?" Goddard asked. "I mean, are they something the military should be aware of?"

"General, I can assure you, the military need not get involved. If the organization that bombed the Ben Raines School ever poses a threat to the U.S., I and the FPPS will neutralize that threat," Owen promised.

"I'm not sure that would be a FPPS responsibility," General Goddard said. "If I get wind of anything—"

"General, by the time those incompetent boobs who comprise your officer corps would get word of any threat, the FPPS will have already eliminated it."

That's enough from both of you," Claire said as Owen and Goddard glared at each other. "I'll have no turf battles going on around me."

"How do you know Raines has gone to Canada?" Ainsworth asked.

"I have a source," Owen answered.

"What sort of source?" Goddard asked.

Owen looked at Goddard. "A very reliable source," he said without giving any more information.

Headquarters Building of Die Kontrollgruppe

Cletus Doyle, Miner Cain, Glen Burkett, and Tamara Lynch gathered in the conference room, as had been directed by their telephone orders from the Gruppe Kommandant. They sat in comfortable leather chairs around a large, round table. Because all four colonels were equal in rank, they alternated chairmanship of the meetings. Tamara Lynch opened the meeting.

"As I was chairperson of the last meeting, I now turn the chair over to Colonel Glen Burkett, who is next in the rotation," Tamara Lynch said.

Burkett nodded, then held up a piece of paper. "I assume that you all received a telephone call from GK?"

The others nodded yes.

The Gruppe Kommandant gave each of us a series of disconnected words, though each word had a number. Let us now begin to assemble our message. Who has word number one?"

"I do," Cain said. "It is General."

"Ben is number two," Tamara said.

"Raines is number three," Doyle added.

Over the next few minutes, the four colonels painstakingly assembled the order they had received from the Gruppe Kommandant. This unique way of delivering messages ensured that no one colonel would have the advantage over the others, and that all would be subservient to the Gruppe Kommandant.

"All right," Burkett said. "The message is assembled. It reads: 'General Ben Raines left Base Camp One, bound for Port Hardy, British Columbia. There, he will charter an airplane from North Star Air Service. It is up to you to ascertain the type of aircraft, time of flight, and destination. Once you have all the information in place, take whatever action is necessary to eliminate Raines.'"

Burkett looked up at the others. "Any questions?" he asked.

"How are we going to do this?" Cain asked.

"He didn't say how, he just said do it," Burkett replied.

"Good," Tamara said.

The other three looked at Tamara. "What do you mean, good?"

"I mean good because he trusts us to take care of it. I say we don't let him down."

"Okay, does anyone have any ideas?"

"Yeah," Burkett said. He smiled at the others. "Yeah, I do have an idea."

The other three listened as Burkett outlined his plan.

FOUR

Alberta

The area was wild and richly timbered, a forest that was still and redolent with the tang of fir and spruce. Snowcapped mountain peaks and massive glaciers towered over a crystal-clear lake, from which sprang a river that fed a roaring waterfall.

The lake was on a plateau, three thousand feet above sea level, and the adjacent forest was inhabited by golden-mantled ground squirrels and bears, wolves, and moose. A moose, advancing toward the lake, slipped in and out of the trees, now visible, now invisible. When it reached the edge of the forest it sniffed the air, and satisfied that there was no danger, moved down to the aquamarine lake for a drink.

Suddenly, the moose's territory was invaded. A four-engine airplane, with three of its engines roaring and smoke pouring from the fourth, made a rapid but controlled descent from above. As it passed between two spruce trees, the engine noise was replaced by the loud wrenching sound of limbs being ripped away. The airplane, a vintage Douglas DC-4, slammed hard into the ground, sending up a shower of sparks, a billow of smoke, and a cloud of roiling dust. The crash sent not only the moose but all the other creatures scurrying away in fear.

The airplane slid along the ground for several feet, screeching, popping, and snapping as it shed large pieces of sheet metal and other items of debris before finally coming to

rest. Had it gone thirty more feet, it would have slipped over the edge of a precipice that would have dropped it another five hundred feet.

The cloud of dust continued to hang in the air along the crash path, and though there were no flames, a small wisp of smoke continued to curl up from the right inboard engine of the broken and twisted craft. When the cacophony of wrenching metal and breaking glass ended, the natural sounds returned: the whisper of wind through the trees, the cry of an eagle, the distant call of a moose, the babbling sound of the river as it broke white and foaming over water-polished stones.

Base Camp One, Louisiana

At that very moment, over two thousand miles away, Mike Post stood at the window of his office, drinking coffee and looking out at a game of croquet taking place on the lawn. He smiled as he thought of how intensely the general took the game.

On the road, just beyond the game, a platoon of basic trainees marched by.

"Road guards, post!" the sergeant commanded, and the right and left guides of the second rank pulled out of formation, then hurried to the road junction, where they assumed the position of parade rest, head erect, eyes straight ahead and unblinking, legs set apart at shoulder width, the M-16s held at a forty-five-degree angle from their left shoulders to their right hips.

"Double time, march!" the sergeant called.

The platoon double-timed through the intersection.

"Quick time, march!" the sergeant called, and the platoon returned to the regular march pace. "Road guards, recover!"

The road guards rejoined the platoon at the rear rank.

There were some in the new country who were already protesting the policy of universal military conscription, but like his boss, Mike believed that anyone who wanted to live here should be willing to pay for that privilege by serving two years in the military. It not only kept the country strong by ensuring a broad pool of trained men and women, it also avoided a disconnect between civilian society and the military.

"Have you heard from the chief?" someone asked.

Turning, Mike saw Cooper coming into his office.

"No, Coop, I haven't," Mike replied. "But I don't really expect to hear from him until he is on the ground and in position. He has the satellite phone with him. He'll give us a call."

"I wish he would have taken an action team with him," Coop said. "Or at least one of us: you, me, Buddy."

"You were at the airport with the rest of us, Coop. You heard the general. We tried to talk him into letting one of us go with him, but he would have none of it."

"I know," Coop said. "Still, I would feel a lot better about it if he wasn't trying to do all of this on his own."

"*Trying* to do it on his own? Come on, Coop, you know the general as well as I do. There is no 'trying' to it. If he says he's going to take care of those sons of bitches, then you can go to the bank with it. He is going to take care of them."

"Yeah, but look at the odds. You said it yourself. Intel suggests there could be as many as two hundred," Coop said.

Mike turned back toward the window and looked outside. He took another swallow of his coffee. "Two hundred? Well, I wouldn't worry. I expect he took enough bullets with him," he said.

Coop chuckled. "You got that right," he said. "When he left here, he was a one-man army."

"Hell, Coop, he was born a one-man army."

"When is he going quit?"

"Quit what?"

"Quit trying to carry the entire nation on his back," Coop said.

"Probably the day they put him in his grave. You know how he feels about the SUSA. He's the father of the country, and he takes that tide literally."

"George Washington was the father of the old USA, but even he retired," Coop said. "I mean, there comes a time when a person gets a little age on him. When you get old, you need to slow down."

Mike turned back from the window and smiled at Coop just over his raised coffee cup. "You want to tell him to slow down?"

"Me tell him to slow down? No, why should I tell him? Thas'a no ma job," Coop said. "Thas'a yo job. You're his chief of staff."

Mike put his hand to his nose. "Tell me, Coop, do you think I've got a nice nose?"

"What?"

"My nose," Mike said. "You know, this thing hanging between my eyes and my mouth? Don't you think it looks pretty nice? Maybe not handsome or anything, but generally it's okay, don't you think? I mean, it's not misshapen, mashed flat, pushed crooked, or anything like that There's no collapsed septum. Everything seems to be ... well ... normal, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yeah, sure, I guess," Coop replied. "Mike, what the hell are you getting at?"

Mike walked over to his desk and put his cup down. "Well, see, here's the thing, Coop. I plan to keep it this way," he said, putting his hand to his nose. "I'm not going to risk having it smashed by doing something dumb like ... oh ... say, telling the general that he needs to slow down because he is ... what was it you said? Oh, yeah, it was *he is getting old*. I believe that is what you said, isn't it?"

Coop laughed out loud. "Okay, I see what you mean," he said.

Buddy Raines came into the office then, and seeing the two men laughing, asked what was going on.

"Nothing," Coop replied. "Mike was just giving me a few beauty tips, is all."

"Beauty tips?"

"On care and maintenance of the nose."

"Isn't it a little early for you two to be drinking?" Buddy asked.

"Don't ask," Mike said. "What do you need, Buddy?" Although Buddy was heir-apparent, he never assumed an "attitude," and thus was liked and respected by the others.

"I was just wondering if you had heard anything from my father yet."

"No, not yet. But it's still a little early. I doubt that he's even on the ground yet."

FIVE

Northwest Canada

It was at least a half hour before he regained consciousness. What was he doing here? And for that matter, where was here?

The immediate answer to the question seemed to be that "here" was the inside of a rather large airplane. There had obviously been a crash, because the floor of the airplane was badly buckled, several of the windows were broken, and it was sitting at an extreme angle on ground that definitely wasn't an airport.

Releasing himself from the seat belts, he looked out the window, where he could see twisted engine nacelles and propellers hanging askew. He was gratified to see that the airplane was not on fire.

There did not appear to be any other passengers in the plane.

"Hello?" he called, looking up and down the cabin. "Hello? Anyone in here?"

Shouldn't there be other passengers in a plane this large? Maybe there had been passengers who had already exited the plane. If so, why did they leave him? Could they not see him? Did they think he might be dead?

Gingerly, he began a self-examination to see how badly he was hurt. To his relief he discovered that, aside from some cuts and bruises, he didn't seem to be in bad shape. The examination done, he got up from the seat.

He picked his way to the after cabin door on the left side of the fuselage, kicked the door open, then stepped outside. Because the plane was flat on the ground, he realized that the gear had either not been deployed, or had collapsed on impact. That made the step down from the plane a small one. He stood there for just a moment, trying to get his bearings.

It was easy to see the direction from which they had come, because there was a trail of debris that marked the impact path. Some fifty yards away, the right horizontal stabilizer was on the ground, propped up against a large rock. Bits and pieces of sheet metal and Plexiglas completed the trail that culminated at the broken fuselage.

The four engines were hanging crookedly in their mounts, the nacelles mashed and shredded, and the propellers badly twisted out of shape. As he looked at the airplane he saw that, while there was no fire at the moment, there apparently had been one in the right inboard engine. The cylinder cooling fins were melted and fused, and paint was blackened and peeling from the cowl, across the nacelle, over the top of the wing, and back along the side of the pale blue fuselage. The words alongside the fuselage—"North Star Air Service"—were badly charred, but still readable. The logo on the tail, a blue star outlined in red, belied the current condition of the airplane, because it was as pristine as if the airliner were parked at a loading gate.

Why were there no passengers? And what had brought them down? Was it the fire in the engine? If so, the pilot had done a good job putting them down in the only clearing around.

The pilot!

It wasn't until that moment that he thought about the pilot, and he hurried back to the twisted and ruptured fuselage. The nose of the airplane was badly concaved, pushed back toward the windshield like the grille of a wrecked car. The side windows of the cockpit were at eye level, thus affording him an easy way to look inside.

The instrument panel was buckled, the control yokes badly bent, and the glass faces of the instruments themselves, as well as the panel and inside of the windshield, were all spattered with blood. He saw two men in front. One was obviously dead, but the other was moaning softly.

"Hold on, I'll get you out."

"It's no use, I'm done for. See about Ed," the injured man said.

"You first."

Going back into the plane, he picked his way through the wreckage of the cabin, then opened the door to the flight deck and pulled the injured man from his seat. He carried him outside the plane and put him down. Clearing the pilot's airway, he elevated his feet to treat him for shock, then looked for his wounds in order to stop the bleeding.

"I'm sorry, Ben," the pilot said. "When that missile took out the engine, it started a fire that would have taken off the wing within another few minutes. There was nothing we could do but put it on the ground as quickly as we could. But there was nowhere to set her down, only this small ledge."

"You did a great job setting it down," Ben replied.

Ben. The pilot had called him Ben. It was funny, but until that moment, he hadn't even thought about who he was. After all, who thought of himself in the third person anyway? But the moment the pilot called him Ben, he realized something significant.

The name Ben meant nothing to him. It wasn't that the pilot had called him by the wrong name ... because no other name came to his mind. In fact, no name came to his mind at all. He must be Ben, but Ben who?

How can it be that I don't even know who I am?

"Uh, listen, I know this is going to sound funny to you," Ben said. "But who am I? You called me Ben. Ben what? What's my last name? And what are we doing here?"

The pilot didn't answer.

"For that matter, who are you? And where are we?" Ben asked.

There was still no answer, and when Ben examined the pilot more closely, he saw that he was dead.

Sighing, Ben stood up and ran his hand through his hair. As he did so, he discovered a large bump on his head. His fingers also encountered something wet and sticky, and pulling his hand down to examine it, he saw blood.

That was it. That explained why he couldn't remember anything. He had sustained a major blow to the head and was probably experiencing trauma-induced amnesia.

"Funny," he said aloud. "I can come up with the term trauma-induced amnesia, but I can't come up with my own name or why the hell I am here." He looked around at the

mountains, lake, and forest. "Wherever the hell here might be," he concluded.

Wherever this place was, it was certainly a beautiful area. Maybe he was here on a vacation, a camping or fishing trip. For the moment, though, where he was wasn't as important to him as who he was. Why couldn't he remember?

The pilot had called him Ben. Ben what? Ben Franklin? Ben Cartright? Uncle Ben? Benji?

In frustration, he shouted at the top of his voice. "Who the hell am I? Ben who?"

"Ben who?"

"Ben who?" he shouted again.

"Ben who?" the echo returned.

Cletus Doyle, Miner Cain, and Glen Burkett trekked through the woods, heading in the general direction where they had last seen the plane. The three men were wearing black uniforms with orange armbands. In the center of the orange armband was a white triangle, and in the center of the white triangle, a black skull. Had anyone examined their left wrists carefully, they would have seen reproductions of the skull and triangle. All three men were carrying automatic assault rifles.

"Maybe the damn thing didn't go down," Cain said.

"It went down," Doyle insisted.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because when I shoot at something, I don't miss," Doyle said.

Burkett chuckled. "Your shootin' at it had nothing to do with whether you missed or not. It was the Stinger that didn't miss."

"Yeah, well, whatever," Doyle growled. "The point is, I hit the damn thing and it went down."

"I don't see smoke," Cain challenged.

"It went down," Doyle said. "Maybe it isn't burnin', but it went down. I saw it."

"Okay, maybe it did go down," Cain said.

"No maybe to it."

"If it went down, they're all dead now, so why are we even bothering to look for it?" Cain asked.

"Because I want to make certain that Ben Raines is dead."

"You know that there is a possibility that we will never find him, don't you?" Cain suggested. "I mean, there are about a million square miles of nothing up here."

Doyle shook his head. "No, it didn't just fall out of the sky. The pilot still had some control over it as it was going down. That means he tried to put it in the nearest open spot he could find."

"Open spot? Ha, what open spot?" Burkett asked with a little laugh. "There's nothing here but mountains and trees."

"There's Maligne Lake," Doyle suggested. "And there's a wide ledge alongside it, before it drops off. That's probably where he tried to put it."

"Yeah, tried," Burkett said. "That was a big airplane. You don't just set a four-engine airplane down anywhere, you know."

"Don't sell them short. These bush pilots are pretty damn good," Doyle said begrudgingly. "If he tried to put it there, my guess is he did."

"Then you're suggesting that Raines might still be alive?" Cain asked.

"I'm saying there's a chance he is. And I aim to make sure, one way or another."

"You know what we should'a done? We should'a killed the son of a bitch when we were down in Louisiana," Burkett said.

"Well, you may recall, there was an outside chance he would have been at the school. They say he goes there from time to time to speak to the kids," Doyle said. "Too bad we didn't catch him there."

"He wasn't there," Burkett said. "So we should've gone to look for him, and we should've killed him then."

Doyle shook his head no. "That's been tried many times," he said. "And it has failed every time. This has all been carefully thought out. Our entire purpose was to get him to come after us, up here, away from his base of support. And it worked."

"What do you mean it worked? You said yourself, he may not be dead," Burkett said.

"All right, let me put it this way. If he's not dead yet, at least he's on our turf. And here, on our own turf, it will be easier to handle him."

"I hope we find him dead in the crash," Cain said. "Because if Raines is still alive, he'll be wandering around out here full of piss an' vinegar and rarin' for a fight."

"Yeah, and not only that, there's something else we may need to think about," Burkett suggested.

"What's that?" Doyle asked.

"That wasn't some single-engine bush plane we shot down. That damn thing was an airliner. A plane that big means he probably had more people with him. Maybe even a platoon. And if he did, then there's no way just the three of us can handle it."

Cain shook his head. "No, there wasn't anybody else with him."

"How can we be so sure?" Burkett asked.

"Because nobody else was listed on the flight plan."

"How do you know?"

"I hacked into the Port Hardy computer and got their flight plan, remember? That's how we knew when and where the airplane would be. Then I crashed their system so that their flight plan didn't go out, which means nobody but us will be looking for them. Brilliant, don't you think?"

"Yeah, well, let's not get carried away with the sheer artistry of it," Doyle said.

"I'm still not convinced there's nobody else on the plane," Burkett said. "Don't forget, this is a bush operation. They don't always do things by the book."

"I don't believe he has anyone with him. But even if he does, and even if they are still alive, they are going to be hurt and disoriented from the crash," Doyle insisted. "All we'd have to do is start shooting. We'll kill them all before they realize what's happening."

"Yeah," Cain said. "It'll be like shooting ducks in a barrel."

Burkett chuckled. "I've always heard that expression, shooting ducks in a barrel. I've never really known what it means."

"Well, if Raines has anyone with him, you are about to find out," Doyle said.

SIX

The crash site

Ben looked at the two men who had been flying the airplane. The two pilots were dead. He did not recognize either one of them, but maybe they were carrying some identification with them. If so, he could examine their billfolds and...

"Son of a bitch! I can check my own billfold!" he said aloud.

Why didn't he think of that before? Surely he would be carrying some identification that would tell him who he was.

Quickly, Ben took out his billfold and opened it. He was both frustrated and confused by what he saw. Except for the fact that it contained ten one-hundred-dollar bills, his billfold, which appeared to be brand-new, was empty.

"What the hell?" Ben said aloud. He searched all the pockets and windows of the billfold, just to make certain he hadn't overlooked anything. "Who would carry a thousand dollars in cash, but not one piece of identification?"

The answer came to him almost as quickly as the question was formulated: someone who was on a covert mission, that's who.

Was he the kind of person who would undertake a covert mission? And if so, what was the mission?

He wasn't aware of any such personal connection. On the other hand, the explanation that a billfold would be empty

because the carrier would not want his identity compromised seemed, somehow, very natural to him.

Putting his billfold away, Ben decided to check out the billfolds of the other two men.

The one who had called him Ben was Gerald Parker. Parker was carrying a Canadian driver's license and a Canadian aviator's certificate.

"Canada? What the hell am I doing in Canada?" Ben asked aloud. "Am I Canadian?"

Ben wasn't sure, but he didn't think he was Canadian. He just didn't "feel" Canadian.

There was also in the pilot's billfold a picture of an attractive woman, holding a baby in her arms. A young boy, his big eyes staring intently at the camera, sat on the bench beside the woman. Seeing the woman and children, obviously Gerald's family, caused Ben to have a twinge of sorrow. It was sad to think that they were home now, comfortable in the belief that their husband/father would be coming back to them.

The other pilot's name was Edgar Parker. Edgar didn't have a family picture in his wallet, but he shared the same last name as Gerald. Were they brothers? Ben looked closely at the men and saw that there was indeed a strong resemblance between the two.

Ben wasn't sure what to do about the bodies. It didn't seem right to just bury them here in the wilderness. On the other hand, he didn't think it would be good to leave the two men out where the bears and other wild animals could disturb

them. He needed to bury them, or at least cover them up enough to protect them from the wild animals.

There was no shovel in the airplane, and no way he could dig a grave with his bare hands, so he did the next best thing. He dragged the two bodies over to a shallow depression that lay just before the edge of a steep drop-off. Putting them in the bottom of the depression, he began covering them with small to medium-sized rocks. It was a poor burial, but it would at least keep the animals away from them. Besides, this was only a temporary interment. Once he got out of here, he would inform the appropriate people where he had buried them.

If he got out of here.

No, he wouldn't allow himself to think like that. There was no "if." He was going to get out of here, even if he had to walk back to civilization. Wherever the hell civilization might be.

When he was finished, Ben turned back toward the airplane. He was startled, and pleasantly surprised, to see three men approaching the plane. All three were wearing black uniforms of some sort, though the uniforms weren't anything that he recognized.

"Hello!" he called to them.

"Son of a bitch! It's him!" one of the three men shouted.

Puzzled by the strange reaction, Ben stopped, then saw that all three were bringing their weapons to bear on him. They were going to shoot him!

Ben didn't know why they were angry with him, but he had no intention of hanging around to find out. Reacting quickly,

almost instinctively, he ran to the other side of the depression he had just left, then launched his body into a dive over the precipice, even as the guns roared and the bullets whistled past him.

When their target was no longer visible, the men stopped shooting. Even after they stopped, though, the sound continued for a few more seconds as the last few shots came echoing back to them.

"Holy shit!" Cain shouted. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah, I saw it. Headfirst on the rocks down there," Burkett replied. He chuckled. "That has to hurt."

The three men raced to the edge of the precipice and looked down, expecting to see a body sprawled out on the rocks below.

They saw nothing.

"What the hell?" Doyle asked. "Where did he go?"

Ben stood on a second protruding lip, just below the ledge that Doyle, Cain, and Burkett were examining, a lip that wasn't visible from their position.

There had been a plan behind Ben's leap into space. While covering the two bodies with rocks, Ben had seen a small sapling growing out from the ledge. When he dived over the edge, he was actually leaping into the top of the sapling. His weight, and the velocity of his impact, bent the sapling all the way down over the edge. He had planned, somehow, to find a way to cling to the side of the mountain, but was pleasantly surprised to find that there was a second lip below the first ledge. Timing his release perfectly, and at the very bottom of

the sapling's flex, Ben let go, dropping no more than three feet onto the lower ledge.

A small path, probably used by mountain goats, led along this ledge, then back up to the table alongside the lake. Ben followed the path back up to the plateau, where he entered the dark of the forest. He listened hard for any sounds of his attackers, but heard nothing.

Why did they shoot at him? Did they feel threatened by him in some way? Or was their shooting at him a random act?

No, it wasn't random. He remembered now that the pilot had said the airplane had been brought down by a missile. And he distinctly heard one of them say, "Son of a bitch! It's him!" as if they knew him.

Why would they say that, unless they intended to shoot him personally? Were these the ones who'd fired the missile? They could have. He knew that there were small but deadly missiles that could be carried by a man and launched from the shoulder.

How did he know that? Was he in the military? He looked down at himself. He didn't seem to be wearing a uniform of any kind. On the other hand, the three men who had attacked him were wearing black uniforms with some sort of orange armband. What did that mean? Were they from some enemy nation?

No, he believed it was more personal than that. He believed that they recognized him specifically. But what did they have against him?

Despite the situation, Ben couldn't help but smile. How would it be, he wondered, if he called a time-out? Yeah, that

would be good. He could call a time-out, meet with them, ask them who they were and why they wanted to kill him.

"Oh, and by the way," he would add, "as long as we are at it, could you tell me just who the hell I am?"

Then, when the time-out was over, they could both get back to the business at hand, them trying to kill him and him trying to stay alive.

Ben chuckled at the scenario.

Back at the crash site

"You think he's dead?" Burkett asked.

"I don't know," Doyle replied. "I do know that he's a slippery son of a bitch, so I'm not ready to count him out yet."

"Hell, you know he's dead," Burkett insisted. "It has to be five hundred feet or more to the bottom. And he went over headfirst."

"If it was anybody else, I would agree with you," Doyle said. "But this is Ben Raines we are talking about, remember? He doesn't kill easy."

"You know what I don't understand," Cain said.

"What's that?" Doyle asked.

"The way he started toward us. He had a big shit-eating grin on his face, just like he was glad to see us."

"Yeah," Burkett said. "I noticed that too. What do you suppose that was all about?"

"I don't have the slightest idea," Doyle replied. "Unless he didn't recognize us."

"How the hell could he not have recognized us?" Cain asked. "We're the ones he came up here for."

"Well, not us specifically," Doyle said. "He obviously knows that Die Kontrollgruppe had something to do with the school bombing and the bank robbery, or he wouldn't have come up here. And he might even know our names, but I don't think he would know us by sight."

"We're wearing Die Kontrollgruppe uniforms," Cain said. "He would recognize those."

"You would think so, but maybe the sun was in his eyes, or maybe he was still stunned from the crash. Whatever it is, he certainly recognized that he was in danger in time to run."

"So what do we do now?" Cain asked.

"Let's look through the plane, just to make certain nobody else is on board," Doyle suggested.

The three men, their weapons ready, walked back over to the plane.

Doyle put his foot on the badly crumpled wing, then held his right arm up, making a muscle. "How about this, guys? If I was flying a fighter, I'd be an ace now for bringing this son of a bitch down."

"You have to shoot down five to be an ace," Burkett said.

"What?" Doyle asked, challenging Burkett. "Who the hell says so?"

"I don't know who says so," Burkett replied. "But that's the way it is. That's the way it has been since World War One."

"Piss on World War One, that's ancient history," Doyle said. "If I say I'm an ace, who the hell is going to tell me I'm not? The bastards who were flying this wrinkled piece of shit?"

Cain laughed. "Hell, Doyle, far as I'm concerned you're an ace," he said. Cain stepped through the door and looked inside the cabin.

"Anybody else in there?" Doyle asked.

"No," Cain answered.

"You sure? Look around."

"Hell, I can see there's nobody in here," Cain said. Seeing a newspaper, he picked it up. "Well, well, look at this," he said.

"Look at what?"

Cain stepped back out of the plane and showed Doyle and Burkett the newspaper he had found.

"We made front-page, above-the-fold news," he said.

The story he was pointing to had a thirty-six-point, bold headline.

SIXTY-ONE KILLED IN SCHOOL BOMBING

"Read it," Doyle said.

Cain cleared his throat, then began to read aloud:

Fifty-three children and eight adults were killed Monday when a large bomb was detonated in the Ben Raines Middle School. Carefully planned, the bomb was positioned to inflict the maximum number of casualties—

"Carefully planned," Burkett interrupted. "I hope to tell you it was carefully planned. I studied the blueprints of that building for two weeks to find the best places to put the bomb."

"Anything else of interest?" Doyle asked.

"Yeah, here's another story," Cain said. "It's on the front page, but didn't make it above the fold." He read aloud again.

The Security Savings Bank was robbed Monday afternoon at one-thirty, resulting in the deaths of two bank employees at the hands of the robbers. The timing was particularly unfortunate because at the time of the robbery, all available police officers and firemen were working the bombing. As a result the robbers, believed to be members of an organization known as Die Kontrollgruppe, had unobstructed access to the bank, and got away cleanly.

Final figures on the amount of money taken aren't available at this time, as the bank is still conducting an audit.

Cain looked up with a broad smile on his face. "You think they really are conducting an audit? Or do they just not want to admit that we hit them for over five million dollars?"

"I can't believe the dumb bastards haven't put two and two together yet," Burkett said.

"You mean that we hit the school and the bank?" Doyle asked. "You better believe Raines has put it together. Why do you think he's here?"

"We got his attention, all right," Burkett said. "And we probably got him killed when he dived over the edge like that."

"Maybe we did," Doyle replied. "And, maybe we didn't. All I know is, I wouldn't want to be the one who told the Gruppe Kommandant that Raines is dead if the son of a bitch suddenly shows up alive later on."

"Yeah," Cain said. "I see what you mean."

"I think he's dead," Burkett said.

"Are you willing to put your ass on the line with the GK?" Doyle asked.

Burkett thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No, not unless I'm sure."

"I think at this point our best bet is to treat it as if he's still alive and out there somewhere," Doyle suggested.

"I'm going to take another look inside," Cain said as he went back into the cabin. He saw a canvas bag.

"I found something," he called back.

"What is it?"

"I don't know, a bag of some sort. Looks like an old military B-4 bag."

"Bring it out," Doyle ordered.

Cain extricated himself from the plane, then, unzipping the bag, looked inside.

"Bingo," he said.

"What is it?" Doyle asked.

"Guns," Cain answered, taking out a .45 Thompson machine gun and a TEK machine pistol. "A satellite phone, a GPS, and several packets of MREs. Also a thermal sheet."

"Ha!" Doyle said. "If he is still out there, we've got the son of a bitch just where we want him."

"What do you mean?" Burkett asked.

"He's wandering around without weapons, ears, or food. What was he wearing, did anyone notice?"

"Just a long-sleeved bush shirt from what I could see," Burkett replied.

"Right," Doyle answered. He held up the thermal sheet. "Without this, he's going to get pretty cold tonight. You know, boys, this could be fun."

Fun? You know, Doyle, you have a strange idea of fun," Cain said.

"No, think about it. Haven't you ever heard the story about the ultimate hunt? Where people pay money to hunt the wiliest game of all?"

"What has that to do with this?" Burkett asked.

"The wiliest game of all is a human being. Come on, let's get back to headquarters. We're going to organize a big-game hunt, and the game will be Mr. Ben Raines."

"Yeah, that might be fun at that," Cain said. "Good idea."

"You know what would make it even more fun?" Burkett asked.

"What's that?"

"If we put up a bounty for whoever brings him back, like, say, fifty thousand dollars."

"What if he is already dead?" Cain asked. "I mean, I still think we'll find his body down on the valley floor."

"It doesn't matter, dead or alive, we'll pay them anyway," Burkett said.

"Hell, it doesn't seem right to pay them if we're the ones who killed him," Cain protested.

"No, Burkett is right," Doyle said. "All we really care about is that he is dead. I don't care whether we killed him or someone else does. The bottom line is, we want to go to the Gruppe Kommandant with the news that Ben Raines is dead. I think that is a good idea, Burkett. We'll offer the reward."

"Think Tamara will go along with it?" Cain asked.

"Fuck Tamara, we outnumber her," Doyle said.

"Fuck Tamara," Burkett said. He laughed. "That's a good one. I've been trying to do that ever since she joined the group."

"Yeah, well, that's not something that's likely to happen," Doyle said.

Cain laughed. "You got that right."

"What about the airplane?" Burkett asked.

"What about it?" Cain asked.

"We going to just leave it here?"

Doyle laughed. "Yeah, why, what did you have in mind? Flying it out of here?"

"Not exactly," Burkett said. "But I thought we might burn it."

"Yeah, Doyle, Burkett has a point. We should burn it," Cain said.

"Why?"

"Just to keep Raines from using it in case he is alive."

Doyle thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Nah, that'll take too much time and I want to get back to the headquarters. We've got his bag of goodies. I don't see any way he could get this thing off the ground, even if he is alive. Come on, let's go."

Doyle started back toward the woods with Cain and Burkett right behind him.

SEVEN

It was several hours before Ben allowed himself to return to the crash site, and even then he stayed at the edge of the trees for at least half an hour, studying the site very closely. He wanted to make certain that the three men who'd tried to kill him were gone. Not until he was absolutely convinced that the coast was clear did he venture out.

Ben still had no idea who the men were or why they were trying to kill him, but he had learned a lesson from the experience. From now on, until he could figure out what was going on, he would be much more hesitant to show himself to anyone.

Reaching the airplane, Ben started poking through the wreckage to find something he could use. A thorough search turned up nothing of value. There was no food, no water, no weapons, no means of communication.

It didn't seem logical that they would be flying over such remote country without some sort of survival kit, yet he could find nothing. That could only mean that the people who shot at him took whatever survival gear there might have been.

Why did they take it? Did they need it for themselves, or did they take it to prevent him from surviving?

Considering the two options, Ben decided it was the latter.

All right, if there was no survival kit on the airplane, then what was there that he could use? He went back into the plane for a second look, this time broadening his search

parameters. He would take anything that might be even remotely useful.

Ben found a toolbox.

"Jackpot!" he said happily. Opening the toolbox, he took inventory of what it offered:

Pliers, diagonal, side-cutters.

Set of socket wrenches, with driver.

Common screwdriver.

Cross-point screwdriver.

Tin snips.

Ball-peen hammer.

Spool of safety wire, .032.

Pocket knife.

File.

Cigarette lighter.

Ben tried the cigarette lighter, and was gratified to see that it worked. "Well, now, bad guys, whoever you are," Ben said aloud, "it would appear that you didn't leave ole Ben in quite as desperate straits as you might have wanted."

Going back onto the flight deck, he found the charts and the log. According to the log, they had taken off From Port Hardy, British Columbia, at 0700 this morning. The clock on the instrument panel was smashed at 0830. An hour and a half. Figuring that this airplane had a normal cruising speed of about 250 miles per hour, that would mean they had come about 375 miles.

Using the edge of the logbook for a rule, Ben made an arc of 375 miles from Port Hardy. Then, comparing the topography of where he was with the topographical symbols

on the chart, he decided that he must be somewhere in the Maligne Mountains. That would make the nearby lake Maligne Lake, and the rapidly running stream nearby would be the Athabaska River.

He smiled. He no longer had to ask where he was. Thanks to a little deductive reasoning, he knew *where* he was. The only questions he needed to ask now were: Who was he, and why was he here?

He figured it wasn't necessary to ask why those men were trying to kill him. If he knew the answer to those two questions, he was pretty sure he would know that as well.

The charts and the flight log were kept in a clear plastic container that could be completely closed with a zipper. That, in turn, was in a canvas pouch that hung from the back of the pilot's seat.

Ben folded the chart and stuck it into his pocket. He would need it to navigate his way out of here. He discarded the logbook, but he kept the pages, tearing them out and stuffing them into the little canvas pouch. Then, finding a way to tie the pouch around his waist, he removed the tools from the toolbox and put them in the pouch as well, thus making it much easier for him to carry them. Next, he removed the magnetic compass from the instrument panel. The chart showed the magnetic declination here to be 18 degrees east. Knowing the declination would enable him to use the compass to navigate his way through the forest.

Finally, he took the plastic bag outside and crawling up under the wing, reached up to the spring-loaded drain plug. He drained fuel from the tank, filling the clear plastic bag. He

had no idea why he might need gasoline, but it seemed prudent to take some. He put the bag full of gasoline into the pouch.

Now it was time to arm himself. Returning to the airplane, he used the tools to take out one of the long stringers. He cut it to the size he needed with the tin snips and diagonal side-cutters, then with the file, put a sharp point on the end. Using the duct tape, he fashioned a handle, and soon was armed with a crude but wicked and quite effective sword.

Finally, he took some sections of control cable, removed a bell crank, and extracted the spring from the battery box cover. With his improvised survival gear packed away, he paused to pay a moment of respect to the men who had flown him here, then started his trek through the woods.

Base Camp One, Louisiana

Mike Post lifted the yellow "Do Not Cross" police-line tape and stepped under it. He picked his way through the rubble of the badly damaged Ben Raines Middle School.

"Sir, you can't come in here. This is the site of a police investigation," a young policeman said, calling out to Mike.

"It's all right, Simmons. Can't you see who that is?" Police Chief Rick Adams said. "That's Mike Post. He is cleared for top-level access anywhere he wants to go." Adams had been looking at information on a clipboard, and he handed it to one of the other officers, then hurried over to meet Mike.

The young policeman who had challenged Mike came to attention and saluted. "I'm sorry, Mr. Post," he apologized. "I didn't recognize you at first. I guess I just didn't expect anyone as high up as you are to come down here."

"That's all right," Mike replied, returning the young officer's salute. "You were correct in challenging me. How is the investigation going, Chief Adams?" he added as Adams arrived.

"Grim," Adams said. "We found the three missing children. They were under the back wall."

"Dead?"

Adams nodded. "All three of them."

"So that makes the total, what? Sixty-four?"

"Yes."

"Those sons of bitches," Mike said.

"Oh, we found the truck VIN," Adams said.

"Have you run an ID on it?"

"Yes, sir. It belonged to Moving Ventures Rental Company. We are checking now to see who rented it."

"It was rented by an organization called Die Kontrollgruppe," Mike replied.

"How do you know that?"

"Because this was a Die Kontrollgruppe operation," Mike said.

Adams shook his head. "Surely you aren't basing your suspicion entirely upon the testimony of a frightened bank teller? All because she thinks she saw a tattoo? A tattoo that nobody else could confirm, I might add."

By now, Mike had a lot more evidence than the tattoo, but it wasn't anything he was ready to share with anyone outside his immediate organization. "I have a hunch that she was right," he said.

Chief Adams shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Post, but as a professional law enforcement officer, I don't have the luxury of operating on hunches," he said. "And if you will pardon me for saying so, I think this investigation would better be left to professionals."

"Do you now?" Mike asked.

"Yes, I do. I know that you have an interest in the outcome, and I will keep you posted. But this is a police matter, after all, not a matter for the national defense. We haven't been invaded by a foreign army."

"The bombing of this school was an act of terror," Mike said. "That involves us all."

"Your position in government is higher than mine, so of course I have no authority to demand that you to step aside and let me do my work," Adams said. "But I do think our country would be better served if you left this whole thing in my hands."

Mike had run across men like Rick Adams before, officious martinets who were overly protective of their own turf. He let the subject drop.

"They sure did a job here, didn't they?" Mike asked, looking around the wrecked cafeteria. He saw a school math paper on the floor. There was a happy face drawn on top of the paper, along with the words *Good work, Sam!*

"Yeah, it's a shame," Adams said. He was interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone. "Pardon me," he said, holding up a finger. He flipped open the phone. "This is Chief Adams."

As Adams talked, Mike walked through the wreckage of the cafeteria. Most of the damage was toward the rear of the

large dining room. The entire kitchen had been taken out by the blast, and every cook, server, and dishwasher had been killed, as well as one of the teachers and all of the children who were seated nearest the kitchen or standing in the serving line. The damage continued on at diminished levels until it reached the front of the cafeteria. Amazingly, a portion of the front of the dining room was untouched, and the tables looked as if the children had just gotten up and left their trays behind them. Mike could see what they had had for lunch, and felt a sense of sadness at realizing this was the last meal the dedicated kitchen staff had prepared: meat loaf, mashed potatoes and gravy, broccoli, apple sauce, and rolls.

Mike smiled, a bittersweet smile, as he noticed that, on virtually every tray, the broccoli was left uneaten.

On an undamaged wall of the cafeteria, in raised letters, were these words:

For some time I have had this theory that we should start from scratch. Gather up a group of people who are color-blind and as free from hate and prejudice as possible and say: All right, folks, here it is.

Ben Raines

Many institutions, groups, and civil and social organizations had wanted to honor Ben Raines by naming things after him, from post offices to buildings to streets. There was now a movement to name Base Camp One, their capital, Raines City, and though the general had squelched every attempt so far, Mike knew that, this time, it was going to go through, with or without Ben's approval. The airport was already named for him, as was this school. And the only

reason Ben had let both the airport and the school be named for him was that they had been done deals by the time he found out about them.

"You shouldn't have anything named after you until you are dead and buried," Ben had told his chief of staff.

"Ha," Mike had answered. "What makes you think you are going to be buried? You aren't going to be buried, you are going to become a national icon."

"Good Lord! You don't mean like the Communists did with Lenin?" Ben had replied.

"No, not like that. They'll probably just dip your carcass in a vat of molten bronze, then stand you up on a pedestal somewhere."

Ben had laughed, but he had allowed the airport and school to be named for him, and Mike knew that, secretly, he even enjoyed the idea of a school bearing his name. It was no wonder that he had taken the bombing so hard that he'd insisted on conducting a one-man hunt to bring justice to the perpetrators.

"Mr. Post?" Captain Adams said, coming toward him.

Mike looked around. "Yes?"

Adams smiled smugly. "That phone call was from headquarters. They traced the rental of the truck to a man named Wayne Howard."

"You don't think it is possible that Wayne Howard is a phony name?"

"It could be phony," Adams admitted. "Also, for your information, we are still investigating the possibility that Die Kontrollgruppe had something to do with it. We are trying to

find out where they are located. As you know, they are a very secret organization with exceptionally good security."

"Their largest cell is in Northwest Canada," Mike said.

"How do you know that?"

"We have our sources. They are somewhere in Alberta."

"Alberta. I see," the chief replied. "All right, good, we'll have to get permission from the—"

"Not necessary," Mike interrupted. "General Raines is already taking care of things."

"Oh, good," Captain Adams replied. "With General Raines getting personally involved with the warrant and extradition, that should speed things along."

Mike shook his head. "No warrant, no extradition," he said.

"If there is no warrant and no extradition, how do you intend to get them back here for trial? Assuming that they are involved."

"No trial," Mike replied ominously.

Captain Adams looked confused. "I thought you said the general was taking care of things."

"He is taking care of things."

"I don't understand. How?"

Mike packed down the tobacco in his pipe, then lit it and stared pointedly at Adams before he answered the chief's questions. "By ... taking care of things," he said slowly and deliberately.

EIGHT

Alberta

At one time the sprawling, three-story log-built building on the banks of the Athabaska River had been Tredway House, a resort hotel. It still had that resort look and feel about it. It was completely encircled by wide porches and fronted by a landscaped lawn and curving driveway. The driveway curved around a circle of white stones at the center of which was a flagpole. At the top of the flagpole, an orange flag fluttered in the breeze. In the center of the orange flag was a white triangle, and in the center of the triangle, a black skull.

Inside on the ground floor, a wide, open area was dominated by a huge, stone fireplace that rose from one end of the room. During the building's halcyon days as a hotel, the fireplace and adjacent bar had been a favorite gathering area for the guests. It was still a gathering place, though the men and women who were here now weren't hotel guests. Today the population of what was once Tredway House was made up of soldiers who belonged to Die Kontrollgruppe. At least 220 of them had permanent quarters in the building.

As a result of the several revolutions in the recent past, dozens of quasi-military organizations had been formed on the North American continent, further dividing the people who'd once called themselves Americans and Canadians.

Most of the recently formed organizations were built around some societal goal, running the gamut from extreme right-wing militant conservatives to those extreme left-wing

organizations who still insisted that Communism had never really been given a chance.

Die Kontrollgruppe didn't fit into either of those categories, for it made no claim to improving society. In fact, there were within Die Kontrollgruppe men and women of both political extremes. What Die Kontrollgruppe really stood for, and what united its diverse members, was the simple premise of money.

Although money was the unifying factor, the founder of Die Kontrollgruppe understood the power of organization. For that reason, Die Kontrollgruppe was similar in structure to the many social and militia organizations that had sprung into existence over the last few years. Die Kontrollgruppe had a leader, a mysterious figure known only as the Gruppe Kommandant. No one had ever seen the man, whom they referred to as the GK, not even Doyle, Cain, Burkett, or Lynch. They had been recruited by the GK through a series of faxes and e-mails, and now received all their instructions in that same way.

In personal messages, the GK would sometimes share a significant piece of information with only one of them, informing that person not to tell the others, while at the same time telling that person that the others also had specific, unshared information. In this way the GK kept members of the second level of leadership dependent upon each other, thus assuring their cooperation and preventing any one of them from getting enough power to attempt to take control.

The Gruppe Kommandant understood the power and psychology of symbolism. Thus, Die Kontrollgruppe had its

own symbols and flags. The flag that hung from the pole out front had many replicas inside, including those prominently displayed throughout the large, open room of the Die Kontrollgruppe headquarters building.

The soldiers themselves were part of the symbolism, for they wore black uniforms with armbands that were miniature reproductions of the flag. Each soldier held rank as assigned by the Gruppe Kommandant, and their shares in Die Kontrollgruppe's plunder, which was significant, were based upon a percentage computed in accordance with their rank.

Cletus Doyle, Miner Cain, Glen Burkett, and Tamara Lynch were colonels. Only the Gruppe Kommandant outranked the four colonels.

Doyle, Cain, and Burkett were sitting in leather chairs in front of the fireplace, an area reserved for the top echelon, when Tamara came over to join them. Tamara was a tall, blond, Nordic-looking woman. She was quite attractive, though the hard edge to her features somewhat detracted from her beauty. She had taken some liberties with the black uniform, and while it had all the prescribed accoutrements, it was a skin-fitting, black leather garment that clung so closely to her perfect figure that her nipples stood out.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Tamara said as she settled in a chair beside them. "But I believe that when you left this morning, you said you were going to bring back Ben Raines's head back in a box. You had all the information on the flight path of the plane. What happened?"

"We shot down the plane," Cain said.

"You did? Well, I'm surprised," Tamara said. "Pleasantly surprised, but surprised."

"Don't be giving us any of your shit, Tamara," Doyle growled.

"Yeah, you know what happens to women with a big mouth," Burkett added.

"I'm not just a woman with a big mouth," Tamara replied. "I'm a colonel. Or have you forgotten?"

Tamara's promotion to colonel was a recent event. Doyle, Cain, and Burkett had all recommended against it, but the Gruppe Kommandant had promoted her anyway, and instructed Doyle and the others that she was to be treated as their equal.

"I'd like to meet the GK face-to-face someday," Doyle said. "I'd ask him just what in the hell he'd been smoking when he decided to make you a colonel."

"That day will never come," Tamara said. "Nobody meets the GK. Nobody even knows who he is."

"Yeah, it's a hell of a note that he doesn't even trust his second in command," Doyle said.

"Second in command? Well, now, just who do you say is his second in command?" Cain asked.

Doyle looked at the challenging expression in the faces of the other three, then snorted what might have been a laugh. "Us," he said, taking in all four of them with an inclusive wave of his hand. "We are his second in command."

"You got that right," Burkett said.

"You said you shot down the plane?" Tamara asked.

"Yes."

"Okay, so where is Raines?"

"He's probably at the bottom of the mountain, all busted up on the rocks," Cain said.

Tamara frowned. "Probably? What do you mean, probably? Didn't you find the wreckage?"

"Yeah, we found it," Cain said.

"So, was he dead, or what?"

"It's not that simple," Burkett insisted.

Tamara sighed. "What happened?"

Doyle told the story of shooting down the airplane, then tracing it to the crash site, where they encountered Ben Raines still alive.

"You shot him, I hope?"

"Yeah, I think so," Doyle replied.

"First you say he is 'probably' dead, then you say you 'think' you shot him. You know what I think? I think you are giving me a line of bullshit Either that, or you aren't telling me everything," Tamara said. "You haven't actually killed him, have you?"

"We may have," Doyle said. "But to be honest, I don't know whether we did or not. It doesn't matter, though. If we haven't killed him, he will be dead soon."

"How do you figure that?"

"For one thing," Doyle replied, "he's wandering around out there without food, weapons, or any kind of survival gear, and that includes no coat or blanket. You know how cold it gets up here at night, even at this time of the year?"

"Not cold enough to freeze to death."

"Maybe not, but you can build up a damn good case of exposure. And if he is still alive, he's going to be one miserable bastard."

"So what are you saying? That you plan to let nature take care of killing him for you?" Tamara asked. "Is that the report you're going to give the GK?"

"No, that's not the report we're going to give the GK," Doyle said. "Though in truth, if we just left the son of a bitch out there, I think nature would take care of him, providing he's not already dead."

"Given that you don't intend to let nature take its course, what do you have in mind?" Tamara asked.

"First thing tomorrow morning, I plan to turn everyone out to look for him."

"With a reward of fifty thousand dollars for whoever finds him," Burkett added.

Tamara thought for a moment, then nodded. "Sounds reasonable," she said. "But why wait until morning?"

"Because if he is alive, a night in the cold will take enough starch out of him to make him easy prey."

Tamara nodded. "Good idea," she said. "When you're going after someone like Ben Raines, you need every advantage you can get. I agree with you."

"Oh, you agree, do you?" Doyle replied sarcastically. He looked at Cain and Burkett. "Great news, boys, *Colonel* Lynch agrees with us."

"Don't be such a wiseass," Tamara said.

"Look, you two can argue all you want," Burkett said. "But I got other plans. I don't intend to spend the night alone."

Burkett looked over toward the bar where several of the soldiers, men and women, were drinking and visiting. "And I think I see just the one I'll ask to keep me company," he added.

One of the perks of belonging to Die Kontrollgruppe was that no one junior could refuse the sexual advances of anyone their senior.

"Who have you got in mind?" Cain asked with a chuckle.

"You see that pretty little redhead standing at the end of the bar? This is her lucky day. I'm going to make her a happy woman tonight," Burkett said, rubbing himself.

Cain and Doyle laughed.

"Find someone else," Tamara said.

"What do you mean find someone else?" Burkett replied.

"That's the one I want."

Tamara smiled. "You're too late. I've already put my claim in. Tonight, that beautiful little piece of fluff will be sharing my bed."

Leaving the men, Tamara crossed over to the bar and said something to the young redhead. The redhead smiled, nodded, then walked hand-in-hand with Tamara toward the elevator. As they walked away, Tamara, without looking around, held her hand out behind her, flipping a bird toward the three men.

"I'll be a son of a bitch," Burkett growled. "It's bad enough we have to have a woman share rank with us. She also shares women with us."

"What are you talking about?" Doyle replied. "That dyke doesn't share her women with anyone."

The other two men laughed, then started toward the bar to find their own companions for the night.

NINE

Ben fashioned a trap by running control cable from one arm of the bell crank to the trunk of a nearby tree. A second, smaller cable was run from the other arm of the bell crank, then formed into a large loop, as in a slipknot. The mechanism was held taut with the spring he had taken from the battery box. When he was finished, Ben covered the exposed cable with leaves.

Tracks had showed him that this was a popular watering place for animals, and he hoped to be able to catch one of them with his makeshift trap. If it worked as he had planned, when the cable was disturbed, the spring would snap the bell crank back, ensnaring the animal in the loop of the second cable. It wouldn't hold the animal permanently, but long enough to make it an easy kill for Ben.

The trap was sprung within thirty minutes of his setting it, and it worked perfectly. The problem was with the animal it caught. Ben had thought to catch a caribou, elk, or bighorn sheep. What he caught was a brown bear, and rather securely, as the bear had ensnared both his left hind leg and right foreleg.

As soon as the trap was sprung, the bear turned to run, which is exactly the way Ben had planned it, because as the animal tried to run, it tightened the noose around the two trapped legs.

The bear, realizing that it was caught, let out a loud roar, then began jerking on the cable, trying to extricate himself.

That only made the noose grow tighter, so Ben wasn't worried about the animal escaping the noose. However, he was concerned that the bear might be able to pull the cable loose from its anchor.

Ben approached the bear warily. Seeing him, the bear correctly surmised that Ben was the cause of his difficulty, and he bared his fangs, growled, and tried to swipe at Ben with his free left foreleg.

Brandishing his sword, Ben tried to move in on the bear, hoping to take advantage of the fact that the bear had two of his limbs ensnared. But the bear was too quick for him, and Ben had to jump back to escape what could have been a crippling blow. He tried several more times, but was unable to thrust his sword into the bear.

Then looking around, Ben saw part of a fallen limb, the top of which formed a Y. Taking the limb in his left hand, Ben approached the bear again. This time when the bear swiped at him, Ben held up the limb, catching the bear's paw in the Y. With the animal's attack parried, Ben made a counterthrust, driving his sword in the bear's underbelly just about where he thought the heart would be.

The bear's roar grew louder, but this time there was as much pain as anger in the bellow. Ben pulled the sword out as blood pumped from the bear's wound, then made a second thrust, near the first.

The bear fell forward, toward Ben, and he jumped back before he could withdraw his sword. He stood there as the bear lay on its belly, flopping and twitching in its death

throes, and for a moment Ben felt a sense of compassion for the creature.

"I'm sorry, bear," he said quietly. "But I didn't have any choice."

Port Hardy, British Columbia

Paul Kingsley, the operator of the small airport at Port Hardy, was sitting at his desk, eating his supper of creamed salmon and biscuits, when Greg Merrill came into the operations building.

"Your supper looks good," Merrill said, reaching across the counter toward it.

"Too good to share," Kingsley replied, pushing Merrill's hand away.

"Come now, Paul, don't you know that the Lord does not like a selfish man?" Merrill asked.

"Uh-huh. Well, you tell the Lord to get his own supper," Kingsley replied. "He's done it before. You do remember the thing about the loaves and fishes, don't you? And turning water into wine?"

"Damn, you are a sacrilegious shit," Merrill said with a little laugh. "Is the computer back up?"

Kingsley put his fork down, then tapped a few keys and looked at the screen. He shook his head. "No. I've got some guys from the computer place working on it, but nothing yet."

"It was up last night 'cause I was working with it," Merrill said.

Kingsley chuckled. "I wouldn't go around admitting that if I were you. People might blame you for infecting it."

"What do you mean, infecting it?"

"You know, a virus. The computer guys say that somehow we got a worm that's eaten everything up."

"Whoa, I didn't have anything to do with that," Merrill said, reacting quickly against Kingsley's jest.

"Take it easy, I didn't say you did. I was just teasing."

"Are they going to be able to fix it?"

"Yes, but it's going to take a while. They have to erase everything from the hard drive, then reload it with backup. Fortunately, we have most of our files backed up."

"Oh. Okay. So listen, I was supposed to change out all the filters on the DC-4 today. You got any idea when Gerald and Ed Parker are coming back?"

Kingsley looked up from his meal. "Coming back? Coming back from where? You mean their plane isn't in the hangar?"

Merrill shook his head. "Nope. Hasn't been all day."

"I didn't even know they were gone," Kingsley said.

"What do you mean you didn't know? Don't you have their flight plan?"

"No."

"How can they not have filed a flight plan?"

"Duh! The computer is down, remember? I didn't say they didn't file it, I'm just saying I don't have it. If their flight plan was on the computer just before it went down, we lost it."

"Well, if they filed before the computer crashed, it would be on the Internet somewhere, wouldn't it?" Merrill asked.

"Yeah, it should be."

"I guess I can always take care of the filters tomorrow," Merrill said.

"Yeah, I suppose so," Kingsley said. He stroked his chin. "But it bothers me that they are gone and I have no flight plan for them." He picked up the phone.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to call Vancouver. If they did get the flight plan filed, Vancouver might have something."

"Yeah, give 'em a call," Merrill suggested. "You think that's where they went?"

"No, I don't think so. If they went to Vancouver, they've had plenty of time to close it. But Vancouver is the clearinghouse for all the flight plans filed in this sector."

"Don't you think if Vancouver had an unclosed flight plan that originated from here, they would have called to check on it by now?" Merrill asked.

"Yeah, you would think so," Kingsley said. He began punching in the numbers.

Merrill folded his arms across his chest and leaned back against the counter that separated him from Kingsley's area.

"Northwest Flight Operations, Fred Johnson."

"Yeah, Fred," Kingsley said when the phone was answered. "This is Paul Kingsley, from Point Hardy. Listen, I'm inquiring about Gerald and Edgar Parker. Do you have an unclosed flight plan from them?"

"What type aircraft?"

"It's a DC-4, tail number 442715."

"Whoa, that's an old one."

"Don't let the age of the plane fool you. It's mint," Paul said.

"Just a minute, let me check," Fred replied. Kingsley could hear the sound of tapping computer keys. "No, we don't have a flight plan from them at all, closed or unclosed."

"You don't? You have nothing on them?"

"No."

"Well, have you heard anything from or about them, or from any of the other airfields around?"

"I haven't personally, and there is nothing on the computer. What's all this about, Paul? Are you declaring them missing?"

"I don't know," Kingsley replied. "Not yet, I guess. They must've left here early this morning, before anyone else arrived. The problem is, we have no idea where they went, or when they are due to come back."

"Are people in the habit of departing your station without filing a flight plan?"

"No, but our computer has crashed, and if they did file a flight plan, somehow it got lost in the system."

"Would you like me to do an Internet search of all other reporting stations?" Fred asked.

"Yes, please. See what you can find out for us. I would appreciate it very much."

"I'll get back to you."

Kingsley hung up the phone, then looked at Merrill.

"They haven't heard anything from them?" Merrill asked.

Kingsley shook his head. "Not a word," he said. "But he's going to check. If they have put in somewhere and closed their flight plan, it will show up on somebody's system."

"Yes, but don't you think they would call?"

"Not necessarily," Kingsley said. "They probably think everything is all right."

The phone rang and Kingsley picked it up. "Port Hardy," he said.

Merrill could hear the voice on the other end of the phone, but couldn't understand what it was saying. He could tell by the expression on Kingsley's face, though, that it wasn't good.

"Thanks," Kingsley said. "Yes, I think you are right. Do you need me to make an official request? All right, consider it done." Hanging up the phone, he looked at Merrill, then shook his head.

"That was Fred?"

"Yes. He's checked with everyone. Nobody has heard from them."

"Damn, that's not good," Merrill said. "That's not good at all."

"No, it isn't. I'm going to call Search and Air Rescue to file a missing report. The request has to come from the flight's point of origin."

"What about Peggy? Somebody needs to tell her," Merrill said.

"You know her better than I do, Greg," Kingsley said.

"Damn. You're asking me to tell her, aren't you?"

"It would be easier coming from you," Kingsley insisted.

Merrill shook his head. "It's not going to be easy no matter who it comes from," he said.

"Wait, I have an idea," Kingsley said. "Why don't we call the Parkers' sister?"

"Carrie?" Merrill said. He nodded. "Yeah, yeah, that's a good idea. Peggy might take it a little easier if the news came from another woman. Especially if it came from Carrie. They are a close family." He reached for the phone and paused for a moment before he picked it up.

"What's wrong?" Kingsley asked.

Merrill sighed. "Nothing. It's just that I'd rather take a beating than do this," he said.

"Yeah, I know," Kingsley said. "But it has to be done."

Merrill dialed Carrie Parker's number.

The one-piece black jumpsuit Carrie Parker was wearing molded itself to every curve, showing off her body to perfection. But she wasn't wearing the suit as a fashion statement; she was wearing it to minimize any interference that normal dress might have with her physical activity.

Carrie was a martial arts expert and, at the moment, she was on a pad, working out with both a speed bag and a heavy bag. With a yell, she drove her elbow into the speed bag, then pivoted on her left foot while lifting her right leg, high over her head, to kick the speed bag.

The phone rang and, with one more swipe at the speed bag, she picked up a towel and dried her face as she walked over to the bookshelf to answer the phone.

"Hello?"

"Carrie, this is Greg Merrill."

"Hi, Greg, what's up?" Carrie asked brightly.

"We may have a problem with Edgar and Gerald."

"A problem?" The brightness left her voice, to be replaced with a twinge of anxiety. She wiped her face again. "What sort of problem?"

"It may be nothing," Merrill said. "It's just that we don't know where they are."

"You mean their flight plan hasn't been closed?"

"It wasn't closed, it wasn't even opened," Merrill said, explaining the problem with the computer.

"Can't you call to where they were going and find out something from them?"

"That's just it. They must've left before seven this morning, because no one here remembers seeing them. We don't know where they were going. I was sort of hoping you would know."

"No, I don't know," Carrie replied. "Peggy might know. Have you asked her?"

"Uh, no, and that brings up another point," Merrill replied. He was quiet for a moment before he spoke again. "Would you, uh—"

"You want me to ask Peggy," Carrie said, interrupting Merrill.

"Yes, if you would, please," Merrill said. "I'll be honest with you, Carrie. I think she would take the news a lot easier if it came from you."

"What news?" Carrie asked. "I thought you said didn't know anything."

"No, we don't know anything officially," Merrill said quickly.

"Officially," Carrie said.

"Here's the thing, Carrie. We have checked with every clearing facility within one thousand miles. Even if the flight plan didn't get up on the Internet when they opened it this morning, closing it would have triggered a response. But there is no record anywhere of the flight plan being closed."

"Oh, I see," Carrie said. "You are worried, aren't you? You are really worried."

"I admit we are concerned. And Peggy is going to get concerned too when she doesn't hear from Gerald."

Carrie sighed. "You're right about that."

"And while you are at it, see if she knows where they were headed."

TEN

"Aunt Carrie!" Five-year-old Jerry Parker ran down the sidewalk toward Carrie as she climbed out of the Jeep she had parked in front of her brother's house.

"Hello, Jerry," Carrie said, smiling at him with her arms open wide. "Come give your Aunt Carrie a kiss."

Jerry allowed his aunt to pick him up. He kissed her, then put his arms around her neck.

Holding him, Carrie realized that there was a very real possibility this child had just lost his father. Filled with sorrow for her own loss, and pity for what Jerry would have to go through for the rest of his life, she returned Jerry's hug, squeezing him so hard that he protested.

"Ow, Aunt Carrie, you are hugging me too hard!" he complained.

"I'm sorry, darling," Carrie said, putting him down. "It's just that I love you so much! Is your mama inside?"

"She's washing dishes," Jerry said. He grabbed her hand and started pulling her with him toward the house.

Carrie reached the kitchen just as Peggy was closing the dishwasher door. Smiling, Peggy looked up at her sister-in-law.

"Carrie, what are you doing here?" she asked. "Oh, have you had supper? We had lasagna. I saved some for Gerald, but there's enough for you too. Let me warm it up for you."

"No, I've eaten," Carrie said.

"Oh, well, you want to come into the living room and..." It was at that moment that Peggy noticed the expression on Carrie's face. She made a painful little gasp, and raised her hand to her mouth. Instantly, it seemed, her eyes filled with tears. "He's ... he's dead, isn't he?" she asked in a quiet, strained voice.

Carrie shook her head. "We don't know yet," she said.

"Oh!" Now the sob rose to her throat. "You don't know ... yet?"

"There was a computer..." Carrie started to say "computer crash," but didn't want to use the term because she was afraid "crash" would be the only thing Peggy heard. "There was a computer malfunction," she said, starting the sentence again. "And because of that, there is no flight plan on file for Gerald and Ed. We don't know where they went."

"They were going to Edson," she said.

"Edson? What time did they leave? Nobody at the airfield seems to know."

"I wouldn't be surprised. Gerald got a telephone call at around three this morning. His passenger, whoever he was, wanted to get under way by seven," Peggy replied.

"Do you know who the passenger was?" Carrie asked.

Peggy shook her head. "No, he didn't say, and I didn't ask."

"Well, we'll find out. What you have given will help."

"Carrie, Edson is no more than a three-hour flight," Peggy said. "They've been gone for eleven hours. That means they've had plenty of time to get there and back, flight plan or no flight plan."

"Let's not jump to conclusions yet," Carrie said, trying to be reassuring.

Peggy shook her head slowly. "He's dead," she said. She looked into the living room where Jerry was playing with a toy airplane. "Oh, my poor children. My poor, poor, fatherless children."

Base Camp One, Louisiana

Jersey brought the earmuffs down, put on the clear, plastic glasses, then raised her .44 magnum pistol. She fired six rounds, firing them so quickly that the muzzle flash was a continuous flame, the sound a sustained roar. She put the pistol down and turned to press the button that would bring the target up to her for a closer examination, but before she could do so, someone else pressed the button. Turning to see who it was, she saw Coop.

As the target reached the end-stop, Coop reached out to stick his fist through a hole in the middle of the face of the target silhouette. The gaping hole was the result of a perfect shot grouping. Those who knew Jersey would have expected nothing less.

Jersey began reloading her pistol. "Fancy seeing you on a shooting range," she said. "Or anywhere else where there is a chance you might improve yourself."

"Funny you should mention that," Coop said. "I've been wanting to talk to you about that very thing."

Jersey looked up from her pistol, a quizzical smile on her face. "You've been wanting to talk to me about improving yourself?" she said.

"Yes."

"Ha! That'll be the day."

"Yeah, well, we'll need to talk about that as well," Coop said.

Now the quizzical expression turned to total confusion.

"Coop, what the hell are you talking about?"

"The day," Coop said.

"The day?"

"Yes."

"What day?"

"Well, any day is fine by me. You can set the date," Coop said.

Jersey let out a long, audible sigh of confused frustration.

"Cooper, I am going to slap you silly if you don't start making sense. What the hell day are you talking about?"

"Why, I'm talking about the day we get married," Coop said. "You pick the date. Today, tomorrow, two days from now? It's up to you."

Now confusion gave way to shock as Jersey stared at Coop in openmouthed wonder.

"Coop," she said in a quiet, awestruck voice, "are you asking me to marry you?"

Coop chuckled. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I guess I am. What do you say, Jersey? I mean, when you talk about me improving myself, that's the quickest fix I can think of."

The shocked expression on Jersey's face changed to one of bemused irritation. "Son of a bitch, Coop! Is that the most romantic thing you can come up with? You want to marry me because it is a quick fix to improvement?"

"Well, no. There are other reasons."

"Other reasons? Not one reason in particular?"

"Yeah, I guess, there is one reason in particular."

"What is it?"

"Come on, Jersey, you know what it is."

"Goddamnit, Coop, when I am proposed to, I want all the ribbons and bows." She opened the cylinder to her revolver, emptied all the shells she had just loaded, then closed the cylinder and held the gun in the flat of her hand. "Now, you make this fucking marriage proposal romantic, or I'm going to smash in your face."

By now, others on the firing range had overheard the conversation and a small crowd was beginning to gather. Coop looked around in embarrassment.

"Come on, Jersey. You know..." he said.

"Do it, you bastard, or so help me..." Jersey said, raising her hand.

Coop cleared his throat, then looking around again, got down on one knee. He reached for Jersey's free hand.

"Uh, Jersey. Uh, I love you, and I am asking you to be my wife."

Jersey smiled broadly, put the pistol down, then reached down to pull Coop to his feet.

"Cooper, that is absolutely the most romantic thing that anyone has ever said to me," she said. "I would be pleased to marry you." She pulled his face to hers for a deep, lingering kiss.

* * * *

"Whoa," Mike said. "You two are going to get married? I mean, actually take out a license, say the words, take the vows, and get married?"

"Yes," Jersey said, smiling broadly. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Mike laughed and looked at Coop. "Why, Coop, I didn't know you had it in you."

"Sure," Coop answered. "I can be a real romantic guy when I put my mind to it. Just ask Jersey."

Jersey laughed. "You have no idea how romantic he can be."

"Have you heard anything from the general?" Cooper asked. "I'd like him to be my best man."

"He can't be your best man," Jersey said.

"What? Why not?"

"Because I plan to have him give me away," Jersey insisted.

"Well, can't he be both? I mean, can't he be my best man, and then when the preacher says, 'Who is giving this woman away?' why, he can just sort of lean over and say, 'I'm doing that too'?"

"Jesus, Coop, you have all the social skills of a baboon," Jersey said with a frustrated sigh.

"Well, at this juncture, it is a moot point," Mike said. "We still haven't heard from Ben."

Coop and Jersey stopped their bickering and looked at Mike.

"What do you mean, you haven't heard anything from him? Not a word?" Jersey asked.

"No."

"I thought he was going to check in with us," Coop said. "Surely he is on the ground now."

"Yeah, I thought he was going check with us too," Mike replied. He sighed, then ran his hand through his hair. "And I don't mind telling you, I'm getting a little concerned."

"Have you tried to reach him on his satellite phone?" Jersey asked.

"Several times. And I've gotten his voice mail every time."

"So what do we do now? Anyone have any ideas?" Coop asked.

"For the time being, I think the best thing to do is just sit tight," Mike Post said. "Ben is very resourceful. If he is in any kind of trouble right now, our attempt to help him might just exacerbate the situation."

"What if it is more than trouble?" Jersey asked.

"More than trouble? What do you mean?" Coop asked.

"What if he is..." Jersey paused for a moment, not wanting to say the word. "Dead," she concluded.

"What if he is?"

"I think we should try and find out, don't you?"

"No," Coop said. "Not yet."

"What do you mean, not yet? Aren't you worried about him?"

"Yes," Coop answered. "But I agree with Mike. Suppose he is in trouble and our trying to find out about him does, somehow, exacerbate the situation by exposing him in some way. That would make the situation even worse, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it could," Jersey agreed.

"On the other hand, if he is dead, there is nothing we could do about it anyway, so delaying doesn't hurt anything."

"Yeah," Jersey said. "Yeah, I see what you mean."

Jersey walked over to the office window and looked out. The street lamps were on and she could see light reflecting from the fountain. "Why the hell didn't he let one of us go with him?" she asked of no one in particular.

Point Hardy, British Columbia

Because it was late spring, the hours of daylight and dark were almost perfectly balanced. Therefore it was dark when Carrie returned to her apartment, but she didn't turn on the lights. Instead, she used the ambient light from outside to go to the cabinet above the refrigerator, where she took down a bottle of brandy.

Splashing the brandy in the glass, she went into the living room, where she sat in the dark. She reached out to turn on the lamp, decided against it, then just leaned back in the chair. Lifting the glass to her lips, she drank it in one gulp, feeling the controlled fire of the brandy as it burned its way down her throat.

She had tried to bolster Peggy's spirits by claiming that Gerald and Ed could still be alive, but she knew, as surely as Peggy knew, that they were dead. She couldn't explain how she knew, but she knew. And while the loss of a husband might be more difficult to take than the loss of a brother, Carrie was faced with the fact that she had just lost both of her brothers.

Carrie set the empty glass on the table beside her chair, leaned her head forward, pinched the bridge of her nose, and

cried.

ELEVEN

Northwest Canada

The aroma of grilled bear steak filled the cave. Ben sat near the fire, enjoying both the warmth and the aroma of cooking meat. As he waited for his meal to cook, he worked on the bearskin, scraping the inside so as to make a bearskin robe. Several narrow strips of meat hung a bit farther back from the fire than the steak. This would become jerky, a portable food source that would do him for the long walk back out of the woods.

He figured to do thirty miles per day. At that pace, he should be able to make it back to Port Hardy within two weeks. He was pretty sure that Port Hardy wasn't his home, but it was obvious from the pilot's log that the flight had originated there. That being the case, he was reasonably certain that once he got there, he would be able to find out who he was.

The steak done, Ben removed it from the fire, then tossed it from hand to hand a few times until he could hold it. When it was sufficiently cooled, he took a bite.

"Whoa, I've never tasted anything any better," he said. "But then, how the hell would I know? I can't even remember anything I've ever eaten." He laughed out loud at the macabre joke.

With the inside of the bear scraped clean, Ben laid the skin on the ground, fur side up, rolled himself up in it, and went to sleep.

Ben walked out onto the front porch. There was something strange in the air, something foreboding. For a moment he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was; then he realized it was the smell. He had smelled this odor before. It was the stench of death.

What was it? What was going on?

Ben hurried back into his house to turn on the TV, but there was no electricity. Going outside, he started his emergency generator, then tried the TV again. There was no picture. Cursing the cable company for being down, he turned on the radio but got nothing, not even a carrier wave. Picking up the telephone, he discovered there was no dial tone.

"What is this? What's going on?" Ben asked aloud.

Driving into town, Ben hoped to find out where the smell was coming from. He wanted to get to the bottom of the nagging sense of apprehension he was feeling, but instead of answering his questions, the drive to town only deepened the mystery.

Cars and trucks were overturned, burned out, smashed up. Even the undamaged vehicles added to the mystery, for they stood there, some in the middle of the street, others half on, half off the sidewalk. All were empty.

At first he wondered where the people were, but that question was answered soon enough, for within a few hundred feet he saw them. Some were burned into charred piles of residue, barely recognizable as human remains. Others were twisted into grotesque positions, while some lay as unblemished as if they were just sleeping. All were dead.

Ben drove through the town, honking the horn and shouting.

"Hello! Hello! Is anyone here? Hello!"*

**Trapped in the Ashes*

"Hello!"

Ben woke himself up by speaking the word aloud. For a moment, he was as confused by where he was as he was confused by the dream he had just experienced. Then he remembered that he was in a cave in the north woods, the survivor of an airplane crash.

The fire had burned down during the night, but enough glowing coals remained to renew the fire. Tossing in a handful of wood, Ben got down on his stomach and blew on the coals to awaken them. Finally, they caught and, as fingers of fire began curling up around the firewood, Ben sat back up and began looking around. The flickering flames painted the walls of the cave a wavering orange. The shadows they cast were long and indecipherable.

What was also indecipherable was the meaning of the strange dream he just had. Was he the person in the dream? Or was he dreaming about someone else? He still had no idea who he was, or why he was here. And he didn't know the name of the location of his dream, where it was, if it was real, or if it was just a part of his subconscious imagination.

Ben didn't know why he knew, but he was certain that what he had just experienced was more memory than dream. At some time in his past he had entered a town exactly like the one in his dream, a town of death and destruction. But where was that town? And when had it happened? If that

memory returned, then perhaps the rest of his memory would come back as well. It might come back in snatches, as this one just did, but if so, so be it. If he could cobble together enough snatches of memory, perhaps he could reconstruct enough of his life to bring it all to him.

"Who am I?" Ben shouted into the cave, and the last two words came echoing back: "...am I? ... am I? ... am I?"

"And what the hell am I doing here?" he shouted. Then the words came back: "...doing here? ... doing here? ... doing here?"

After a breakfast of roasted bear meat, Ben took the bear's stomach down to the river, where he cleaned it thoroughly, then he filled it with water, checking the seals he had made that would allow the stomach to retain liquid. By midmorning, wearing his bear robe and carrying his food, water, and supplies, Ben checked the compass, then started out. Allowing for compass deviation, he began following an azimuth of 250 degrees.

As Ben got under way, he thought about how easily the survival skills came to him. It was more than mere intuition. Whatever and whoever he was, he realized that he was a most resourceful person.

"Ben," he said to himself, "I don't know who the hell you are, but if I'm going to be stranded here in the wilderness, I'm damn glad I've got you with me. Now, that's not being conceited if I don't even know who I am, is it?" he asked, laughing at his attempt to make light of the situation.

Control Group Headquarters, Alberta

Cletus Doyle stood on the front porch of the former Tredway House, looking out over the group of Control Group soldiers who were assembled to begin the hunt for Ben Raines. Cain and Burkett were on the porch as well.

"Where is Colonel Lynch?" Doyle asked.

"She hasn't come down yet," Cain said. "We may as well start without her."

"Here she comes," Burkett said.

Tamara came out of the front door and stood there for a moment, looking out over those who were gathered for the assembly. Burkett saw her exchange an intimate glance with the redhead who had spent the night with her.

"So, how was your night?" Burkett asked. He was still bugged by the fact that the redhead had gone with Tamara rather than with him.

"Would you like a blow-by-blow report?" Tamara asked. She smiled smugly. "Or rather, should I say a 'lick-by-lick' account?"

"You are a bitch, Tamara," Burkett said.

"And proud of it," Tamara replied.

With all four colonels in place, Doyle began his remarks.

"Remember," Doyle said as he addressed the assembled soldiers of Die Kontrollgruppe. "Ben Raines is unarmed, but that doesn't mean he isn't dangerous. He is a very resourceful man."

"But he doesn't have a weapon, right?" Pete Logan asked.

"No, he has no weapon," Doyle replied.

Logan grinned. "Then how dangerous can the son of a bitch be?"

"He can be very dangerous," Tamara said, stepping up to the front of the porch then. "And don't you forget that."

"And there's a fifty-thousand-dollar reward to bring him back?" John Purvis asked.

"That's right, fifty thousand dollars," Doyle answered.

"And that's dead or alive," Cain added.

"Damn, he's unarmed and we get fifty thousand dollars for bringing him in, dead or alive," Logan said. "The way I look at it, this is going to be like taking candy from a baby."

"If you say so," Doyle said.

"How do you want us to do this, Colonel?" one of the other soldiers asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Should we go out in a group, or separate and go out on our own? What?"

"I don't care how you do it," Doyle said. "As far as I'm concerned, you can work it out among yourselves. All I am interested in is results."

"Fifty thousand dollars? Hell, I don't plan on sharing that with anyone," one of the men said. "The way I figure it, it is every man for himself."

"Yahoo!" another shouted, and the group scattered as everyone started on the hunt.

"Hey, Purvis," Logan called as the others began scattering. "What do you say we go together?"

"Why would I want give up half the reward?" Purvis replied.

"Think about it," Logan said. "If we go together, our chances of finding him go up by one hundred percent. Sure,

we'll only get twenty-five thousand each, but the odds of the two of us getting twenty-five thousand are twice as good as the odds of one of us getting fifty thousand."

Purvis scratched his cheek as he thought about Logan's logic. "All right," he finally said. "Sounds good to me. Where do we start?"

"We start by looking at the map," Logan said.

"What's that going to tell us?"

"Look, you have to figure that he's going to try and make it back to Port Hardy. If we look at the map, we'll be able to see the most logical way for him to go. While everyone else is running around in the woods like chickens with their heads cut off, we'll find a place to wait for him."

"Yeah," Purvis agreed, smiling broadly. "Yeah, sounds like a good idea."

Studying the map, they saw that Ben would have to go through Sunwapta Pass in order to negotiate the mountains. Logan put his finger on the map.

"That's where we need to go," he said.

"That's a long walk from here."

"We can go more than halfway on the all-terrain vehicles," Logan said. "We'll have to walk the rest of the way, but that will put us ahead of him."

"All right, let's do it," Purvis agreed.

It looked as if Logan's hunch was about to pay off, because about one hour after abandoning their ATVs he and Purvis spotted their quarry.

"There he is," Logan said, pointing him out.

"Are you sure that's him?" Purvis asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Logan replied. "At first, I thought it was a bear, but when I saw him the second time, I saw that it was a man wearing a bearskin."

"Where the hell did he come up with a bearskin?" Purvis asked. "I thought Doyle, Crane, and Burkett said they didn't leave him any survival gear."

"Maybe he killed a bear," Logan suggested.

"How? With his bare hands? They didn't leave him any weapons either."

"As far as I'm concerned, it makes no difference how he got it. The point is, he's worth fifty thousand dollars to us, dead or alive."

"Yeah, well, you can just forget about that 'alive' shit. There's no way I'm going to try and bring that son of a bitch in alive," Purvis said.

Logan chuckled. "I don't know. It might be kind of fun to bring him in, then listen to him beg for his life before we kill him."

"Yeah, but I'll get just as much enjoyment out of seeing the expression on his face when he gets to Sunwapta Pass and sees that we beat him there," Purvis said. "The way I figure it, Mr. Raines is going to be one surprised dude."

"Yeah, but not for long," Logan said. "I figure that by the time he figures what's going on, we'll be dropping the hammer on his ass."

"Boom!" Purvis said, laughing.

TWELVE

What neither Logan nor Purvis realized was that Ben would not be surprised by their sudden appearance, because he had already seen them. He'd also seen, from the black uniforms they were wearing, that if not the same men who had jumped him yesterday, they were obviously affiliated with those men in some way. He was certain that they were looking for him.

From his perusal of the chart, Ben knew that if these men had seen him, and were planning to attack him, Sunwapta Pass would be the ideal site for the ambush. Deciding that forewarned was forearmed, he continued along his current path, giving no sense of having seen his pursuers.

It was Ben's intention to lull the two men into a false sense of security. In order to accomplish that, he neither quickened nor slowed his pace, but continued on without looking around, as if everything were normal. Then, when he was out of sight, he left the path and started climbing up the side of the hill adjacent to the trail he had been following.

It was a hard climb until he found a ledge that would allow him to continue laterally, but even with the ledge, the going was extremely difficult. Despite the difficulty, Ben was able to continue his progress until he was well beyond the entrance to the mouth of the pass. Once there, he worked his way down to the trail. That maneuver put him behind where the two men would be waiting for him with guns raised and ready.

Satisfied that he had avoided an immediate confrontation, Ben turned and continued on his way, moving quietly so as not to alert them. He would have avoided them entirely, getting away cleanly, if Logan hadn't turned just before Ben disappeared around the bend.

Logan saw him.

"What the hell!" Logan shouted, pointing toward Ben. "How did that son of a bitch get by without us seeing him?"

Logan and Purvis opened fire, but the range was too long, and Ben had no trouble disappearing into the forest, even as bullets were whipping by.

"Get him!" Logan shouted.

Ben ran fast enough to open up some distance between him and his pursuers. Then, when he was certain that he had enough time to set it up, he laid a strand of the smaller cable just about ankle-high across the path. About half a man's length beyond the cable, he used his sword to cut a sharpened stake, which he planted point-up. Next, he kicked leaves over the cable strand and the stake.

The whole thing took less than a minute, and even as he was kicking the leaves over the strand, he heard the two men approaching. He got behind a tree just as they came up.

"Where is he?" Purvis asked. "Where'd the son of a bitch go?"

"He can't be far," Logan answered. "Probably just around ... uh!"

Logan tripped over the cable, then pitched forward.

"Ha! You dumb ass! You tripped!" Purvis said.

Logan made a gurgling sound.

"Get up," Purvis said. "The son of a bitch is getting away from us."

When Logan still didn't get up, Purvis knelt beside him, grabbed his shoulder, and turned him over.

"Oh, shit!" he shouted, recoiling in horror. A large, gaping hole was in Logan's chest, and his shirtfront was covered with blood. There was also blood on a sharpened stake that was sticking up from the pile of bloody leaves. Logan's eyes were open, but unseeing. "Logan!" Purvis shouted. "Logan!"

Purvis stood up then and continued to stare down at Logan's body, totally confused as to what happened.

"You dumb shit!" he said. "You're so clumsy you stumbled over a tree root!"

Purvis looked back to see what had tripped him. That was when he saw the cable stretched across the path. For just a moment, seeing the cable confused him even more, as he wondered what it was and what it was doing there. Then he realized that it was no accident.

"Holy shit!" he said. "Somebody put that there."

"Not just somebody," Ben said, stepping out from behind the tree. "I put it there."

"You son of a bitch!" Purvis shouted. He tried, desperately, to bring his Uzi up to bear on Ben, but before he could do so, Ben thrust forward with his sword. The wide blade with the jagged edge plunged deep into Purvis's chest.

Ben withdrew his sword from Purvis's body, then held it before him, the blade running red with blood.

"Uhn!" Purvis grunted. Reaching down, he covered his wound with both hands, but was unable to stop the bleeding.

The blood filled the palms of his hands, then spilled through his fingers. He looked up at Ben, his face a picture of pain and surprise.

"Who are you?" Ben asked.

Purvis didn't answer.

"Who am I?"

"You ... you don't know who you are?"

Ben shook his head. "The plane crash. It's taken my memory. Who am I, and why were you trying to kill me?"

Despite it all, Purvis laughed. The laughter pulled and strained at his wound, causing him even more pain.

"I don't aim to tell you anything, you bastard," Purvis said. He laughed again. "It's almost worth dying, just to see you so fucked up."

Purvis coughed, and blood started streaming from his mouth. He gagged, then pitched forward, falling alongside Logan.

Ben stood over the bodies of the two men he had just killed. He had the feeling that he had killed before, but he couldn't remember it. He looked at the sword he had made from the wreckage of the airplane. With it he had killed a bear and defended himself against assassins. It had served him well, but he wouldn't be needing it anymore. He tossed the sword aside and picked up one of the Uzis, plus all the ammunition and magazines both men were carrying. One of them was also wearing a large bowie knife. Ben took that as well.

Control Group Headquarters, Alberta

"Well, that answers the question," Tamara Lynch said as some of the others brought Logan and Purvis's bodies back to the hotel.

"What question is that?" Doyle asked.

"Whether or not Ben Raines is still alive. He obviously is, which means you three dumb shits fucked up."

"Yeah, well, at least we know he isn't armed," Cain said.

"Oh? And how do we know that?" Tamara asked.

"Well, look at 'em," Cain said, pointing to the two bodies. "They ain't shot. Don't you think, if he was armed, they would'a been shot?"

"Uh-huh," Tamara replied. "Tell me something, Cain. Where are their guns?"

"What?"

"Purvis and Logan were both carrying Uzis, weren't they? I mean, you don't think they went after Raines with their bare hands, do you?"

"Well, no, I wouldn't think so."

"Where are their guns now?"

"Oh," Cain said. "Oh, yeah, I see what you mean. Raines probably got them."

"Probably," Tamara said. "Of course, from the way he handled these two, it doesn't seem to make any difference whether he was armed or not."

"Logan and Purvis were good men," Burkett said. "I can't believe Raines could take them out, them being armed and him not, unless he got the jump on them."

"Of course he got the jump on them, you dumb son of a bitch!" Tamara said. "That's how you beat your enemy. I'd

give anything to have three or four real men like Ben Raines with us."

"What would a bull dyke like you do with a real man?" Doyle asked with a sneer.

"I don't know," Tamara answered. "I haven't seen any real men lately."

Cain laughed. "Ha! I guess she told you off," he said.

"You think he is the only one I was talking about?" Tamara asked.

Now it was Doyle's time to laugh.

"I'm glad you boys are enjoying yourselves," Tamara said. "In the meantime, Ben Raines is still wandering around the north woods, alive and dangerous."

"He's in the middle of the north woods with no survival gear, three hundred miles from civilization. Just how long do you think he can last?" Burkett asked.

"I think he can last until we take him out," Tamara said.

"Yeah, well, we've got about two hundred well-armed people looking for him. Mark my word, we'll have him within the next twelve hours."

"Is that a fact. Are you willing to make that promise to the Gruppe Kommandant?" Tamara asked.

"What do you mean, am I ready to make a personal guarantee to the GK?" Burkett asked. He shook his head.

"Hell, no, I ain't goin' to do that. Ain't no way I'm going out on a limb by myself."

"Then your word that we will have him within twelve hours means nothing," Tamara reminded him.

"You know what I think?" Cain said. "I think we might have to get off our ass and go find him ourselves."

"I think you might be right," Tamara said. "What do you think, Doyle?"

"What do I think?"

"Yeah."

"Have any of you ever been to a bullfight?" Doyle asked.

"A bullfight? No," Cain replied.

"In a bullfight, they send the banderilleros out to stick banderillas into the bull."

"Banderillas?"

"Yeah, you know, those decorated barbed sticks you see hanging from the bull? They do that to weaken the animal before the matador comes out to finish him off."

Cain and Burkett looked at each other in confusion.

"Christ, Doyle, have you lost your mind?" Cain asked. "We're talking about going after Ben Raines, and you are telling us some dumb-assed fact about bullfighting."

"Yeah," Burkett said. "What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"I know what he's talking about," Tamara said. "And under the circumstances, I agree with him. In fact, it may be the only way we are going to be able to bring Ben Raines down."

"What?" Burkett asked in exasperation.

"What he is saying is, let the people who are out looking for him now wear Raines down. Your chances of getting him are a lot better when he has been bled a little."

"You're pretty sharp," Doyle said to Tamara. That's right, that is exactly what I'm thinking."

"Oh," Cain said, now understanding the analogy. He smiled. "Yeah, I see what you are talking about now. What about you, Burkett? You still in the dark?"

"Nah, I know what you're saying," Burkett said. Then, to change the subject, he added, "About that redhead you took to your room last night."

"Her name is Kelly, not 'that redhead,'" Tamara said. "What about her?"

"I was just thinking, if you would send her to my room one time, I'd make a straight woman out of her."

Tamara laughed. "I pity the woman who would sleep with you, Burkett. One night with you and even someone like Cleopatra would have been turned away from men."

Armed now, and fully aware that, for some unknown reason, he was a target, Ben continued his journey more alert than before. Although it was warm enough during the day, it got quite cool during the night, so he knew that his first priority was to find a way to stay warm. That presented somewhat of a problem, because he had no cave to stay in, which meant he would be unable to build a fire, for fear of it being seen by his adversaries.

Those were the conditions facing him on this, his second night in the woods. Drinking water from the bear-stomach flask, and eating a supper of bear jerky, he set about making his camp for the night.

Ben knew, without knowing exactly how he knew, that he could find warmth from the chemical reaction of decomposing vegetable matter, so wrapping himself snugly in the bearskin, he burrowed down into a bed of old pine needles.

To his relief, he realized that he could spend the night quite comfortably.

Sleep came more quickly than he would have thought, and with sleep, the dream returned. Once more Ben found himself, or at least his dream-self, in the town of death and destruction he had visited in last night's dream.

In his sleep-conscious, part of him knew this wasn't real, knew it was a dream. And yet, that same sleep-conscious also knew that there was a basic authenticity to these sleep memories.

He went from store to store collecting the essentials of survival ... medical supplies, food, weapons and ammo, gasoline, and a wide-band shortwave radio.

Returning to his home, he began to plan his next move. After much thought and much bourbon, he resolved to travel around the country to see if there were other places like the town of death he had just visited. If so, he would use his skills as a writer to leave a detailed account for posterity of what he found.

His mission clear, he packed up his pickup truck and headed north, intending first to find out what happened to his family, to find those who survived, and to bury the rest. *

**Trapped in the Ashes*

THIRTEEN

Base Camp One

Mike Post sat drumming his fingers on his desk, drinking his third cup of coffee this morning, as the others filed into his office. He had called a staff meeting to discuss the situation with regard to Ben Raines.

Buddy sat next to Mike's desk, while Coop and Jersey drew themselves each a cup of coffee and sat next to each other on the leather sofa against the wall. Harley and Anna came in together.

Mike selected a pipe from the pipe stand on his desk, took some tobacco from the humidor, and tapped it down into the bowl. He was doing it all slowly, and very deliberately, and everyone knew that he was formulating what he was going to say. Nobody interrupted him.

Finally, with the tobacco tamped down, he lit it, drew in several puffs until clouds of tobacco curled about him. Only then did he begin to speak.

"Day before yesterday, as of nineteen hundred hours British Columbia time, the airplane Ben had chartered was declared missing," Mike said.

"What?" the others gasped. "The general's plane is down?"

"Presumed down," Mike replied.

"This happened day before yesterday and you are just now getting around to telling us?" Jersey challenged. "Why did you wait so long? Didn't you think we would be interested in knowing this?"

"Jersey, do you really think I would keep something like this from everyone? I didn't find out about it myself until a few minutes ago," Mike replied. "If you remember, this whole mission was kept secret. The authorities in Canada didn't know who to notify. I only found out about it when I called to check on the status of the flight."

"Oh," Jersey said contritely. "Oh, of course, I should have known that would be the case. Listen, I'm sorry, Mike, I had no business shooting off my mouth like that. I'm just ... just..." Jersey pursed her lips and blew out a stream of air. Tears began flowing down her cheeks, and she made no effort to hide them. No one commented about her tears, because all were fighting the lumps in their own throats.

"You don't have to apologize, Jersey. I know how upsetting this is for you. For all of us. It just doesn't seem real."

"Well, do we know anything more about it?" Coop asked. "Was there a last known position? Any eyewitnesses to a crash? Anything?"

"No, not at this point. We don't even really know that the airplane is down," Mike said. "They only know it is missing."

"If it's missing, that means it's down, doesn't it?"

"Not necessarily. They could have landed at some private field somewhere. Don't forget, the general is very resourceful. If he got later information, I am sure he would react to it."

"But wouldn't he call us? I mean, he does have a satellite phone," Anna said.

"Anna, you know your father as well as any of us. He is mission-oriented. Accomplishing what he set out to accomplish would be more important than keeping in contact

with us. Especially if trying to establish contact would complicate things for him."

"That's true," Anna admitted. "But even knowing that does not keep me from worrying about him."

"Hell, Anna, you don't have dibs on that. We're all worrying about him," Harley said.

Coop stood up. "Yeah, well, I'm going to quit worrying and start doing something. I'm going up there," he said.

"No," Mike said quickly.

"What do you mean, no?" Coop demanded angrily. "What am I supposed to do? Just sit around with my thumb up my ass, waiting to see what happens?"

"Coop, do you think it's easy for me to stay here?" Buddy asked. "If I thought I could do some good up there, I'd be on the next plane. Hell, I'd walk if I had to. But if you go up there now, where would you go? To Port Hardy? And what would you be doing there, if not sitting around with your thumb up your ass?"

"Damn it!" Coop said. "Damn it, damn it, damn it!" He kicked his chair halfway across the room, then retrieved it and sat down.

"Are you through?" Mike asked calmly.

"Yeah, I'm through," Coop answered.

"Coop, you know I'm right. You know there is nothing you can do up there."

"I know, I know," Coop replied. He sighed. "It's just not in my nature to sit around and do nothing."

"Oh, I don't expect you to do nothing," Mike said. "In fact, I very much expect you to do something."

"What do you want me to do?" Coop asked. "Tell me, and I'll do it."

"The general went up there to find the people who blew up the school and robbed the bank," Mike said.

"Die Kontrollgruppe."

"You know damn well they didn't pick a middle school in Louisiana by random. They had to have local sources to set things up for them. I want those people found."

"After we find them, what?" Coop said.

"Extract whatever information you can from them, then close the file on them ... with extreme prejudice," he added.

Coop smiled and nodded. "You're damn right I will," he said.

"What can I do?" Buddy asked.

"Buddy, it may be that folks are going to start looking to you to carry on in your father's behalf," Mike said.

"I thought you said—" Buddy began, but Mike held up his hand to interrupt him.

"I know. I said I believed the general was still alive. And I do believe that. But we must also face the possibility that he isn't. And if he isn't, there are certain operational functions that you will need to assume. I think you should start preparing yourself for that."

"All right," Buddy said. "If you say so."

* * * *

Northwest Canada

Ben sat in the V of a tree. His face was mottled in green and brown as a result of the natural dyes and stains he had

extracted from nuts and berries. There were branches and leaves tied about his body so that someone staring at him from no more than ten yards away would not see him.

He chewed on a piece of jerky, then took a drink of water. His hunger and thirst satisfied, he found a comfortable position and waited. He still didn't know who he was, or why people were trying to kill him, but he knew there would be more. And when more appeared, he would be ready for them.

At that very moment, no more than half a mile from where Ben was waiting, four more DK soldiers were on his trail.

Kenner, the leader of the group, had a radio and he broke squelch. There was a little rush of static before he spoke.

"Mad Dog Team, this is Turtle, do you copy? Over."

"Copy, Turtle," a voice replied.

"You picked up any sign?"

"No. You've got to hand it to him, this son of a bitch is good."

"Yeah. That's why there are four of us on his ass."

"Have you seen anything yet?"

"Not a blessed thing."

"Call if you spot him."

"Will do."

Kenner turned the radio down, then looked at the others. "It'll be a cold day in hell before I call anyone else," he said. "We're cuttin' the reward thin enough with the four of us. No way I'm going to split it with anyone else."

"Yeah, well, if he's as good as they say he is," one of the others said.

"We'll do what? Call everyone else in and say, 'Help, the big bad Ben has us outnumbered'?" Kenner asked with a snarl.

The others laughed.

"No, nothin' like that."

"Then what would you do?"

"Nothin', I guess. I just don't think we ought to underestimate this guy. Look what happened to Logan and Purvis."

"Yeah, well, he must've got the jump on them. But I figure if we're on our toes, there's no way he can do that to us."

Suddenly, and totally unexpectedly, Ben dropped down onto the trail in front of them. The apparition they saw before them was terrifying, let alone that his sudden appearance had startled them. He looked like some sort of forest-green monster, a cross between man, beast, and tree.

"What the hell?" Kenner shouted in alarm.

"Are you friend or foe?" Ben asked, perfectly willing to cooperate with them if they declared themselves to be his friend.

"Shoot him!" Kenner shouted, bringing his gun up. "Shoot the son of a bitch!"

"Well, I guess that answers that question," he said, squeezing off a shot from the Uzi he had taken from one of the first two men he killed. His bullet smashed into Kenner's forehead, making a small puncture in the front of his head but, with hydrostatic pressure, blowing out a half-dollar-sized exit wound in the back. Kenner fell, dead before he hit the ground.

The other three watched with shock as their leader went down. Not until then did they react, and by then it was too late. With shouts of anger and fear, they began firing at the form before them, or rather, they began firing at the place where the form had been.

The woods and nearby mountainsides echoed and reechoed with the staccato sound of their shooting, and nearly one hundred bullets buzzed like angry hornets across the gap, slamming into tree trunks, cutting leaves, ricocheting off rocks, and whining as they spun off into the distance.

But not one bullet found its mark, for even before they squeezed their triggers, Ben leaped through a bordering bush and disappeared.

"There!" someone shouted. "Fire into that bush!"

The three swung their submachine guns toward the bush and continued to fire. The bullets chewed away the leaves, clipped off the limbs until, after a moment of sustained fire, the bush was cut away as cleanly as if they had gone after it with a bush hog.

Finally, they quit firing, not because they had accomplished their mission, but because they had exhausted their ammunition. Three banana clips, each holding 120 rounds, had been expended. In the distance, they could still hear the last reverberating chatter of machine-gun fire.

Then it grew quiet, deathly so, for the machine-gun fire had stilled the animals of the forest.

"What the hell happened to him?" someone said. He pointed to the bush. "He was right there, I saw him."

The bush was gone, and there was nothing behind it.

"Hell, nobody could'a lived through what we just poured in there," one of the others said.

The third one, who had yet to speak, put in a new banana clip, then started forward for a closer examination. The other two reloaded as well, and waited.

Ben had planned his ambush well. The moment he went through the bush, he rolled several times to his left, winding up at the base of the same tree he had been waiting in. Even as his three assailants were firing nonstop at the bush, he was climbing the tree, regaining the position he had occupied while he waited for them. Now, with their guns silent, he untied a hanging vine, wrapped his left arm through it, then cradled his rifle, with the safety off, in his right arm.

Suddenly a memory returned to him. It wasn't a memory that would tell him who he was, though it was a memory from his childhood. It was the memory of Tarzan's yell. Smiling broadly, he pushed himself off the limb, then, holding on to the vine, made a long, arcing swing down across the path.

"Ayieeeeeeeayahayeeee!" he screamed in an imitation of Tarzan's yell.

"There he is!" one of the three assailants yelled, and they spun back toward him, but it was too late.

As Ben swung out across the trail, he squeezed the trigger of his Uzi. This time he had it on full automatic, and he swung the barrel back and forth as he fired, watching with satisfaction as the bullets slammed into the chests of his three attackers.

It wasn't until that moment that he noticed the chest of one of the three had breasts. One of his would-be assailants was a woman.

Ben let go of the vine and dropped down the path, then hurried over to look down at the three. He had hoped to be able to get some information from at least one of them, but he was too late. All three were dead, including the woman.

Ben stared down at her. She was an attractive young woman, and had he seen her in a bar somewhere, he might have been tempted to buy her a drink, strike up a conversation, and see where that would lead.

But he hadn't met her in a bar. The first and only time he had ever met her, she was trying to kill him, so instead of buying her a drink or striking up a conversation, he had killed her.

Should he feel bad about killing a woman? Even if she had been trying to kill him, shouldn't he feel some remorse?

Ben realized that he did not feel any remorse, and as a result, knew that he had been in similar situations before. Shrugging his shoulders, he reloaded his weapon, then continued on his way, leaving to the buzzards the bodies that lay on the trail behind him.

Now, the memories were beginning to return, even in his waking moments, and while Ben still didn't know who he was, he found that he was able to pick up with memory where the dream had left off.

The memory was vivid and detailed, but was this a memory of a real thing, or was this merely an extension of the dreams he had experienced on the previous two nights?

Along the way, Ben began meeting the citizens of this brave new world ... or at least, what few were left. The level of destruction he encountered was staggering, far beyond anything he had seen in that first, small town.

The major cities were gone. Washington, D. C., was hot, radiating death, and no longer part of the map. And while other parts of the country were physically intact, the death toll was unbelievable. Chaos reigned, and bands of dangerous men far outnumbered the few survivors who were trying to pull themselves out of the ashes. Ben learned to shoot first and ask questions later, and he wondered why it always seemed that the violent and vicious triumphed and reveled in disaster.

The lack of authority and order had created a hell on earth. The America he had known was an armed camp*

**Trapped in the Ashes*

Ben still didn't know who he was, or where he was from, but he was beginning to believe that the sort of thing he was going through right now was a routine part of his life. Apparently, he was used to people trying to kill him, and more importantly, had developed great skills, not only for staying alive, but for overcoming his adversaries.

Ben was glad that while details and specifics of his life were not familiar to him, for some reason those military skills had survived.

FOURTEEN

Port Hardy

With the Parker brothers' airplane officially declared missing, what air assets there were available in the region gathered at Port Hardy to begin the Search and Rescue operation. Since they now knew that the destination of the flight was supposed to be Edson, SAR operations were being conducted from that location as well.

Paul Kingsley briefed the gathered aviators on the mission before them. Because Gerald and Edgar Parker were bush pilots, most of the searchers were civilian aviators drawn from the ranks of the bush pilots. Paul knew they would conduct a very thorough search because they considered Gerald and Edgar as two of their own.

"For those of you who are unfamiliar with the Parkers' airplane, it is a Douglas DC-4, four-engine airplane, light blue in color, with red cowls, red on the wingtips, and a blue star on the vertical stabilizer."

"Do we know their route?" one of the aviators asked. "I mean, were they going direct to Edson, or was there a planned stop?"

Paul shook his head. "I don't know the answer to that question," he said. "I'm sure they filed a flight plan, but as some of you know, our computer crashed and we have no record."

"In my day, when all flight plans were filed by paper, we never had this problem," one of the older aviators said.

"Yeah, John, but in your day airplanes had a range of, what ... how far was it again that the Wright Brothers flew?"

The others laughed.

"We will begin with the assumption that they were flying direct to Edson," Paul said. "So we have worked out a search grid along that route. Before you take off, see Merrill for your grid assignment."

"Can we get outside the grid if we see something?"

"Of course. But I ask each of you to please be thorough within your grid. We don't want to miss something because a grid was left uncovered."

Each pilot had an observer and with the briefing concluded, the pilots and observers left the flight operations building and hurried across the flight line to their airplanes. The search fleet was composed of a myriad of aircraft, from business jets all the way down to Piper Super Cubs.

Merrill had volunteered to go along as an observer with Dale Prescott. Prescott wasn't a bush pilot; he was a local doctor who owned his own plane, a Cessna 172. The preflight taken care of, Merrill climbed into the right seat as Prescott went through the prestart procedure. With the engine primed and magneto switch on, Prescott shouted through the open window.

"Clear!"

He hit the starter and the engine caught right away. The propeller quickly spun into a blur; then Prescott taxied out to the end of the runway, where they joined the long queue awaiting their turn to take off.

Now the memories were coming with increasing regularity, whether awake or dreaming. They were unbidden memories, images and words rushing through his brain. As before, he made no effort to suppress or enhance them. He was a passive participant in the memories, almost as if he were watching a drama unfold on a television or movie screen.

Ben did think it was significant, though, that this memory, unlike the one he had just experienced, had nothing to do with the dream.

Was it real?

Yes, it had to be real. It was too vivid for it not to be real.

Those around him looked like something out of a space movie as they gathered near the door of the C-130 transport plane. They were dressed all in black, with faces enclosed in Plexiglas helmets to give them oxygen until they fell far enough to breathe on their own. They were told they would be at terminal velocity, 120 miles per hour, for some time prior to their chutes opening.

"It's almost impossible to breathe at that speed, so leave your helmets hooked up until your chute opens. After that, if the shock of the sudden deceleration doesn't knock you out, you can jettison your helmets and get your weapons ready to fire. We don't know what we're gonna find when we land."

"What if we get hung up in the jungle canopy, too far to drop from our chutes?"

"That's what the nylon cord on the front of your HALO suit is for. Just attach it to your harness, hit the release button, and climb down the rope to the ground."

"And if the rope doesn't reach the ground?"

"Then you're SOL."

"SOL?"

"Shit out of luck," the jump master replied, turning to watch the lights at the front of the transport, waiting for the jump light to turn from red to green. *

**Tyranny in the Ashes*

The sound of an aircraft engine brought Ben out of his reverie, and he looked up to see an airplane flying over. The Cessna was flying much too low to be on a regular commute, so he realized it must be in a search mode. They were obviously looking for him, but the question still remained: Were they would-be rescuers, or was the airplane just the air arm of those people who seemed bent upon killing him?

For a moment, Ben considered stepping out into the clearing and trying in some way to attract the attention of the airplane overhead, but he decided at the last minute not to.

If the pilots of his plane were still alive, he would have taken the chance in order to get them rescued. But they were dead and there was nothing anyone could do for them; thus, he didn't feel it prudent to take any unnecessary risks. He stayed well out of sight as the airplane passed overhead, the sound of its engine receding in the distance.

Merrill sat in the right seat of the Cessna that Ben had just seen. Using binoculars, he was scouring the wooded and mountainous terrain below.

He took the glasses down and rubbed his eyes.

"Getting eyestrain?" Dr. Prescott asked.

"Yeah, a little."

"This kind of intense searching can get to you."

"The thing is, even if they were down there, we probably wouldn't see them. What can you see under all those trees?"

"We just have to hope that they found an open place to set it down," Prescott said.

"Yeah. Though from the looks of things down there, I sure don't know where that would be," Merrill replied, the tone of voice indicating that he was beginning to have little hope for a successful outcome of their endeavors. He raised the binoculars to his eyes and resumed the search.

With the aircraft gone, Ben's memories returned. He didn't try to fight the memory, he didn't try to dig his identity from the memories, or specific information, or even understanding. In fact, if the memories were valid, he wasn't all that sure he wanted to know everything. He knew, though, that he couldn't put them aside. If the memories were real, if the world was in such turmoil and chaos, he needed to know about it. To be knowledgeable was to be armed, and one must be armed if one planned to survive this world or any other.

They were called the Night People, so called because they hid by day, and emerged by night.

Ben didn't know why this rather disjointed memory of the Night People suddenly popped into his head, nor even how it got there, since he had no coherent memory of anything prior to awakening in the crashed airplane. But like the dream in which he found himself wandering through a town of death and destruction, this memory was vivid and real.

He could visualize them very clearly, the hideously misshapen mutated creatures who, though they had human antecedents, were considerably less than human themselves.

They were cannibals, who took innocent prisoners and warehoused them for food, and Ben knew that at some time in the past he had fought them.

He still had no idea of who he was, or what circumstances had led up to his battle with them. He knew that he hadn't fought them alone. There were others fighting by his side, people that he knew he trusted, depended upon, even loved. And yet, as important as he knew those people were to him, his fuzzy memory still could not put features to them, or recall their names.

But the Night People, he could remember. In fact, the recall was so strong that it was almost as if he was reliving the moment in his memory. He wondered how the images for this could be so strong when he was totally unable to recall anything else. Then he realized that it must be because there was nothing else to compete with this memory. It was as if his mind had been washed clean. Thus, any memory would be uncontested and all the sharper as a result.

Almost as if it was happening right now, he could see the monsters pouring out of subway tubes, tunnels, and coming out of alleys and basements. They were coming in hordes, like rats, grotesque creatures who were armed and savage. The sheer weight of their numbers made them a dangerous adversary, for they outnumbered Ben and his fellow warriors by a large margin. But they lacked the discipline and the intelligence to conduct coordinated attacks and, as a result,

*Ben and those with him were able to cut them down by the hundreds, thousands, killing them until they littered the streets with their hideous, putrefying bodies. **

**Valor in the Ashes*

Port Hardy

"Andy, hand me that chart, would you?" Paul Kingsley asked. "I want to mark off the grids that have been cleared."

"Here you go," Andy said, passing the chart over. Andy was from the Civil Air Bureau, and had come to Port Hardy to help monitor the Search and Rescue operation. "How many have we cleared?" he asked.

"Looks like we have about one-third of them searched and cleared," Kingsley replied.

"At this rate it's going to take us at least three days."

"It might," Kingsley agreed.

"By the way, have you heard any rumors about who their passenger was?" Andy asked.

"Rumors?"

"Yeah."

Kingsley shook his head. "No, not that I know of. I don't even know his name."

"I'm not sure either, but I've heard it's some high-ranking muckety-muck from the SUSAs."

"What's he doing up here?"

"He's after Die Kontrollgruppe."

"Trying to find information on them, you mean?"

"No, trying to wipe them out."

Kingsley laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"We're talking about one man, right?"

"Yes."

"One man trying to wipe out Die Kontrollgruppe?"

"That's what I've heard."

"That's the dumbest damn thing I've ever heard of. How could one man wipe out Die Kontrollgruppe?"

"I don't know. All I know is that is the rumor I'm hearing," Andy said.

"Hmm," Kingsley growled.

"Well, there must be something to it," Andy insisted.

"What makes you think so?"

"The rumor is that Die Kontrollgruppe took it seriously enough that they shot down the plane."

Kingsley laughed. "Where would we be without conspiracies and theories of conspiracies?" he asked. "I tell you, without them, the world would be a boring place."

They heard a vehicle stop out front of the operations building, and Andy looked up. "Someone's here," he said, though his declaration wasn't necessary because Paul too had heard the vehicle arrive.

Looking through the window, Paul saw the Jeep, and groaned.

"What is it?" Andy asked.

"It's Carrie," Paul said. He pointed toward the Jeep. "Carrie Parker. She's the pilots' sister."

Paul continued to look through the window as a long-limbed, lean young woman climbed out of the Jeep. Carrie brushed a fall of blond hair away from her face as she came up the walk toward the operations building. She had high

cheekbones and full lips, and Paul and Andy could see the beauty of the woman, though it couldn't be fully realized since Carrie was wearing dark glasses to hide her eyes.

"Hello, Carrie," Paul said as Carrie stepped inside.

"Hello, Paul." Carrie looked at the man with Paul.

"This is Andy Alford," Paul said. "He's from the Civil Air Bureau, here to monitor the search for your brothers."

"Have you heard anything yet?" Carrie asked.

Paul shook his head. "No. I wish I had something to report, but so far nothing has turned up. We do have a maximum effort on, though."

"How many planes do we have out looking for them?" Carrie asked.

"We have as many as we were able to get together," Paul replied.

"That's not a very specific answer."

"I know," Paul said without elaboration.

"How many?"

"I'd say we have at least six planes out, including those from Edson."

"Six? That's all we could get? We have six airplanes and you are calling that a maximum effort?"

"Come on, Carrie, you know things are different now. It's not like it used to be when we could mobilize civil and military aircraft for Search and Rescue missions. Since the Great War, then all the civil wars we've experienced over the last few years, we have very little assets for a real SAR operation. We're lucky we have six airplanes still flying."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," Carrie said, holding up her hand in apology. "I'm just anxious, that's all."

"Of course you are, and you have every right to be," Paul replied.

Carrie looked around the office. "Where is Greg Merrill? I thought sure he would be here."

"He's one of the searchers," Paul said.

"How can that be? He's not a licensed pilot, is he?"

"He volunteered to go as an observer. He's with Dr. Prescott."

"Dr. Prescott is out looking? As busy as he is? How wonderful," Carrie said.

"How is Peggy holding out?"

"She is having a rough time."

"Is there anything I can do for her?" Paul asked.

"The only thing anyone can do for her is find Gerald and Ed," Carrie said. "And you are already doing as much as you can."

"Carrie, you know that if we find them, there is a very good chance that they will be ... uh ... well, what I'm saying is, you and Peggy may not like what we find."

"I know," Carrie said. "But at this point, knowing anything, even the worst, is better than knowing nothing."

"I suppose that's true. But I do wish I could do more."

Carrie sighed, then turned to leave. When she reached the door, she turned back toward Paul. "Paul, you will keep me posted on everything?"

"Yes, of course," Paul said.

"If we get ... uh, really bad news, it might be better if you told me before anyone told Peggy. That way I could break it to her."

Thank you, Carrie," Paul said. "I was hoping we could count on you for that."

Carrie nodded, then left.

"That's the pilots' sister?" Andy asked. "She is one beautiful woman. Is she married?"

"No."

That's hard to believe. A good-looking woman like that."

Paul chuckled. "It wouldn't be hard to believe if you knew her."

"Why, what's wrong with her?"

"Nothing is wrong with her. That's the problem. Men are intimidated by her."

"Intimidated? Because she is so pretty? She is pretty, but I wouldn't think men would be put off by that."

"I'm not just talking about her looks. I'm talking about the whole package. She is a professor of physics at B.C. University, but she has taken a sabbatical to work on developing cold fusion. She's had at least half a dozen of her papers published in scientific journals around the world."

"Oh, I see. Pretty much of an egghead, huh?"

"Yes, but don't let that fool you. Two years ago she won the gold medal for the women's marathon at the New Olympics. I admit, the New Olympics haven't quite caught on like the original Olympics, but her time was competitive with the best from the old games. She's also a mountain climber and sky diver."

"Damn! Does she cook?" Andy asked. "Maybe I'll start sniffing around her."

Paul laughed. "Not in your dreams, Andy. Not in your dreams."

FIFTEEN

Richmond, the New Capital of the U.S.

MEASURE INTRODUCED TO

RENAME BASE CAMP ONE

New Name To Be Raines City

Area Around Raines City

To Be Called Capital District

"Raines City, C.D. What a load of horseshit!" the chief of the FPPS said. He threw the newspaper across the room, and it fluttered and flapped until it hit the wall and slid down to the floor.

The old FBI was gone, and the FPPS had taken its place. It was a fancy title that fooled no one. The FPPS was the nation's secret police, and they were everywhere, bullyboys and thugs. Day-to-day activities of those living in the USA were highly restricted, and President for Life Claire Osterman maintained control over her people through organizations like the FPPS.

"What's the matter, Derek? You don't think the citizens of the SUSA should honor their brave leader?" Carl Roberts said,

chuckling at Owen's reaction. Roberts was Derek Owen's second in command.

"I'd like to honor the son of a bitch," Owen said. "I'd like to honor him by putting my boot up his ass."

"Ha! You might be able to shoot him, if you were in ambush somewhere. But I don't think you, my friend, or anyone else could put a boot up his ass. You'd have to get close to him for that."

"Well, you know what they say, 'Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer,'" Owen replied with a controlled smile.

"Trust me, Ben Raines isn't someone you want to get too close to."

"You know Ben Raines, do you?" Owen asked. "When did you two become such great friends?"

"I would hardly call us friends. The bastard killed my brother."

"You aren't the only one who has lost a brother to him. He's killed a lot of brothers," Owen said. "But the chances are very good that he won't be killing anybody else's brother."

"What do you mean?" Roberts asked.

"Well, the SUSA has made no official announcement, but his airplane is missing," Owen said.

"What? How do you know?"

"This is the FPPS, remember? We have our sources," Owen said.

Roberts chuckled. "Are we talking about the same FPPS? I mean, I wouldn't admit this to anyone else, but you and I

both know that this is the biggest department of incompetents and malcontents in the whole government."

Owen held up his finger, as if calling for attention. "Ah, but trust me, my friend. It is all changing," he promised. "That's how it is that I happen to know that Ben Raines is missing."

"Missing where?"

"His plane went down in Alberta, up in Canada's northwest woods. I doubt they will ever find his ass. You have any idea how wild that country is up there. Hell, last year they found an airplane that crashed on a training flight during World War Two. Can you imagine that? That plane had been there since World War Two, and they didn't find it until last year."

"Son of a bitch!" Roberts said. He walked over to the paper and picked it up.

"Oh, you won't find it in there," Owen told him. "The SUSAs doesn't want the population to panic over the loss of their great leader. They aren't about to make an announcement that he's missing and presumed dead."

Roberts smiled. "You're wrong," he said. "They've already made the announcement." He tapped his finger on the paper. "It is in here."

"The hell you say. They announced it in the paper?" Owen asked in surprise. He hurried over for a closer look at the newspaper. "I don't believe that."

"Oh, it's in the paper, all right," Roberts said. "You just have to know how to look for it." He showed Owen the headlines. "Raines City, C.D.," he said.

"I'm not following you."

"Don't you get it? They would never name their capital city after Ben Raines if he was still alive. Unlike our own president, he's not the kind of person who gets off on aggrandizement, whether from self or from others."

Owens laughed. That's a pretty good observation," he said. "You're right. Ben Raines is not the kind of person who would let that happen. Now I know why I promoted you."

"The dumb assholes don't want to let it out that their great leader is missing, but they announce that they are renaming Base Camp One after him. That's the same thing as broadcasting that Raines is dead."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" Owens agreed. He smiled. "And with Raines out of the way, we can write our own ticket as far as President Claire Osterman is concerned."

"What? How so?" Roberts asked.

"You know many wars she's fought trying to get the SUSA back into the USA. Well, you and I, my friend, are going to hand Madame President the SUSA on a silver platter. You might say this is our keys to the kingdom."

"That's pretty ambitious, isn't it?"

Owen laughed. "Yeah, well, ambition is what this is all about, isn't it? Come on, we're catching the next flight to Base Camp One."

"We're going to Base Camp One? Why? What do you have in mind?"

Owen smiled. "You'll see."

Base Camp One

As Buddy Raines drove toward his quarters, he wondered where his father was. If the airplane crashed, literally fell out

of the sky, then perhaps Ben was dead. Not even his father could survive an accident of such catastrophic proportions.

But if the plane managed to make a forced landing, and Ben survived the crash, he could still be alive. There would be survival gear on board the plane, and with only the minimum amount of gear, Ben could survive. And Buddy knew that it wouldn't be a matter of just a few days in the wilds of the northwest woods either. Ben could survive the winter.

The others were worried, primarily because nobody had yet heard from him. But if the satellite phone was damaged in the crash ... or even in the crash landing, then Ben would not be able to get word out. But the fact that he couldn't contact them had no bearing on his condition.

As Buddy rounded a curve, he saw an overturned car in the road just ahead of him. One man was lying on the pavement, and the other was on his knees, over him.

"What the hell?" Buddy said, applying his brakes so hard that the car broke into a skid. It was only by skillful manipulation of the steering wheel that he was able to avoid crashing into the overturned car and the two men.

When the car came to a stop, Buddy hopped out and hurried over to them.

"What happened?" he said.

"It's my brother," the man on his knees said. "The car, I lost control ... we turned over. Please help him! I think he may be badly hurt."

"Must be internal," Buddy said. "I don't see any blood."

"Please, see what you can do!" the man on his knees said.

Buddy got down on one knee, then leaned over to put his ear to the man's chest to listen for a heartbeat.

"Well, your friend still has a strong heartbeat. That's a good sign," Buddy said. "I don't think he's—uhhhh!"

Buddy grunted as the knife slipped in between his ribs. He looked down at the man on the ground and saw that it was he who had wielded the knife. The man's eyes were open, and he was glaring at Buddy with more hate than he had ever seen.

Fighting the pain, Buddy tried to get up, but as he did, the man twisted the knife, then drew it all the way across Buddy's belly, effectively disemboweling him.

"Who ... who are you?" Buddy gasped.

"My name is Derek Owen," Owen said, sliding quickly to one side to avoid the blood and viscera that were now pouring from Buddy's wound. "And you are the first casualty of the New War of Unification."

It didn't take a lot of detective work for Coop and Jersey to figure out what happened. The overturned car told the story. Buddy's car wasn't here, but it seemed obvious that he had seen the overturned car and stopped to administer aid. A close examination of the overturned car showed that it had not been a violent roll. In fact, the car had gone over as gently as if someone had merely pushed it over.

"He was set up," Jersey said angrily. "The low-life bastards turned the car over, knowing Buddy would stop to help, and when he did, they killed him."

"I have to admit, that's what it looks like," Coop said as he examined the scene.

"Oh, Coop, you know what this means, don't you?" Jersey asked.

"What?"

"It means we have let Ben down. He left Buddy in our care, and we failed him."

"I feel bad about it, Jersey, but I wouldn't say that Buddy was left in our care. He was a grown man, after all, and quite capable of taking care of himself."

"Yes, well, the point is, Ben is in Canada, we are here, and Buddy is dead."

"There is no getting around that," Coop admitted.

"If I get my hands on them ... well, you know what I'd do to them," Jersey said.

"Yeah, I know exactly what you would do to them," Coop replied.

Coop recalled an incident from their past:

Coop and Jersey stood over the bodies strewn about the jungle path. Jersey reached over with her foot and kicked Garza in the mouth. "That'll teach you to kill innocent women and children, you bastard!" she growled.

Coop glanced at her. He'd never seen her so furious. "You want to scalp the son of a bitch too?" he asked.

She started to give a sarcastic answer, then hesitated, a thoughtful look on her face. "You know, Coop. Every now and then you come up with a pretty good idea, even if it is by accident."

Jersey took out her K-Bar and squatted over Garza's body.

"Hey, wait a minute, Jersey. I was just kidding...."

She looked up at him. "I'm not." She bent and with a quick slash of the K-Bar, made a circular incision around the top of Garza's skull, then grabbed his hair and yanked a full scalp lock off in one squishy jerk.

"Damn!" Coop said, almost gagging at the horrible sight.

"Listen, Coop," Jersey said, pausing to wipe her bloody hands on Garza's shirt. "We're stuck out here in the middle of a jungle, surrounded by hostiles, with no transportation and no way to phone home."

"We can take one of these..." Coop started to say, pointing to the Jeeps in the path, until he saw bullet holes in all the hoods and steam coming from each and every motor.

"Good thought, Sherlock. Wanna try again?" Jersey asked.

"So, what does that have to do with scalping our enemies?"

"The only chance we have to survive is to put some fear in our opposition. The more barbaric and crazy we can seem, the fewer men who are going to be witting to come into the jungle after us."

"You really think taking a few scalps will scare off men like these?" he asked, pointing to the dead lying around them.

"Not just scalping, but I have a few more ideas. Remember, I'm part Apache."

Coop took a deep breath as he took his own K-Bar from his belt. "Okay, Pocahontas, show me the way."*

**Tyranny in the Ashes*

SIXTEEN

The northwest woods

Ben was lying on top of a flat boulder, watching as a dozen hunter-trackers worked their way up the trail. They were determined bastards, Ben had to give them that. And they really wanted him bad.

Ben slid down from the back of the rock and started on up the hill. As he scrambled up the trail, he left footprints in the soft soil, and his body, passing through the thick undergrowth, broke twigs and branches to make his passage.

Ben was aware of the fact that he was leaving a trail that a blind Cub Scout could follow, but he made no effort to cover his tracks. He wanted them to follow him.

Miner Cain held up his hand. "Hold it!" he called, and the group stopped behind him.

"What is it?" Fowler asked, coming up to join him.

"Nothing," Cain said. He unzipped his trousers. "I just wanted to take a piss, is all."

"Jesus, I thought you'd found something ... maybe a trail or something."

As Cain stood there relieving himself, he looked dispassionately at Fowler. "Do you mean to tell me you haven't seen the trail?"

"What trail?"

"Holy shit, Fowler, use your goddamned eyes, will you?" Cain pointed to the trail, and when Fowler still didn't see, Cain snorted.

"Oh," Fowler said, finally noticing, for the first time, the bent weeds and broken twigs. "Yes, I see what you mean."

"What I don't understand is how someone this dumb has managed to elude us for so long," Cain said. "Shit, he may as well have put up a sign saying, 'Here I am, come get me.' I guess it just proves the old saying: 'If you want something done right, do it yourself.'"

Ben put twenty rounds into the little sack, then hung it suspended over a small fire. The sack was held up by a piece of wet rawhide, and the rawhide passed through the flames. The idea was that the flame would dry out the rawhide, then burn through it, dropping the sack of bullets into the fire. Ben figured it would take about forty seconds for that to happen, and another fifteen to twenty seconds before the bullets would cook off.

Ben waited until he saw the pursuit party again, then he lit the fire. The fire was just to the south of the trail. Once it was burning, Ben moved quickly to get into position on the north side.

He had selected his spot carefully. From this position there would be nothing to impede his field of fire. He watched them approach.

Across the trail from Ben, the fire began doing its work. The flames licked at the rawhide strip that held the little sack, dried out the strip, then began eating into it the little strip of rawhide smoked, smoldered, then caught on fire.

The burning rawhide strip parted, and the sack of bullets fell into the flames. The sack was quickly burned away and the bullets began to heat up.

"Hey," Fowler said. "Do you smell something burning?"

"Like what?"

Fowler laughed. "Damn me if I don't think that dumb son of a bitch is smoking a cigarette."

"The hell you say."

"I can smell it!" Fowler insisted.

Suddenly, the bullets began to cook off, not quite as rapidly as a machine gun on full automatic, but rapidly enough to indicate that someone was maximizing the rifle's semiautomatic capability.

"Return fire!" Cain shouted, firing toward the sound.

Cain's men turned their weapons toward the sound, and the little whiff of smoke coming up from behind a bush, and began firing.

The woods reverberated with the sound of weapons being fired ... Cain and his men, and Ben.

As Cain saw his men dropping around him, he began screaming in fury, and concentrated his fire on where he thought Ben was.

"Kill him!" he shouted. "Kill the son of a bitch!"

It wasn't until everyone around him was down that Cain realized the shooting wasn't coming from the bush. It was coming from behind him.

"What the hell?" he shouted. He spun around just in time to see the muzzle flash of Ben's rifle. He didn't live long enough beyond that moment for surprise to turn to fear.

"Wait! Wait! Circle back!" Greg Merrill shouted as he adjusted the binoculars.

Dr. Prescott put the airplane into a steep right turn, which took them back, but also dropped the wing down so that Merrill couldn't see what he thought he had seen. Merrill waited patiently until the turn was completed, and the wing lifted.

"There!" he shouted. There it is, right there on that high ledge, between the stream and the drop-off."

They had passed over this same place three times yesterday, and this was the second time today, but this was the first time the wreckage had been spotted.

"Damn, wonder why we didn't see it before," Prescott said. "It's sticking out down there like a sore thumb." He checked his chart. "Well, we were a little north on our last pass. Maybe that's why we missed it."

"Do a three-sixty," Merrill said. "I want a good, long look."

"You've got it," Prescott answered, complying with Merrill's request.

Merrill examined what was left of the airplane. "It looks to be pretty much in one piece," he said.

"Except for the nose. That looks pretty smashed up."

"That's true," Merrill said. "And there's a lot of residue along the crash path. When there is that much left behind, that means the impact was pretty severe."

Prescott started his second orbit of the site. "Any sign of Gerald or Ed?" he asked.

"No," Merrill replied. "No sign at all." He dropped the binoculars.

"It doesn't look good, does it?" Prescott said.

"No, it doesn't. You think you could put down here?"

"Sure," Prescott replied, "if you don't mind winding up just like them."

"Yeah, I was sort of afraid of that. We're going to need a helicopter to get down there, aren't we?"

"You got that right."

"Well, we won't get that from Port Hardy. What do you say we put in at Edson and give our report?"

"All right," Prescott agreed.

Port Hardy

Paul Kingsley groaned quietly when he looked up from his desk and saw Carrie's Jeep park in front of the Operations Building. It wasn't that he didn't welcome her company. Who wouldn't welcome her company, as pretty and smart as she was?

And it wasn't that she was making a pest of herself trying to determine the fate of her brothers either. In fact, under the circumstances, she had been very understanding about it. But Kingsley had no news to report and he hated having to disappoint her.

"Hi, Paul," Carrie said as she came into the office. She was carrying a plate, covered with aluminum foil, and she set it on the counter.

"What is that?"

"It's a Bundt cake," she said. "I thought maybe you could put it over by the coffeepot for the pilots when they come in."

"They will appreciate it, I'm sure," Kingsley said. At that moment the phone rang, and Kingsley answered it. "Port Hardy FBO," he said.

The expression on his face changed, and he looked tellingly toward Carrie. "Yes, thank you," he said. "Please keep me informed." He hung up and stared at the phone for a long, silent moment. He didn't have to speak. The expression on his face told her everything.

"That was about my brothers, wasn't it?"

Kingsley nodded. "Yes," he said. He didn't elaborate.

"Well?"

"They have sighted the plane," he said.

"Where?"

"Near Maligne Lake."

"Any sign of life?"

"Nothing that they could see from the air," Kingsley said.

"They're going to try and get a helicopter in tomorrow to make certain."

"What do you mean, tomorrow? Why are they waiting? They should do it now."

"It's the same thing I told you earlier," Kingsley said. "We don't have that many assets. We are trying to locate a helicopter now."

"You said they were close to Lake Maligne. Can't they land a floatplane?"

Kingsley shook his head. "Since the big blizzard last year, the lake is filled with logs and underwater obstacles. If someone tried to land there right now, they could wind up ripping out the belly of the plane. Then we'd have two rescue missions under way."

"In the meantime, if my brothers are injured and unable to take care of themselves, they have to spend one more night

out there," Carrie said. "Paul, they've been out there for three nights now. One more night of exposure could mean the difference between life and death."

"Unfortunately, that is true," Kingsley said. "Believe me, Carrie, if there was anything I could do, I would do it."

There is something you can do," Carrie said.

"What? You tell me what it is, and I'll do it," Kingsley said.

"You can take me there."

"You mean fly over it so you can see the site?"

"No, I mean put me on the ground there."

"How would I do that? I just told you that—"

"I'll jump," Carrie said.

"What?"

"I'm an experienced sky diver," Carrie said. "All I need you to do is get me to the area. I'll jump."

"No, that's too dangerous. Besides, even if you do get in, how would you get out? That's a long walk back."

"You said they were going to go in with a helicopter tomorrow, didn't you? I'll come back with them."

"No," Kingsley said. "It's too dangerous. I can't let you do this."

"Paul, please," Carrie said. "If you don't take me, I'll find someone who will."

Kingsley sighed in frustration. "What do you think you could do, even if you were there?"

"If they are still alive, I could keep them alive for at least one more day," she said. "What if they are too badly injured to get water? I could give them food, water, first aid, and keep them warm."

Kingsley ran his hand through his hair, then looked at his watch. "I don't have a plane available; they are all being used."

"What about my brothers' old plane?"

"Old plane? What? Do you mean the Stinson Reliant?"

"Yes."

"Carrie, that plane is eighty years old! It's an antique! The only time they ever fly it is for classic air shows."

"Yes," Carrie replied. "But they do fly it. Which means it is flyable."

"I don't know, it has no GPS, it would be pretty risky to—"

"We can install one."

"Merrill's not here. He does all the maintenance work."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Paul, what is there to installing a Global Position indicator? I can do that."

"You can?"

"Yes."

Kingsley ran his hand through his hair and sighed. "If your brothers are still alive, they will kill me for flying that airplane."

"I'll protect you," Carrie promised with a smile.

"All right, all right. Get the GPS installed. I'll take you out there. How long will it take you to get ready?"

Carrie smiled. "I've got my parachute, jumpsuit, and survival kit in the Jeep," she said.

SEVENTEEN

Richmond

The official seal of the Federal Prevention and Protective Service, the FPPS, was similar to the old FBI seal. Highly paid psychological consultants had suggested that the FPPS seal, like the seal of all the other newly created institutions, give the illusion of continuity with the government everyone had grown up with.

The FPPS seal wasn't the only one that resembled the original seal. There was a very strong similarity in nearly every official seal and emblem, because the United States liked to make the claim that it was the same nation it had always been: the nation of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, the nation saved by Abraham Lincoln, and the nation that saved the world during World War II.

That was the illusion they tried to project, but in reality, the government Ben Raines and his followers had established was much more of a linear descendant of the old USA than was the new.

The Rebels, as the liberal U.S. press referred to citizens of the SUSA, had built their new nation upon the Constitution, following the original interpretations of that document.

Theirs was a commonsense approach to government, something that wasn't understood by the liberal press. Even before the breakup of the old United States, the liberal press, mostly located in the Northeast, had played its role in undermining the freedoms of the people. They led the charge

as a corrupt national government abandoned the Constitution, or worse, so corrupted the interpretation of the Constitution that personal freedoms were being stripped away, right and left.

Now, the new United States, whose government was openly and unabashedly liberal/socialist, gave lip service only to America's rich heritage. And under the guise of national resurgence, power was taken from the people and put in the hands of the few, including President for Life Claire Osterman and those henchmen who had allied themselves with her in order to stake out their own claim to power.

When Derek Owen and Carl Roberts returned to Richmond from their brief mission to Base Camp One, they brought back word that Buddy Raines was dead. Now, Derek Owen, Carl Roberts, and President Osterman were meeting in a conference room of the FPPS to plan their next move. Owen had just suggested that President Claire Osterman authorize him to insert special agents into the SUSAs, with orders to bring about as much disorder as they could.

"How many operatives could we turn loose in the SUSAs?" Claire asked.

"I have one hundred highly trained, well-armed, and totally motivated men ready to go right now," Owen answered.

"You are talking about your Shock Squads?"

"Yes."

"You have only one hundred men?"

"One hundred is all we will need."

Claire Osterman drummed her perfectly manicured and bloodred fingernails on the conference table.

"I don't know about that," she said. "The SUSA has defeated our armies in the past. What makes you think one hundred men can get the job done now?"

"In the past, the SUSA was led by Ben Raines. He's not there now. Neither he nor his son."

"We know that Ben Raines's airplane is missing, but we don't know that he is dead," Claire said.

"He's dead. Or if he is not yet dead, he soon will be. I can promise you that."

"How do you know that?" Claire asked. "How can you make such a promise?"

"Madame President, you remember, I told you that I would look into who bombed the Ben Raines Middle School and robbed the bank?"

"Yes."

"That was done by an organization called Die Kontrollgruppe. Have you ever heard of it?"

"No, I don't think I have. What are they? Are they like one of those militia units that used to exist in the U.S. prior to the Great War, built around some societal goal?"

"No. Die Kontrollgruppe makes no claim to improving society. In fact, there are within Die Kontrollgruppe men and women who are extreme right-wing and extreme left-wing sympathizers. But they have managed to put all that aside. What Die Kontrollgruppe really stands for, and what unites its diverse members, is money. Greed ... individually and corporately."

"How do you know so much about this organization?"

Claire asked.

Owen smiled. "Because I am the Gruppe Kommandant."

"The what?"

"The Group Commander," Owen said. "I am the head of Die Kontrollgruppe. I am the founder of Die Kontrollgruppe. The entire organization was my creation. I named them, put them into being, and pay them. I even designed their uniforms and emblems. Funny how something like a snappy uniform and an impressive emblem can inculcate loyalty and a sense of belonging in someone who, otherwise, has no core."

"I see," Claire said in a clipped voice. "You are aware, are you not, of the law that prohibits any member of the government from being involved with a group such as the one you have just described?"

"I am well aware of that law, Madame President," Owen replied. "As head of the FPPS, I have found it necessary to enforce that law, as I'm sure you know."

"Yet you have not only become involved with such an organization, you started it. And on top of that, you are now boasting of it."

"Die Kontrollgruppe has no domestic operations," Owen said. "Not one member of Die Kontrollgruppe resides in the U.S."

"That doesn't matter. You are involved with it. I don't care if it—"

"It has no domestic operation, in accordance with our agreement," Owen continued, interrupting Claire's outburst. "Yours and mine."

"Wait a minute. What do you mean, our agreement?" Claire asked.

"I will refresh your memory," Owen said. He opened a folder and took out a letter. "Madame President, I have here your authorization to create Die Kontrollgruppe. Here is a letter, drawn up by me, and signed by you, ordering me to create a secret organization that could be used to funnel money into a private bank account."

Claire looked at the letter. "I signed this?" she asked.

"You did."

"I don't remember it."

"Well, I'm certainly not surprised that you don't remember it," Owen replied breezily. "What with the pressing duties of state that you have to attend to, it is a wonder you can remember anything."

"You said something about a private bank account?"

"Yes," Owen said. He shoved another paper across the table. "I have made distribution of the funds, also according to your directive, in the following way."

Claire looked at the paper for a moment; then her eyes widened. She put her finger on one of the columns. "Oh, my!" she said. "Is this correct?"

"Yes, Madame President. Thus far, the sum of three million dollars has been deposited into your personal account."

"That's ... very ... nice," Claire said.

"I'm glad you are pleased, but I must tell you that Die Kontrollgruppe was founded for a much more noble cause than money."

"And that would be?"

"To give us an arm of military and economic effectiveness, beyond our borders, and beyond governmental restraints. It will be the means by which we cause the collapse of the Tri-States government and bring the SUSAs back under our control."

Claire nodded. "Yes, yes, I remember now."

"I was sure you would once I refreshed your memory," Owen said with a broad smile.

Claire couldn't possibly remember such a conversation because it never happened. Die Kontrollgruppe had been Owen's idea from the beginning, and neither Claire nor anyone else in government knew of his involvement with it. He had faked the letter of authorization, and her signature. And though he had done it partly for money, he had done it primarily as an extension of his own power.

He was making his position known now, as a means of getting government support for step two of his plan. Step two would be the defeat and takeover of the SUSAs. Step three would be the delivery of the SUSAs to the USA, and step four would be taking over the reins of government in the USA and seizing all power for himself. At this point, nobody, not even Carl Roberts, his second in command, knew his entire plan.

"Yes, well, I believe you said a moment ago that Ben Raines is dead, or soon would be. Did Die Kontrollgruppe have anything to do with that?"

"It had everything to do with it," Owen said. "Die Kontrollgruppe is the reason Ben Raines's plane went down over Canada's northwest woods. We shot him down."

Claire examined her bank statement again. "Who else is getting money from this organization?" she asked.

"Just you and the actual members."

"Nobody else in my government knows about it?"

"Nobody."

"Let's keep it that way, shall we?"

"Whatever you say, Madame President. You are in charge," Owen said. He thought, but didn't add, *for now*.

EIGHTEEN

Port Hardy Airport

Paul Kingsley taxied the antique plane to the far end of the active runway at Port Hardy Airport. Although the Stinson Reliant had been a mainstay of Canada and Alaska bush flying in the thirties and forties, no one had seen such an airplane in anything but an air show for many years. A few, hearing and recognizing the distinctive sound of the engine, stepped outside to watch the high-wing, gull-wing monoplane as it took off. It climbed out of Port Hardy Airport, departing the sector on a northeasterly course as it headed out on its mission.

When Kingsley reached cruising altitude, he trimmed the plane out, set the RPM, leaned the fuel mixture, then studied the instrument panel. All needles were in the green, quivering well within the optimum ranges. The airplane rode solidly, holding the altitude and direction with little input from Kingsley.

It was obvious that the brothers were proud of the old Reliant, because the leather upholstery was well kept, soft, supple, and gleaming. The panel was showroom-clean, as was the rest of the airplane. Kingsley put his hand on the burlled wood-grain panel and rubbed it.

"This is a beautiful airplane," he said. "Your brothers have done a marvelous job in restoring it and keeping it up. It's handling as well as just about any plane I've ever flown."

"It was more Ed than Gerald," Carrie explained. "Ed loved this old plane. Gerald had Peggy and Jerry, but this plane was Ed's family."

Carrie gasped.

"What is it?"

"I said he *loved* this plane," Carrie said. "*Loved*, not *loves*. I used the past tense."

Kingsley didn't answer.

"They are dead, aren't they?" Carrie asked.

"I don't know," Kingsley said. "If I had to make an educated guess, though, I would say yes, they are dead."

"I haven't wanted to admit it to myself, but that would be my guess as well," Carrie said.

Kingsley looked across at her. "Carrie, you don't have to go through with this."

"Yes. Yes, I do. I have to give them every chance, Paul. Don't you understand that? I have to give them every chance. I owe it to them, and I owe it to Gerald's wife and child."

"I know," Kingsley answered.

They were silent for several more minutes before Kingsley spoke again.

"If you get in there and discover that both are dead, will you be all right with it?"

"Do you mean, am I going to go to pieces?"

"Yes."

Carrie reached across the space between the seats and put her hand toward Kingsley, letting it rest lightly on his arm.

"I told you, Paul, I've already resigned myself to the fact that they are probably dead," she said.

"You are a brave woman," Kingsley said.

"Not so brave. Determined maybe, but not so brave."

"We're coming up on the lake."

Kingsley throttled back, then did a long, slow circle around the lake as he and Carrie searched the area.

"Did they say where it was?" Carrie asked.

"They said it was on a ledge, just by—"

"There it is!" Carrie interrupted, pointing.

"Where? I don't see anything."

"There," Carrie said. "In the rocks, alongside the river."

"Oh, yes, I see it now," Kingsley said. "Damn, it's really close to the edge, isn't it?"

"Oh, my, the front, it is..." Carrie began, then stopped in midsentence. "That ... that would lessen the likelihood of survival, I think."

"Yes," Kingsley replied quietly. He had already known this, but had thought it better not to tell Carrie until she discovered it for herself.

Carrie unsnapped her seat belt, then began checking her parachute harness.

"What are you doing?" Kingsley asked.

"Get me a little altitude," Carrie said.

"Carrie, are you sure you want to do this?" Kingsley asked. "You don't have to go through with it now. I mean, you can see what it looks like down there. There is little to absolutely no chance anyone survived that."

"I know that."

"You know that, but you are still going to go down there?"

"Yes, I have to do it," Carrie insisted as she repositioned herself in her seat, turning toward the door. "Where's the wind?"

"It's out of the southwest."

"All right, I'll exit about half a mile southwest of the site," she said. "That should take me right up to it."

"Carrie, I'm asking you to reconsider one last time."

"I've come too far for that," Carrie answered. "You just get me in position for the jump."

Kingsley sighed in defeat. "All right. I'll hang us on the edge of a stall. That'll give you an easier exit," he said as he throttle back and pulled the nose up. The airspeed dropped to about sixty miles per hour.

"Okay," she said. "If I'm going to do this, now's the time!" Carrie opened the door, turned around, and presented her backside to the open air. She looked at Kingsley for a moment, then nodded. "Bye," she called.

"Good luck!" Kingsley replied.

Carrie pushed herself away.

Raines City, Capital District

The ceremony was being held on the lawn of the headquarters building, the same lawn that also provided a place for the croquet court. A platform had been built in the middle of the lawn. The city high school band was playing a repertoire of spirited marches as the population of the city filed in and took their seats for the ceremony.

Mike Post, Harley Reno, Anna, Coop, Jersey, and Chief of Police Rick Adams were on the stage, sitting beneath a banner that read:

Welcome to Raines City, Capital District.

There had been some discussion before the ceremony began as to whether or not Mike would tell the citizens that Ben was missing. There was some concern as to the effect his missing would have on overall morale, especially so soon after news of Buddy's murder.

They finally decided that because the rumor was now making the rounds, Mike should mention it, giving it the best possible spin.

After a few more high-spirited numbers from the band, Mike got up to address the crowd.

"My fellow citizens," he began. "Welcome to Raines City, C.D.!"

The crowd roared their approval, applauding and standing, continuing the demonstration for several moments before Mike raised his hands to quiet them.

"It is fitting that we should name our capital city in honor of the man who did more than any other to bring this new nation into being."

More applause.

"Many of you have heard the rumor that General Ben Raines's plane has been reported missing in the wilds of Northwest Canada. I am here to tell you that the rumor is true."

"No!" someone shouted from the crowd, and there were other demonstrations of shock and horror. Once again, Mike quieted the crowd with his raised hands.

"But he has not been reported dead, and those of us who know Ben Raines, who really know him, know that, at this point, any such report would be greatly exaggerated."

The crowd cheered, and some even managed to laugh.

"I ask only that you keep Ben in your thoughts and prayers, and do nothing to further spread rumors that may not be true. And now, in honor of this occasion, I take pride in unveiling this bronze tablet, containing on it the words we live by, the doctrine of our nation, the Tri-States Manifesto!"

The crowd cheered as Mike jerked on a cord that dropped a shroud from the recently erected bronze tablet. Although many had read the Tri-States Manifesto, they crowded up to the tablet to read it, yet one more time:

THE TRI-STATES MANIFESTO

AS ADVOCATES AND SUPPORTERS OF THE TRI-STATES
PHILOSOPHY, WE BELIEVE:

* THAT FREEDOM, LIKE RESPECT, IS EARNED AND MUST BE CONSTANTLY NURTURED AND PROTECTED FROM THOSE WHO WOULD TAKE IT AWAY.

* IN THE RIGHT OF EVERY LAW-ABIDING CITIZEN TO PROTECT HIS OR HER LIFE, LIBERTY, AND PERSONAL PROPERTY BY ANY MEANS AT HAND WITHOUT FEAR OF ARREST, CRIMINAL PROSECUTION, OR LAWSUIT. THE RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS IS CENTRAL TO MAINTAINING TRUE PERSONAL FREEDOM.

* THAT LIBERAL POLITICIANS, THEORISTS, AND SOCIALISTS ARE THE GREATEST THREAT TO FREEDOM-LOVING AMERICANS AND THAT THEIR MISGUIDED EFFORTS HAVE CAUSED GRAVE INJUSTICES IN THE FIELDS OF CRIMINAL LAW, EDUCATION, AND PUBLIC WELFARE.

* THEREFORE IN RESPECT TO CRIMINAL LAW:

* AN EFFECTIVE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM SHOULD BE GUIDED BY THESE BASIC TENETS:

—OUR COURTS MUST STOP PANDERING TO CRIMINALS.

—THE PUNISHMENT MUST FIT THE CRIME.

—JUSTICE MUST BE FAIR BUT ALSO SWIFT.

—THERE IS NO PERFECT SOCIETY, ONLY A FAIR ONE.

* THEREFORE IN RESPECT TO EDUCATION:

EDUCATION IS THE KEY TO SOLVING PROBLEMS IN THE
SOCIETY AND THE LACK OF IT IS THE ROOT CAUSE OF
AMERICA'S DECLINE.

AN EFFECTIVE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION:

—MUST STRESS HARD DISCIPLINE ALONG WITH THE ARTS, SCIENCES, FINE MUSIC, AND BASIC SKILLS IN READING, WRITING, AND MATHEMATICS;

—MUST TEACH FAIRNESS AND RESPECT;

—MUST TEACH MORALS, THE DIGNITY OF LABOR, AND THE VALUE OF FAMILY.

* THEREFORE WITH RESPECT TO WELFARE:

—WELFARE (WE PREFER WORKFARE) IS RESERVED ONLY FOR THE ELDERLY, INFIRM, AND THOSE WHO NEED A TEMPORARY HELPING HAND, AND THE WELFARE SYSTEM MUST ALSO:

—INSTILL THE CONCEPT THAT EVERYONE WHO CAN WORK MUST WORK AND BE FORCED TO WORK IF NECESSARY;

—INSTILL THE CONCEPT THAT THERE IS NO FREE LUNCH AND THAT BEING PRODUCTIVE CITIZENS IN A FREE SOCIETY IS THE ONLY HONORABLE PATH TO TAKE.

* THAT RACIAL PREJUDICE AND BIGOTRY ARE INTOLERABLE IN A FREE AND VITAL SOCIETY.

—NO ONE IS WORTHY OF RESPECT SIMPLY BECAUSE OF THE COLOR OF THEIR SKIN.

—RESPECT IS EARNED BY ACTIONS AND BY DEEDS, NOT BY BIRTHRIGHT.

—THERE ARE ONLY TWO TYPES OF PEOPLE ON EARTH, DECENT AND INDECENT. THOSE WHO ARE DECENT WILL FLOURISH, THOSE WHO ARE NOT WILL PERISH.

—NO LAWS LAID DOWN BY A BODY OF GOVERNMENT CAN MAKE ONE PERSON LIKE ANOTHER.

* A FREE AND JUST SOCIETY MUST BE PROTECTED AT ALL COSTS EVEN IF IT MEANS SHEDDING THE BLOOD OF ITS CITIZENS. THE WILLINGNESS OF CITIZENS TO LAYDOWN THEIR LIVES FOR THE BELIEF IN FREEDOM IS A CORNERSTONE OF TRUE DEMOCRACY; WITHOUT THAT WILLINGNESS THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY WILL SURELY CRUMBLE AND FALL INTO THE ASHES OF HISTORY.

* THEREFORE:

—ALONG WITH THE INALIENABLE RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS, AND THE INALIENABLE RIGHT TO PERSONAL PROTECTION, A STRONG, SKILLED, AND WELL-EQUIPPED MILITARY IS ESSENTIAL TO MAINTAINING A FREE SOCIETY.

—A STRONG MILITARY ELIMINATES THE NEED FOR "ALLIES," ALLOWING THE SOCIETY TO FOCUS ON THE NEEDS OF ITS CITIZENS.

—THE BUSINESS OF CITIZENS IS NOT THE BUSINESS OF THE WORLD UNLESS THE RIGHTS OF CITIZENS ARE INFRINGED UPON BY OUTSIDE FORCES.

—THE DUTY OF THOSE WHO LIVE IN A FREE SOCIETY IS CLEAR. PERSONAL FREEDOM IS NOT NEGOTIABLE.

* IN CONCLUSION

—WE WHO SUPPORT THE TRI-STATES PHILOSOPHY AND LIVE BY ITS CODE AND ITS LAWS PLEDGE TO DEFEND IT BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY. WE PLEDGE TO WORK FAIRLY AND JUSTLY TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN A SOCIETY IN WHICH ALL CITIZENS ARE TRULY FREE AND ARE ABLE TO PURSUE PRODUCTIVE LIVES WITHOUT FEAR AND WITHOUT

INTERVENTION.

NINETEEN

"Look up there!" Jason Pratt said, pointing to the parasail that was circling down from the departing airplane. Pratt was one of a team of six Control Group soldiers who were working the area, still searching for Ben.

"You think it's one of Raines's people, come to find him?" Evan Burke asked.

"Well, it's sure as hell not Search and Rescue," Pratt replied. "Not coming down by parachute."

"Maybe not, but it doesn't seem likely that one person would jump in to support Raines. I mean, hell, as big a wig as he is, you'd think they would bring in a whole army. Or at least a company-sized unit. Not just one man."

"Yeah, well, if that one man is anything like Ben Raines, one is all that would be needed," Pratt said. "In case you haven't noticed it, that son of a bitch has been holding his own with us. Whoever this is will just make him twice as dangerous."

"Then we need to find him and kill him before he can join up with Raines."

"Yeah, that's my thinking," Pratt said. "Wait, no, don't kill him yet."

"What do you mean, don't kill him? What the hell are you planning to do with him? Make him a pet?"

The others laughed at Burke's suggestion.

"I said don't kill him yet," Pratt said. "If he has come for Raines, then Raines will be looking for him. If we can get to him before Raines, we can use him for bait."

"Yeah," Burke said, seeing Pratt's plan. "Yeah, that's a good idea."

"Come on," Pratt said. "He's conning down pretty fast. Let's get a move on."

Ben also saw the parachutist and came to the same conclusion that Pratt, Burke, and the others had. Whoever it was, was coming for him.

"I wish you hadn't come," he said under his breath as he watched the parasail glide down. "At this juncture, I'm better off by myself."

For a moment, Ben considered ignoring the parachutist, but he knew he could not. If the jumper had come for him, he would be in as much danger as Ben was. Ben couldn't let that happen. He had to connect with the jumper and warn him about the people who were trying to kill him. With a groan, Ben started retracing his steps. It looked as if the jumper was going down at the site of the plane crash.

"Whoever you are, I give you credit for coming, even though I would rather you hadn't," Ben said as he started back. "On the other hand, if you have come for me, then surely you know who I am."

Ben hurried back toward the crash site with renewed enthusiasm. On the surface, it might seem a foolhardy thing to do, but it would almost be worth going back into the very teeth of those who were after him if in so doing he could find out who he was and what he was doing here.

Carrie's skillful manipulation of the risers allowed her to glide to a perfect landing, just a few feet away from the wreckage. Slipping out of the harness, she ran quickly to the plane, then went inside. Although the cabin was pretty much intact, seats were wrenched out and the floor was buckled, showing the severity of the impact. She picked her way through the strewn wreckage until she reached the flight deck.

The top of the flight deck was crushed down, the instrument panel was back against the seats, the control wheels were askew, and shockingly, there was a great deal of blood.

But the seats were empty.

That gave her a little hope. If her brothers had been killed instantly, they would still be inside the airplane, strapped into their seats.

She saw that the seat belts had been opened, not torn away. That meant that human hands had been at work, either her brothers' hands, or someone else's. Then she noticed that the compass was missing from the instrument panel. It wasn't wrenched free, it had been removed. That too gave her a modicum of hope, and she breathed a quick prayer that they were out there, somewhere, trying to navigate their way back to civilization.

Leaving the airplane, Carrie continued her examination of the wreckage, looking around the crash site for any sign that might lead her to her brothers. That was when she saw six people coming toward her from the tree line. Smiling, she started toward them.

"Hello!" she called brightly. "Are you the rescue team?" she asked. "Boy, am I glad to see you. Where are my brothers? Have you found them?"

"Who are you?" one of the men asked. The man who asked the question, like the others, was wearing a black uniform with an orange armband. This was not a uniform that Carrie recognized. Neither the Mounties, nor the army, nor the police, nor any other organization she was familiar with wore such a uniform. In fact, there was something unsettling about the uniforms, almost sinister, and as the men drew closer, her pleasure at the initial encounter turned to apprehension.

"I asked you a question, lady. Who are you?" the man repeated, and this time he emphasized his question by aiming a submachine gun at her. The others with him followed suit, and Carrie saw herself staring down the barrels of six guns.

"I ... I am Carrie Parker," she said. "I don't understand this. Who are you? Why are you aiming those guns at me?"

"I'm asking the questions, Miss Parker. What are you doing here?"

Carrie pointed toward the wreckage of the airplane. "My brothers were flying this airplane," she explained. "I've come to look for them. Please, do you know anything about them?"

"Ha! You expect us to believe that you came out here alone to look for the pilots of this plane? A Search and Rescue party of one?"

"Yes, of course I expect you to believe that, because it is true."

"If you had found them, what did you plan to do with them? Carry them out on your back?"

"No," Carrie answered. "I was going to tend to them while we waited for the rescue helicopter. You're not the rescue team, are you?"

"Hardly, since we are the ones who shot this plane down in the first place," one of the others said with an evil laugh.

"You did this? You shot down my brothers' plane?" Carrie asked in a strained voice. "But why? Why would you do such a thing?"

"I told you, we're asking the questions around here," the first man said. "Now I'm going to ask you again, what are you doing here? And don't give me any shit about you being a one-woman rescue team."

"And I told you, I came to find my brothers. I don't understand what is going on here. Who are you people?"

"Hey, Jason, maybe she's telling the truth," one of the others said.

"Jason? Your name is Jason?" Carrie asked.

"You don't need to know my name," the one who seemed to be the leader replied.

"What are those uniforms? They aren't like anything I've ever seen before. You aren't military, are you?"

"Have you ever heard of an organization called Die Kontrollgruppe?" one of the men asked.

"No. Should I have?"

"It doesn't matter. Come with us."

"Come with you where?"

Suddenly, and unexpectedly, Pratt squeezed off several rounds, and the bullets whistled past Carrie's head. She

screamed, then fell to her knees, crossing her arms in front of her face.

"Lady, I'm tired of screwing around with you," Pratt said. "Now, get your ass up and do what I say, or the next time I will shoot to kill."

Ben heard the gunfire, and he quickened his pace. If the parachutist had come to help him, he now needed help himself. That is, if it wasn't already too late.

When Ben reached the crash site, he saw the parachute wadded up and stuffed just inside the door of the airplane. He also saw several footprints, and found a handful of expended shell casings, but he didn't see any blood. That meant that the shots were either warning shots, or the shooter had missed.

If the shooter had merely missed, then whoever he was shooting at would have fled the scene, but a closer examination made him doubt that scenario. From the evidence he could glean through his investigation, it appeared that the parachutist had left with the others. And given that there had been shots fired, he was absolutely certain that the parachutist hadn't gone with them of his own volition.

"Damn!" he said again. "I wish you had just stayed home. I could get out of here by myself if I didn't have anyone else to worry about."

Ben had no idea who had come for him, or why. But he knew that, even though he could escape without a great deal of difficulty, he would not. He could not abandon his would-be rescuer.

"Well, Ben, whoever we are," he said aloud, "I must say that I respect and admire men of honor and integrity, and I'm glad that we seem to be just such a person." Ben laughed at his own joke.

Newport News, Virginia

The one hundred men who comprised the fifty two-man Shock Squads were at an airport in Newport News. The Shock Squads, called SS by officials of the U.S. Government, were gathered in a large maintenance hangar. Several airplanes were parked inside the hangar, from small, single-engine Cessnas to large, multiengine jets. The aircraft were in various states of repair, from those that were little more than skeletal airframes, to those that were ready to roll out onto the flight line.

The airport had been formerly known as Patrick Henry Airport, having been named after one of the Revolutionary War heroes. Since the Great War, however, this airport, like so many others, had been renamed. This one was called the Claire Osterman Airport.

The two-man teams were dressed in one-piece black jumpsuits, and at first glance a casual visitor might think he had happened on a ninja convention. The SS teams stood around long tables, inventorying the weapons and equipment they would be taking with them.

Derek Owen stepped up onto an elevated platform at the front of the hangar, then picked up a microphone to address them. The speakers squealed in protest, and he let go of the button, then squeezed it again. This time it worked.

"Men, you are about to embark upon a mission that your fellow countrymen will remember, speak about, and for which you will be honored for years to come. Your actions over the next twenty-four hours will be instrumental in bringing the SUSA back into the Union, thus restoring the United States to its rightful position of power and glory."

The men cheered.

"When do we start?" someone called.

"Your mission will begin as soon as the airplane lands."

"What exactly is our mission?" another of the men asked.

"Your mission is simple," Owen said. "You are to kill. If possible, kill people who are in authority: policemen, military officers, members of the SUSA Government. But if those targets aren't readily available, then you are to kill whoever you can find. The whole idea is to spread terror, convince the people of the SUSA that their government, army, and police force can no longer protect them."

"Wait a minute. When you say kill everyone, are you also talking about women and children?" Owen was asked.

"Especially women and children," Owen said.

"Why the hell would you kill women and children? I couldn't do that. That doesn't seem right," the questioner said in reply to Owen's pronouncement.

Owen didn't answer him right away, but turned instead to Carl Roberts and whispered something to him. Roberts nodded, then signaled for two men to accompany him. The three men walked back to the man who had expressed his uneasiness with killing women and children.

"What is your name?" Roberts asked.

"Withers. James Withers," the Shock Squad soldier answered.

"Would you step outside with us for a moment, please, Mr. Withers?" Roberts asked quietly.

"Step outside? What for?" Withers replied. He nodded toward the front. "I'm listening to the briefing."

"It will only take a moment," Roberts said.

Withers started to go with them, then, growing suspicious, stopped and shook his head. "I'd rather not," he said. "I'd rather stay here and listen to the mission briefing."

Roberts didn't answer. Instead, he looked toward the two men who were with him. He gave them a very controlled, barely perceptible nod. Responding to his unspoken order, the two men stepped up to Withers, one on each side, and they took hold of his arms.

"Come, please, Mr. Withers," Roberts said. "Don't give us any trouble."

"Where are we going? What is going on?" Withers asked.

By now, Owen had suspended his mission briefing and everyone in the hangar was looking toward Roberts, Withers, and the two men with Withers. They took him outside and closed the door behind them.

For a moment, there was curious silence in the hangar, and everyone looked toward the door. But because it was shut, it blocked off whatever was happening just on the other side.

"No!" they heard Withers scream.

Withers's scream was followed by two quick shots.

"What the hell? What happened?" someone asked.

"Shh!" a nearby friend cautioned. "I think now is not the time for dissent."

A moment later, the hangar door opened again and Roberts and the men with him returned. Withers returned as well, though now instead of being led by the arms, he was being dragged by the arms.

"Bring him up here," Owen ordered.

The two men dragged Withers up to the front of the hangar and put him on the floor right in front of the platform. Owen looked down at Withers's body, then back up at the men he'd been addressing. He resumed talking, his voice as calm and well modulated as if he were carrying on a friendly conversation over a cup of coffee.

"Now, to answer Mr...." Owen looked over at Roberts. "What did he say his name was?"

"Withers, he said his name was Withers," Roberts said.

"Yes. Withers. Well, to answer Mr. Withers's question as to why we would kill women and children, I give you this. We are engaging in total war, and total war means collateral damage, in which no one has a pass."

"Don't get me wrong, Mr. Owen, I'm all for what you say," the questioner said. "But killing them on purpose isn't exactly what you would call collateral damage, is it?"

"You may call it what you wish. But in fact, killing women and children is often one of the most effective tools of war, because it spreads rage and terror through the enemy population. No doubt you remember the terrorist attacks against the U.S. and Israel before the Great War. Those attacks were highly effective, because they generated

unfocused rage. And unfocused rage and mindless terror can be our two biggest allies."

"I see," the questioner replied.

"Do you have a problem with that?" Owen asked.

"No problem," the questioner replied quickly, gulping in a quick breath.

"Does anyone have a problem with that?" Roberts shouted.

"No problem, sir!" the men answered as one.

"Are there any questions about the mission?" Owen asked.

One man put his hand up, rather tentatively, given what had happened to Withers.

"You are?" Owen asked

"The name is Nelson, sir."

"And your question?"

"We are flying in, right?"

"We are."

"How are we going to penetrate SUSA airspace without being seen?"

"Oh, we *will* be seen," Owen replied.

The men looked at each other nervously. The SUSA had the best early-warning and anti-aircraft defense system in the world. Penetrating their airspace in an unauthorized flight wasn't a pleasant thought.

Owen saw the expressions of concern on the faces of his men, and he laughed.

"But don't worry about it," he said. "The reason we chose Newport News as our point of departure is that a civilian Lockheed Hercules airplane, International Flight 371, is due to depart Newport News at six o'clock tonight. International

Flight 371 won't be making the trip today. You will. You will fly the same route and maintain the same schedule as Flight 371. And because you will be in a C-130, which is the military version of the Lockheed Hercules, the radar signature will be exactly the same."

"That's pretty smart," Nelson said.

"Yes, it is," Owen agreed. "Now, gentlemen, before you depart this hangar and board your plane, I think it would be only fitting that you file by the late Mr. Withers to pay your last respects. It might be helpful for you to see what happens to someone who questions orders."

The first few men who filed by Withers looked down at the body without reaction. But the fourth man, perhaps to show his loyalty and support, spat on the body. So did the next, and the next as well, until several others decided that spitting was no longer enough and they began more forceful demonstrations, kicking him, then stomping him.

A few even dropped down beside him to take a souvenir, and by the time the last person had passed by, Withers's body was mutilated beyond recognition. Both ears were gone, as was his nose, half a dozen fingers, and finally, in the most audacious act, his penis and testicles were taken.

By the time the men loaded onto the C-130, they were filled with a blood lust, a blood lust that, ironically, came from the death of one of their own.

TWENTY

Control Group Headquarters, Alberta

"What the hell are we supposed to do with this woman?" Doyle asked. His arms were folded across his chest and he leaned back against the bar as he looked at the prisoner Pratt and his team had just brought in.

"Well, I don't know exactly," Pratt replied. "I just thought it might be a good idea to bring her in."

"Where did she come from anyway?"

"She bailed out of an airplane," Pratt said. "I mean, one minute that plane was flying over, and the next thing you know, she was sailing down out of the sky, using one of those parachute wing things."

"A parasail?" Doyle asked.

"Yes."

"Yeah, well, you should've killed her. Or else left her out there to die."

"I've got a feeling she wouldn't die all that easy if we left her there," Pratt said. "I mean, she looked like she knew what she was doing."

"What's your name?" Doyle asked the woman.

"My name is Parker. Carrie Parker."

"What are you doing in our woods, Carrie Parker?"

"I didn't know this was your woods," Carrie replied. "I thought it was public property."

"There is no more public property."

"I don't plan to argue the point," Carrie said.

"So, what are you doing here? What brought you parasailing down into our country?"

"I was looking for my brothers," Carrie said.

"Oh, yeah, that's another thing. She claims to be a sister to the two men who were flying the plane," Pratt explained.

"Is that true?" Doyle asked.

"Yes," Carrie replied with a nod of her head. "I'm looking for them. Do you know anything about them?"

"I know that your brothers are dead," Doyle said callously.

"Oh!" Carrie gasped. She felt tears stinging her eyes.

"Well, come on, you didn't really think they had lived through that crash, did you?"

"I ... I don't know," Carrie replied. "I had hopes that they had."

"Yeah, well, they didn't. They are both dead.

Unfortunately, their passenger, the son of a bitch we are really after, survived the crash and is still out there somewhere. He's not only alive, he's also killing our people."

Carrie shook her head in confusion. "I don't understand," she said. "Are you saying that my brothers' passenger is wandering around out in the woods killing people?"

"That he is."

"Why?"

"Perhaps he's a little pissed off because we are trying to kill *him*," Doyle said with a giggle.

At that moment, Tamara Lynch and Glen Burkett came into the room.

"I heard some of our people brought back a prisoner. Is this her?" Burkett asked, glancing toward Carrie.

"Yeah. She says she's the sister of the man who was flying the plane."

"You don't say. Well, I'll say this for her," Burkett said. He grabbed his crotch. "She's one good-looking woman."

"Yes, she is. She's a hell of a lot more woman than you can handle," Tamara said.

"More than I can handle? Ha! You think she's one of your kind?" Doyle asked.

"You never can tell," Tamara said. She reached out to put her fingers on Carrie's cheek. "How about it, honey?" she asked. "Are you the adventurous kind?"

"Adventurous?"

"Wouldn't you like to see what a woman can do for you?" Tamara asked as lightly, sensuously, she stroked Carrie's cheek.

For a brief second, Carrie had no idea what Tamara was referring to. Then she saw something in Tamara's eyes that, prior to this, she had only seen in men's eyes. She saw pure, unadulterated lust. This woman was making a sexual overture toward her.

Carrie wanted to recoil in disgust, but fought against the urge.

"I'm adventurous enough, I suppose," she said, purposely meeting Tamara's gaze.

Tamara let her hand linger a bit longer on Carrie's cheek. The pupils of Tamara's eyes widened, and her skin grew flushed.

"Leave this one alone," she ordered.

"She could be dangerous," Doyle said. "I'm not totally convinced she is who she says she is. I don't think it is such a good idea to keep her around."

"I said, leave her alone," Tamara ordered again. "She belongs to me."

"Yeah, well, that's easy for you to say. What do we do with her now?" Burkett asked.

"Put her in the basement storeroom," Tamara said. "But make her comfortable. They are more cooperative when they are comfortable."

"Cooperative? What kind of cooperation are you looking for?" Doyle asked.

"Just ... cooperation," Tamara replied. Then, with one last, unnerving glance toward Carrie, Tamara left the lobby, heading toward the elevator.

"You heard the ... lady," Doyle said, setting the word *lady* apart from the rest of the sentence. "Put her in the storeroom."

As Jason Pratt led Carrie away, Carrie was too busy trying to figure out what her next move should be to notice the attractive young red-haired girl who was standing at the far end of the bar. Had she seen her, she would have seen a face contorted with jealousy.

Tamara was in her suite, standing in front of her closet. She had already taken off her uniform, and was now wearing a hip-length dressing gown, held closed with a tie-belt. The top of the dressing gown gaped open, and in the V thus produced was a great expanse of bare skin.

Her breasts, though not entirely exposed, were visible from the mound of flesh at their base all the way out to the tip of the cone. Only the nipples were covered, and even one of them was temporarily exposed as Tamara reached out to slide the hangers along the rack. She was trying to decide what to wear when she had the prisoner brought to her.

I will obviously have to be the aggressor, she thought. I'm sure that sweet thing has never tasted the delights of woman-to-woman love before. But I don't want to frighten her away by being too butch.

Should she wear a dress, or a revealing pant suit? Perfume or not? She felt her blood running hot, and a churning heat in her loins. The anticipation of it was nearly as good as the event itself, and she had to fight against the urge to dip her own fingers into that moist center of sensation.

She heard a light knock, and Tamara left the closet to answer the door.

A young, beautiful red-haired girl stood there.

"Kelly, what are you doing here?" Tamara asked, surprised to see her.

"I, uh, just wanted to see you," Kelly said. She had intended to tell Tamara that she had seen her reaction to the woman prisoner that was brought in, and to express her displeasure. But upon seeing Tamara, she changed her mind—first, because she was afraid, and second, because she had never seen Tamara looking more desirable than she did right now. The jealousy and anger left, to be replaced by pure lust.

Tamara recognized the look at once, and although she had her mind set on seducing the woman prisoner, she decided that a little preliminary sexual play wouldn't be out of hand.

"You wanted to see me?" Tamara said.

"Yes."

Smiling, Tamara untied the belt, then opened the dressing gown, revealing herself to the young redhead. "Is seeing enough?" she asked in a sultry voice.

"No," Kelly replied. "Seeing isn't enough. I want more."

"Show me what you want," Tamara said.

"Inside," Kelly said.

"No," Tamara replied. She took off the robe and spread her legs, then, reaching out, put her hand on top of Kelly's head. Clutching Kelly's red locks in her fingers, she pushed Kelly down to her knees, then pulled Kelly's face to her. "Show me here," she said.

This was what Kelly wanted, and she cared not that they were in an open door, that anyone who might happen by would be able to see everything that was going on. Not only did she not care, she found that she was enjoying it, and she went eagerly to her task.

Raines City, CD.

Mike Post threw the rubber ball through the open door of his office. It bounced off the wall, then rolled down the hall.

"Go get it, Jody," he said.

The malamute took off after the ball, running through the door so quickly that she slid down as she made the turn.

"She misses Ben," Coop said.

"And Buddy," Mike added. "She was staying with Buddy while Ben was gone."

"She has no idea they are both gone," Coop said. "She thinks Ben will be back any time now."

"Maybe that's good," Jersey suggested.

"You mean, that she doesn't know? Yes, I agree. There's no sense in her having to suffer through what we are feeling right now."

"No, I mean, maybe it's good that she doesn't know because dogs have a sixth sense about these things," Jersey said. "If Ben were dead, I think Jody would know it."

Jody came lumbering back into the office, the ball in her mouth. She dropped it proudly at Mike's feet, then sat on her haunches and looked up at him, eager for the game to continue.

Coop reached down to rub the dog behind her ears, and she tilted her head toward him, giving him better access.

"Maybe Jersey's right," Coop said.

"Could be," Mike admitted. "Sometimes dogs seem to have a deeper understanding about things than humans do. Maybe they do have a sixth sense."

Mike threw the ball again, and Jody ran through the door after it.

"I wish I had a sixth sense that would tell me why Buddy was killed," he said.

"You don't need a sixth sense for that," Jersey replied. "It seems simple enough to me."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"Claire Osterman is behind it. Somehow, she has gotten word that Ben is missing. And in her pea-sized brain, she figures that taking out Buddy, on top of Ben's disappearance, is going to throw us into such a turmoil that she will be able to walk in and take over."

"You mean by military invasion?" Mike asked.

"Something like that."

Mike shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Intel has nothing on any troop buildup or movement in the U.S. If she was planning anything, we would know about it. Or at least, get some hint about it."

"Maybe she isn't planning on using her army," Jersey said.

"If not her army, how?"

"I don't know exactly. I just know that I have a bad feeling about all this. Somehow, some way, Claire Osterman is planning on taking advantage of the fact that Ben is ... missing."

"And you think she killed Buddy?"

"I do."

Mike drummed his fingers on his desk for a moment. "Let's see if we can get proof of that," he said. "If I could be sure that she was behind Buddy's murder, we won't have to wait for her to do something. By God, we'll go after her."

TWENTY-ONE

Control Group Headquarters, Alberta

Satiated, Kelly left Tamara's room, then moved through the shadowed halls and down the darkened stairway to the storeroom, located behind the kitchen. As she expected, a guard was posted in front of the door. He was sitting in a chair that was tipped back against the wall. Reading a comic book, he looked up as Kelly approached.

"Hello, Kelly, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Hi, Johnny. I seem to have gotten on the bad side of Colonel Lynch," Kelly said. "She sent me down here to relieve whoever is on guard."

"Really? I just got here. I'm supposed to do four hours before I'm relieved."

"Aren't you the lucky one, though?" Kelly said. "You'll be all snug in your bed while I'll be spending the next four hours sitting here."

"I don't know," Johnny said. "Nobody told me anything about this."

Kelly smiled. "You mean you don't want me to relieve you? Great, I'll just go on back up to my room then."

"No, wait," Johnny said. "You say Colonel Lynch sent you?"

"Yes."

Johnny smiled, then stood up and stretched. "Well, in that case I guess it'll be all right. How'd you piss off Colonel Lynch? I thought you and her were ... well ... uh..."

"You thought we were what?"

"You know," Johnny said. "Aren't you and the colonel sort of..."

"Are you asking if we sleep together?" Kelly asked, seeing the obvious prurient interest in Johnny's question. "You want to know if we ... do things to each other ... if we are lovers?"

"Yeah, that," Johnny said. He rubbed himself as an obvious bulge appeared in front of his pants.

Kelly laughed. "You like thinking about that, don't you? Two beautiful women getting it on with each other? Rolling together, wet and naked."

"Oh, man, yeah," Johnny said, his voice now thick with lust. "Two beautiful women together? I'd give anything to see something like that."

"How much?"

"What?"

"How much would you give to see me spread the colonel's legs?"

"Come on, quit teasing me."

"I'm not teasing," Kelly said. She put her hand down on her own crotch. "As a matter of fact, it's getting me hot just thinking about it."

"What? How? How would I get to see something?" Johnny said.

"Ah, so you are interested."

"Damn right I'm interested. Just tell me how," Johnny said again.

"You know the broom closet, right next to Tamara's room?"

Johnny looked confused. "Yeah, I know it. What about it?"

"If someone put a small peephole in the right place, they could see right into Tamara's bedroom. I could make certain that whatever we did was easy to see."

"Why would you do that?" Johnny asked suspiciously.

"Let's just say that I might want a favor sometime," Kelly replied.

"What kind of favor?"

"I don't know yet, but I'm sure something will come up." She laughed, then pointed to the front of Johnny's pants. "Speaking of something coming up," she said. "Something seems to have done just that."

Johnny looked down at himself. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, it, uh..." The guard looked up and down the hallway. "Listen, I don't suppose you ever go the other way, do you? I mean..."

"Why, Johnny, are you asking me to have sex with you? Right here?"

"Yeah."

"You want to have sex with a lesbian? Doesn't the thought of such a thing threaten your manhood?"

Johnny smiled. "No," he said. "Matter of fact, I might change you over."

"Oh, now, I don't know if I want to be changed over. But I might be talked into sampling what you have to offer sometime."

"Sometime? What do you mean, sometime? We could do it right here, right now. It wouldn't take that long."

Kelly reached down to unzip his pants. Grabbing hold of him, she gave it a couple of pulls.

"No, wait ... wait, not like that, not ... oh ... oh ... uh, shit!" he said as he spewed hot cream into her hand.

Kelly laughed again. "You were right. It didn't take long," she said. She wiped her hand on his shirt.

"Damn it, woman, what the hell got into you? I didn't want to do it that way," Johnny said.

Kelly smiled sweetly. "Well, you should've said something, honey," she said. "I just wanted to make you feel good, that's all." She began to unzip her trousers. "All right," she said. "We'll do it your way."

"Shit," Johnny said. "You know I can't do it now. I mean, not after this."

"Oh, yes, I forgot," Kelly said. "Men are onetime wonders, aren't they?"

"Listen, you aren't kidding about the peephole, are you? I mean, if I put one in the broom closet, you'll fix it so I can really see something?"

"Honey, after your performance here, are you sure you are up to watching a couple of women?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Okay, if you're sure. You just drill a peephole in the broom closet. I'll take care of the rest."

"All right, I'm going to do that," Johnny said. He started to leave, then looked back toward Kelly. "You've got the watch here, right? I mean, I'm not going to get into trouble for leaving?"

"I've got it," Kelly said.

Kelly watched Johnny until he was gone; then she sat in the chair he had been using. She stayed there for about ten

minutes, just to make certain he, or someone else, didn't come around to check.

Kelly had put on the entire show with Johnny just to make certain that he trusted her enough to leave her here alone with the prisoner. She was jealous of the fact that Tamara was obviously attracted to this woman. She didn't know if the woman was a lesbian or not, but she also knew that didn't matter. If Tamara wanted to have sex with her, she would have her. That was the nature of Tamara's power.

On the other hand, if the prisoner was killed while trying to escape, that would eliminate the problem. Kelly pulled her pistol, chambered a round, then opened the door and stepped inside.

Shortly after Carrie was locked into the storeroom, she managed to work her way out of the handcuffs. That accomplished, she climbed up one of the shelves, then reached over to unscrew the lightbulb. Now, as the door was opened, she stood in the darkest corner of the room, holding the lightbulb in her hand.

"Where are you?" a woman's voice asked.

A woman? Carrie was glad it was a woman. Even if it had been a man, she was prepared to attempt an escape. But the fact that it was a woman made the odds more even. She hoped it was the same woman who had put her hands on her shortly after she was brought here. The woman's obvious sexual designs had made Carrie's flesh crawl, and she would welcome the opportunity to let the woman know, in no uncertain terms, that she wasn't interested.

The woman who had come into the storeroom flipped the light switch several times. The light didn't come on.

"What the hell?" Kelly asked.

She flipped it again.

"What the hell is wrong with the light?" she asked.

Carrie threw the lightbulb across the room. It popped loudly when it hit the wall, and Kelly spun toward the sound. That gave Carrie the opening she was looking for and, pivoting on her left foot, she slapped her right foot across Kelly's temple.

Kelly went down with a grunt, and Carrie slipped quickly through the open door, then closed and locked it behind her. Looking around, she found herself in a long, narrow hallway.

At one end of the hallway was a set of stairs, going up to the main floor. Carrie went to the foot of the stairs, thought for a moment about using them, then saw, high up on the wall at the other end, a window that appeared to lead outside.

The window seemed the better option, so Carrie went back to the door of the storeroom, took the chair, and carried it down to the window. Using it, she climbed up, opened the window, and wriggled outside. A moment later, she found herself outside. Carrie crouched over and darted through the dark toward the edge of the woods. If she could get in there without being seen, she was fairly certain she could get away.

She ran quickly, feeling the branches and leaves slapping against her face. Once she tripped over a root and was sent sprawling. She felt the pain of a rock cutting her face, and got

a mouthful of dirt, but she didn't cry out for fear of being heard by one of the people who had captured her.

Carrie ran for at least half a mile before she stopped, then sat down beneath a tree and listened to see if she was being chased. She put her hand to the wound on her head, then pulled it down to look at it, trying to judge how serious it was. There didn't seem to be too much blood.

Her wound wasn't a problem, and she now believed that her escape was successful. But it was cold, much colder than it had been during the day, and she suddenly had the unpleasant thought that she might have escaped captivity only to die of exposure.

"Don't be afraid," a man's voice suddenly said.

"What?" Carrie gasped, jumping up at the sound. She saw a man in front of her. He didn't appear to be one of those who had taken her prisoner, or at least, he wasn't wearing a uniform. Actually, he was wearing a bearskin, and she wondered for a moment if he was some wild man who lived in the woods. "Who are you?"

The man chuckled and shook his head. "I was sort of hoping you would recognize me."

"I'm sorry. I don't recognize you. Who are you?"

"I don't know," Ben answered.

"What do you mean, you don't know? You aren't making sense."

"None of this is making sense," Ben said. "I thought perhaps you had come for me, but I see that isn't the case."

"Come for you?"

"To rescue me," Ben said.

"You aren't one of them, are you?"

"No."

"What are you doing out here? Do you live here in the woods?"

"No. At least, I don't think so."

"You don't think so?" Now Carrie was getting very confused by the direction this conversation was going.

"Look," Ben said. "The truth is, I don't remember anything any further back than a couple of days ago when I came to in a crashed airplane."

"It was you!" Carrie said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were my brothers' passenger!" Carrie said.

"Yes!" Ben said. "Yes, now we're getting somewhere. Okay, so who am I?"

"What? Why do you keep asking that question?"

"Because if you know that I was your brothers' passenger, then I was hoping you would know who I am."

"You don't know who you are?"

"I don't have the slightest idea. I don't know anything about the people you escaped from, or why they are trying to kill me. I don't even know why I was in your brothers' airplane. If you don't know me, do you by any chance have any idea where they were taking me?"

"I think to Edson," Carrie replied.

"Edson?"

Carrie stared at him for a long moment. "You ... you have amnesia, don't you? Yes, that's it, isn't it? You have amnesia from the crash."

"Apparently I do," Ben said. "One of the pilots called me Ben."

"Ben?"

"Yes. Does that mean anything to you? Did you ever hear your brothers say my name?"

"No."

"What is your name?" Ben asked.

"Carrie. Carrie Parker."

Ben smiled. "You aren't married."

"What? No. How do you know that?"

"Well, I don't know my own name, but I do know your brothers' names. I read it from their pilots' licenses. Gerald and Edgar Parker."

"Yes, that's them," Carrie said. "Then you are telling the truth. You were with them."

"Yes."

"Do you know anything about them? Do you know where they are?"

The expression on Ben's face answered Carrie's question.

She was quiet for a moment. "Both of them?" she finally asked in a choked voice.

Ben nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid so. I'm sorry, Carrie," he said.

"I knew it. I suspected as much when I examined the airplane. Then these people, these uniformed Nazis who call themselves Die Kontrollgruppe, told me they were dead. But I was still hoping, irrational as that might be."

"Hope is never irrational," Ben said.

"Did these people kill my brothers?" Carrie asked.

"No. They were killed in the crash. Both of them. If it is any consolation to you, they didn't suffer." He didn't tell her that Gerald had lived for a few minutes beyond the crash.

"If they were killed in the crash, then Die Kontrollgruppe did kill them. They told me they shot down the plane."

"I didn't realize that," Ben said. "I knew we crashed, but I didn't know what caused it."

Carrie shivered.

"You're cold," Ben said. He took off the bearskin coat and handed it to her. "Here, put this on."

"I can't take that from you," she said.

"Sure you can. You need to get warm."

"It looks big enough, maybe we can share it," Carrie suggested.

Ben smiled. "That's a good idea," he said. "When I get back, maybe we'll do that."

"When you get back? When you get back from where?"

"I have some business to take care of," Ben said. He slipped the bearskin around Carrie's shoulders and she pulled it to her, grateful for its warmth.

"Thanks," she said.

"You stay here," Ben ordered. "By the way, do you know how to use a gun?"

"Yes," Carrie said.

Ben pulled a pistol from his waistband. "Here," he said. "Just in case you need it."

"Ben?"

"Yes?"

"Whatever it is you are about to do, please be careful," Carrie said. "Somehow, it's comforting to know that I'm not all alone out here."

"I would say that careful is my middle name," Ben said. He laughed. "That is, if I knew my middle name."

"Ben Careful," Carrie said, laughing with him. She sat back down beneath the tree. "Don't leave me out here all alone, Ben Careful."

"I'll be back," Ben promised.

TWENTY-TWO

Raines City, C.D.

It was just before the shift change when Chief of Police Rick Adams came into the station. The desk sergeant looked up in surprise.

"What are you doing here this time of night, Chief?" he asked.

"Oh, I just thought I would drop by. How are things going, Sergeant Quinn?"

"Quiet," Quinn answered. "Not even a domestic disturbance tonight."

"Well, that's the way we like it, isn't it?" Adams asked.

"Yes, sir, you got that right," Sergeant Quinn answered.

Adams went back into the squad room and spoke to some of the officers who were just going off duty, as well as those who were coming on. Then he went into the communications room and, reaching around behind the junction box, placed a thermite device. At exactly eleven o'clock, the thermite device would ignite, cooking all the wiring and taking out all telephone and wireless communications. Because it was heat instead of explosive, it would be silent and the police would know nothing about it, until they tried to communicate.

Leaving the communication rooms, Chief Adams next visited the arms room. Except for the side arms carried on the officers' persons, all the weapons were kept in the arms room. There, Adams squirted a few drops of acid into all the locks, freezing them so that they couldn't be opened. That

done, he started back out front, once more passing Sergeant Quinn as he left.

"You aren't going to stay for the watch change?" the desk sergeant asked.

Adams shook his head. "No, I don't think so," he said. "I think I'll just go home and go to bed."

"Can't say as I blame you," Quinn replied. "I sure wouldn't be down here tonight if I didn't have to be. I'd be home with my wife on our tenth wedding anniversary."

"You don't say," Adams said. "Well, congratulations."

"Thanks, Chief."

Rick Adams went out to his car. For a moment, but just for a moment, he had second thoughts about what he was doing, and he paused just before he got into the car.

No, he thought. What he was doing was right. This would bring about a reunification of the SUSA and the USA. And in the new USA, he was promised the position of head of a national police force.

What he was doing was patriotic, and future historians would recognize that.

What he was doing was also profitable. Today he had received verification that half a million dollars had been placed in a Swiss account under his name.

* * * *

It was 11:30 p.m. when the C-130 put down at the Ben Raines Airport. When the plane turned off the active and taxied away from the terminal instead of toward it, the tower operator called the pilot.

"International Flight 371, this is Ben Raines Tower. Say now your purpose for exiting the active before the taxiway."

"Ben Raines Tower, International Flight 371. I have a brake overheating on me," the pilot replied. "I need to let it cool or it might lock up on the runway."

"Do you require assistance, International Flight 371?" the tower asked.

"Negative," the pilot answered. "We'll just sit here for a few minutes."

"Do you require a bus for your passengers?"

"Negative. Thank you for your offer, but we have only two passengers, and they have agreed to remain on board until the situation is resolved."

"Roger, I understand you have only two passengers and they will ROB?"

"That's affirmative."

"Please call before reentering the active," the tower cautioned.

The pilot snapped the talk button twice, interrupting the squelch two times by way of acknowledgment.

"They bought it," the pilot said to Derek Owen, who was standing on the flight deck just behind him.

"Good, good," Owen said. "Put the ramp down, then stand by."

"What if they send someone out to check?" the pilot asked.

"If we do our job, there won't be anyone alive to send out," Owen said. "This is the best time to hit them. They have a minimum staff on duty."

Owen stepped back into the cabin of the plane, where his men sat, their charcoal-dark faces gleaming dimly in the red overhead lights.

"All right, men," he said. "Exit the plane and head toward the terminal building. It's dark enough that we won't be seen until we are right on them. Then open fire."

"Any specific targets?" one of the men asked.

"Yes," Owen replied. "Anything that is breathing." Owen moved down the center of the cabin until he reached the ramp, then turned back toward his men. "Let's go," he said.

It took about one minute for the dark-clad, blackened-faced men to sprint through the darkness toward the terminal. Through the windows of the terminal, they could see no more than two dozen people waiting for their flights. There were at least half a dozen men out on the flight line, tending to various tasks germane to operating an airport. They looked up in surprise and curiosity as one hundred apparitions suddenly appeared before them.

"Hey!" one of the airport employees called. "Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"Now!" Owen shouted.

Suddenly the darkness of the night was lit up by one hundred men firing automatic weapons. Windows and doors were shattered under the onslaught, and the shocked passengers were mowed down in seconds, their bodies jerking and twitching under the impact from the bullets.

There were three security officers on duty in the quiet airport, two men and one woman, and like the brave officers

they were, they ran toward the sound of gunfire. They were cut down before they could get off one shot.

"Check all the offices!" Owen shouted as they ran inside and picked their way through the bloodied and dead bodies. Owen ran up the stairs to the tower. The chief flight controller was standing at the head of the stairs, looking down, trying to figure out what was going on. Owen took him out with one short burst, then stepped inside the control room.

Radars winked and blinked in the shadows of the room, but at the moment, none of the stations were manned. Looking around, Owen saw three men and two women standing toward one side of the room, their hands in the air.

"Get down!" he ordered. "Get down on your knees and look toward the wall!"

Quickly, and fearfully, the five did as they were instructed.

Owen took the magazine from his weapon and put in a fresh one. Then, pointing the weapon at the kneeling controllers, he pulled the trigger and moved the gun back and forth, sending bullets toward them as if squirting water from a hose. Blood and brain matter sprayed from the exit wounds as they fell forward.

Carl Roberts rushed into the control tower then.

"How is it downstairs?" Owen asked.

"Dead. All dead. What about the police station? Is everything set there?" Roberts asked.

"If Adams did what he was paid to do, they are now without communication or weapons," Owen said. "Come on, let's go."

By now there was only an occasional shot here and there as his men found the few stragglers remaining and shot them.

"I thought you said they were all dead," Owen said to Roberts.

Nelson overheard the question and he aimed his pistol at one of the men on the floor, then pulled the trigger. "They are now," he said.

"Good. Did you get the keys to the buses?" Owen asked.

"Yes," Nelson answered.

"All right, men, let's load up!" Owen shouted. "We're going to the police station."

"Lieutenant Jenkins, we don't have any communications," Sergeant Quinn said, sticking his head into the squad room. Raines City's finest were lined up for shift change. They were standing in neat rows, uniforms clean and pressed, shoes shining, as the watch commander and patrol sergeants pulled their inspection.

"Telephone or radio?" the lieutenant asked.

"Both are out," Quinn replied.

Lieutenant Jenkins sighed. "That's strange that both of them are out. All right, as soon as watch mount is over, I'll look into it."

Out on the floor, one of the watch sergeants, pulling the change-of-watch inspection, put his finger on a policeman's shirt-pocket flap.

"You are about to lose this button," he said. "Get it sewed on tight."

"Yes, Sergeant."

Suddenly a dozen men burst through the doors with machine guns firing.

Owen led his Shock Squads as they fired at the confused and shocked policemen. He enjoyed the feeling of the gun bucking and exploding in his hands as his bullets tore into the flesh of the helpless policemen.

Sergeant Quinn had the keys to the arms locker in his pocket.

"Follow me to the arms room!" he shouted, and the lieutenant and half a dozen other policemen who escaped the initial onslaught hurried back to the arms room with the desk sergeant.

Lieutenant Jenkins and two others knelt just outside the arms room, firing back toward their attackers, using only their pistols.

"Hurry, Sarge!" Jenkins shouted. "We can't hold them off much longer!"

"I can't get the arms rack unlocked!" the desk sergeant called back. "The son of a bitch is—" That was as far as he got before he was cut down.

Within moments, everyone in the police station was dead, most of them dying before they could return one shot. The blue uniforms, which had been inspection-pristine but seconds before, were now splattered with blood and soiled with feces and urine as veins spilled blood and bowels and bladders emptied.

In less than two minutes of concentrated firing, every policeman in the building was dead.

"All right, men, to the cars!" Owen shouted. "You know what to do!"

Under the cover of the police cars, the SS troops fanned out through the city to continue their campaign of death and destruction. Owen and Roberts returned to the airport, and the waiting C-130, for the flight back.

Although Owen had made no official count, he would have been pleased to learn that, as of this moment, the death count stood at 115 SUSA civilians and officials dead, two SS men dead.

Control Group Headquarters, Alberta

After leaving Carrie, Ben retraced her path to the headquarters building.

He had to admit it. He was impressed by their digs. It had the look and feel of a resort hotel, completely encircled by wide porches and fronted by a landscaped lawn and curving driveway. The driveway curved around a circle of white stones at the center of which was a flagpole. At the top of the flagpole, a bit of orange cloth hung limply in the high, thin air. No doubt this was a flag of some sort, though it wasn't one that Ben recognized.

Ben stayed hidden for a long moment, making a careful survey of the situation. He waited until he had the layout of the building and grounds memorized before he made his first move.

There were guards posted around the outside of the building, but he had already observed their walking routes, so he was able to move through them without being noticed.

Since he had been shot down, Ben's personal weapons inventory had improved considerably, growing with each additional man he took out. In addition to the pistol he had left with Carrie, he was carrying an Uzi in one hand, and a K-Bar knife in the other. The plan was to use the knife, but it was nice to have the Uzi in case he had to fall back on it.

As Ben slipped through the darkness, he caught the scent of cigarette tobacco. Someone was just ahead. Holding the knife palm up, blade projecting forward, he moved more slowly and more carefully through the night until he saw him. The guard was leaning against a tree, smoking and looking out into the dark woods. He had an AK-47 hanging over his shoulder, and as he took a puff of his cigarette, Ben could see the man's ugly face in the orange glow.

Ben stepped up in front of him, appearing before the man as suddenly, and unexpectedly, as if he had been beamed down from some spaceship.

"Hey, what the hell? Who are—" the man began.

That was as far as he got before Ben made a quick slashing motion across the man's throat. That severed his jugular, cut his windpipe, and destroyed his vocal cords. He died, gushing hot blood but making no sound.

Ben stepped over the body, then looked around for other guards. Seeing no one else, he crouched low and ran across the circular driveway to the edge of the porch. He went up the steps, then let himself inside.

The bottom floor had probably been a hotel lobby at one time, but now it was clearly a bar. Except for a lighted clock on the wall beside the fireplace, the bar was dark. The clock

said it was one-fifteen in the morning, and the bar was nearly deserted. Nearly, because there were two men sitting at a table on the far side of the bar. They were talking and drinking beer.

"I've gotta take a piss," one of the men said, and he stood up and walked toward the rest room.

Ben stepped up against the wall and moved quietly down the wall, keeping in the shadows, until he reached the rest room. Opening the door, he stepped inside. A man was standing at the urinal, with his back to the door.

"What's the matter, Al, don't you think I can piss by myself?" the man asked. "What do you want to do, hold my dick for me?" He laughed.

"Not particularly," Ben said.

The man at the urinal turned quickly, and seeing Ben, inhaled deeply in order to call out. But Ben plunged his knife into the man's heart while, at the same time, putting his other hand over the man's mouth to keep him from calling out.

Ben held him aloft until life left his body, then pushed him backward. The man slid to the floor, but remained in the seated position, as his head fell over into the pool of urine he had just made.

When Ben stepped back out of the rest room, he saw that the one called Al was still sitting at the table. Ben walked directly toward him, through the shadows.

"You didn't pee on your shoes, did you?" Al asked, laughing at his own joke. When Ben got close enough for him to see clearly, Al gasped.

"Where is Gil? Who are you?" Al asked, surprised to see a stranger in what he knew was a well-guarded headquarters.

"Gil has been detained," Ben said. "He asks that you join him."

"Join him? What do you mean?"

Once more, Ben put his knife to work with a quick, deadly slash across Al's throat. Al fell forward onto the table, knocking over his glass of beer. Beer and blood mingled freely, then ran from the table to drip onto the floor below.

Ben thought about using the elevator, but decided against it, choosing the stairs instead. On the next floor up, he moved down the hallway, listening to the snoring and loud breathing of the people in the rooms off to either side of the hall.

Ben opened the door to the first room and saw that, while it had originally been a large, comfortable room for a visiting guest, it was now converted into a bunking area, with six bunk beds in three stacks of two.

Putting his hand over the mouth of one of the sleepers, Ben cut his throat. Surprised, his victim opened his eyes, looked up in horror, then bled to death, his pillow turning dark with his blood. The blood was black, though Ben knew it would be crimson if there was light to see it.

The first man he killed was on the bottom bunk. The next man was on the top bunk, and the third was on the bottom.

Leaving that room with half its occupants dead, Ben moved down the hall and slipped into the other rooms to leave his grizzly calling card. Sometimes he killed only one in the room, sometimes he killed none, and on one occasion he killed everyone in the room.

When he exited the hotel an hour later, he left behind fourteen bodies. He was pretty sure that he would get their attention.

As Ben left the grounds, he smelled a terrible odor and, investigating, saw what it was. There was no sewer system for the building, but there was a huge septic tank. What he was smelling was the septic tank vent.

Just after daybreak, a loud yell awakened everyone on the second floor.

"Ah!!! What is this? What the hell is going on? They're dead! They're dead!"

As the shout spread through the hotel, waking up others, they raised their own voices in shock and terror as they discovered the dead among them. Within moments, the hotel was a house of panic.

It took several minutes for the three colonels to restore some calm, and they ordered everyone to gather downstairs until they could figure out what was going on.

"You don't have to be all that smart to figure out what has happened here," Tamara said.

"Well, I'm glad you have the smarts to know the answer," Doyle said. "Because I don't have an idea in hell what it is."

"You just named it," Tamara said. "It was hell."

"What? What are you talking about? Make sense, will you?"

"It's our own private hell," Tamara said. "It's obvious, isn't it? Ben Raines paid us a visit last night."

TWENTY-THREE

Raines City, C.D.

The headquarters building was surrounded by hastily erected sandbag bunkers and machine-gun emplacements. Armed men and women in battle dress utilities were manning the posts and standing guard at the doors and windows. Jersey was driving the Humvee, and she drove across the sidewalk all the way up to the sandbags nearest the front door before she and Coop got out.

One of the guards came over to challenge them, then, seeing who it was, came to attention and saluted. Coop and Jersey returned the salute.

"Mike inside?" Coop asked.

"Yes, sir, I think so," the guard answered. "Are we at war?"

"Son, from the time this nation started, we have never not been at war," Coop replied.

Like the guard, Coop and Jersey were wearing BDUs. Jersey's uniform was custom-tailored to her body, and though it emphasized that she was a very good-looking woman, she was, as Coop once explained, like a coral snake. Beautiful, but deadly.

They passed half a dozen other guards inside the building before they reached Mike's office. With Ben missing and Buddy dead, Mike Post was now acting as president and commander in chief. When Coop and Jersey reported to him, they stopped in front of his desk and saluted.

"Knock it off," Mike said, waving the salute aside. "I'm just temporary and you know it."

"Temporary or not, you're in command," Coop said. "I just hope you are ready for it."

"Yeah, you and me both," Mike replied. He sighed, then leaned back in his chair and looked up at them. They had been through a lot together, but always before, Ben had been there to see them through. And alive or dead, he wasn't here now and the situation was critical.

"What do we know so far?" Mike asked.

"They arrived last night on International Flight 371," Coop said. "The plane landed at the airport, then taxied off the runway and unloaded in the dark."

"How do we know that?" Mike asked.

"We got that information from one of the flight controllers," Coop replied.

"We had a survivor? I thought everyone at the airport was killed."

"Yeah, so did the bad guys," Coop said. "But we found one of the controllers still alive this morning."

"How badly is he hurt? Is he going to survive?" Mike asked.

"He's not hurt at all. He managed to get away from them."

"What? How can that be?"

"When he heard the shooting downstairs, he hid in an equipment locker."

"Good for him. Though it would have been nice if he had thought to call the police after they left," Mike said.

"He tried to," Harley replied. "But the phones were out. And get this. We know why the phones were out."

"Why?"

"Our esteemed chief of police sabotaged them," Harley said.

"What?" Mike asked.

"That's what the controller said. He overheard the bad guys talking."

Mike stroked his chin. "That would answer some questions," he said.

"Like what?" Anna asked.

"The communications were knocked out ... from inside, before the attack. And when the attack came, the cops couldn't get their weapons out because the locks on the arms racks were frozen with acid. They were butchered."

"Damn. No wonder the bad guys were so successful."

"What's the latest count of our losses?" Coop asked.

"I think the count is close to three hundred now," Mike answered. "That's counting the people at the airport, police, military, and some civilians who were killed at random. What about the bad guys?"

"We've killed twenty of them," Coop answered.

"Which leaves seventy-eight to go," Jersey added. She walked over to the window and looked outside. More sandbag bunkers were being erected around key buildings, the telephone building, a TV station, and the hospital.

Mike looked over at Jersey. "What do you mean that leaves seventy-eight? That's a pretty precise number, isn't it? How can you be so sure it is seventy-eight?"

"Because just before he died, one of them was gracious enough to share that information with me," Jersey said. She turned back toward Mike and let her hand rest on the handle of her knife.

"Yes, I can see how he might have cooperated," Mike said. "So, what did you learn?"

"That this was a special operation of the FPPS, personally commanded by Derek Owen."

"The head of FPPS," Mike said. "Then he is the one we really want."

Jersey shook her head. "He flew back right after the initial attack. He and his second in command, Carl Roberts."

"Leaving the rest of them here?"

"Yes. According to the information, they will be operating in two-man teams."

"I'm sure they aren't in any kind of uniform," Mike said.

"No. By now, they have shed their uniforms and are dressed in civilian clothes, or worse, police or military uniforms," Coop said.

"Any idea on how best to handle them?" Mike asked.

"I've put out the word to check and double-check everyone's ID," Harley said. "The word to our men is, if they find someone they aren't sure about, and if the suspect can't find a local citizen to vouch for them, we will assume they are the enemy and deal with them accordingly."

Mike laughed. That's a little like profiling, isn't it?"

Coop laughed with him. "You're goddamn right it's profiling."

The phone rang and Mike grabbed it. He listened a moment, then replied, "We'll be right there."

"What is it?" Anna asked.

"We've got Adams."

Chief Rick Adams was standing on the grass in front of the bronze plaque upon which the Tri-States Manifesto had been embossed. There were several armed soldiers around him, backed up by a rather substantial crowd of angry citizens.

Nobody dared approach Adams, because he was holding a gun to the head of a six-year-old child. The child was his own.

Coop's Humvee stopped just outside the circle of citizens and soldiers and he, Jersey, Mike, Harley, and Anna climbed out. They walked up to the front of the circle, and Mike took one step farther in.

"No!" Adams shouted. "Stop right there!"

"Rick," Mike called. "Rick, you don't want to do this."

"How do you know what I want to do?" Adams replied.

"That's your own child. Let him go," Mike said.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," Adams said. "They said it would be a quick, painless coup. Then the country would be reunited again."

"Who told you this? Claire Osterman?"

Rick laughed, though there was no humor in his laugh. "Not her," he said. "She's probably dead by now. Like General Raines. Don't you see? The only way we could reunite, the only way we could become one nation like we once were, was to get rid of the two leaders. Then we could start over. But what happened last night ... all the killing of civilians ... that wasn't supposed to happen."

Mike took another step toward him.

"I told you, don't come any closer!" Adams shouted.

"We can work this out," Mike said.

"No, we can't work it out."

"Sure we can."

Adams looked at Mike, then raised the pistol to his own temple.

"Rick, no!" Mike shouted, but it was too late. Adams pulled the trigger, and blood, brain, and bone matter exploded from the opposite side of his head.

Headquarters Building, Alberta

"You look to be pretty athletic," Ben said to Carrie. "Can you run?"

Carrie chuckled. "Two years ago I won the gold medal in the New Olympics."

"Damn," Ben said. "I'm impressed."

"Why did you want to know if I can run?"

"Because I saw that they have a septic tank back at their headquarters building."

Carrie laughed. "You want me to run because you saw a septic tank? How bad is it?"

"It's pretty bad," Ben said. "But that's good for us."

"Why?"

Ben told her his plan.

* * * *

Ben waited on the south side of Die Kontrollgruppe's headquarters building. He checked his watch, then got ready. At exactly nine o'clock, Carrie began firing from the north side

of the building. Several DK soldiers came through the front door to investigate, and as they did, Ben opened fire, killing two of them. The other two ran back inside.

Five minutes later, gunfire erupted again, this time from the east side of the building. Once more people came out to investigate, and once more Ben opened fire, killing a couple more. A few minutes later, Carrie, who was running around the building, started firing from the west side, and again, Ben was waiting to drive them back inside when they came out.

The plan was to generate confusion, and also to force everyone into the building to use it as a fortress. Then, with everyone inside, Ben was ready to put the next part of his plan into action.

Ben moved around the grounds until he reached the septic tank. Then, taking out the pouch of gasoline he had been carrying with him from the time of the crash, he lit the plastic edge of it. When he saw that it was burning well, he dropped the pouch down the vent, then turned and ran back to the edge of the woods. Carrie was waiting for him.

"You think it will work?" Carrie asked.

"From the smell of it, I'd say that the septic tank is not only full, it is backed up," Ben explained. "That means there should be enough methane gas trapped in the lines to make a pretty good show."

"How big a show?" Carrie asked.

Before Ben could answer, the entire building exploded. The fireball and concussion from the explosion was much, much larger than Ben would have ever imagined, and the pressure wave from the blast knocked both of them down.

"Holy shit!" Ben said as he looked over toward where the building had been.

The fireball kept growing, bigger and bigger, until Ben feared it was going to envelop them as well, and he pulled Carrie to him, then covered both of them with the bearskin. He could hear, and feel, flaming pieces of wreckage falling all around him.

Finally, the roar of the explosion subsided and Ben threw off the bearskin and looked toward the building. Or rather, what was left of it.

When the fire burned down and the smoke cleared, Ben, his weapon at the ready, picked his way through the wreckage looking for survivors. There were none.

"They called themselves Die Kontrollgruppe," Carrie said. "I'm not sure who or what they are. Were," she corrected. "They are obviously no more."

"They were a terrorist group," Ben said. "And a little over a week ago, they bombed a middle school down in Louisiana."

"Yes!" Carrie said. "Yes, I remember reading about that in the newspaper. The school they bombed was named after the general who started the SUSA."

"Raines," Ben said. "Ben Raines."

"Ben Raines, yes, I believe that is..." Carrie stopped in midsentence and looked at Ben. "Your first name is Ben," she said. "Could you be...?"

"I am," Ben said. "You've got your memory back!"

"I have," Ben said. He reached for her. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Raines City, CD.

"Adams was right about Claire Osterman," Mike said. "We just got word that she, General Goddard, and the entire Cabinet are dead. Derek Owen has declared himself as head of the government until he can organize a nationwide election."

"Ha. When is that going to be? One hundred years from now?" Anna asked.

"That would be my guess," Mike replied.

"So what's next?" Harley asked. "Do we have a plan?"

"Yes, we have a plan," Coop said. "That is, Jersey and I do."

"What is that?"

"To start with, put our military on full alert," Coop said.

"Close down the borders, and don't let anyone in or out."

"All right."

"Then give Jersey and me full authority to go to Richmond to deal with Owen."

"Deal with him? You mean negotiate?"

Coop shook his head. "No. No more negotiating with anyone over there," he said. "I intend to deal with Mr. Owen with extreme prejudice."

"You mean kill him?"

"Yes," Coop replied.

"He's just pulled off a successful coup," Mike said.

"You know he's going to be surrounded by bodyguards."

"I know."

"I'd say you would probably have only a one-in-ten chance of succeeding."

"Yeah, we know that too," Jersey said.

"Then you will understand why I am going to say no," he said.

"No, I don't understand."

"Coop, look at it from my point of view. Right now the situation is critical. Ben is gone, probably dead. Buddy is dead. And for all I know, Derek Owen is hours away from invading us. You two are too valuable to risk. I can't let you do it."

"You don't understand, Mike. It was only a matter of courtesy that caused us to ask you for authority to deal with him. But whether you grant it or not, we're going," Jersey said.

"Goddamnit, Jersey! No!" Mike said. "I won't allow it!"

"Do you really think you can stop us?" Coop asked.

Mike sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. He was silent for a long moment.

"Mike, you know this has to be done," Jersey said quietly. "If we can take him out, there will be no invasion, and we'll have time to put the pieces together here again. With or without the general."

After a long moment of silence, Mike nodded. "I know it," he finally said.

"And you know we are the only ones who can do it," Jersey said.

Mike nodded again. "I know that as well."

"It would be easier on us if you don't try to stop us," Coop said.

"All right. You can go. I won't try to stop you."

"Thanks."

"Is there anything I can do to help? Anything I can do for you before you go?"

"Yes," Jersey answered. "There's one thing you can do."

"What's that?"

Smiling, Jersey put her arm though Cooper's arm. "You can marry us," she said.

Richmond

Derek Owen was standing at the window of his new office, looking out over the rose garden that Claire Osterman had planted. He was enjoying his new position, especially the prestige and power that went with it.

The phone on his desk rang, and he picked it up. "Yes?"

"Mr. President, the tailors are here."

"The tailors?"

"To fit you for the uniforms you ordered, sir."

"Oh, yes, yes, thank you. Send them in," Owen said.

Owen had decided that the first change he would implement was to create a uniform for the president. After all, the president was the commander in chief. Yesterday he had made arrangements to have tailors sent out for a fitting. He'd also asked them to bring some ideas for a uniform that would be fitting for a man of his station.

The tailors were a man and a woman. They were wearing matching white one-piece, form-fitting outfits. The woman was very attractive, but Owen was sure he had never seen anyone as fey as the man who was with her.

"Tell me, Bruce, do you think you can come up with a design for our new president?" the woman asked.

"Oh, honey, yes," the man replied in a mincing tone. "Why, it won't be hard at all. I mean, just look at him. He is gorgeous."

"Honey, you think every man is gorgeous," the woman replied.

"Well, aren't they?" the man replied, hanging his wrist limply.

The woman laughed. "Let's get busy. I don't have time to stand here and let you drool over our president," she said. "We have to get this man in some clothes."

"Yes, and such is the pity," the man replied. "When you and I would both love to get him out of his clothes."

The woman laughed again, then knelt down with a tape measure. She looked up at Owen. "I thought it would be better if I measured your inseam," she said. "I don't think you would want his hands down there."

"You have all the fun," the man said.

Owen glared.

"Take these measurements down," the woman said.

"Wait a minute, dear, let me get the tablet and pencil," the man said, reaching into the case they had carried in.

"Hurry up, will you?" Owen said. "I don't have a lot of time."

The man turned around to face Owen. The expression in his face had turned hard.

"You don't have any time left, asshole," the man said. The mincing in his voice was gone.

"What? Who are you? What is this?"

"We are Mr. and Mrs. Cooper," Coop said. "And this, you son of a bitch, is justice for all."

The gun bucked once in his hand, the silencer making a sound not much louder than a sneeze. The bullet hit Owen in the forehead and he fell back, dead before he hit the floor.

Coop and Jersey left, Coop still mincing and carrying on about what a lovely uniform they would make for the president.

"You think he's ever made anything that didn't have lace on it?" one of the security guards asked the others. They laughed.

Fifteen minutes later, Coop and Jersey, now dressed as a farmer and his wife, were heading south on I-95. They had three hogs and a bale of hay in the back of a pickup truck that was colored with three shades of primer.

They passed through a dozen checkpoints on their way to the border between the U.S. and the SUSIA. The next morning, they crossed the border between the U.S. and the SUSIA, doing so at a prearranged checkpoint, met there by Harley and Anna.

"What are you going to do with those pigs, Coop?" Harley asked.

"Have the biggest barbecue you ever saw," Coop answered.

TWENTY-FOUR

A new beginning

Jim LaDoux turned off his battery-powered radio and wondered, for perhaps the hundredth time in several weeks, what the hell was going on in the war-torn nation. For months he'd been hearing about some invasion from space. So far as he knew, it had never materialized. But something from somewhere out in space had struck the earth, and within a matter of several weeks had created a panic. As far as he could tell, the panic was worldwide.

Jim walked out of his mountain cabin and sat down on a bench his grandfather had made years back. His eyes were drawn to the tiny cemetery a hundred yards from the cabin. His mother and father and grandmother were buried there ... and now his grandfather rested forever beside his wife of sixty years. Jim sighed. Now the cabin and the woods around it had grown too lonesome for Jim to remain. Everything he planned to take with him had been packed up and put in the bed of the pickup truck. He was ready to go. He walked over to the cemetery to say good-bye to the only family he had ... that he knew of. His grandfather's old dog, Brandy, was buried beside the man who had raised her from a pup. Brandy had grieved herself to death after the old man had died. She had never left the old man's final resting place. Wouldn't eat, wouldn't take a drink of water. She just gave up and pined away. Devoted to the end.

Jim went back to the place where he'd been raised, and walked through the roomy cabin one last time. He was leaving the only home he'd ever really known, and wonderful memories flooded the young man. He turned away and walked outside and got into his pickup. He drove away and did not look back.

Raines City, C.D.

"Have you heard from the general?"

"They made it as far as Nevada," the commo officer said.
"They're ... in bad shape."

The team?"

"Most are dead, including Jersey and Coop. They all have the virus."

"General Raines?"

"He's showing the first signs of the infection."

"For years he fought all over the fucking world, only to be brought down by a goddamn virus from space!"

"Yes, sir."

"You feel all right, Brady?"

"No, sir. The medics say I've got it. You?"

"I've got the first signs. It won't be long now. Tell the general this will probably be our last transmission. And ... tell him good luck."

"Yes, sir."

Idaho

Jim stayed on the back roads after leaving the wilderness area, avoiding any major highways. He passed through small towns that he had visited often in the past. They were devoid of life. There were rotting bodies in the streets.

"My God!" Jim said, pulling over to the curb. "What the hell has happened?"

But the dead don't speak, and there was no one left alive to tell him. At least, that's what he first thought.

A bullet whined off the cab of the truck, just inches from Jim's head. Jim floorboarded the gas pedal and the pickup roared forward. In his side mirror, Jim watched as half a dozen men ran out of an alley, all of them armed. Then he was out of the small town, speeding down the highway, heading south in one hell of a hurry.

"Shit!" Jim yelled as his heart began to slow its beating and the adrenaline ceased its wild rush through his system. "What the jumpin' Jesus Christ is going on around here?"

Several miles out of town, Jim pulled off the highway and drove down a gravel road for several hundred yards. There, he dug in a rucksack and belted on a pistol, a .45-caliber auto-loader. The belt had four full magazines in a web clip pouch. From another duffel bag, Jim took out a Ruger Mini-14 with a collapsible stock and a bag filled with twenty-and thirty-round magazines. The magazines were all full. He jacked a round into the chamber of the Mini-14 and clicked it on safety. He got out a canteen and took a swig of pure mountain spring water. He had jugs of the water in the bed of the truck. Feeling better, he rolled a cigarette and smoked, further calming his still-rattled nerves. Then he got back behind the wheel and once more headed south.

Northern Nevada

Ben forced himself to eat a few bites of food and drink some coffee. He had to keep his strength up despite the

infection that was beginning to spread through his body. Judging from the others he'd seen with the wasting disease, Ben figured he had two to five days to live, at the max.

He had tried all that morning to contact somebody, anybody, at Raines City. Nothing. He had tried all the Rebels' emergency frequencies. Nothing.

He felt certain that not all the Rebel Army was dead. His medical people had told him that in the hurried tests they had performed, some people had a built-in immunity to this ... unknown bug that was sweeping the world. The doctors didn't know if the immunity was in the individual's blood, or what. They had not had time to complete their tests before they, to a person, were felled by this seemingly unstoppable virus.

Ben looked over at the row of graves a hundred or so feet away. Shallow, narrow graves. His team. To a person. Cooper and Jersey among the dead. Married briefly, buried together.

He looked up at the sound of vehicles on the road. Ben reached for his weapon. A lot of vehicles, maybe a dozen or more. So not everyone was gone. But what kind of person remained?

Ben's team had pulled off the road and into deep timber just a few miles south of the Idaho line when the first few Rebels began getting sick. Then his team began dying. Now he was alone and he was showing some serious symptoms of the virus.

Ben listened as the vehicles traveled on. He turned on his CB radio and listened to the chatter.

"Man, I gotta find me a woman pretty damn quick," the male voice said. "I'm gettin' tired of that damn whiny bitch

we grabbed up in Mountain Home. All she does is squall and bitch. A man can't enjoy pussy with all that hollerin' goin' on."

"We'll get shut of her a little bit further on down the road," another voice replied. "We'll cut east soon as we can and slide over into Utah. Pick us up some Mormon pussy."

"So much for what kind of people those are," Ben muttered, clicking off the CB to conserve the battery.

Not that he would need much more time—or have much more time, he thought bitterly. He felt like warmed-over shit. He thought he'd take a nap. Maybe he'd feel better when he woke up.

When Ben awakened, he was looking up into the tanned face of a young man with the greenest eyes Ben had ever seen.

"I thought you were dead, sir," the young man said.

"I will be before long," Ben replied. "I have the bug."

"The bug?"

"The virus. Do you feel all right?"

"I feel fine. Sir, what in the hell is going on?"

"Have you been living in a cave, son?"

The young man smiled. Very handsome young man, Ben thought. Maybe thirty years old, dark brown hair, square-jawed. Well built. Powerful-looking. Ben could not be sure, as he was lying down, looking up. But he judged the young man to be about six feet tall.

"Sort of, sir. I lived with my family in what used to be called the Great Primitive Area of Idaho. We got no TV at all, not since the satellite dish went busted, and radio wasn't all

that great either. Especially the last month or so. Do we have spacemen landing in America?"

Ben chuckled and sat up. "No. That was a rumor started by ... Hell, I don't know who started it. Doesn't matter. What we have, had, is a number of capsules landing all over the world. They carried some sort of terrible plague. People began dying by the thousands. How did you find me?"

"I pulled up behind some pretty rough-talking guys. Was listening to them on the CB. I decided I better hole up somewhere until they were far away. I saw this road and took it Who are you? What are you, military?"

"Rebels."

"Really? Like in Raines's Rebels?"

"Yes. I'm Ben Raines."

The young man sat back on his butt in the spring growth of grass. *"The Ben Raines? General Raines?"*

"Yes. And you are?"

"Jim LaDoux."

"You have a French name with Irish eyes, Jim."

"Cajun French, General. I was born in south Louisiana. My dad took us north to my grandpa's place in Idaho when I was four years old. My mother was from Ireland. My gramps said I had a hell of a combination in me. Cajun and Irish."

"Fire up that camp stove over there, Jim. I'll get the coffee. Then we'll get down to some serious talk."

"Suits me. Maybe then you can tell me what is really going on."

TWENTY-FIVE

"What's going to happen, General?" Jim asked.

"How do you mean?"

"To the world."

"The world will survive, Jim. It did before, after the Great War, I mean."

"The people then."

"More people will come out of this than it looks right now. Back years ago, when I first started roaming America to assess the damage, I thought only a handful of people had survived. I was very wrong. I suspect it will be the same this time."

"But you found enough people to start rebuilding."

"No, they found me, Jim. At first I didn't want any part of it. The job seemed too large; impossible for a handful to attain."

"But you did it."

The people did it. But this time..." Ben shook his head and didn't finish his thought.

"My dad and grandpa used to argue about the SUSA. But they both agreed it was a fine thing you did."

"What was the argument then?"

"Whether it would last."

"It lasted for more years than I thought it would." Ben looked over at Jim's beat-up pickup. "It's seen its better days, Jim."

Jim smiled. "I'll sure agree with that."

"When the time comes, and it won't be long now, you take my Humvee."

"I couldn't do that, General!"

"Why not? I won't have any use for it. You take it And my old Thompson."

Jim's eyes narrowed. "The magic gun."

"That's nonsense, Jim. There is nothing magic about it. It's a .45-caliber spitter, that's all. Hell, it's not even the original weapon. My ordnance people kept the original design and made it better. It's lighter, a bit faster, and easier to handle. But it's still a hell of a weapon. Now, hand me that briefcase I had you get from the Humvee."

Ben took a sip of hot coffee and opened the metal case. "I want you to have this too, Jim. Guard it carefully while you're memorizing some locations in here." He opened a folder. "These are the locations of Rebel supply depots, all over North America. Food, water, fuel, weapons, ammo, medical supplies. Believe me, you're going to need them. Memorize them, then destroy the papers. You don't want them to fall into the wrong hands."

"Yes, sir."

"You've got a Mini-14. That's a good, dependable weapon. The Thompson is better for close-in fighting. That .45-caliber slug will stop a man when that 5.56 won't. Practice with it. It won't take you long to become proficient with it. I've also got an M-14 in that Humvee. Take it too. It's a hell of a weapon. It's also a son of a bitch on full auto." Ben smiled. "You'll see what I mean."

"Are there any Rebels left, General?"

"I'm sure there are. But those that made it scattered. And that reminds me of something I need to do." He took a piece of paper and wrote for a couple of minutes. He folded the paper, put it in a waterproof pouch, and carefully closed the pouch. He handed it to Jim. "This will introduce you in case you run into other Rebels." He chuckled. "But I don't know if you're the last Rebel or the first Rebel. Time will tell, I suppose. Let me rest a while, Jim. Then we'll talk some more."

While Ben rested, Jim transferred his gear from his pickup to the Humvee. Then he went over the weapons Ben had told him about. He put the Thompson on the front seat and placed the full clip pouch next to it. Then he squatted down in the shade and rolled a cigarette.

He was scared, no point in denying that. Scared right down to his boots. The full impact of what had happened and what was happening hit him hard. The whole world was in chaos. Millions were dead. America was no more. The commanding general of what had been the largest army in the world lay dying a few yards away. The Rebel Army was no more; only a memory.

And Jim was alone in a hostile world.

And scared.

He looked over at Ben Raines. Ben's eyes were open, looking at him.

"Scared, Jim?" Ben asked in a voice that was considerably weaker than it had been only a few hours before.

"Yes, sir."

"I was too, many years ago. When I decided to roam the nation after the Great War. It will pass in a very short time."

"If you say so, sir." Jim cut his eyes toward the old grown-over logging road. "Vehicles coming."

"Hide!" Ben said. "Get ready for a fight."

Jim grabbed the Thompson out of the Humvee, ducked into the brush, and knelt down.

A big four-door pickup truck rolled slowly into view. It had been refitted with huge tires and the body sat high off the ground. Four men got out, all of them armed.

"I told you I got me a smell of coffee," one said.

"You were right, Jones," another said. "You got you a hell of a nose."

"What do you men want?" Ben asked.

"Looks like to me you ain't in no shape to argue about whatever we want," another man said. "Looks like to me you're dyin' from the virus."

"That's right," Ben admitted. "How'd you men escape it?"

"Don't know, for sure," the fourth man replied. "Doctor down in Winnemucca said it looked like to him about one in ten people was immune. He didn't know why. I know you can't catch it by screwin'." The other three man joined him in dirty-sounding laughter. "We'd have all been dead by now if that was the case."

"By rape, you mean?" Ben said.

"Yeah, that's right. We wanted some pussy. We took it. So what? There ain't no law now. It's big dog eat little dog."

"How about the laws of decency?" Ben questioned, contempt thick in his voice.

"What are you, a preacher?"

Ben didn't reply, just looked at the man, disgust shining in his eyes.

"I don't think that man likes us very much, Otis," one of the men said.

"I don't give a damn what he likes," Otis replied. "Hell, he's dyin', You boys start goin' through the vehicles, take the weapons and anything else you think we might need. And we'll take one of them Hummers too. Hell, no. We'll take three of them."

"No, you won't," Jim said, standing up, the Thompson leveled at the quartet. There was about fifty feet between Jim and the outlaws.

"Who the hell are you?" Otis asked.

"It don't make no difference who he is," another of the men said. "Kill the son of a bitch!" He lifted his AR-15.

Jim squeezed the trigger and the Thompson stuttered. The man who'd ordered him killed went down, as did the man standing next to him.

The other two dropped their rifles and put their hands in the air. "Don't shoot!" one screamed. "Don't shoot!"

"Kill them," Ben said. "Do yourself and the world a favor and kill them."

"I can't do that," Jim protested. "They've surrendered."

Ben lifted his right hand from under the blanket, a .45 auto-loader in his hand. He squeezed the trigger twice, and the two joined their buddies on the ground.

"You killed those men in cold blood, General!" Jim said.

"They were about to kill me, Jim. Didn't you hear them?"

"Well ... yes ... but ... they had surrendered."

"And what were you going to do with them? Turn them over to the police?"

"Well ... no. But..." Jim hesitated.

"But what?" Ben questioned. "Turn them loose so they can rape and kill some more?"

"I..."

"Learn something now, Jim. Learn it and never forget it. For if you do forget it, you're a dead man. You don't try to cure a rabid animal. You kill it. For the sake of society, you kill it. One of those men said it, Jim: It's big-dog-eat-little-dog time. And you'd better start being the biggest, baddest dog on the block."

Jim lifted the Thompson. "I like this weapon."

"I thought you would. Now stop trying to change the subject. Do you understand what I just told you?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"You've never killed a man before, have you?"

"No, sir. But it sure came naturally to me this time. There must be something wrong with me."

Ben laughed. "I'm sure glad you found me instead of some damn bleeding-heart liberal. You'd have been dead before you ever got started."

"You sound just like my grandpa, General."

"Hell, I'm old enough to be your grandfather, Jim."

Jim looked over at the dead men and swallowed hard a couple of times. "I'll drag those men into the timber and shovel some dirt on them."

"I'll heat up the coffee," Ben said. "And dig out a bottle of whiskey I have. You look like you could use a drink."

The next morning, Ben's condition had worsened. He was so weak he could not get to his feet. "Won't be long now," he told Jim. "If you have any questions, Jim, you better ask them."

"You want me to mark your grave?"

"No. There is no point in you taking the time to do that. When you leave here, you hunt you a hole and stay put for a time."

"I have to ask: for how long?"

Ben looked at the young man for a moment. "I think you will know when it's time to venture out and see what's going on."

"I figured you would say that," Jim replied with a boyish grin.

"I think it's probably the last thing I'll say, Jim. Except for ... good luck to you."

Ben lapsed into unconsciousness. An hour later, Ben Raines was dead.

TWENTY-SIX

Jim buried Ben's body deep, then covered the mound with sticks and leaves. He took all the weapons and ammo and supplies he felt he could safely carry in the small trailer out of the vehicles, and then pulled one of the Humvees out of the clearing and deep into the timber. Then he walked back to stand for a moment by Ben's grave.

"God, maybe You won't agree with me, but I feel like I just buried the most important man in modern times. I think history will bear me out." Despite the seriousness of the situation, he could not help but smile, thinking about both his grandpa and Ben Raines. "Providing, of course, that chapter in history isn't written by a liberal. You take care of General Raines, God. He may have been sort of rough around the edges, but he was a good man who saw his duty and did it when no one else would."

The radio in the Humvee started squawking, and Jim ran over to it and listened.

"General Raines? Do you copy this, sir?"

Jim picked up the mike and keyed. "General Raines is dead. I was with him when he died. This is Jim LaDoux."

There was silence on the other end for a time. "I'm leading a contingent of Rebels into Mexico. Not many of us left. Did the general leave any orders with you?"

"No. Nothing."

"What is your twenty?"

"Northern Nevada."

"You're sure that was General Raines that died?"

"I'm sure. I was with him for a couple of days. He gave me his Thompson."

"He *what?*"

"Gave me his Thompson."

"He must have seen something in you that he liked."

"I guess so. He talked to me for many hours. He said he didn't know if I was going to be the first Rebel or the last Rebel."

"Good luck to you, Jim."

"Same to you, sir."

The radio went silent.

Using the camp stove, Jim made coffee and smoked a cigarette, sitting and thinking for a time. He did not have a clue where he should go to be safe. Or should he go anywhere? Why not just stay put?

He looked over at the graves of the Rebels and thought of Ben Raines. No, he couldn't stay here. In the short time he'd known Ben, he had grown to like the man very much. Like and respect him. Staying here so close to his grave was out of the question.

Maybe staying on the move was the best thing he could do. At least that way he'd get a feel as to what was going on in the nation. He'd do that.

Without further hesitation, Jim walked over to the Humvee and pulled out. Whenever possible, he would avoid the major highways and stick to the back roads. Stay out of the cities and travel through the small towns, but only then when he had to.

With a sigh of resignation, Jim eased out of the dirt road onto the pavement. He had the Rebels' powerful, jacked-up CB on scan, and he would have to stay alert for any hint of trouble. He'd head south for a time, then cut east. He thought about that for a moment, and then pulled over to the shoulder of the road, digging in Ben's map pouch. He studied the very detailed maps for several moments, mapping out a route of secondary roads that would take him across the northern part of Nevada and into Utah. Once he got there, he'd make up his mind where to go next.

"Okay," Jim said aloud. "Here we go."

He made camp late that spring afternoon behind an old house that looked as though it had not been inhabited since the Great War—and that had been a long time back. Jim had no memories of that time, having been only a little boy during that terrible time.

The next morning, staying on mostly dirt and gravel roads, Jim made his way slowly eastward. When he would see highway signs indicating a town up ahead, he would avoid it, many times leaving the road and taking off cross-country. There was often chatter on the CB, and he could tell that some of it was close, but he never responded to any of it. Just after entering a national forest, he was forced to take a state highway south in order to connect with a highway that would take him east. He had run out of roads leading east.

He encountered no towns along this lonely stretch of highway, but he did see many homes built along and just off the roadway. He did not stop at any of them. As he approached Elko, he pulled over and again consulted his

maps, finding a way around the town. He was very reluctant to meet any people, not knowing what his reception would be.

He spent another lonely night in a deserted house south of Interstate 80, spending the early part of the evening listening to chatter on the CB. Obviously, there were a lot more survivors of the sickness than he first thought ... and many of them appeared to be less than friendly. He also heard gunfire on the CB.

"There is a war going on out there," Jim muttered. "But who is fighting who and which side is winning?"

He had no way of knowing the answer to any of his questions.

The sounds of vehicles approaching from the south reached him. Vehicles with loud mufflers. They stopped right in front of the house. Jim reached for the Thompson and clicked it off safety.

"Get them bitches in the house!" a hard voice yelled a few seconds after the engines were silenced and the roaring of the loud mufflers ceased.

"Oh, Lord," Jim muttered.

"This young one got herself braced in here, and she's kickin' like a mule," another said.

"Break her face and then her fingers then," the first voice said. "That won't hurt what she's got between her legs."

"Hold on, Lou," a third voice commanded. "I don't want no passed-out pussy. You and Claude get them two you got in the house. Stay with them. Me and Roger'll try to talk this one out."

"Okay, Jake. Come on, you two. Move your asses."

"Please," a woman's voice said, reaching Jim. "Don't do this to us. We haven't done anything to you."

"We're about to do something to you," a man said, then laughed. "And if you'll just lay back and relax, you'll enjoy it. Right, Claude?"

"Damn you to hell!" the woman yelled. "That girl is only fourteen years old."

"Well, that'll be some prime pussy then, won't it?" Lou replied. "I want that young stuff first. I like to hear 'em holler."

"You sorry piece of crap!" the woman yelled.

That got her a smack across the face.

Lou pushed the woman up onto the old porch and stepped up behind her. Jim stepped out of the shadows and gave the man the butt of the Thompson in the center of his face. Lou didn't even grunt. He fell back onto the ground, unconscious, his face smashed and bleeding.

"Lou?" Claude yelled just as Jim grabbed the woman's arm and pushed her through the open door into the darkened house. "Be quiet," he told her. "I'm a friend."

"Lou? Damn it, boy. Talk to me."

"Damn you to hell!" the woman Claude was holding yelled, and broke free from his grasp.

She darted away just enough so Jim could see the man's outline in the dim starlit night. He pulled the trigger of the Thompson, and Claude caught a short burst of .45 slugs in the belly. He was flung backward as if hit by a sledgehammer.

Jim could see another man standing by a truck. He gave that man a burst, most of the slugs striking the man, some of

them sparking and howling off metal. The man screamed and went down to his knees, holding his torn belly.

"Jake!" Roger yelled, running toward the man. He didn't run far. Jim leveled the SMG and finished the magazine, giving Roger a neck-to-hip taste of .45-caliber justice.

"You ladies can get your friend out of that vehicle now," Jim said, ejecting the empty mag and clicking in place a full one. "I'm a friend. These men won't bother you anymore."

"Are they dead?" the woman in the house asked.

"I doubt this one on the ground in front of me is," Jim replied. "But if the other three aren't dead, they soon will be. Go on, get your young friend. I have food and I'll make some coffee. I could use some."

Jim felt sort of queasy in his stomach. He'd had fist-fights in school in the small town where he often attended school—when his parents weren't home-schooling him—but never anything like what had happened with General Raines and now this. He'd seen death before, of course, but he had never caused it.

Jim stepped off the porch and removed the pistol from Lou. The man was still out cold, but breathing evenly. Blood leaked from his smashed nose and mouth. Jim did not know what in the hell he was going to do with the man.

"I'm Jenny," the woman Jim had pushed into the house said, stepping out to stand beside him. "I'm a nurse. I'll check on the other men."

"Thanks," Jim replied as the other two women walked into view in the dim light.

"I'm Peggy and this is Pam, my cousin," a woman said. "I want to thank you for what you did."

"No problem," Jim said. "Glad to have been able to help."

"The three out here are dead," Jenny called. "I've collected their guns. I guess we'd better keep them. We'll need them."

"You sure will," Jim called. "We'll check the trucks for other weapons and ammo after we have some coffee."

Jim lit a camp lantern, and the living room of the old house was filled with light. Then he dragged the unconscious Lou into the room. While Jim made coffee, Jenny checked Lou.

"His nose is broken and he's got some teeth knocked out," she said. "But other than probably a slight concussion, he's all right."

"He's a pig," Peggy said. "If I ever see him again, I'll kill him. I swear I will."

"Did the men ... ah ... sexually assault you ladies?" Jim asked, clearly embarrassed at having to ask.

Jenny smiled at him. She was really a pretty woman, Jim thought.

"No, they didn't," Jenny replied. "This is where they planned on raping us. What is your name, mister?"

"Jim. Jim LaDoux. I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce myself."

"Well, you were sort of busy there for a couple of minutes. Where did you come from? You're not from around here."

"Idaho. And I still don't know exactly what is going on in America. Do you?"

"Germ warfare," Peggy told him. "That's what the newscasters said."

She grimaced. "When we had newscasters, that is."

"Who started it?" Jim asked.

The woman shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think anybody does."

"I heard on the CB that it came from somewhere out in space," Pam said. "And that the government knew they were coming but didn't tell anybody about them."

"I was told they came from out in space," Jim said. "By someone who should know."

"Who?" Jenny asked.

"General Ben Raines."

The two older women looked at him, Peggy blurting out, "*Ben Raines! The Ben Raines?*"

"Himself. In person."

"Where did you meet him?" Peggy asked.

"West of here. He was dying from the virus. I stayed with him until he died. He talked to me a lot. Told me about the space capsules. Told me that some people have a built-in immunity to the disease. He gave me his personal vehicle and a lot of supplies. He gave me his Thompson."

"What's a Thompson?" Pam asked.

"Yes," Jenny said. "What's a Thompson?"

Jim pointed to the weapon. "That. A submachine gun."

"I've seen those in old gangster movies," Pam said. "Is that supposed to be something special?"

"It saved your lives," Jim said. "You saved our lives, Jim," Peggy corrected.

TWENTY-SEVEN

While the women were opening and heating packets of MREs, Lou staggered to his feet. He stopped staggering when he found himself looking square into the muzzle of a pistol, a .45 auto-loader, in the hands of Jim LaDoux.

"Where's my buddies?" Lou mumbled the words past swollen lips.

"Dead. You want to join them?"

"Not if I can help it. We wasn't gonna harm them women. We just wanted some pussy, that's all."

"What you were planning is called rape, you stupid bastard."

"I reckon. I hurt something awful, mister."

"Would you rather be dead?"

"Hell, no!"

"Then shut up and sit down on this porch."

"Yes, sir." Lou sat.

Jim tied his hands behind him and then tied him to a support porch.

"Are you gonna leave me like this all night?" Lou asked.

"Yes."

"It gets cold out here! I'll freeze to death."

"Good. Then I won't have to fool with you, will I?"

Lou said no more.

Back in the house, Jenny asked, "Where are you going, Jim?"

"I really don't know," Jim admitted. "I thought I'd just travel around, see what-all has happened."

"Millions of people dead is what has happened," the nurse told him. "The hospital where I worked in Elko was swamped with dying people. Then the doctors and nurses began contracting the virus and dying. The place became a death house." She slowly shook her head. "There was nothing I do for them. There is no cure. I couldn't take it anymore."

"I watched my whole entire family die," Pam said. "All my neighbors except one died."

"What happened to that one?" Jim asked.

"I don't know. He was still alive when I got in my dad's car and drove away. I was hysterical. I don't even remember why I left the car, or where. I guess I ran out of gas. I don't know. I don't remember."

"You suffered what a lot of the survivors I've spoken with did," Jenny said. "A fever, a rash, a loss of memory, then complete recovery." She looked at Jim. "How about you?"

"I've never been sick a day in my life," Jim replied.

Jenny nodded her head. "I've spoken to a few who were like that too. Had no symptoms at all."

"I didn't have no symptoms neither," Lou called from the porch. "But I sure would like to have something for the pain in my head right now. Can't you all give me something?"

Jenny walked out onto the porch and looked down at the trussed-up man. She touched the butt of the pistol stuck behind the waistband of her jeans. "Yeah, I can give you something that can end all your pain."

"Aw, come on, lady!" Lou hollered. "Lighten up, will you? Nobody said nothing about killin' you women. You could have give us some pussy and we'd have turned you loose. Hell, who knows, you might have enjoyed it."

"I really, really doubt it," Jenny said. "Now you shut your damned filthy mouth and keep it shut."

Lou shut his mouth.

The four of them ate their MREs and then had some coffee. "I wish I had a Coke," Pam said.

"Honey," Peggy said, "you better get used to doing without a lot of things. Once the current supply is gone, there'll be a lot of things we'll all be doing without."

"But everything will be all right pretty soon, won't it?" the teenager asked. "I mean, the government will have it all fixed soon, right?"

Jim and the two older women exchanged glances. Pam picked up on the looks immediately.

"What do those looks mean?" she demanded.

Jenny took the girl's hand in hers. "It means, Pam, that this is something the government can't fix. Because there is no government. I'm old enough to remember the Great War, as many called it. I was just a girl, but I remember it. It was years before things got even halfway right. And that was due in no small part to a man named Ben Raines."

"And now he's dead," Peggy said.

"Yes," Jim said, stirring a packet of sugar into his coffee.

"And you don't think the SUSA survived this?" Jenny asked.

"No. No government in the world did. That came from Ben Raines's own mouth."

"Then what are we going to do?" Pam asked.

"Survive, honey," Peggy told her. "Band together and survive. Right, Jim?"

"That's the name of the game," Jim said. "And it's the only game in town."

As had long been his custom, Jim was up at dawn. He was careful not to wake the others as he stepped outside for a moment. It was early spring, but the morning was chilly. He had draped a blanket over Lou's shoulders before they all went to sleep, and the man now looked at him with pleading eyes. His face was swollen, and the area around both eyes was a combination of deep blue, dark green, and black.

"What are you gonna do with me?" Lou asked.

"That's up to the ladies," Jim told him. "They're the ones you kidnapped."

"That Jenny is a mean bitch. She'd like to kill me."

"She might just do that."

"And you wouldn't interfere?"

"No."

"You're as sorry as them bitches."

Jim chuckled. "You kidnapped women to rape them and you're calling me sorry?"

"They could have just give us some snatch. It wouldn't have hurt them none. I ain't never heard of no pussy being worn out by humpin'."

Jim shook his head in disgust and walked back into the old house. Jenny was out of her blankets and dressed.

"You heard Lou's remarks?" Jim asked.

"I heard him. What are you going to do with that worthless piece of crap?"

"Probably tie him up in the shed with his dead buddies and leave him. He'll eventually work loose. I'm not going to kill him."

"No. I wouldn't do that either." She smiled briefly. "But let him continue thinking I will. How about you, Jim?"

"What do you mean?"

"What happens to you?"

"I don't know. I'll just wander, I guess."

"Good way to get killed."

"I can't just stick my head in the sand and think nothing happened and nothing is wrong."

"You could come with us. Peggy and I talked last night. I know of a little community just over the line in Utah. Several of those people survived the plague. We're going to take Pam and head over that way." Again she smiled. "Why not come with us? At least guard us till we get there."

"Good idea. Okay, I'll head over there with you. Check it out. But I doubt if I'll stay."

While they were packing up to leave, Jim asked, "Which truck are you taking, Jenny?"

"The newer one. The one with four doors."

"I saw some extra gas cans in the others. I'll transfer them for you. And I've got a siphon pump. I'll top off the tanks, then disable the remaining trucks."

Lou watched as Jim filled up gas cans and topped off the tanks. "You gonna leave me a truck to get gone in?" he called from the porch.

"I'll leave two trucks," Jim replied. "How you get gone is up to you."

"What do you mean?"

"Watch." Jim popped the hoods and began ripping out wiring while Lou sat on the porch and cussed him.

"How am I supposed to get out of here?"

"Once you get loose and out of the shed, you can walk."

"You're about a sorry bastard, you know that?"

"If you don't close your mouth, I'm going to leave your fate up to Jenny. You want that?"

Lou shut up.

All the gear loaded, Jim led Lou to the rear of the house and shoved him into the shed.

"These guys are beginning to stink!" Lou griped. "You can't leave me in here with them. That ain't right."

"You'll be able to work loose in an hour or so. Have fun."

Lou was still shouting and cussing as Jim and the women drove away, heading east.

TWENTY-EIGHT

The gathering of men and women in the northwest corner of the state greeted Jim and the three women cordially if not overly warmly. Jim understood their standoffish attitude. It was not smart to take people at face value while chaos ruled the world.

The attitude of the small gathering softened considerably when the women had finished telling their story of how they'd met Jim LaDoux. A man stepped forward and offered his hand to Jim.

"John Stanley, Mr. LaDoux. Glad to meet you."

Jim shook the hand as the others came forward to greet him.

"I'm Loris Stanley, Mr. LaDoux," a woman said with a genuine smile. "John's wife. How about some coffee and a sandwich?"

"Sounds good, ma'am," Jim replied.

Over coffee and sandwiches, Jim was questioned extensively. He didn't object to it; he understood the reasons behind it. But when he got to the part about Ben Raines, the group fell silent.

"The general is really dead?" John asked.

"Yes," Jim replied. "I buried him."

"For years I thought about pulling my people out and traveling south to join the SUSA," John said.

"But ... we've always done things pretty much our own way here, without much interference, so I never did. But I always greatly admired the man."

"I only knew him for a few hours really," Jim said. "But I really liked him."

"And now, Jim, your plans are?"

Jim shrugged his shoulders. "Travel on, I suppose." He smiled. "Like my grandpa used to say: See what's around the next bend and over the next hill."

"Trouble, I would imagine, Jim," John said. "Why not stay here with us? You'd be more than welcome."

Jim slowly shook his head. "No ... I've lived a very isolated life, John. Sometimes I went to school in town, but most of the time my parents educated me at home. I can build things. I can work on any combustion engine. I can hunt and fish. I know my way around any wilderness area and I can survive in it. But I haven't seen anything of the United States. I've never seen a city except in picture books. I've never ridden in an elevator, or flown in a plane. You understand what I'm saying?"

The older man smiled. "Yes, I do, Jim. I really do. Well, you stay here with us for as long as you like." He laughed. "We might put you to work for your supper, but the food is good and the company is outstanding."

Jim stayed for the better part of a week, and then, one gorgeous morning just at dawn, he pulled out. He had said his good-byes the night before, and there was no one out by the dirt road to see him off. Jim had spoken extensively with John about the best way to get across the state without running

into a lot of people. He and John had gone over many maps, charting out the best route, and Jim headed south, on a county road. He saw no one the first day out. Not one living person ... or dead person, for that matter.

On the second day after leaving the group in extreme northwest Utah, Jim was on a county road heading toward I-80 when he saw the body in the road. A pickup truck was parked on the side of the road. Jim pulled over and stopped, getting out of the Humvee and carefully looking all around him. It was then he heard a groan of pain. He stared at the body in the road. It had not moved. He checked the body. A middle-aged man, very dead. Then he again heard a groan. It was coming from the other side of the truck. Jim walked over, the Thompson at the ready. It was a woman. Her head and arm were bloody. Jim knelt down just as the woman opened her eyes and looked up at him. Her eyes grew wide with fright.

"Take it easy," Jim said. "I won't hurt you."

"My father?" the woman whispered.

"There is a man in the road. Dressed in coveralls."

"That's my dad. Is he ... dead?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. What happened?"

"My head hurts," the young woman said, and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Jim picked the lady up and carried her to his Humvee, carefully placing her in the passenger seat and belting her in. He quickly checked the bed of the truck. No luggage. He dragged the body of the man out of the road and into the ditch, placing him on his back. Jim contemplated burying him,

then thought better of it. The body had not stiffened or swelled, and that meant the attack had not occurred that long ago. Whoever did it might be back. Jim pulled out, heading south. About ten miles from the Interstate, Jim spotted several houses and pulled in behind one, tucking the Humvee in close to the rear. He walked through the house. It was empty, and obviously had been looted, probably more than once, from the looks of things.

He carried the young woman inside and placed her on a couch that he had righted. Then he bathed her face, washing away the dried blood. The blood on her arm had come from her head wound. There was a knot on her head and a small cut. The cut was not serious, the knot might be very serious. Only time would tell. He was sure she had a concussion. How serious? Again, only time would tell.

The home used propane, so Jim checked the stove. It worked. He put on water for coffee, using his own water, and walked back into the living room. The woman had awakened and was looking at him.

"I have a splitting headache," she said.

"I'm sure you do." Jim held up three fingers. "How many fingers do you see?"

"Three."

"Now?"

"Four."

"I put water on for coffee. It'll be ready in a few minutes."

"I could use some."

"Feel like talking?"

"Sure."

"What happened back there?"

"Dad pulled over to help a man standing by his truck, the hood up. That was the truck you saw back there. Then two other men appeared. One of them hit me on the side of my head with a rifle butt. I woke up several times in the ditch. I could see dad in the road, and the broke-down pickup. The next thing I know, I was looking up at you. Are you sure my dad was dead?"

"I'm sure."

"Was he beaten?"

"He was shot several times in the chest."

The young woman tried to get up, and fell back against the cushions. "Whoa!" she said. "I'm dizzy."

"Don't move," Jim warned. "Just lie still for a time. I'll get us some coffee."

Jim found two unbroken cups and wiped them clean, then filled them with hot coffee. He took several packets of sugar and the coffee into the living room and set them on an end table. He held up the packets of sugar.

"One sugar, please," the young woman said.

"Be right back," Jim said with a smile. "I forgot the spoons."

The coffee sugared and stirred, Jim said, "I'm Jim LaDoux. And you are?"

"Ruby. Ruby Davis. Glad to meet you, Jim LaDoux. You're French?"

"My father was Cajun French. My mother was Irish."

"Dark hair and beautiful green eyes. Emerald green. I bet you've got a temper."

Jim again smiled. "So I've been told. How's the coffee?"

"Delicious."

"So what were you and your dad doing out on that lonely road?"

"We were heading for Dad's hunting cabin up in Idaho. Dad and some of his friends bought the place years ago. It's fairly isolated, and Dad thought we'd be safer there."

"Your mother?"

"She died a long time ago. I was just a little girl."

"No other family?"

"Some cousins back East. I don't know them at all. Dad and I were the only ones on our block to survive the virus. We didn't even get sick. We spent much of our time burying our friends in their backyards. It was ... depressing."

"I'm sure."

"Did you get sick?"

Jim shook his head. "No. Do you know for sure what really happened?"

"No. Not really. We heard so many conflicting reports. Everything from capsules from outer space to an explosion at some sort of laboratory that released the germs into the air. I don't know what to believe. What did you hear?"

"Basically the same thing."

"The whole thing is ... eerie. Like a really bad dream. I keep hoping and praying that I'll wake up and everything will be back to normal. But every day turns out to be just like the day before."

"How old are you, Ruby?"

"Twenty-five last month. Heck of a way to spend a birthday. You?"

"Twenty-nine. I'm really sorry about your dad, Ruby."

"Thanks. You believe in God, Jim?"

"Why ... yes, I do."

"Me too. So did my dad. So I guess he's in a better place now."

"Yes. That's the way to look at death."

"I'm really tired. Think I'll get some sleep." She set her coffee cup on the end table. "Don't let me sleep too long."

"I won't. I'll stand guard while you get some rest."

Ruby was asleep in moments. Jim walked through the house. It had been looted, torn apart. Clothing had been scattered all over the place, drawers pulled out and slung to the floor. Jim wondered if the looters had been looking for money. If so, why? What the hell good was money now? It was worthless.

Jim refilled his coffee cup and walked outside to the back of the house. He listened for a moment to some birds singing. Obviously, the virus had not affected animal life, for he had seen many birds, and numerous types of animals, since leaving the cabin in the wilderness area.

He heard a thump from inside the house, and walked back into the living room. Ruby had fallen off the couch. Jim knelt down beside the woman and tried to find a pulse. There was none. She was staring up at him through sightless eyes.

I'm glad you believe in God, Ruby," Jim whispered. "Have a peaceful journey home."

TWENTY-NINE

Jim found a shovel in the toolshed and dug a shallow grave in the hard dry earth. He wrapped Ruby in a blanket and buried her in the backyard. He stood for a moment by the grave, trying to think of some words. He finally recited the Lord's Prayer and walked back into the house.

Jim sat for a time, drinking coffee and thinking. He finished the pot he'd made, and then rummaged around the kitchen, finding several cans of food, including three cans of mixed fruit. He fixed a large can of pork and beans for his supper. When he had eaten his fill, he walked outside and stood for a moment in the gathering twilight. It would be full dark in a few minutes. He would sleep until dawn and then take off again. With a sigh, Jim turned and went back into the house. He laid his sleeping bag on the carpet and stretched out. He closed his eyes. He was asleep just as the night settled over the land.

Using high-powered binoculars, Jim studied the Interstate for several minutes. Two pickup trucks and one car passed on the Interstate, all heading east. Jim slipped under the overpass unseen—he hoped—and cut onto a dirt road, heading south. At a general store that was located in a town that was just a dot on the map, Jim fueled up and then pulled around to the back and parked, entering the store by the back door. The skeletal remains of two people were on the floor of the storeroom. Jim could tell by the manner of dress that the remains were those of a man and a woman.

In the store proper, Jim rummaged around the mess and found several items that he needed. Toothpaste, toothbrushes, aspirin, and numerous cans of food. He boxed everything up and put it in the trailer. Then he opened a can of warm Coke, and walked outside to sit on the front porch and enjoy his soft drink.

He had found a big box of Prince Albert smoking tobacco in the store and a display box full of papers. He rolled himself a smoke and sipped his soft drink.

He looked up at the sound of a vehicle approaching, putting his right hand on the Thompson. It was an old pickup truck. A very old pickup. One man in it. The pickup pulled up to the front of the store, and the old man behind the wheel cut the engine and stared at Jim.

"Howdy, boy," the man said.

"Morning, sir."

The old man chuckled. "Just passin' through, son?"

"You might say that."

"You ain't got the sickness, have you?"

"No, sir. I feel fine."

"Did you find Barstow and his wife in the store?"

"I found the bodies of a man and a woman, yes, sir."

"I discovered 'em last month. Left 'em where they was. Didn't see no point in buryin' 'em. Hundreds and hundreds of dead people in this county. All over the damn place. It was a major stink for a time."

"I can imagine."

"My wife caught the sickness and died. We was married for forty years. I never even got sick a day. Do you know what caused all this tragedy?"

"Not really. I've heard a half dozen different theories."

"I don't believe in them little green spacemen with big peckers."

Jim laughed. "I hadn't heard that one."

"Oh, yeah. That one was one of the first rumors. But you know what?"

"What's that?"

"I think it was God who done it."

"You really believe that, mister?"

"Sure do. End-of-the-world time, son. Armageddon."

"Then how come we're still alive?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know that? I ain't God, boy."

Jim didn't know if the old man was putting him on or not.

"So what are you going to do, mister?"

"Wait until I'm called home. Say, where'd you get that old Chicago piano?"

"Get what?"

"That old Thompson submachine gun."

"Ben Raines gave it to me."

"Ben Raines, huh? The general?"

"That's right."

"Now, why would he do something like that?"

"He was dying."

"Do tell? Well, I never liked the man myself. Met him a couple of times. I thought him to be a tad on the know-it-all side."

"There were a lot of people who would disagree with you."

"I'm sure. Well, I got to be gettin' on, boy. Got things to do. Take care of yourself. See you."

Before Jim could reply, the old man slipped his rattletrap truck into gear and rattled away.

"Be safe," Jim said to the cloud of dust trailing behind the old pickup.

Jim sat for a time, finishing his Coke and smoke. Then his eyes caught movement at the end of the long porch. He placed his right hand on his Thompson, then withdrew it and smiled as a puppy ran out from under the porch. Jim called to the animal, and the dog ran to him and jumped up into his arms, licking his face.

"All right, all right," Jim said, holding the pup away from him and looking him over.

It was a male, probably four or five months old. But what breed of dog was up for grabs. It certainly was a mixture of several breeds: German shepherd, some sort of Alaskan breed, and just plain mutt. But for sure it was going to be a big one.

"You know what?" Jim told the dog. "I think I'm going to keep you. I need some company and you need a home. So welcome to your traveling home."

When he approached the next town, a slightly larger one than the one where he had stopped at the country store, Jim stopped and studied the town from a distance, using the

high-powered binoculars Ben had given him. He could detect no signs of life. He checked his map. He would sure avoid the next town, for the map showed it to be a town of about six thousand. The population of the town he was approaching was not listed.

Jim slowly drove to the edge of town. There was nothing on the CB and the scanner was picking up nothing.

"There has to be someone left alive," Jim muttered. "It's inconceivable that everybody in town would die."

He stopped at a house on the edge of town and pulled around to the back, getting out, Thompson in hand. The puppy lay on his blanket on the floorboards, showing no interest in leaving the Humvee. Jim stood still and listened. Not a sound.

He pushed open the back door and looked in. The kitchen was empty. But the first bedroom he came to wasn't empty: it had two bodies in it. The remains of a man and woman were on the bed. Jim walked closer and looked. A pistol lay on the floor. The woman had been shot once in the head, and it looked like the man had then put the muzzle in his mouth and pulled the trigger; the top of his head had been blown off.

Jim left the house and went to the next house. Empty. Farther on down the street, he came to a small block building that housed a veterinarian's office. Jim pulled around back and went in. The cages were all empty, so no animals had starved to death. Jim prowled through the supplies, and took what he felt he might need for the dog. He found a case of canned puppy food and took that. The bags of dog food had all been rat-chewed. He picked up several collars of various

sizes. Standing by his Humvee, Jim listened to the silence that surrounded him, the stillness broken only by the singing and calling of birds and the occasional distant barking of a dog.

The title of a book he'd read years back suddenly came to mind: *Brave New World*. Jim had read that novel several times as a teenager.

"Well, that's what this is, sort of," he said. "A new world." He looked inside the vehicle at the puppy, who was sitting on the front seat, looking at him. Jim had decided to call the animal Little Rebel. "All right, Little Reb. Let's go see our New World."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

After twenty years of Ben Raines chasing bad guys all over the world, there appear to be no more worlds to conquer, so to speak. And Ben is also getting old and weary of it all.

After many discussions with my publisher, I have decided to end the *Ashes* series.

In its place will be the new series: *The Last Rebel*. Number one in the new series will be out in September 2004. It will feature Jim LaDoux trying to survive in a world gone mad.

I hope you enjoy *The Last Rebel*.

William W. Johnstone

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at www.fictionwise.com.