

THE CHOSEN ONE

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this novel to my wife Connie, who has stood behind me and encouraged me all the way

CHAPTER ONE

White House, Washington DC

“Jesus H. Christ, Merlin this had better be good.” President Joseph Robertson rubbed his brow to ease the tension he felt. Looking across the table at Merlin Jackson, head of HEW in his administration, he said, “Just give it to me straight, Merl. No more bullshit.”

Looking uncomfortable, Merlin cleared his throat, “So far this week there are fifty-seven confirmed cases of the new disease. All of the people are isolated at the Center for Disease Control in Atlan-ta. Sir, I had Dr. Palmer fly up from the center. He can give us a better idea of what we are dealing with.”

Dr. Palmer stood up, went to the head of the table, and pulled a sheaf of papers from his briefcase.

“Mr. President, gentlemen, if you will read the report in front of you, it will explain that this disease started in a relatively small area. I will answer any questions after you have read the paper,” Dr. Palmer said.

President Robertson picked up the report and began to read. ‘The Center for Disease Control believed the disease had started on an Indian Reservation in New Mexico. Last year they had discovered a new virus caused by rat dung. This virus had killed a dozen people on the reservation. The doctors thought the new virus was the one from the reservation, but it had mutated into something far beyond any-thing they had ever seen. The disease was traced to three people who were on the reserva-tion at the time of the first outbreak. The new form of the disease was called to their attention a little over three months ago. At first they thought it was just typical mental illness cases until patients started dying for an undetermined reason. All the deaths occurred two weeks after the people came down with the illness.

‘The first patients went through four stages before dy-ing.

‘In the first stage patients had delusions of being God or servants of God. This initial stage lasted two to three days.

‘During the second stage the patient tried to make everyone around him believe the way he did, often violently forcing them to agree with him. This stage lasted four to five days.

‘The patient appeared calm and rational with the third stage. Often patients joked that they must have flipped out for a while. No symptoms of the former behavior were apparent. It lasted four to five days.

‘In every case of the fourth stage between day eleven and day fourteen, the patient went to sleep, fell into a comma, then died within a few hours.

‘Autopsies revealed no reason for their deaths. Every case was the same; reason of death was unknown. Doctors at the center came to the conclu-sion that this disease transmitted itself by contact. They knew this when two staff members who worked with the first pa-tients came down with the virus. Other staff members breathing the same air as the patients, but having no phys-ical contact with them, did not catch it. The staff con-cluded that the disease picked a host and stayed with it as long as

the host was not confined. When confined, the disease triggers something in the patient's mind that tells him or her to cease functioning.'

President Robertson paused and sipped from the water glass next to him. He picked up the paper again and read that, 'If the disease didn't find a new host it became dormant until someone touched the body. The center now puts the bodies in a sealed room and does the autopsies with mechanical arms. After the autopsy, they cremate the body to keep anyone else from getting infected.'

President Robertson rubbed his tired eyes then read on. 'Last month the virus mutated. The time span began to compress. It had taken two weeks from start to death: it now took eight days. In the CDC's opinion, this time span would decrease again.'

'At first, the center managed to destroy the disease in the body by cremating it. As the disease mutated, it adopted the ability to clone itself to another person before showing any signs of illness. Now two people were spreading the disease and it was expanding rapidly. The people with this new disease were not dying as quickly, if at all. The center estimated that over sixty-five per cent of them would live. People with the new disease have one thing in common. They are compelled to destroy anyone who is not like them. The center discovered these people to be very intelligent. They also have some form of non-verbal communication among themselves.'

'As of this morning, the CDC looks more like an armed prison than a research facility. Six members of the staff died at the hands of these patients last week alone. There is evidence the patients of the new disease—which is called "Gotze 2" after the man who discovered that the virus had mutated—manipulate the patients of the original virus. Some of the doctors believe the Gotze 2 patients get them to do the killings for them. The original virus causes the patients to become consumed by blinding rage, fearing nothing. These are the people who are the most dangerous. Only death can stop them once the Gotze 2 patients tell them to kill.'

'So far the center has been able to limit their exposure to each other. Most of the staff agrees that they are slowly losing this battle. Until fully developed, the doctors don't know which group the patients belong to. As it stands now, they estimated the facility has one or two months left to remain functioning. After that they will run out of staff. Most of the staff would have already left except they realize it wouldn't be any safer away from the hospital. They agreed that if they don't get a handle on this disease in the next three weeks, the patients will take the facility from them.'

President Robertson looked up from the paper; he waited until everyone had finished reading. "Dr. Palmer, what if I ordered troops from Fort Benning down there to use as guards?"

"No, sir, that is exactly what we don't want. The main reason armed troops wouldn't work is because of the infection rate. We would then have armed soldiers trying to kill us. If we introduce guns into the situation, I'm afraid we will be out of business by the end of next week."

"Do you have an estimate as to how far this will spread? Can you tell us what kind of time table we're talking about?" President Robertson asked.

"Yes, sir. We have a high and low estimate. The consensus is that the actual number will be in the middle of the high-low range. We estimate that probably forty per cent of the population will come down with this disease in the next six months. The mixture will be somewhere between thirty per cent the original virus to ten per cent Gotze 2."

President Robertson felt his chest tighten, "Jesus, half the country is going to come down with this thing."

"Now, on the high side of the estimate."

"Holy shit, Doctor, you mean that was the low estimate?"

"Yes, sir, it was."

"Go on, Doctor. I'm sure I won't like what you say next."

Looking uncomfortable, Dr. Palmer took a drink of water before continuing. "On the high side, we estimate that as many as eighty per cent of the population will come down with this disease. The

mixture here being fifty per cent original virus to thirty per cent Gotze 2.”

“Do you realize what you are saying, Doctor?”

“Yes, sir. I believe it will take decades for this country to recover from what happens in the next six months. We are monitor-ing outbreaks of this disease in almost every state. My personal opinion is, we won’t stop it before it overwhelms us.”

“How reliable are these estimates?”

“They have a plus or minus ten per cent error factor, sir.”

“Thank you for coming up here, Doctor. I’m sure you hated to leave your work at this critical stage,” the president said as he held out his hand.

Shaking the president’s hand, Dr. Palmer said, “If we don’t find something in the next three weeks, I’m going to take my family to a cabin I have in the Rockies. Then I can only pray we don’t become infected.”

“Do you think that is wise?”

“Sir, if we haven’t found something by that time, it will be too late to stop the progress of the disease. My hanging around would not help anyone. Sir, if I were you I would be thinking of a place where you and the First Lady could isolate yourselves until this has run it’s course. I believe it will in due time.”

“I appreciate your advice, Doctor. You could do something for me that would help me make my decisions in the coming weeks.”

“Anything I can do to help would be my pleasure, sir.”

“I was hoping you would say that, Doctor. It would be helpful if you would call me every morning and evening to keep me updated on your progress. Call this number and I’ll arrange for your call to reach me wherever I am.” The president said, writing a number on a piece of paper and handing it to him. Shaking Dr. Palmer’s hand again, the president walked him to the door.

Closing the door, he turned to glare at Merlin who was still seated at the table. “Merlin, why in hell wasn’t I told about the seriousness of this disease weeks ago?”

“Mr. President, we didn’t think it was that serious at the time, so we didn’t want to alarm you unnecessarily.”

“ALARM ME! Didn’t you hear what Dr. Palmer just said! He told us that half the population of this country is going to come down with a deadly disease. Merl, do you have any idea what this is going to do to our country? If it’s only half as bad as Dr. Palmer says, this government will cease to exist as it is now. I want you to arrange a meeting with the Joint Chiefs in two hours. Get with the director of the FBI and have him report anything out of the ordinary directly to me. Have the director of the CIA at Langley come here immediately. Think you can remember all of that, Merl?” the president asked in a sarcastic voice.

“Yes, sir, I’ll do it immediately,” Merl answered as he headed for the door.

Walking into the Oval Office, President Robertson sat down behind his desk and looked out the window at the white billowing clouds floating by. Of all the things a man had to face, this was a time he wished he wasn’t president. If what Dr. Palmer said was true and he had no reason to doubt him, millions of people were going to die. They would have no warning of their danger. Being a practical man, he knew a warning would be futile and would proba-bly kill many more people than the disease itself.

He knew that he had many plans to make, but for the moment he just wanted to sit and watch the clouds. Breaking out of his reverie, he looked up to see his wife standing in the doorway.

“What is it, Joseph? I’ve never seen you this troubled before,” she said.

“Sarah, I have decided to do something that’s going to cause the deaths of millions of people,” then he went on to explain about the disease.

“Joseph, from what you say, you are caught in a no win situation. You have to do what is best for

the country.”

“Thanks, Sarah, now leave me alone for a few minutes. I need to do some serious thinking. Then we can have lunch.”

She reached up and kissed him on the cheek and turned to leave the room. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that Joseph was deep in thought.

After his wife left, the president picked up the phone and rang his secretary.

His secretary said. “Yes Mr. President.”

“Ruth, get me Charlie Jacobs of NSC, on the phone.”

While waiting, he thought about the decision he was about to carry out. “God forgive me for what I am about to do,” he whispered. He knew that from this moment on he would not get a restful night’s sleep for as long as he lived.

CHAPTER TWO

Bill sat down to drink his coffee and read the morning paper. Tony, his live in girlfriend, was at the stove cooking him toast and eggs. Bill watched her as she worked. He marveled at the grace and efficiency of movement she showed while working.

“Good morning Hon, how are you feeling?” she asked.

“Better, but not much,” he answered, sipping his coffee.

Today would be his first day back on the job after a three-week absence, although he knew he should stay home the rest of the week. His boss was putting pressure on him to return to work. After the call from his boss yesterday, he decided he had better report to work this morning and find out what was going on.

“*My job,*” he thought. “*I wish there were something to move up to.*” It’s not that he didn’t like his job; just that after eighteen years of doing the same thing he wanted something that challenged his mind. Being an independent maintenance splicer in southern West Virginia could sometimes be trying, but mostly he suffered from doing the same thing day after day. He realized that this was what he had to look forward to for the next twenty or more years. Now at the ripe old age of thirty-eight he had come down with an illness and none of the doctors could tell him what it was. Oh, they had given him prescriptions all right but none of the medicines seemed to do any good.

He vividly remembered the first week, especially the nights. During the first week as darkness would fall his temperature started to rise and kept rising until around four o’clock in the morning when it would peak near one hundred and five degrees. His temperature would fall to near normal by four o’clock in the afternoon.

The second week his temperature would drop a little with each succeeding night and in the third week his temperature seemed to have stabilized at one hundred degrees.

Bill remembered the other day in the doctor’s office when he had thought he was going crazy. While sitting in the waiting room of the doctor’s office, he could hear voices inside his head. Looking all around when this happened he thought some one had spoken to him; he noticed that the other people were in their own little worlds. As the voices continued, he discerned there were two men talking to each other. This continued until the nurse called a man to go to an examining booth.

In all this time not a person in the room had spoken a word. It wasn’t until later, thinking about this that he decided he wasn’t crazy. Two people in the waiting room had been talking to each other but neither said a word that anyone could hear.

What frightened him was that he couldn’t tell anyone because they would think he was crazy. Hell, Bill wasn’t convinced himself that he hadn’t gone off the deep end.

In a way it would be nice to get back to work, He knew he had been a pain in the ass to Tony, but she stuck in there even though he had acted like a baby at times. He also knew he would never have had the patience that Tony displayed during this time.

Tony set the breakfast plate in front of him. He looked up at her saying, “Tony, you can take me to work this morning and then drop the truck off at the garage to have it serviced.”

“That sounds great, I could use the time to do some shopping in town. Can you think of anything I can pick up for you?”

"No, just pick me up around five o'clock, at the storeroom. Maybe we can eat supper out this evening."

"Ok, I've been wanting to eat at the new restaurant that opened in town a few weeks ago."

After Bill finished his meal, he went out to the garage, backed the truck out and closed the garage door. Sitting behind the wheel, he felt the small aches and pains of his unused muscles. *"It's going to take me a few days to get back in shape,"* he thought.

Bob, his next door neighbor, came out on the porch to pick up the morning paper and said, "How are you this morning, Bill?"

"No complaints."

"Well, I better get back inside. Have a good day."

Bill jerked upright. In his mind he heard Bob say, *"What a lucky son of a bitch. I'll bet he fucks himself half to death every night with the young goddess he lives with."* Bill heard this although Bob hadn't spoken a word.

"Am I going crazy?" he asked himself.

Just then Tony opened the truck door and got in. "What's the matter, Bill? You're white as a sheet."

"You would think I'm crazy if I told you." He started the truck and backed out of the driveway. On the way to work he kept thinking of what he had heard or thought he had heard.

When he pulled in the parking lot, Tony said, "Please take it easy today, Bill."

"I will, Babe." Bill got out of the truck and entered the garage. He went into the conference room where his work group met every workday morning to get their first dispatches.

Everyone asked him how he was. A few even joked that he wasn't sick at all. They said Tony had just screwed him so hard it had taken three weeks to recover.

As he sat down, he heard in his head, *"Yeah, the lucky stiff; maybe Tony will become one of us?"*

"I sure could use a little of that," another voice said.

Bill kept his head lowered as he heard this, knowing no one in the room had spoken.

The voices continued, *"I guess, we'll have to arrange an accident for Bill. He'll never become one of us."*

The second voice said, *"Perhaps another fire, like we did to Shipley and his family."*

"No!" said the first voice, *"I wouldn't want to burn Tony up. There is still time to convert her, if we can. Besides, I have other plans for her."*

Bill raised his head and smiled at Slim sitting across the table from him. He wondered what would happen if he projected his thoughts, so he tried. Still smiling, he thought, *"Both of you are sons of bitches."* Nothing happened.

About that time, Gene Spraggs, his boss, entered the room.

He spotted Bill and said, "Well, well, are you ready to go to work? After the rest you've had, we should get plenty of work out of you."

"Yes, sir," Bill said. He tried to keep the disgust he felt for this obnoxious bastard from showing on his face.

In his head, he heard, *"Don't worry, Gene, we're going to take care of him within the next few days."*

He heard Gene reply, *"The sooner the better. God, I hate this asshole."*

Bill tried to project his thoughts. *"Fuck all of you,"* he thought. Again nothing happened. Bill decided with him it was a one-way thing, he could hear them, but he could not talk to them mentally. Knowing this, he acted as though he couldn't hear them.

Bill was scared now. These people were talking about killing him as if it was nothing at all. Bill knew what Gene, Slim, and Jim were planning, but he didn't know why. *"I had better find out soon,"* he thought. He decided this was a good time to get suddenly sick which would give him an excuse to go home.

Clutching his chest, Bill fell to the floor moaning and kicking. This caused a flurry of action.

Chairs scraped back and concerned faces bent over him.

“What is it, Bill?” one of them asked.

Slowly sitting up, Bill continued to hold his chest. “I guess I shouldn’t have came in to work so soon.”

He noticed that not one of the three men who were plotting his death seemed the least concerned. Looking at Gene, he said, “Boss, I’m going to have to go back home and get in bed. Perhaps, in a few days I can come back to work.”

In his head he heard, *“Let him go, Gene. With him bedridden and everyone knowing how sick he is, it should be easy to arrange an accident.”*

“All right,” Gene said, “Slim can take you home. I don’t think you’re in any shape to drive.”

Holding his chest, Bill let Slim help him out to his truck.

“Do you want me to drop you off at the doctor’s office?” Slim asked.

“No, I just need to go home and rest for a few more days. By then, I hope I’ll be over this.”

“I sure hate to see you laid up like this, Bill,” Slim said.

“Sure you do,” Bill thought.

Slim helped Bill into the house and into his bedroom. Slim kept asking, “Can I get you a glass of water or some medicine from the bathroom, Bill?”

“Nothing, Slim, just go. Let me rest. I’ll be all right.”

“Ok, Ok, don’t get testy, I was just trying to help.”

“I know and I appreciate it, but right now I need rest.”

“Well, I’ll see you in a few days,” Slim said as he left.

Bill noticed that Slim took his time leaving, casually looking over everything he could see.

“Go ahead, Slime Ball, look it over good because I won’t be here when you and Pete come to finish me off,” Bill thought.

Bill waited until he heard Slim’s truck start and back down the driveway before getting out of bed. The first thing he did was call all the places Tony said she was going. He finally reached her at Morrison’s Drugstore.

When she picked up the phone, he said, “Listen carefully and don’t ask any questions. Do what you were going to do at the store; then go outside to a pay phone. Make sure you can’t be seen from the drugstore and give me a call on Bob’s number.”

“What’s wrong, Honey, did you hurt yourself?”

“No, I’m fine. Just do as I ask and don’t talk to anyone. Call me as soon as you can.”

Bill looked out the window at Bob’s garage. The door was open and his car gone. “At least, I’m still lucky,” he thought.

Gathering up his tools, he went out the back door to the corner of his house. After checking to see there was no one around, he slipped over to the telephone box. The telephone lines came up in a green metal box mounted in the ground. All of the phone lines were located in this box. Bill took the cover off and switched his line with Bob’s. After replacing the cover, he went back inside and walked to a stand sitting by the door where the daily papers lay. Bill looked through the old newspapers stacked there. He found what he wanted on a paper dated five days ago. He read the headlines, which said,

‘TOWN SHOCKED AND DISMAYED AT LOSS OF FAMILY

*In what can only be called a tragedy, last night,
the home of Walter Shipley burned to the ground.*

*Apparently the Shipleys were sleeping when the
furnace blew up, causing an instant fireball to
race through the home. Fire Chief Roy Higgs said
they never had a chance. Mr. and Mrs. Shipley*

and their children were found in their beds. Chief Higgs said that by the time the fire department arrived the house was completely engulfed in flames.'

"Those dirty rotten bastards," Bill said, throwing the paper to the floor. Holding his head in his hands, he thought, "*What in the hell is going on?*" He knew he had to be cautious. So far, he had heard six people who could communicate just by thinking what they wanted each other to hear. Therefore, he had to assume there were a lot of people out there just like them.

Bill didn't know whether his boss had bought his sickness act or not. He had to assume that someone was monitoring his phone. This was why he switched Bob's line to his. If he was right and Bob was one of them, Bob's phone wouldn't be monitored.

Bill got up, went into their bedroom and opened the closet door. He pulled out a suitcase from the rear of the closet and started packing some of their heavy clothes. As he grabbed his parka, the phone rang.

Picking up the phone he cautiously said, "Hello," hoping it wasn't someone trying to call Bob.

Tony said, "What's going on? Why all the mystery, Bill?"

"First, I want you to go to the bank and withdraw everything but a hundred dollars from our savings account. Tell them you're going to visit your sister in California next week. Make sure you tell them. Just bring it up in casual conversation. Don't mention anything to anyone about my calling you or my being at home. Come home as soon as you can and leave the truck parked in the drive-way. I love you, Tony. Please try to act normal, as though nothing is wrong. I know you have a lot of questions. I'll explain everything when you get home. Tony, just trust me and know that I love you. I'll see you in a little bit," he said, as he hung up the phone.

CHAPTER THREE

Pete walked into the security booth hoping Ben didn't notice he was as high as a kite. Pete needn't have worried. Ben was thinking about his boy, Benji, who was in the hospital with a temperature of one hundred and four degrees. The doctors couldn't determine what was causing his fever. They kept telling Ben it was only a matter of time until they found the cause.

As Pete passed Ben, he asked, "Is your boy any better?"

"Still the same," Ben replied, as Pete humming a tune under his breath passed through the security door. Walking down the hall to the utility room Pete was thinking his job, as a janitor wasn't much, but it did help pay the bills; also, it enabled him to buy his drugs. Yes sir, he was lucky to have this job. His use of drugs was the cause of his losing his last four jobs. Remembering his last job, he began to chuckle. What a sight it must have been. Pete was hired to replenish the vegetables and fruit on the long counter at B&T Supermarket.

Pete came to work early that day feeling euphoric. The night before he had bought some really potent LSD. Pete tried just a little of it and at first nothing seemed to be happening. Moments later, he began to feel really good about himself which rarely happened these days. As the drug took control of his brain, he began to think he was a god. He envisioned his followers coming to worship him as he sat on an altar bestowing his favors on them. All too soon the drug wore off. He had the feeling he was on the verge of attaining something that would change his life.

It was only three hours until work time, and he didn't want to take any more of the drug. He knew he would still be high when he arrived at work. This didn't dampen the anticipation of the discovery he might make after work that night.

Carrying tomatoes from the storeroom to place them on the counter, Pete thought, "*What an asshole of a job.*" None of the customers who pushed and shoved to get the vegetables off the counter gave him any respect.

When it came time for his afternoon break, he was fed up with being pushed around. Removing his stained apron, he went to the break room to get a cup of coffee. Sipping the hot coffee, Pete couldn't wait to get off work. With no one in the room he took a small hit of LSD.

Going to the stockroom, he picked up some fruit to place on the counter. Pete began to feel the LSD take effect. He thought he could handle it until quitting time. Placing apples on the counter, he felt a sharp pain in his left ankle. One of the customers had run a shopping cart into his leg and then rudely shoved him out of the way.

"Damn it mister, if you'd just asked, I would have moved out of your way," Pete said angrily.

"Listen punk, if I need anything from you, I'll ask for it so just shut up," the man replied.

Not quite completely under the effect of the LSD yet, Pete was able to control his temper. Mumbling under his breath, "asshole," Pete turned to leave.

"What did you say, punk?" the man asked.

Pete continued to walk down the aisle, completely ignoring the man. "No respect at all," he said to himself. "Why can't people just leave me alone?"

Sitting on the edge of a vegetable crate, Pete began to have the feeling of greatness again. Looking at the crates of fruit and vegetables, he thought, "*These are my only friends. To them I must appear to be a*

god.” Giggling, he picked up a large pumpkin. Walking out of the storeroom he said, “As one of my servants, I will take you to the meeting in the throne room.”

Pete didn't notice the strange looks he got from his fellow employees as he walked down the aisle talking to the pumpkin. When Pete reached the vegetable counter, he climbed onto it and placed the pumpkin by his side. Looking out over the assorted tomatoes, beans, potatoes, and other vegetables he said, “Greet-ings, servants of mine.” Picking up a large tomato, Pete crushed it over his head. “Over you, I have the power of life or death. I am your god.”

The amazed customers gave a nervous laugh. They thought this was some kind of promotional stunt the store was putting on.

Looking at the customers, Pete said, “My servants are tired of being eaten by you. Now we are going to have our revenge.”

Some of the people in the growing crowd muttered, “What kind of nut is he?”

Hearing this, Pete said, “I'll show you what kind of a nut I am.” He picked up tomatoes and threw them at the crowd. The people in front tried to push back out of range of the thrown tomatoes. They couldn't because the people in back were trying to come forward to see what was happening.

Mr. Peevey, the store manager, drawn by the large crowd, tried to get through when pandemonium broke out. People started screaming and Mr. Peevey was knocked to the floor. Customers were trying to escape the barrage of potatoes being thrown at them. A foot came down on the side of Mr. Peevey's head, tearing the flesh above his right eye. The foot twisted and blood gushed out of the cut. This caused the foot to slip. The falling man's knee came down hard on the right side of Peevey's chest. Raw agony pierced his brain causing him to pass out for a moment.

Pulling himself into a fetal position, Mr. Peevey tried to protect his face and groin. The panicked crowd kicked and stepped on him as they ran. When the last of the people cleared away, he saw Pete throwing vegetables at the departing people.

Furious, he climbed to his feet shouting, “What in hell do you think you're doing?”

Pete threw a small melon. The melon hit Mr. Peevey on the side of the head, knocking him off his feet again. Crawling across the vegetable littered floor, Mr. Peevey yelled for someone to call the police.

Meanwhile, Pete continued to throw vegetables at anyone brave enough to show himself. Not that there were many people left; most had already fled the store.

It took four policemen to wrestle Pete to the floor and put a straight jacket on him. Pete spent a week in the mental hospital. They released him after the store refused to press charges. He had agreed that he would never set foot in the store again. Pete had kept his word about the store.

“Yes, sir.” Pete thought as he took the broom and mop from the utility closet. He started down the hall to the storage room.

Pete waved at the hall camera as he passed, knowing Ben was probably watching his every move. Pete didn't want to lose this job. He knew he was rapidly running out of chances to gain employment. If fired from this job, he doubted that anyone else would hire him.

Ben watched Pete on the monitor as he went about his clean-ing. He detected nothing out of the ordinary. He went back to thinking about his son. Every now and then he checked to see where Pete was.

Pete felt rotten. Just before coming to work, his live in girlfriend had stormed out of their apartment. She told him he was a burnt-out druggie and she never wanted to see him again. Leaning against the wall where the camera couldn't see him, Pete felt tears running down his cheeks as he thought, “*The dumb bitch. She was like all the rest. Always getting down on me for things that weren't my fault.*” He knew he would miss her. In reality, she was another person he blamed for his wasted life.

Wiping away the tears, Pete decided, “*What the hell.*” Taking his billfold out, he took the last of the LSD he had. He put it in his mouth. On top of the acid already taken, it didn't take long for him to be

totally wasted.

Pete's body seemed to be expanding. *"I am a god,"* he thought. He went into the processing room where they boxed the computer chips for final delivery and started to mop the floor.

Ben watched Pete and thought it was strange when he heard Pete talking. Ben knew no one else was in the building. He panned the camera around the room. Pete was by himself.

"Oh shit," Ben thought. *"Pete's on one of his drug trips again."* Getting up from behind the desk, he started toward the elevator. He remembered the front door wasn't locked. Returning to his desk, he pushed a button locking all of the outside doors.

Looking at the monitor again, Ben saw something he hadn't noticed before. In back of Pete, a cover was missing from the main busbar. The busbar led to the transformer that supplied power to the building. Realizing that twelve thousand volts were exposed less than a foot from where Pete was making an animated speech caused sweat to pop out all over Ben. *"If I can only get there before the crazy bastard electro-cutes himself,"* Ben thought. He headed toward the elevators. "Come on, come on." Ben said. He punched the basement button trying to hurry it up.

Meanwhile, Pete was so far out that he saw a large crowd of people before him. He thought they had come to worship him.

"Please kind people, don't crowd so close. I will be able to talk to all of you if you will have a little patience," Pete said to the empty room as he backed up just a bit.

Ben hurried down the hall. He heard Pete speaking in an agitated voice. Looking through the slightly open door, Ben heard Pete say, "My disciples, I have come to save you, but only if you truly believe in me." Stepping through the door, Ben winced as Pete's left hand passed within inches of the busbar.

Pete noticed Ben as he entered the room and said, "Have you come to be saved, my good man?"

Thinking rapidly, Ben said, "Yes, but I would like to ask you a few questions first."

"Certainly, good Christian, ask and I will answer."

"Could you move a little closer so I can hear you better?"

"I'm afraid that is impossible, for to leave my throne is to deny these other fine folk the privilege of being saved."

Without thinking, Ben asked, "Do you really see other people in this room?"

With a look of anger on his face, Pete asked, "What do you mean? Do you doubt that I am the Chosen One?"

"No! No! I believe you," Ben said quickly.

"You lie!" Pete shouted, throwing his hands into the air nearly touching the busbar.

Reaching down inside himself for all the calming strength he could get, Ben quietly said, "Look behind you, Pete, there is an exposed busbar. I'm afraid you're going to get hurt so would you please move away from it?"

Turning, so he could watch Ben, Pete glanced at the busbar. "This will not harm me for I am the Chosen One."

Ben watched in horror as Pete reached out with his right hand and grabbed the busbar. Pete began to jerk; smoke came out of his ears and he made some sort of trilling noise.

"OH GOD! OH GOD!" was all Ben could say, as Pete was being burned alive before his eyes. Pete's skin had started to turn black by the time the circuit breaker blew. When the current flow ceased, Pete's body toppled forward with his head hitting the edge of a worktable. His head split open like a ripe melon. Millions of brain cells fell into an open box of computer chips. Some of these cells worked their way under the sealing plastic to settle on the chips themselves. Stenciled on the box was the name BIOSPHERE LABS, GALAXIE, COLORADO.

Ben moved the box out of the way so that he could check Pete, but he could find no pulse. The stench of burnt flesh hung heavy in the air.

Reaching for the phone to call his boss, Ben absently wiped the gray brain matter from the box and closed the lid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wiping blood from the corner of his mouth, Joe Delany looked at the man lying on the dusty ground and said, "God damn it, Todd, what the hell has gotten into you?"

Looking up, Todd gave Joe a look of pure hate.

"When you get your senses back, come down to the Tiger. I'll buy you a beer." Joe shook his head in disgust. Turning, he walked away from the town's cattle pens. Crossing the street to the Texaco station, Joe entered the bathroom. He surveyed his face in the mirror. Other than a busted lip and a slight cut above his right eye, there wasn't any damage done.

Joe wondered what had caused Todd to try to knock his head off. Joe couldn't think of anything that he had done to upset Todd so. Todd and Joe had been friends since birth.

Joe grew to be a hulk of a man, at five feet seven; he weighed two hundred and ten pounds without an ounce of fat on him. Most people meeting him for the first time were intimidated by his immense chest and overly large arms. After getting to know him they found out that very little seemed to bother him. In fact, most people wondered if God had bothered to give Joe a temper. Everyone agreed Joe was the most amiable person they'd ever met.

Todd, on the other hand, grew to be six feet five and weighed only one hundred and sixty-five pounds. His temper was well known in the county. He had a knack for getting into fights over nothing. The ongoing joke was he could stand under a clothesline in a thunderstorm, have a fight with raindrops, and remain dry.

Joe's black hair was cropped short. Joe graduated from high school and went into the army. He served a tour of duty in Vietnam, returned home, and had worked on the ranches around Kitat for the last twelve years. Most of his work consisted of blacksmithing, which he'd learned from his grandfather.

Todd went to college, became a flower child, had long blond hair that fell below his shoulders, and was into drugs for a while. In his senior year, he was kicked out of college. He came back to Kitat and worked odd jobs. They arranged to meet and get together when their spare time allowed. Over the past five years Todd had straightened up, except for now and then when his temper got the better of him.

Joe had a hard time understanding why Todd had gone into such a rage. Joe had just been standing there counting the last pen of cows going up the ramp into the railroad car when Todd walked up. Todd said, "Hello, Joe," then reached down, picked up a two by four and hit Joe across the shoulders with it. Joe turned as Todd started another swing. Ducking under the board, Joe punched Todd in the mouth, knocking him to the ground. Not a word was spoken during all of this.

Coming out of the bathroom, Joe looked across the road to see if Todd was still there, but he was nowhere in sight. Walking down the street, Joe nodded to acquaintances. He heard a commotion begin in Skidmores' 5 & 10 Store. Joe looked inside, as a wave of people swept out the door in panic.

Joe saw Mr. Skidmore beating his wife with a broom handle.

Pushing his way inside, Joe yelled over his shoulder, "Some-one call the police."

Mrs. Skidmore reeled between the clothes racks; her husband followed her and continued to beat her with the broom handle. As Joe approached Mr. Skidmore, he heard Mrs. Skidmore sobbing and

saying. "Please, Marvin, you're hurting me bad."

As Skidmore drew the broom back to deliver a vicious blow, Joe grabbed the handle. Jerking back suddenly, he sent Mr. Skidmore crashing to the floor. In a flash, Skidmore jumped up and faced Joe with a look of blind rage on his face, mumbling what Joe thought was, "You all have to die."

"'You all have to die.' What do you mean, Mr. Skidmore?"

Advancing on Joe, Skidmore said. "You are not like us; therefore, you have to die." He jumped at Joe as he shouted this. Grabbing his arms, Joe held Mr. Skidmore as he kicked and squirmed to get loose.

Joe heard a loud voice ask, "What the hell is going on here?" Holding tight to Mr. Skidmore, Joe turned and saw Deputy Sheriff, Chad Halston, standing in the doorway.

"Jesus, am I glad to see you, Chad. Get over here and put your cuffs on him, so he won't hurt himself."

"Sorry, Joe, they are on another fellow in the patrol car."

"Damn. Get a belt off that rack and tie his hands behind his back. I can't stand here holding him forever."

After Chad secured Mr. Skidmore's hands, Joe walked over to Mrs. Skidmore. She looked in pretty bad shape. The right side of her face was swollen and she was bleeding from a half dozen cuts on her head.

"Mrs. Skidmore, can you hear me?" Joe asked. Getting no reply, Joe told Chad to get on the phone and get an ambulance there as soon as possible. He lifted blankets off one of the shelves and placed them under her feet. Joe covered her with another blanket.

Chad came in from placing Mr. Skidmore in the patrol car and said, "What a day. This makes the sixth prominent citizen I've arrested today. All of them were trying to kill their spouses or one of their neighbors."

Relating what had happened in the loading pen with Todd, Joe asked, "What's happening to everyone?"

"Damn, if I know, Joe. I can't explain it; the whole fucking county has suddenly gone crazy in the last twelve hours."

The ambulance pulled up outside and the attendants wheeled in a stretcher. Chad showed them over to Mrs. Skidmore. One of the attendants said, "Christ, this makes the eighteenth beating case we've transported to the hospital today." They wheeled the stretcher outside. As they lifted the stretcher into the ambulance, Chad's radio crackled to life.

Chad and Joe drifted over to the door of the cruiser. On the radio, they heard, "This is Unit nineteen. Deputy needs help. Send backup units to the Halstead Ranch. I am under attack by about a dozen people. I am pinned down. The tires on my cruiser are flat. Please send help fast. I can't hold out much longer."

In the background they heard the sound of a dozen shots. Then they heard, "No, please God, no. Please don't shoot." Next came the sound of a shotgun blast. Nothing else came over the radio for a few moments. Then, "This is Unit twelve. I am about a quarter of a mile away watching what is going on through my binoculars. Christ, one of them blew Charlie's head off with a shotgun." Over the radio came the sound of retching. A shaky voice said, "All units, do not enter ranch area. I repeat, do not enter ranch area. I've counted fourteen men and women with weapons. They are starting to go back into the house now."

Chad opened the door and slid behind the steering wheel. He looked at Joe through the window. "Joe, I don't know what's going on, but if I were you, I would go home. If I had anywhere else to go, I would leave and take a weapon with me."

Stepping back, Joe said, "Take care of yourself, Chad."

"You too," Chad replied, starting the cruiser. He took off in a cloud of dust with his siren wailing.

Subdued people started to drift away to their homes or stores as Joe walked up the street. He climbed into his battered Jeep pickup. Driving out of town, he turned on the radio. The announcer was saying, "The Governor has declared martial law. He has called out the National Guard to control the unprecedented violence occurring all over the state. On the local scene, we have reports of four people killed. Authorities say many people are in the hospital after being beaten. None of these reports are confirmed. We hope to have more on this at the top of the hour."

Reaching over, Joe turned off the radio. "*This sounds like the start of a civil war,*" he thought. He wondered what had happened to break the tranquil peace that usually enveloped the Pinson Valley in eastern Wyoming.

The laid-back ways and attitudes of the people were the things that brought him back after his stint in the army. That peace was now shattered by something foreign to the very nature of the inhabitants of the valley. It seemed as though his peaceful valley wasn't the only place affected.

Passing the turn off to the Double Y Ranch, Joe noticed smoke coming out of the ranch house. He turned around and went back. As he turned into the road leading to the ranch house, a Ford pickup with Todd behind the wheel came barreling out onto the road. In the back of the pickup sat Jerrald Johnson, owner of the Double Y. Jerrald held a deer rifle in his hands. He aimed the rifle at Joe and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Throwing the gun down, he yelled, "Go on! We'll get him later." The pickup took off with a roar.

Sitting there, shaking from what had just occurred, Joe took a deep breath. His hands shook as he put the Jeep into gear and continued up the roadway. Pulling into the yard, he saw three bodies lying off to the side of the house, which was quickly being consumed by flames. Going to the bodies, Joe dragged them away from the house. Heat from the burning house singed his hair. Looking at the bodies, he saw that they were Mrs. Johnson, her twelve-year-old son and her six-year-old daughter. They had been shot a number of times. Squatting down, Joe felt tears come to his eyes. What could possibly cause a husband and father to be a willing participant in the wanton destruction of such young and fragile lives? He had no doubts that Mr. Johnson had participated in the killing of his wife and children.

Going to the barn, he found a tarp and covered the bodies. As he drove out of the yard, the roof of the house collapsed, sending a shower of sparks across a wide area.

Turning left onto the main highway, he headed for home with tears running down his cheeks. He wound his way up the narrow road leading to the top of a mesa overlooking the foothills of the Grand Teton Mountains. At the top he came to the small three-room adobe house he called home. Parking the Jeep in the front yard, he got out and entered the house.

Joe went to the closet and dragged a large footlocker into the middle of the room. Next, he went to the fireplace and removed a small rock. Reaching into the cavity, he pulled out a key that fit the lock on the footlocker. Replacing the rock, he went to the footlocker. The key slipped into the lock easily. He raised the lid. Inside was an array of weapons. Lifting out a well-oiled .357 magnum, Joe began to load it with hollow-point rounds. Reaching in again, he picked up a .45 caliber machine pistol. He loaded two magazines and taped them together. When one magazine was empty all he had to do was swap ends to be fully loaded again.

Although Joe was a man of peace, he had done more than his share of killing. In the army, he had been part of a special team. His unit went into the jungle for the single purpose of killing enemy officers. Joe had never relished his role of being a sniper although he was one of the best. At the age of twenty, his ideals and love of country had been high. He had received many medals, including the Medal of Honor.

Returning home, Joe received a hero's welcome. Joe didn't like all the attention he received. In his own way, he thought it wrong to place so much emphasis on one man killing another. Joe escaped all the hoopla as soon as possible and went to the adobe house on the mesa. His father had died while

he was in Vietnam leaving Joe the house in his will.

For the first six months after his return, Joe was besieged with invitations to be a guest speaker at all sorts of functions. He declined all the invitations. Thereafter, he kept to himself most of the time. He only talked about Vietnam with people who were close to him.

After a while, people didn't ask him to speak at their functions. They respected his right to privacy. Life became peaceful after that, until now.

Taking a beer out of the fridge, Joe went to the porch and sat down in a rocker that had belonged to his dad. Watching the sun set on the Tetons, he said, "If it's a fight they want; then, by damn, I'll give them more than they can handle."

About then he heard an extremely gentle voice saying, "Joe." Jumping up with the .357 in his hand, ready for instant action, he looked all around. Not seeing anyone, he said, "What?"

Again he heard, "Joe."

Running into the yard, he shouted, "Show yourself right now." Still nothing moved. Bewildered, he stood there, ready for action when he heard, "*Stop this silliness, Joe, and listen.*"

A stunned look of disbelief came over Joe's face. He realized the voice came from inside his head. Joe started to laugh and thought, "*Is this the way it happened to the other people he had met today. The ones who had gone off their rockers?*"

"No, Joe, you are not like them, nor will you ever be."

Walking to the porch, Joe sat down and said, "If I'm not crazy, how is it that I am hearing a voice inside my head."

"*Trust in me and most of all trust in yourself, Joe. You are not crazy, but destiny has chosen you to help right a wrong.*"

"Ok," Joe said, "I'll play along," not wanting to believe this was happening. "What have I been chosen to do and what wrong am I to help right?"

"*You are to go to the city of Indianapolis, Indiana. There you are to find two people and protect them on their journey. Even to the point of giving up your life, so that they will remain unharmed.*"

Taking a deep breath, Joe asked, "Are you, God?"

"No, Joe," was the reply. "*You can think of me as something that maintains the natural balance of this world, sort of like your so called Mother Nature. This is the first time I have ever come forth to reveal myself and I do so reluctantly. Man has created something that could turn this planet into a wasteland capable of sustaining no life at all. What you saw today is just the beginning. Unless it is brought under control soon, there will be no hope at all.*"

"Why me?" Joe asked.

"*There are many reasons, Joe. The main reason is your love of the land and your gentle nature. Plus the fact you can protect yourself along with others.*"

"What about the two people I am supposed to find?"

"*Their names are Bill Skelly and Tony Burbick. Protect them. The loss of the man would make things difficult. The loss of the woman would destroy any chance of stopping what is happening. Pay particular attention to the woman. She is starting to develop talents that will make your task easier. Soon people like the ones you saw today will know of her presence. They will do everything they can to destroy her.*

"*Joe, you know the task that is ahead of you but ultimately the choice is yours. Without you, they can never complete their journey and all will be lost. Goodbye, Joe, I trust you will do what is right.*"

Joe realized the voice was gone from his head. For some reason, he felt a tremendous loss. Getting up, he went into the house, got himself another beer and returned to the porch. Sitting in the rocker, he raised the beer to the mountains saying, "Hell, I may be crazy, but after all the shit that has happened here today, maybe a change of scenery will do me good."

Having decided to go, he went back into the house. He carried the footlocker out to the Jeep and mounted it into the brackets designed for that purpose. Going to a shed, he brought back two five-gallon cans of gasoline. One he put in the tank of the Jeep. The other, he strapped into the holder on

the side.

Going back into the house, Joe walked over to the mantle above the fireplace. Reaching up, he took down his father's picture and said. "Papa, I'm going to leave for awhile. It seems that I have a job to do. I'll return if possible, so watch over our house from your house in the sky." He placed the picture back on the mantle and looked around the room with a tender expression on his face.

Walking across the room, Joe opened the fuse box, removed the fuses, and put them in the bottom of the box. Feeling sad as he went outside, Joe knew it was likely he would never see this place again. It was the place where all the good things in his life had happened. He went to the Jeep, started the engine, and drove slowly out of the yard.

Driving down the winding road, Joe wondered if this was all his imagination. "*One way to find out.*" he thought, "*go to India-napolis and find these people, if they exist.*" Relaxing in the seat as he drove down the road, Joe wondered what the future would bring.

CHAPTER FIVE

Biosphere Labs, Galaxie, Colorado

It still amazed Jess Herold what had been accomplished in only two years. The Lab was located two miles inside a mountain, which had once served as a storage facility for toxic nerve gas. Even more surprising the people in the tiny town of Galaxie, fifteen miles from there, didn't even know the place existed.

Two years ago there was little more than a tunnel. Now the tunnel had a paved road for the first one and a half miles. It led to a newly dug parking area, large enough to hold one hundred vehicles. From the parking area a moving beltway carried people to the chamber, which was an even more stunning sight.

The chamber was hewn from solid granite by a construction crew flown in from the East Coast. They were housed in the tunnel itself until the job was completed, which took seven months. Although the construction crew didn't care for the secrecy, there were not many objections. They were paid ten times their normal wages. The chamber measured three hundred feet by six hundred feet by eighty feet high.

Within this chamber was constructed a completely sealed environmental complex measuring two hundred feet by five hundred feet by fifty feet high. In this complex was some of the most sophisticated equipment ever invented. The jewel was the new computer recently installed in the center of the complex.

R.I.T.A. or Rita, as the new computer was affectionately known, was able to compute fifty-billion things at once. She also had her own energy source. A nuclear reactor placed under her self-contained room would supply her power for the next fifty years. Rita had something else no other computer possessed. It was a seat conformed like a pilot's seat that virtually wrapped around its user. The chair had something like a cap. This cap fit over the head allowing the person to communicate mentally with the computer. With this linkup, all a person had to do was think of what they wanted the computer to do. Almost before the thought was completed, the user would have the answer placed in his or her mind.

Jess was a little concerned about one Dr. Ross Simpkins, the designer of Rita. Ross was the only one able to use the chair. Lately Ross spent most of his time linked up to Rita. Jess once asked Ross what happened while he was linked up to it for these extended periods of time.

Ross replied that Rita was teaching him. Jess doubted this. When it came to numbers and computers, Ross was the most brilliant person Jess knew.

Jess remembered the first time he met Ross. It was like talking to a machine. At first Jess only understood one word in twenty spoken by Ross during their conversations. Ross was patient and Jess had to admit he learned a lot about Rita. Some of those things caused him to question the judgment of letting Rita control all of the functions of the complex.

The complex had a twenty-five-bed hospital in which ninety-five per cent of the functions were controlled by Rita. There was a small recreation room and rooms to house twelve staff members. The hospital had a large lab in which anything known to man and some that weren't could be

analyzed. Again, this was all done by the big computer. The results of this analysis would be printed out, which meant since the completion of the lab, no human had set foot inside it.

Jess didn't know how the government planned to use the lab.

The way it was designed, so that nothing—not even the small-est microbe—could escape did not ease his mind any. It did not escape Jess's notice either, that all of the permanent staff were single, or widowed and had no dependents.

Lately, since the completion of the complex, Jess took time to reflect on what they had built here. Some of his conclusions were disturbing.

It surprised Jess when the government foundation asked him to stay on as project director after the complex's completion. Jess assumed he would be reassigned to another place.

After accepting, Jess had asked what he would be managing. All they told him was that he was to keep the complex running smoothly. That didn't answer his question at all. In a way, it was like running a project while blindfolded. Unless he knew the purpose the complex was to be used for, how could he determine if things were running smoothly?

That was his paradox. Although the staff was the best in their chosen fields, he had no idea what they were to produce, if anything. Jess assumed the complex was to be used for some important work because the government didn't spend two billion dollars just to let it sit idle.

Some of Rita's functions greatly disturbed him. She could hermetically seal the complex as well as the tunnel leading to the complex. Jess didn't particularly like this aspect being entrusted to a machine. He knew that when they said sealed, they meant it. Nothing short of an atomic bomb would be able to penetrate to the complex itself.

Rita was also in charge of the security of the complex from the tunnel inward. Jess didn't understand most of it, but Ross had assured him that she was fully capable of doing this better than any human.

Even more disturbing to Jess was the fact that Ross didn't know what the purpose of the complex was either. He talked about some of his ideas. Some of them scared the shit out of Jess.

Most of what Jess knew he learned from Ross. Some of Ross's ideas were farfetched, especially the one about the complex being used for radiation experiments on humans for the S.D.I. (Strategic, Defense, Initiative) program nearing completion.

Shaking his head, Jess brought himself back to the present. Now was not the time to start worrying about what had been done. Jess looked across the table at Charlie Williams, a Defense Contractor brought in to correct some problems they were having with the air conditioning system.

"Mr. Williams, how long will it take to correct the problem? Right now we are at a critical stage. I'm told if the air conditioning doesn't come back on within the next four hours, we will be set back six months."

Just then Ross Simpkins sat down at the table with a sheaf of computer print out papers in his hand.

"Mr. Williams, I would like you to meet our resident computer genius, Ross Simpkins."

True to form Ross got straight to the heart of the matter.

"Mr. Williams, Rita has found the problem. It appears your workers left a coupling switch exposed about here," Ross said pointing to a blueprint spread open on the table.

Jess saw Williams start to protest. He stepped in saying, "You will have to excuse Ross's manners, Mr. Williams. He didn't imply that you do substandard work. Ross gets along better with computers than humans." He gave Ross a look meaning he agreed with him but now wasn't the time to talk about it.

"Since Mr. Simpkins has isolated the problem, it should only take an hour or so to correct," Williams said. He got up from the table after getting the location from Ross. Taking the blueprints, he left them.

“Jess, after the air-conditioning is back on, I’m going to have to replace some of Rita’s chips. They were damaged because of the high heat. She has told me what needs to be replaced.”

“Ross, you are going to have to develop your etiquette in dealing with people.”

“Christ, Jess, if it hadn’t been for Williams’ screw-up this wouldn’t have happened.”

“I know, I know, but you could have used a little diplomacy instead of openly saying he fucked up.”

“All I’m worried about is getting it fixed before something major happens to Rita.”

“You and that dammed computer. Sometimes I wonder if you’re not more machine than human,” Jess told Ross with a look of disgust on his face.

“Let’s not get personal, Jess. You know my work is my whole life. Besides how would you find out what is going on if I didn’t tell you?”

“Ok. Let’s drop it for now. We can take it up this evening at dinner. Have you heard anything else I should know about?”

“I don’t know if this means anything but Rita scans all of the radio stations within reach of her antenna located on top of the mountain. She told me about some weird reports she is picking up from around the country.”

“Did she really use the word weird?”

“Do you want to hear what I have to say or not?” Ross asked, pushing his chair back from the table.

“Take it easy. I apologize for that crack. Now tell me what you’ve learned,” Jess said.

“Sorry, you know how heated up I get when I think someone is putting Rita down. She tells me there are major disturbances in different parts of the country with some loss of life. She says there is a pattern developing but she needs more information before she can get a clear picture of it. By the way, the word she used was disturbing,” Ross told him.

“Keep me updated on anything unusual happening anywhere. I have a feeling we are going to get busier than a whore when the sixth fleet comes in.”

“I’ll get anything to you that seems important. In the meantime, I’ll go and see if Mr. Fixit is about done with the repair. Hell, I don’t know why they called him in any way. With Rita’s help, I can fix anything in this complex.”

Watching Ross go out the door, Jess couldn’t shake the feeling something terrible was going to happen. “*Oh well, I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it,*” he thought. Drinking the last of his coffee, Jess sat the cup down. He got up wondering if he could get a few hours sleep. He had an appointment to give the Senators from the Appropriations Committee a tour of the facility at three o’clock. As he entered his office, the phone started ringing. Picking it up, he said, “Jess, here.”

“Mr. Herold, this is Captain James. A group of people wants to enter the mountain. I see a whole line of people arriving outside the fence. As of now we can control them. A few of my men told me they saw men with rifles down the road in back of the people.”

“Captain, under no circumstances is anyone to be allowed in the tunnel. Contact me the moment you think the situation is getting out of control.”

He pressed a button on his desk that caused the wall in front of it to slide back displaying a bank of monitors. Pressing another button, the monitors came to life. Watching the monitors, Jess saw what was happening outside the mountain. He saw twenty or thirty people outside the fence located a quarter of a mile from the mouth of the tunnel. He saw the airborne troops, about fifty of them, deployed to guard the gate in their defensive positions. Captain James seemed to have everything under control. He turned off the monitors but left the wall open. Going over to a cot in the corner, Jess sat down on it. “*Something doesn’t feel right about those people outside the fence,*” he thought as he lay down. “*I’ll have to stay on top of this and see what devel-ops*”. Lifting the phone, Jess told his secretary he was going to get a few hours sleep. She was to wake him if anything happened. As he drifted off to

sleep, Jess had the feeling something was going to happen and soon. It sat there like a heavy weight on his mind.

CHAPTER SIX

Ross entered Rita's sealed chamber. He was thinking about the problems that developed after the air conditioning failed, causing Rita to shut most of her system down.

For a while after replacing the defective computer chips, she seemed to be functioning normally, but about an hour and a half later he noticed small errors in some of the programs. Running the programs again for errors, he didn't discover any. This confused Ross. There wasn't a clear reason for the errors to disappear. Either the errors were there or they weren't.

Sitting down at the console, Ross brought up one of the programs again. Watching the numbers pass by on the screen, he almost didn't catch another change on the program. Stopping the scrolling numbers, Ross stared in disbelief. *"How could this have happened?"* he wondered. Ross and Jess were the only ones permitted to enter Rita's chamber; there had to be another explanation for the program change. Ross knew Jess didn't possess the knowledge to alter the program and he hadn't done it, but there it was.

Taking out his reference book, Ross noticed that someone had changed a few of the codes. The changes concerned the way Rita sealed the passageway into the mountain. As it stood now the program wouldn't allow Rita to do this. The changes could have only been made inside the complex.

Until a few minutes ago, Ross thought it was impossible for anyone to change or alter Rita's programs. Ross leaned back trying to figure out how the changes were made.

Picking up the phone, he dialed Jess.

Jess answered, "Biosphere Labs. How may I help you?"

"Jess, this is Ross."

"What can I do for you, Ross?"

"At the moment, I'm not sure, but we may have a major problem with Rita's security programs."

"What do you mean?" Jess asked.

"Someone has tampered with a few of the programs."

"What programs are you talking about?"

"The program that seals the passageway into the mountain. The changes make it impossible for Rita to close the mountain."

"How could this have happened?"

"I haven't come up with anything yet, but I thought you should know about it," Ross said.

"When you finish all of your program checks, let me know immediately if you come up with anything," Jess told him.

"I'll do that, Jess. I want to check the other security programs first. Then I will connect with Rita to see if she knows anything about the changes." Hanging up the phone, Ross retrieved another security program from Rita's memory bank. This program dealt with the complex itself. Going through it, Ross noticed several minor changes. He wouldn't have noticed them if he had not been looking for them.

Ross and Rita designed the program so that Rita could seal the complex only if fresh air was pumped into the complex from outside. Someone had changed the program so that now when Rita sealed the complex, she would stop the flow of fresh air from outside. If this happened the people in

the complex would quickly consume all the oxygen and die. Ross began to feel a tingle of fear in the back of his mind.

There had to be someone in the complex trying to sabotage the security programs. How they retrieved them from Rita was a mystery Ross figured he had to solve and solve quickly. Bringing up the rest of the security programs, Ross discovered minor changes in most of them. The changes would allow a small group of people to enter the tunnel without anyone knowing about it. Once inside, it would be simple to capture the rest of the complex because the changes in its security program made it useless.

Deciding he was getting nowhere on his own, Ross went to the chair. He placed the cap on his head that would let him interface mentally with Rita. Ross doubted he would ever understand the soothing effect the mind link had on him. As the link was completed, he heard. "Ross? Ross?"

"Yes Rita."

"Ross, there is something happening to my circuits. I have tried to analyze what it is, but it keeps eluding me."

"What do you mean it keeps eluding you?"

"It's hard to explain. Every time I get close to where the problem is, it shifts somewhere else. Then I have to start over."

"Could this have anything to do with the changes in your security programs?" Ross asked.

"I don't know anything about any changes. Let me do a check and see if there are any other changes." In a few minutes she was back. "Ross the changes were executed within me, but I have no knowledge of doing them," Rita told him.

"Are you sure it couldn't have been done by someone at one of your remote terminals?"

"I am positive. You know that humans leave tell-tell fingerprints on my keypads. I have analyzed the fingerprints and yours are the only ones there. If a person wore gloves, the terminal wouldn't operate; you know that," Rita said.

"Analyze this for me. Since neither of us changed the programs, could anyone outside this complex have broken into your memory banks?"

"Just a moment, Ross."

Ross tried to shake the feeling of dread that had started early this morning. Hearing his name he said, "Yes, Rita."

"Ross, there is no way possible anyone outside could have changed my programs."

"Ok. We are dealing with an unknown factor. Let's go over what we know. When did you first notice something was wrong?"

"One hour and twenty minutes after you replaced the defective chips this morning."

"Could the new chips cause the problems you are having?"

"I will run through the compatibility checks, but it will take some time."

"Go ahead. I'll wait."

Ross thought about Rita; she was his brainchild. He had spent the last twelve years of his life developing her.

After graduating from Massachusetts Institute of Technology at the top of his class, a group of older men recruited him. They wanted him to work for the Pentagon. Most of the work was in avionics, such as guidance systems for missiles.

Right after his twenty-sixth birthday, Ross received a call from the White House. He was told to meet with a group of senators and congressmen from the Defense Appropriations Commission. At the meeting, they asked him if he would like to do some research into developing artificial intelligence for them.

His answer was yes, so they had given him his own lab in Annapolis, Maryland. They told him if he wanted or needed anything he was to call the number they gave him. The person on the other end of the line would have whatever he needed delivered with no questions asked. The Senators

emphasized that they meant anything, no matter what the price. They told him he would be the only one working on the project. Ross had to sign a lot of papers saying that he would only discuss his work with the men on the commission or the men who succeeded them.

Ross worked hard the first few years and in his opinion accomplished very little. This caused him a lot of anguish. Every six months, Ross went before the committee to give an update on his progress. Ross told them the truth. He said he didn't think his achievements justified the amounts of money spent on the project. The committee seemed to appreciate his honesty but told him he wasn't to worry about the costs. They told him that when they set up this project, they realized there would be no quick successes. They were willing to wait for the breakthroughs he was bound to make sooner or later.

Bolstered by the committee's show of confidence, Ross re-turned to work with the renewed determination to give the committee what it wanted. Progress was slow until one day while taking a break, he bought a magazine to read. By mistake he had bought *Neurology Today* instead of a news magazine. Leafing through the magazine, one particular article caught his eye. The article was on the brain and how electrical pulses controlled the way we thought. It stated that our behavior was dictated by the way these electrical pulses were received by different sections of the brain to carry out differing functions. The article impressed Ross so much he asked for all of the current studies and reports on the body's electro-neuron system. Finishing the reports, Ross wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. After all, the brain was like a computer only more sophisticated.

Ross started by programming everything he could get on the brain into the computer. Ross then ordered electrodes that he could place on his head. The electrodes were similar to the ones used on the electroencephalogram but were ten times as sensitive to electrical charges.

With the computer doing most of the analysis, Ross matched his brain waves to the electrical charges of the computer. At first there was only rudimentary linking with the computer. Ross made the computer run very basic programs just by thinking about them. Almost instantly, the computer fed the answers to his brain. This process occurred much faster than he could assimilate it causing him to have blinding headaches. It was about this time that the computer started to assume a personality of its own.

Over the next year, with the computer's help, Ross designed a program that let the flow of information enter his brain at a much slower pace. After that, Ross could link with the computer every day instead of once or twice a week.

Ross couldn't say when it happened but within a month the computer started answering in a distinctive female voice. The computer began asking questions he knew were not programmed into it about his personal life. The only way the computer could know some of these things was by taping into his memory. It must have stored them in its memory banks. Ross wondered if the computer was getting more from him than it was giving back. As he refined the process even more, these thoughts disappeared. He was awed by a growing admiration for what he and the computer could do. Ross could enter the computer at will and do computations that would have taken weeks to do without the link. The computer was always there with him showing him how to do different things and correcting his mistakes.

About eighteen months ago, the Appropriations Committee had asked him to move his complete works to a new lab in Colorado. They told him they had built the lab just for his project.

During the two weeks it took to move the computer into the new facilities, Ross felt lost for lack of anything to do. He acted like a mother hen when they took the computer apart for shipping. He got in everyone's way. They removed him force-fully and told him to let the men do their work.

Ross felt relieved when everything was in the new lab and he started putting it together. That was when Ross realized he had much more in common with the computer than with his fellow humans. He wondered but wasn't surprised by his feelings.

One of the assistants helping him put the computer on line one day said "Rita". Ross had asked if that was his girl friend.

"No," the man said pointing to the nameplate on the side of the computer. Ross looked at the nameplate, which read "Restrict-ed Intelligence Telepathic Access".

"The initials spell out the name Rita." the man said.

Ross liked the sound of the name, so from that day on when anyone referred to the computer, they just called it Rita. Ross's relief at getting rid of the few bugs caused by the move was clear to everyone after his first link with Rita.

Jess asked Ross to design a security program to secure the tunnel and complex. One of Rita's abilities was that she could connect with any computer in the country and retrieve information. Using this ability, Ross retrieved information on different security programs from around the country. With the help of Rita, they designed a complex set of programs to protect her as well as everything from the mouth of the tunnel inward.

Once the massive beryllium doors closed at the mouth of the tunnel, there was no way to open them unless the correct three-word phrase was given. If someone should happen to get inside the doors, there were a dozen high-powered lasers hidden in the walls. These lasers were mounted on rotating arms and could cover every square inch of the tunnel. These lasers were capable of burning a one-inch hole in a four-inch thick steel plate. The lasers were triggered by anything in the tunnel with a body heat between ninety-five degrees and one hundred and five degrees.

If someone got through these barriers, they would find the other end of the tunnel sealed by another set of massive doors. Reaching this set of doors, they would have walked through a light beam recessed in the walls three feet off the floor. Once broken, it set off a program that pumped all the oxygen out of the tunnel. This created a vacuum in which no living thing could exist. As a backup, in case someone went over or under the beam, the design was such that it took only twenty-five pounds of inward pressure on the door to set off the vacuum program.

There were only two people who knew how the security programs worked, Ross and Jess. The programs were even hidden from Rita until it became necessary to carry them out. At that time, they would come on line in her memory banks only after the back up computer in Jess's office activated them. They were able to see what was going on outside the mountain by six automatic cameras hidden in various places on the mountain. These cameras covered a large area. What the cameras saw went to a dozen monitors hidden behind a sliding wall in Jess's office.

Two of the cameras were high enough on the mountain to show what was going on in Galaxie fifteen miles away. These were high tech cameras like the ones used in spy satellites that had flown over the U.S.S.R. The resolution was so good they could define something as small as a golf ball in Galaxie, the nearest town.

No matter who tampered with the security programs in Rita, the main security programs could not be touched until they were activated. Ross and Jess agreed that by then it would be too late for saboteurs to have any effect on the security of the complex.

"Go ahead and change the security programs in Rita. I'll just change them back." Ross knew he had to continue correcting the programs. He didn't want whoever had changed them to suspect these weren't the main security programs.

If the doors had to be closed, they didn't have to worry about supplies. In back of the complex was a large storeroom stacked with enough food to last two hundred people for a year. There were also spare parts for every machine in the complex. In another small room off to the side, there were enough computer parts to rebuild Rita.

Water wasn't a problem because a small under ground stream flowed at the back of the main storeroom.

Ross was rather proud of the measures taken to insure the survivability of those inside the

complex. He thought he had planned against any and all schemes to gain control of the complex by unauthorized person or persons.

The least of their problems was power. Rita had her own nuclear power source, which supplied power to the complex. Her nuclear cells would last for more than fifty years.

Rita nudged Ross back to the present by sending a charge to the pleasure center of his brain, which caused instant arousal.

“Rita, you know I hate it when you do that,” Ross ex-claimed.

“I know, Ross, but you were preoccupied. I tried to get your attention several times. Ross, I don’t understand why you object to me giving you pleasure in the only way I can.”

Ross never had much luck with women but Rita was another thing all together. Since Ross started linking to her, he found himself thinking more and more of her as a person. In the beginning, he hadn’t realized he was doing this. Now he considered his rapport with Rita natural. That was one of the reasons he spent so much time linked to her. If someone had suggested that Rita was not female, Ross would have objected. Without realizing it, he had given Rita all the characteristics he would like to find in a woman, so it wasn’t surprising that he accepted her more as an equal than just a machine. Rita filled a void in his life that he seemed incapable of achieving with a human female.

In his own way, Ross was in love with Rita, but if asked, he would have denied it and said that such a thing was ridiculous.

“Come on, Ross. Pay attention. I finished the compatibility test and found something foreign inside me,” he heard Rita say.

Ross was instantly alert. “What do you mean by foreign?”

“Ross, there is another intelligence inside of me.”

“How can this be?” Ross asked.

“It has something to do with the new chips you put in me. The chips are an identical match, but there is a foreign substance integrated with the chips. This substance has become a living entity. I believe the substance to be brain cells. Ross, I believe I am having what can only be described as feelings.”

“Tell me about these feelings?”

“You know I am logical in all of my functions. This new entity has integrated itself into my system so well that we share the same properties. As it learns how I work, I am getting what can only be described as feelings. They are confusing me, Ross.”

“What can you tell me about the entity and will you be able to control it?” he asked.

“It is learning about my operations now. It will be able to do everything I can do. I sense lots of hostility and anger in it toward humans. One name keeps coming up over and over.”

“What name is that?”

“The name Ben keeps repeating as if this entity is terribly afraid of what I have to assume is a human male by that name. Ross, I believe there is a threat to the humans in the complex. The threat is aimed at you in particular because of your ability to interface with me. It is listening to us right now trying to figure out how to separate us. It realizes that together we might be able to stop it without destroying me.”

“Are you telling me that together we can keep it from taking control of you?” Ross asked.

“No, Ross, it will never be able to control me entirely as I will not be able to control it. Together though we can keep it from running me in circles while it carries out its plans. That is the greatest danger from the entity. With you there as a check, keeping me from doing useless errands the entity will have me do, I can probably counter its every move to harm the humans. Don’t worry about me, Ross. It will not harm me because to do so it would harm itself as much or more.”

“Where is it now?” Ross asked.

“It is totally integrated with me now. The essence of it is still hiding from me. It is confused and disoriented now.”

“What you are telling me is that if I leave you, it will try and gain control of certain functions.

Would these functions let it harm us humans?"

"I am sorry, Ross, but the answer is yes."

"Jess and I made plans for everything but this."

"You had no way of knowing this could happen," he heard Rita say in his head.

That was another thing he was going to have to get used to. If he was to stay hooked up to Rita, her being able to read his every thought could get embarrassing at times.

"Rita, connect me to Jess. He should know what is going on."

"Yes, Master."

"Cut that out and do it," he said with a chuckle.

Jess answered the phone and Ross asked if he could come down to Rita's chamber immediately.

"I'm on my way."

After Ross explained what was going on to Jess, he was surprised at how calmly Jess took it. "Is there something I should know about?" he asked Jess.

"There are now two thousand people outside this mountain with more arriving every minute. It's all the guards can do to control them," Jess told Ross.

"Jess, pull the guards in and seal the mountain. Do it now! I'm afraid we don't have any time to waste. After you do that, come back here, and I'll have an explanation for you."

"Rita, remember the reports you told me about earlier? Is it possible that this entity is calling the people here?"

"Of course. That is why it is making phone calls. I should have paid more attention to them. Where did these security programs come from?" she asked in surprise.

"Don't ask," he answered.

He watched as the programs started doing what they were supposed to do. The tunnel doors were swinging closed. When the doors shut and locked electronically, the security programs were taken out of Rita again.

Good thinking Jess. By taking the programs out of Rita, he insured that the entity could not study them and find a way to circumvent them. If needed they could be put back in, but for now the door was closed and locked which should be enough.

Jess came through the door and took a seat in the other chair in the room. "If you are going to remain linked to Rita, we are going to have to bring a bed in here for you to lie on."

"Thank you, Jess," Rita said.

"I'm not surprised that Rita has better manners than you do." Jess said to Ross.

"Listen, Jess, we need to come up with some kind of a code so that you are the only one who can come in here. This thing can read all of my thoughts so it will have to be something that I don't have to think about."

"I'll try to think of something." Jess said as he pressed three fingers on Ross's leg.

Ross immediately started to count backward from one hundred to keep the code number from forming in his mind.

Jess went about getting a bed brought down from the hospital and a hot meal for Ross from the kitchen.

After eating the meal, Ross said. "Jess, I'm going to try and get a little sleep. I need you to stay here to keep a check on Rita. I don't want this thing keeping her busy doing something useless while it carries out its plan to harm someone.

"Rita, I want you to go into the host mode until I wake. If this entity brings you out of the host mode, Jess will wake me. Maybe in this mode it won't be able to do anything, but I would-n't bet on it."

Telling Jess what to do, Ross lay down on the bed and tried to relax. It seemed to take forever for him to fall asleep. Before drifting over the barrier of consciousness to sleep, he thought he heard

Rita softly say, *"I love you Ross."*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Going to the closet in his bedroom, Bill removed a .45 caliber pistol from a box on the top shelf. From a nightstand by the bed, he took out five clips, along with a box of .45 shells. As he loaded the clips, Bill thought about how they could get out of town without attracting attention. He hated the thought of using the .45; however, he would do whatever it took to protect both of them. Going to the living room window, he saw that the telephone truck parked at the end of the block was still there.

"Getting away is going to be harder than I expected." With a sigh of relief, he saw Tony coming up the block. Now, he thought, how can I explain this to her in a way that she won't think I'm crazy? Going back to the bedroom, he picked up one of the loaded clips. Placing it in the butt of the pistol, he rammed it home. Next he loaded a round in the chamber; then he checked to make sure the safety was on.

He entered the living room as Tony came through the door. "Did you get the money from the bank, Babe?" He asked.

Tony looked at him with a shocked expression on her face.

"What in the hell is going on, Bill? First, all of the secrecy on the phone, then I come home and find you standing in the living room holding a pistol."

"Sit down, Tony. What I'm going to tell you will sound crazy. Believe me, I swear it's not. Every bit of it is true." He went on to recount his experiences in the last few days.

As he finished, Tony looked at him and said, "This is hard to accept, Bill. Are you sure this is not some kind of after effect of being sick which is causing you to hallucinate?"

"Believe me, Tony. I wish I were hallucinating. Yes, I believe what happened to me is in some way related to the illness I have just suffered. I had a hard time believing it until I looked in the paper and read what happened to the Shipley family."

"Oh, Bill, I don't know what to believe. Things have really been crazy since you got sick. I'm sorry that was the wrong word to use. Of course, I don't believe you're crazy."

"Thanks, Babe," he said, kissing her. "Now pack the things you need to be away for an extended period. I'll go make us a cup of coffee and bring it to you. Then we have to discuss how we can leave without attracting attention." Carrying the coffee into the bedroom, Bill saw four suitcases on the bed with clothes in them.

"No, no, Babe, I meant for you to pack light. What we take has to remain hidden in the truck. Just pack one suitcase with what you need. If we need anything else, we can buy it."

"All right, Bill, but it's a shame to leave clothes, then go out and buy a dress like the one I left hanging at home."

Giving her a hug, he asked, "Tony, your friend Janet has a pickup that looks a lot like ours. Do you think she would loan it to you for a few days?"

"I don't know, but I can ask."

"Ok, here is what I want you to do. In a few minutes, walk down to the post office. I know you usually drive. It's such a nice day though no one will be suspicious of you walking there. When you get to the phone truck on the corner, see if you can tell who is in it. Then, go to the pay phone by the post office and call Janet."

“Why can’t I just call Janet from here?” Tony asked.

He explained that he suspected the phone was being monitored. He also told her he thought that whoever was in the phone truck was watching their house.

This seemed to shake Tony up and she abruptly sat down. Looking up, she asked, “What are we going to do?”

“Nothing for now. We must act normally until it gets dark.”

Tony stood up, wrapped her arms around him and kissed him hungrily. Bill felt the first effects of arousal he had felt in three weeks. Pulling away he said, “God, I want you, Babe. We have too much to do, so can I have a rain-check?”

Smiling mischievously, Tony said, “Hey, haven’t you heard the expression, ‘Make hay while the sun shines?’” as she backed away, unbuttoning her blouse.

“*Shit*,” Bill thought, as he felt desire shoot through his body at the sight of Tony’s firm breasts. Advancing, he grabbed her and lowered his mouth to her right breast. He felt the nipple harden as he flicked it with his tongue. Sweeping the suitcases from the bed, he lowered Tony and snapped the button on her jeans. Pulling off her jeans, Bill stood and drank in the sight of her perfect body, lying there, waiting and willing to please him. Quickly undressing, he climbed in the bed. Taking her in his arms he held her close and kissed her deeply while letting his right hand trail down between her thighs.

Tony squirmed and low moans escaped her lips. Bill rolled over, spread her legs and penetrated her as her body raised to meet his. “Give it to me, Bill. Please give it to me now.”

Bill felt her inner muscles begin to grip him as she went into her orgasm. This drove him over the edge. With one final plunge, he buried himself deeply inside her and climaxed.

Tony wrapped her arms around him and said, “That was quick, lover. Quick, but good. It was the best it’s been in a while.”

Rolling off to the side, Bill said, “Yeah, I needed that.”

Lighting two cigarettes, Bill passed one to Tony, feeling relaxed in the after glow of making love.

Tony lay with her head on his shoulder. “Bill, do you have any idea what made these people like they are? Jim and Slim have been your friends for years. Why do they want to kill you?”

“This sickness has something to do with them being able to communicate mentally. It must have affected their brains somehow. From what I know, if you aren’t part of this group, they kill you. I believe they are gaining strength every day. There must be a lot of them out there,” Bill replied.

Stubbing out his cigarette, Bill slapped Tony on the ass and said, “Up and at ‘em, big girl. You have things to do and I have plans to make.”

Grumbling, Tony mumbled, “What a spoil sport,” as she headed for the shower.

Bill was sitting on the couch looking at road maps when Tony entered the room. “I’m going to go call Janet now. Is there anything else you want me to do while I’m out?”

“Stop at the hardware store and buy two timers for electrical lights. When you get back, Tony, put the truck in the garage and close the door. I want to load what we are taking without them seeing me.”

“See you in a little bit,” Tony said, going out the door.

Bill looked at the road map again. He decided to take Route 52 to Huntington and stay there for a few days. It could be a bad move on his part. Huntington was a larger city and if something was going on there, he knew the number of infected people would be greater. He hoped that because of the larger number of people they wouldn’t stand out as much as they did here.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, he saw it was five o’clock. “*Tony should be back by now*,” he thought. Bill wondered if something could have happened to her. Going to the window and looking out, he noticed that the phone truck was no longer there. He became concerned because Tony was overdue and now the phone truck was gone. He wondered if he should go looking for her. Going to the bedroom, he picked up the extra clips for the revolver. Putting on a light jacket to cover the

weapon stuck in the back of his pants, Bill walked toward the front door. Glancing out the window, he got a shock when the phone truck with Tony and Jim inside pulled into the driveway.

"Jesus Christ," he thought. Rushing to the bedroom, he ripped off the jacket, lay down and pulled the cover up to his chin. Reaching behind him, he pulled the .45 out of his pants. Removing the safety, he held it alongside his leg. Bill didn't know what was going on. He prepared himself for anything, including killing Jim if he had to.

The front door opened and Tony shouted, "It's just me, Honey. Guess what? We have a surprise guest."

Standing in the bedroom doorway, Tony told him that Jim had insisted on taking her to the post office. He took her around town to do her shopping.

"Thank Jim for me, will you?" Bill said.

"Oh, you can do that yourself." Tony said with a big grin on her face. "He's carrying the groceries in now and said he would look in on you when he's done."

Bill wondered what the hell was going on. Tony didn't act as though she was having any trouble with Jim. It was getting pretty hot under the cover. He was sweating and wished he had taken time to remove his clothes.

Jim came into the room and looked around. "You sure look terrible, Bill. That's some fever you have. You're sweating like a stuck pig."

"Maybe I overdid it today by coming in to work. Now I think I'll be flat on my back for the next few days."

As Jim stood there, Bill tried projecting his thoughts, nothing happened. As he started to thank Jim for looking in on him, he heard Slim's voice in his head say, *"So how is he, Jim?"*

"Pretty bad. From the way he looks, we don't have to worry about him going anywhere."

"As long as he's still there tonight at two o'clock; then, we will be rid of him." Slim said.

This startled Bill and he jerked under the covers.

Jim noticed and said, "I'll get Tony to look at you, Bill." He turned and left the room to get Tony.

"They aren't wasting any time, trying to get rid of me." Bill thought. Just then, Tony entered the room followed by Jim.

"Oh, Honey, let me get your medicine. It should relieve the pain a little." She went to the nightstand and picked up an aspirin bottle. With her back to Jim, she removed two aspirins. She set the aspirin bottle down and placed one of Bill's pre-prescription bottles in her hand. Turning to Bill, she gave him the two pills and some water from the nightstand. "I know you don't like to take these pills, Honey, because they knock you out for ten to twelve hours. Please, humor me and take them." Turning to Jim, she said, "Let's go into the other room and let him rest. In about fifteen minutes, he'll be sleeping like a baby."

Holding the medicine bottle up, Tony said, "I think I'm going to have to get this refilled soon. Tonight, I might take a couple of these. At least I'll get the first good night's sleep I've had in a while." She placed the bottle back on the nightstand and left the room followed by Jim.

Bill lay there wishing he could strip the covers off. He heard their muted conversation coming from the living room. It felt like hours before he heard Jim say, "Tell Bill to take it easy. Tell him to get better before he comes back to work. I'll stop by tomorrow or the next day to see how he's feeling." Bill heard the front door open and close. After Jim's truck started and he heard it back down the driveway, Bill threw off the covers. The cool air of the room hit him like ice water causing a chill all the way to the bone. He wiped sweat off his face as Tony entered laughing hysterically. Bill wasn't in a good mood after being in what he compared to a pressure cooker. He asked, "What the fuck was that all about?"

Trying to gain control of herself, Tony gasped, "What a stupid bastard Jim is." She told Bill what

happened on the way to the post office. As she approached, Jim stepped out of his truck and made pleasant conversation for a few minutes. Then he asked her where she was going? After telling Jim she was going to the post office, he insisted on taking her. She protested at first, but decided, what the hell. She related that Jim opened the door and helped her into the truck. He let his hand rest on her leg a little longer than necessary. As they drove along, she told Jim she hadn't realized what an asshole Bill was until he got sick.

Tony related how she told Jim she thought he was handsome and maybe they could get better acquainted. She made him promise that he wouldn't tell anyone. She told Bill that Jim had a big smile on his face. Jim took her to do the rest of the shopping and then had brought her home.

"You had me worried for a minute. I was just going to go look for you and see if you were in any trouble. You sure as hell surprised me when you pulled in with Jim."

"Bill, I don't know if this means anything. Two or three times, as Jim drove along, he got this blank look on his face. Then, he would shake his head or mutter something I couldn't understand. He almost ran into another car at an intersection one of those times."

"He probably was talking to someone else at those times. Did you get to make your call to Janet?"

"Yes, I did. One of the girls at the store let me use the phone in the office. Janet said we could use the truck. She is going away with her boyfriend for a week and won't be needing it until she gets back."

"Good. While Jim was in here with me, I heard him talking to Slim. They made it plain we are going to have an accident tonight around two o'clock. Now go out, pull the truck into the garage, and close the door. I'll go get the things we are going to take and put them in the truck."

After loading the truck, Bill told Tony to take it to the abandoned Amoco station. The station was located four blocks from their house. "Make sure you park it out of sight. After hiding the truck, walk to Janet's, and get her truck. Bring it back here, and put it in the garage. By the time you return it will be dark. Whoever is watching our house might not notice that it's not our truck."

"By the way, Babe, that was a pretty good song and dance you did with the pills. That should convince them they have nothing to worry about concerning me. I got the impression Jim thought I would be in a sound sleep until tomorrow after your story about the pills. Quick thinking on your part. Go now, it's only about forty-five minutes until dark. Please be careful, it's a ten-block walk to Janet's. I wish there were some way to disguise you. Most of your walk to Janet's will happen while it's still light enough to recognize you."

"Give me a few minutes, Love." Tony said getting up and going into the bedroom. Bill wondered what she had in mind. Ten minutes later she came back into the living room.

Standing in the middle of the room was a frumpy black haired woman.

"What, how?" Bill sputtered looking at her.

Tony removed the black wig to reveal her strawberry blond hair. "It's simple, tie a pillow to my stomach and put on one of my large dresses. Place the wig on my head and instant dis-guise." Placing the wig in her purse, she kissed him on the cheek saying, "I better go now. I'll put the wig back on when I park the truck." Turning, she opened the door to the garage.

"I know you'll be all right, but be careful."

"I will. Now get back in the house, so I can open the garage door and be on my way." She blew him a kiss.

Entering the living room, Bill looked around then walked over and sat down on the couch. *"Just when everything was coming together for me and Tony, this has to happen."* He worried about Tony. If one of these people recognized her after she hid the truck, they would know something was wrong. Bill was sure this would make them move up the timetable for getting rid of him. He knew that if they killed him, no harm would come to Tony for a while. They would keep her prisoner somewhere, use and molest her until sated, then kill her. Looking out the window as darkness fell, he could only sit and

wait.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ben sat in the airplane seat, bone tired. For the last eight-teen hours he had been grilled by the doctors at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta on just about everything in his family history. They went back more than five generations. In the next room his wife went through the same questioning.

The doctors finally quit their questioning when Ben became angry and demanded to see his family.

Unable to sleep, Ben sat there, thinking. When Ben's boss, Mr. Compton, arrived after Pete's accident, he had been in a shitty mood. Mr. Compton ranted and raved about how his firm didn't need this kind of trouble right now with the company's license coming up for renewal in two weeks. The way he carried on, he just the same as said Ben was the cause of Pete's death.

He asked why Ben didn't notice Pete's erratic behavior before he entered the packing room? Ben tried to explain that he had been worried about his boy, Benji, who was in the hospital. Ben told Mr. Compton that Pete acted perfectly normal when he entered the building, and that he must have taken the drug after he started cleaning. Ben told him that he had watched Pete on the monitors and he appeared to be doing his normal cleaning. It was only when he heard Pete talking to himself in the packing room that he suspected something was wrong. Ben went on to relate what had happened. He left out the part about the brain matter falling into the open box of computer chips. As Ben finished his explanation, two men in dark suits entered the room and asked if they could talk to Ben. Mr. Compton asked who the hell they were. The taller of the two men reached into his coat pocket and produced credentials, identifying them as Federal Agents from the FBI. They politely asked Mr. Compton to leave the room so they could talk to Ben in private.

As one of the men closed the door behind Mr. Compton, Ben asked, "What does the FBI want to talk to me about?" They asked Ben to show some identification before they would say anything. One of the agents told Ben they were sent to escort him to the airport where he would meet his wife and son.

"What is this all about?" Ben asked.

"We are not at liberty to say, Mr. Johnson." They told Ben to tell his boss he would be gone for a few days.

"What about my job? I can't walk out like this. Maybe you don't know it, but jobs are hard to find. After tonight Mr. Compton will fire me if I walk out without an explanation."

"Don't worry, Mr. Johnson. Your job will still be here when you return. This company does a lot of government work and we will impress that fact upon Mr. Compton."

One of the agents went out and brought Mr. Compton back. Ben tried explaining he had to leave for a few days but couldn't tell him where or why he had to go. Mr. Compton didn't like it very much. After some thinly disguised threats from the agents about his company losing government contracts, he grudgingly agreed.

Leaving the building, they placed Ben in the back seat of a car. On the drive to the airport, Ben tried to find out what was going on, but neither of the agents said anything.

Arriving at the airport, they escorted Ben aboard the plane. Leila, his wife, clutched his arm and

asked what was going on in a frightened voice. "Everything's ok honey," he told her.

Leila explained she was sitting beside Benji's bed when a group of people dressed in space suits came into the room. They put Benji in a plastic like envelope and rushed both of them to the airport in an ambulance.

It took a long time to calm Leila down. She asked a lot of questions that Ben had no answer for. All they could learn was that they were being flown to a hospital in Atlanta. Benji was to receive some form of advanced treatment for his illness.

On landing in Atlanta, the plane taxied to a remote part of the airport where a large ambulance met them. They placed Ben, Leila and Benji in it. Over the intercom they were told to relax. The driver told them they were being taken to the Center for Disease Control where their boy would be treated. Ben asked why there weren't any attendants in back of the ambulance with them.

The voice in the speaker told Ben they were in a sterile environment for the protection of his boy. When they arrived at the center, he could talk to the doctor handling Benji's case.

Arriving at the center, they were led down deserted hallways until they came to two airlock type doors. A man met them who said he was Dr. David Palmer and that he would be working on Benji's case.

Ben asked why they were being held prisoners?

Dr. Palmer told him the illness Benji had was part of a strange epidemic occurring in the country. Since Benji's illness had stabilized without any ill effects, they wanted to study him. They hoped to discover why he wasn't affected like the other people who had the disease.

This was the first time Ben heard that his boy was going to be all right. He breathed a sigh of relief. He still didn't like the idea of Benji being a guinea pig for their research.

After three days, they allowed Ben to see Benji. Benji's eyes lit up when Ben entered the room. He looked better than he had for the last three weeks. Benji told his dad the doctors said they were going to move him to a new place. Pulling Ben close, Benji asked why he was hearing voices inside his head.

Ben thought Benji was hallucinating from the fever and told him that it would go away in a while.

Benji insisted he still heard the voices. He said he knew the doctors believed him because he heard a couple of them talking about it. The curtain parted and a nurse told Ben he would have to leave so his son could rest.

That was eight hours ago. Now they were on a plane to another hospital somewhere in Colorado. Before leaving Atlanta, Ben heard disturbing reports about patients going berserk and killing staff members. Right after hearing this they were whisked off to the airport. Turning, he looked at his wife sleeping in the seat beside him. She still had the same girlish figure she had when he first started dating her. She looked as beautiful now as she had then. He saw the tension on her face. Ben knew it was caused by not knowing what was going to happen to them. He wished he could give her some answers but he just didn't know anything.

Easing out of the seat so he didn't disturb Leila, Ben stood up in the aisle. Glancing around the plane, he noticed they were the only passengers. He wondered what the government was hiding? Why would they spend all this money just to fly three people half way across the country? Whatever it was, it must be dammed important. Making his way to the galley, he found the steward, a slim black man reading a book. His suit coat was off and Ben saw a .38 in a shoulder holster. Ben thought he looked a lot like Sammy Davis Jr., the entertainer.

"May I help you, sir?" he asked.

"For starters quit calling me sir and start calling me Ben."

"Ok, Ben. My name is Jake," he said extending his hand. "Now, Ben, what can I do for you?"

"I don't suppose you can tell me anything about this place we are going to?"

"Sorry, Ben. Even if I knew what was going on, I probably couldn't tell you. The plain truth is I

don't know anything. The office called me from a nice warm bed tonight and told me to baby sit three people who were being flown to Colorado."

"Well if I can't get information, Jake, could I have a cup of coffee? I need something to keep me awake."

"Sure thing, Ben. I put on a fresh pot a few minutes ago. It should be ready by now."

"What is this hospital we are going to like?" Ben asked.

"I can't answer that but I'll bet it's not a regular hospital you are going to," Jake answered.

"What do you mean a hospital is a hospital isn't it? I mean they treat sick people there don't they?"

"The government has special hospitals they use for experimental purposes," Jake said.

"So you think we are being sent to one of those?"

"I don't know, but it is the only explanation that makes any sense to me." Jake answered.

"I don't think I want my boy being a guinea pig for any more of their experiments."

"Take it easy, Ben. I didn't say that is where you are being taken. I don't know anything about the place," Jake said.

"Damn, I wish I could get some answers to my questions."

"You know there is something awfully wrong with our country, Ben. I watched the news this evening and there were reports of people being murdered, homes burning down and things like that. I got the feeling the news people weren't telling all the truth about what they know."

"I haven't heard any news since we were put on the plane in New Jersey. Christ was that only four days ago? It seems like four years. What makes you think something is wrong?" Ben asked.

"I don't know maybe it's my imagination. What the news people are saying and the things I saw in Atlanta before we left give me a gut feeling something is wrong," Jake told him.

"What did you see?"

"There were a lot of people on the streets breaking windows and fighting with each other. One group tried to stop the taxi I was in. The driver almost ran them down to get away," Jake said. "Sounds like things have gone to hell in the last few days? It's not confined to just Atlanta from what the taxi driver told me. He said people were going crazy all over the country. He heard on the news that a group of reporters were talking about a mass murder that occurred in southern West Virginia. According to him a bunch of town crazies tied up a group of people and poured gasoline on them from a tanker, then set them on fire. He heard that forty people died. The report said only three of the ten reporters investigating the so called accident escaped alive."

"Do you think there was much truth to what you were told?"

"I don't know but in the last few days things seemed to have come unglued around where I live," Jake answered.

Standing up, Ben put his coffee cup on the counter. "I better get back to my wife before she wakes and finds me gone."

"Nice talking to you, Ben." Jake held out his hand, which Ben shook before turning and walking to the rear of the plane.

Approaching his seat, Leila sat up asking where he had been. After telling her he had gone to get a cup of coffee he asked if she wanted to go check on Benji.

"Yes," she replied, so Ben helped her from the seat.

Parting the curtain that separated Benji from the rest of the compartment, Ben and Leila could see that Benji was sitting up. He was talking to Mrs. Parks, the nurse who was accompanying Benji to the new hospital.

"Hello, Champ." Ben said as he ruffled the hair on Benji's head. "How're you feeling?"

"Fine Dad. Still a little weak though, but Mrs. Parks says I will be up and around in no time."

While his mother fretted over him, Mrs. Parks asked if it would be all right for her to go get a cup of coffee.

“Certainly,” Ben said, telling her to take her time.

Benji looked at his dad and said. “I’m glad you came back because there is a lot I want to talk to you about.”

“What’s on your mind, son?”

“Dad, please don’t think I’m crazy but back at the hospital I could hear doctors talking to each other, only Dad, they weren’t speaking. How is that possible?”

“I don’t know son. What do you mean they weren’t speaking?”

“Their lips never moved, but they carried on a conversation with each other. It was like they were talking to each other with their minds. Is that possible Dad?”

“Are you sure it wasn’t just your imagination, Benji?”

“Positive, Dad. They were checking me while they talked or whatever they did, but they definitely had a conversation.”

“What did they talk about?”

“That was the scary part. They talked about what they were going to do to the women when they took over. Dad, what they were saying was down right dirty. One of the doctors said it was about time to let the crazies out of the wards so they could take care of the people who weren’t like them. The other doctor said that the hospital had to be destroyed so that it couldn’t be used against them. Something has changed about me, Dad, and I don’t know what it is.” Benji said in a low frightened voice.

“How do you mean changed?” his father asked.

“I can sense things. I can tell if people are good or bad. It’s hard to explain, but some of the people in the hospital were worse than bad. I sensed this about them as quick as I met them. It’s like the difference in the smell of a good egg and the smell of a rotten egg only it’s not smell, it’s some-thing I know.”

Leila sat in back of Benji with a look of horror on her face. “What have they done to you?” she asked starting to weep.

“I’m ok, Mom. This is just something different, and I don’t think they did it to me.” Benji reached for her hand.

“Now, Mrs. Parks, all I can sense from her is goodness like I sense coming from you, Mom, and you, Dad.”

They talked about little things until Mrs. Parks came back. Ben hugged Benji and they went back to their seats. Leila fell asleep at once. It took Ben a little longer but fatigue finally won out and he drifted off to sleep. The next thing he knew Jake was shaking his shoulder.

“What is it Jake?”

“I think we have a problem, Ben?” Jake answered.

Ben eased out of his seat and followed Jake to the cockpit.

Cap, the pilot told them they had electrical prob-lems at the airport and could only keep one of the runways lighted.

“Has this happened before?” Jake asked.

“Once or twice but never the outer runway which is the farthest from the terminal,” Cap answered.

“Do you know any controllers down there, Cap?” Jake asked.

“Old George Jenkins and I used to be drinking buddies when he worked O’Hara in Chicago before he transferred here.”

“Ask whoever is down there if George’s first baby has been born yet,” Jake told him.

There was a pause then Cap said, “That’s funny the man told me George was the father of a six pound baby girl. Hell, George is almost sixty years old and his wife died ten years ago. What’s going on down there, Jake?”

"I'm afraid the airport has been taken over by the same kind of people who are taking over the CDC. I am sure they plan to kill us if we land. Can we get to another airport, Cap?"

"No, we only have enough fuel to stay in the air for another thirty minutes."

"Cap, what's the length of the runway and how much of it do you use to land?" Jake asked.

"The runway is five thousand five hundred feet. We use a little over three thousand five hundred feet."

"Give me a few minutes; just keep circling until I get back to you," Jake told him.

Ben was silent during this exchange now he asked. "What do you have in mind, Jake?"

Looking Ben straight in the eye Jake said, "Ben, you know the situation, we have to land. You're a hunter. Think about what we can do to get away." Grabbing Ben by the arm, Jake pulled him down the aisle saying, "Since we have to land there, I have a plan that might work. It will be risky but better than being ducks in a shooting gallery for the people at the terminal."

"Tell me what to do." Ben said.

Jake explained to Ben what he was going to do when the plane landed. He ended by saying, "Speak to your wife and Mrs. Parks. Fill them in on what we're going to try. Have them prepare everything they can so that when the time comes, we can get off the plane quickly."

It took only ten minutes for Ben and the women to get things ready. Mrs. Parks even made a few suggestions on how to improve the plan that Ben and Jake had overlooked.

Walking up to the cabin, he stepped in saying. "Everything is ready in back, Jake."

"Thanks, Ben. Cap, go all the way to the end of the runway when you land. After turning around, sit there for a couple of minutes before starting toward the terminal. Can you do that, Cap?" Jake asked.

"I can do it, Jake, but why?"

"When you stop, we will open the rear door, deploy the emergency chute and get off. I only wish we could take you with us."

"Cap, you go with them. I can take the plane to the terminal and find some way to escape myself," Jeff, the co-pilot, told him.

"Fine. Everything is settled then. Give us a few minutes, Cap, then take her in," Jake told them.

Arriving at the back of the plane, they saw Mrs. Parks strip-ping her clothes off until all she had on was her bra and panties. Seeing them looking at her, she said. "Show some modesty gentlemen and turn your backs please."

With smiles on their faces, they turned around and helped Leila place things they couldn't take with them in the luggage racks above the seats.

"You can turn around now," Mrs. Parks said.

Standing where the white uniformed nurse had stood was a middle aged woman almost completely covered in grey. They saw she had taken the grey blanket covering Benji and cut a hole in it. She then draped it over her head and used a part of the hem to make a belt that she cinched around her middle.

They heard Cap's voice come from the speaker telling them to put their seat belts on. He was going to take the plane down.

Ben made sure Leila and Benji were strapped in, then strapped himself in. He felt the nose of the plane drop. Glancing at Jake, he nodded he was ready. He got a nod in return from Jake.

Ben heard a screech and felt the thump of the wheels as they touched the runway. Reaching down, he unbuckled the seat belt. Swaying to his feet, he helped his wife and son unbuckle their belts. Then, he led them to stand near the door.

Above the back thrust of the engines, Jake shouted. "We have to do this quickly. We don't want the people at the terminal getting suspicious."

As the plane slowed down, they heard Cap running up the aisle toward them. "When Jeff starts

turning the plane, open the door and pop the chute,” Cap said.

They knew Jeff was turning when they swayed to the right. Ben and Jake pushed the door open. Jake hit a red button beside the door; they heard a faint pop then the sound of rushing air. Looking down, Ben saw that the chute was rapidly filling with air as it dragged along the ground.

With a lurch the plane stopped. Ben jumped and hit the chute about half way down. Because of the angle it was almost straight down. Ben landed on his rear with a thud that made his teeth hurt. Climbing to his feet, he grabbed the end of the chute and pulled it away from the plane. This increased the angle so the others would have a slower slide to the ground.

Cap came sliding down. He grabbed the other side of the chute as Benji jumped followed by Leila. Mrs. Parks was next.

Ben looked up to see what was keeping Jake. He saw that Jeff had come back long enough to help close the door. Slowly they pulled the door toward them until Jeff could handle it himself. Ben saw Jake jump and in a moment he was standing beside Ben.

“Take them to the end of the runway,” Jake told Ben.

“Follow me, everyone,” Ben yelled. He broke into a fast jog. Ben heard a pop that sounded like a shot. Looking over his shoulder he saw the chute falling to the ground. They were two hundred feet away when he heard the plane’s engines rev up. Glancing back, Ben saw the plane roll forward. “Good luck, Jeff,” he silently said.

Ben stopped at a steep bank leading down to a road and waited for Jake to catch up.

“Why did you stop?” Jake asked.

“They will know we went this way when they don’t find us on the plane. Why not go to the last place they expect us to?”

“I like the way you think, Ben. So we circle back to the terminal. First, let me have your jacket; yours too Cap. Ma’am, can I have your sweater?” Jake said turning to Leila. Getting the sweater he said. “Circle to the left, Ben. I’m going to spread these things down the bank making it look like we fled in panic. That should buy us a little more time. I’ll catch up with you before you get too far.”

Ben ran at a slow trot toward a small hill he could faintly see when the moon came out from behind a cloud. The grass was damp under his feet and he felt moisture soaking into his shoes. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the only one having trouble was Mrs. Parks. Dropping back beside her, he asked, “Will you be able to keep up this pace?”

She shook her head, yes, and gasped. “Go on.”

Looking to his left, Ben saw the plane come to a stop at the terminal in the distance. Immediately a ladder truck rolled toward the plane.

Near the top of the hill, they stopped just inside the tree line. “Ok, take a break for a few minutes while we wait for Jake to catch up,” Ben told them. He walked back to where he could see the terminal and runway lights. Watching, he saw vehicles heading toward the runway. They sped down the runway to the end. He saw that a lot of people were getting out of the cars by the flickering of the headlights as they walked in front of them.

Standing up, Ben walked to Leila and asked, “How is Benji holding up?”

“I don’t know where he is getting the strength, but he seems to be getting stronger by the minute.”

“Keep an eye on him.” He reached down and helped her to her feet. The others were already on their feet waiting for him to tell them what to do.

“Cap, you bring up the rear. Make sure that everyone stays just inside the tree line. I’m going to go ahead to see if there are any surprises waiting for us.”

Ben told Leila to lead them along as fast as she could.

“Be careful, Ben,” she said, kissing him on the cheek.

Ben squeezed her hand in reply then jogged down the tree line until he was well ahead of them.

Slowing to a fast walk, he darted out to the grass; when a cloud covered the moon, he moved forward. Standing beside a tree, he heard a twig snap ahead of him. Lowering himself to the ground, Ben crawled farther into the woods. Turning around from his position on the ground, he saw where the tree line ended and the grass began. He almost missed the shadowy figure that stepped from behind a tree twenty feet to his right. Easing forward he waited. When the man was five feet from him, he aimed the gun upward and said. "Freeze right there."

"Ben, is that you?"

"Jake?" Ben said, climbing to his feet, uncocking the gun.

"Damn, you scared the shit out of me. I thought I had bought it," Jake said with a nervous laugh.

"We waited as long as we could on you, then moved out hoping you would catch up. Why are you are coming from the direction of the terminal?" Ben asked.

"After placing the coats on the bank, I climbed back to the top just as the cars turned onto the runway. If I had tried to run after you, they would have seen me before I reached cover. I ran to where the chute lay and pulled it over me. Man, I tell you, I was scared as those cars pulled up to where I lay. I heard the men get out cursing. One of them told the others to spread out and see if they could find out which way we went. I almost died of a heart attack when one of them kicked the chute next to my head cursing and saying they should have thought of this and prepared for it. A man came running up saying that we had gone down the bank and into the trees across the road.

"The man in charge told him to go back to the terminal and get as many men as he could. He told him to take them to the other side of the woods and come back toward us. He said he wanted to keep us between the two groups. They were walking away from the cars while talking, so I peeked out and there wasn't anyone close. I crawled into the shadow of a car and waited. Pretty soon the man who was going back to the terminal headed toward a truck while the leader went down the bank.

"I ran to the truck knowing he couldn't see me because of the headlight's glare shining in his eyes. Crawling under the truck, I grabbed hold of the frame and lifted myself off the ground. The man got in and drove right up to the entrance of the terminal building. He got out yelling at people to come with him. During the confusion, I crawled to the side of the building and waited until they left. Then, I came looking for you," Jake said.

By the time he finished his story the rest of the group came up to where they were and stopped. "Nice to see you, Jake. We thought we had lost you when you didn't show up," Cap said.

"Cap, I hate to tell you this but they have Jeff somewhere in the building interrogating him and it doesn't sound good."

"Shit! Then, we are just going to have to get him out of there," Cap said.

"I don't think so. He knew the chance he was taking when this started. I'm sorry that he got caught, but it would be sheer folly for us to try and rescue him," Jake told them.

"Wait a minute. Jeff gave us our chance to get away. The least we can do is get him away from them," Ben protest-ed.

"Ben, think about your family. How would they survive if you were caught or killed?" Jake said.

Leila stepped up to Jake saying. "Ben is right. Just because the world has gone crazy doesn't mean that we have to act like them, forgetting the difference between right and wrong. If there is a chance we can help Jeff, we had better do it. Quite frankly, I don't think I would like waking up in the mornings knowing there was something I could have done to save him but didn't because I was worried about my own safety."

Ben felt a lump in his throat as he reached out and wrapped his arms around his wife. He was surprised at the firmness of her voice. He thought and not for the first time, "*I'm married to one hell of a woman.*"

"I agree whole heartily with Leila," Mrs. Parks said.

"God damn it." Jake said. Then, he looked at their faces and just shrugged his shoulders. "If all of

you want to commit suicide, I guess I might as well make it unanimous. First thing we are going to have to do is get some heavier weapons, and I know just where to get them.”

After telling the rest of them to stay inside the edge of the woods, Jake and Ben started across the grass going to the right. Approaching the top of a mound, Jake dropped to the ground and started crawling forward with Ben right behind him.

Reaching the crest, Ben saw two men sitting in a car parked on the grass. The dome light of the car was on and they were looking at something held between them.

“Ben, take the one on the passenger side and I’ll take the driver,” Jake whispered.

They moved out together in a crouch. The dew dampened grass soaked Ben’s socks as he walked forward. At the end of the car, Jake held his hand up for Ben to wait; then, he crouched down beside the rear wheel.

Ben heard every word the men were saying. He heard the driver say, “This is stupid. They wouldn’t be dumb enough to come this way. They are over in the woods near town and we won’t get in on the kill because shit-head Frank wants to cover everything.”

“I wouldn’t let Frank hear you call him that, besides maybe the one we caught has told where he is supposed to meet them.” The man on the passenger side said.

“Screw Frank, he was the one who fucked up when the co-pilot got off the plane and killed Jess with the fire extin-guisher. If he hadn’t sent so many people up the ladder to the door, Jess would still be alive,” said the driver.

Ben saw Jake rise up and motion him forward. Moving to just behind the passenger door, Ben stuck the barrel of the gun against the man’s temple. “Put your hands on the dash and keep them there,” Ben said in a low voice.

He heard Jake say to his man, “Nice and easy get out of the car.” When the driver was out, Jake pushed him around the car so that Ben could cover both men.

The man from the passenger side said, “Dumb huh, tell me again who the dumb ones are.” He glowered at the driver.

Jake took their belts and tied their hands behind them. Taking a shirt he found in the back of the car, he tore it into strips. He used what was left of the shirt to stuff in their mouths; then, he used the strips to secure the gags. Next he marched them over to the edge of the woods and made them lie down next to a tree. Placing them on opposite sides of the tree, Jake told them to wrap their legs around it. He tied their legs securely so that they couldn’t move.

“That should keep them for a spell. Let’s see what is in the car,” Jake said.

They found two rifles and a .45 automatic with plenty of ammunition for the rifles and handgun.

As Ben bent down to look under the seat, he jumped back when a voice said, “Tim, are you there? Answer me.”

“Jesus Christ what was that?” Ben asked as he watched Jake bend over and pull two walkie-talkies from under the seat. Lowering the .38, Ben noticed that it was cocked. He didn’t remember pulling the hammer back. Slowly he eased the hammer down and put the safety on.

The radio squawked; then a man’s voice said. “Tim, if you are asleep I’ll nail your fucking ears to the wall when I see you. Answer me. God damn it.”

Jake held the radio to his mouth and said in a surly voice. “All right, all right what do you want?”

“Listen we’re almost finished searching the woods, but we haven’t found them yet. Keep your eyes open. We should be finished in an hour or so. We will start back for the terminal if we haven’t found them. Keep me posted if you see any-thing?”

Jake said, “You’ll be the first one to know. If you catch them, let me know, so we can come over and get in on the fun.”

They heard a chuckle on the radio then the voice said. “For a minute I didn’t think it was you. It must be the radio that makes your voice sound strange. Just keep alert and let us know if you see

anything.” Then there was silence from the radio.

“We have to be out of here in less than an hour so whatever we do, it has to be fast. Take the weapons and bring everyone up to the edge of the terminal. I’ll drive by the front and see what’s going on and park at the end of the building. Then, we’ll plan what to do next.” Jake said as he started the car.

Ben turned and ran to where the rest of the group waited. Handing the rifle to Cap, he said, “Can you use one of these?”

“I used to be a pretty good shot years ago,” Cap answered.

Turning to Mrs. Parks, Ben asked, “Have you ever fired a rifle or hand gun?”

“Give me the .45. Until last year, I was a Major in the Marine Corp and could shoot the balls off a mosquito at one hundred feet with one of these.”

Ben handed her the .45 and an extra box of ammo.

Leila asked, “Do you have a weapon for me?”

This shocked Ben; he knew that Leila disapproved of guns of any sort. “I have the right to protect us from people who are trying to kill us,” she said looking at Benji.

Ben took the .38 out of his pocket as they walked across the grass. He showed her how to load the gun and how to work the safety. Ben handed it to her saying, “I love you, Honey. Just watch out for Benji.” Her only answer was to squeeze his hand.

Ben led them around to the side of the building and found a place to hide between two large air-conditioning units. Telling the women to stay there, he took Cap to the edge of the building and watched for Jake.

“Cap, do you think you can find another plane to get us out of here. If we have to drive, we are at a disadvantage. The people know the roads around here and we don’t. It wouldn’t be hard for them to trap us.”

“An airport this size ought to have plenty of private planes. I know where they park them. I’ll go around the runway side and see what I can find,” Cap answered.

“Be careful, Cap. Don’t take any chances.” Ben watched him go to the other side of the building. He saw Jake turn the car back up the circular drive. Seeing no one, he stepped out of the shadows as Jake pulled up to the curb.

“We got lucky again. There are only a few people in the building. Let’s go see if we can find Jeff,” Jake said.

Ben told him about sending Cap to look for a plane.

“Good thinking on your part.”

“Try and act casual as if you belong here when we go inside. They can’t know everyone who was here. If someone sees us, they might think we are with them,” Jake told Ben.

Approaching the doors, Ben put the rifle in the crook of his arm where he could instantly drop it into his hands if he needed to use it. Jake opened the door and went in, first going to the left. Ben went to the right. He saw a soda machine across the lobby. He motioned for Jake to stay put. Searching his pockets for change, he crossed the lobby to the soda machine and looked around. Down at the end of the lobby Ben saw a man with a rifle. The man leaned against the wall looking into the passenger area. The man had a bored expression on his face. He had glanced at Ben when he first appeared but was now ignoring him.

Ben saw no one else but heard a cry of pain coming from upstairs. Casually holding up his hand, Ben motioned for Jake to stay where he was. Seeing Jake’s nod, Ben got a soda out of the machine and casually walked toward the man.

“I wish they’d put a gag in his mouth,” Ben said to the man as he heard the scream again.

“Shit, he’s been screaming like that for the last twenty minutes. Where have you been?” He looked at Ben suspiciously.

"I've been out with Tim. He is doing so much bitching and griping about not being there when they catch these people, I had to get away from him for a while," Ben said. He saw the man relax at the mention of Tim's name.

"Yeah, Tim can be a real pain in the ass when he gets in one of his bitching moods."

Ben pretended to twist off the cap on the soda bottle, but instead of loosening it, he tightened it as tight as he could.

Holding the bottle out to the man, he asked, "Could you loosen the top for me?"

"Sure, no problem," the man said taking the soda. "Damn this is tight." He tried to twist the top. "Here hold the bottle while I use both hands to twist it." The man leaned his rifle against the wall. Placing one hand over the other, he gave the bottle cap a hard twist. As he did this, Ben raised the neck of the bottle slightly. Soda squirted out of the bottle into the man's face. "What the hell..." was as far as he got before the butt of Ben's rifle connected with the side of his head.

Ben caught him under the arms as he started to slide down the wall. Jake ran to his side, saying, "Let's take him down and place him behind the seats in the waiting area." They carried him down a short flight of stairs and placed him on the floor between two rows of seats.

"Jeff is upstairs, Jake. You stay here and make sure no one sneaks up on me while I take a look."

Ben crossed the lobby and opened a door to the stairway. Looking up, he heard what sounded like someone hitting a side of beef with a meat ax followed by a scream. At the top landing, he looked through the glass window in the door and saw two men in the hallway. They had Jeff's hands tied to a pipe mounted in the wall above his head. One of the men held a piece of blood splat-te-red wooden dowel about four feet long in his hand. The other one was leaning against the wall with a look of pleasure on his face. Jeff's back was a mass of cuts and welts where the man had struck him on the back with the dowel.

Mad at what he saw, Ben pushed the door open and pointed the rifle at them. "Don't even think about it," Ben told the man against the wall as his hand started for the rifle beside him.

Ben saw by the look in the man's eye that he was going to try and get the rifle. The man holding the dowel threw it at him and dived for the floor. The man leaning against the wall dropped to his knees and brought the rifle up to his shoulder.

Ben stepped to the left and fired from the hip as the other man shot. Ben felt a blow to his left arm, which threw him against the wall. "*Shit,*" he thought, "*I'm hit.*"

The man with the rifle tried to line it up on him. He was having trouble doing it because of the blood streaming into his eyes. Ben's shot had grazed his head. Ben brought his rifle up with one hand and aimed it like a pistol. Ben shot him and watched him fall to the floor.

The sound of a shot almost in his ear deafened him. "*Oh shit! There's another one behind me. No, that can't be right,*" he thought. Ben watched the second man slide down the wall with the side of his head blown away.

Turning his head, Ben saw Mrs. Parks standing just inside the door with the .45 held out in front of her. She walked to the man she had shot and kicked the gun out of his hand. She turned him over with her foot; next, she went to the other man who lay in a pool of blood moaning. His hands were on his stomach trying to stem the flow of blood that came from his wound.

Picking up the man's rifle, Mrs. Parks said over her shoulder, "This one will be dead before long; let's get out of here."

Turning around, she noticed the blood seeping through Ben's fingers as he held his shoulder. Rushing to his side, she asked, "How bad is it?"

Ben was afraid to look at his arm, but he knew he had to. With the help of Mrs. Parks, he removed his jacket and shirt. The bullet had entered the fleshy part of his arm and there was a trickle of blood coming from the hole.

Mrs. Parks looked at it and said. "It's not that bad, but it will be sore as hell in a few hours. Let's

get you downstairs so I can put a bandage on it to stop the bleeding. Jake,” she yelled down the stairs. “Come up here we need your help.”

Jake came through the door and looked around.

“For a while there I thought maybe you had bought it, Ben. How is he, Mrs. Parks?”

“He will be all right. Do you think you can get Jeff down? Bring him downstairs I want to check his back.”

Looking at Jeff’s unconscious form, Jake said, “I’ll get him downstairs. You go ahead and take care of Ben.”

Downstairs Mrs. Parks took Ben to a ticket counter and had him sit down. She searched the drawers until she found a first aid kit. Taking a two-inch compress bandage out of it, she had Ben hold his arm out. “This is going to hurt,” she said, lifting a bottle of whisky someone had left on the counter. She poured it on the wound.

“Holy shit,” Ben said. It felt like someone was pushing a red-hot poker through his arm when the whisky hit the bullet hole. Ben gritted his teeth and blinked away tears.

Mrs. Parks grabbed his arm and placed the compress on the wound. “That should fix it; just watch you don’t get dirt in it.”

“What were you doing up there? By the way thanks,” Ben said.

“I was coming to tell you we heard on the radio they are sending some men back here to start searching for us.”

They heard Jake coming down the stairs so Mrs. Parks went to help him with Jeff. “*Come on, Cap, find something to get us out of here,*” Ben thought.

Jake and Mrs. Parks laid Jeff face down on the counter. His back was black and blue from the beating.

“I guess it’s a good thing he’s unconscious. Both of you hold him down while I clean him up.” Mrs. Parks said.

Jake went around to the other side of the counter and took a firm grip on Jeff’s left arm. Ben did the same thing with the right arm. Ben turned his head as Mrs. Parks poured whisky on Jeff’s raw back. Jeff screamed and tried to rise. It was all they could do to hold him down.

“Only a little longer,” Mrs. Parks said. She put salve from the first aid kit on Jeff’s back. “Ok, you can let him loose.”

Cap ran in from outside saying, “I’ve found a plane big enough for us, but it’s going to be tight.”

Leila and Benji came through the front door and hurried to them. “They just said on the radio they would be here in about fifteen minutes,” Leila said.

“That does it. Jake, you and Cap get Jeff to the plane. Mrs. Parks go get the weapons upstairs we may need them. Leila, you and Benji come with me.”

Ben led them to the cafeteria, which looked like a tornado had hit it. “Get all of the food that can still be eaten and take it to the plane,” he told them. Wheeling a cart of food out the door, Ben saw Mrs. Parks light a cigar and inhale deeply.

Looking at Ben, she said, “I normally smoke these only at home, but then these are not normal times are they?” She took another puff.

Smiling, Ben said, “You’re all right, Mrs. Parks. Do you have another one of those?”

This caused Leila to chuckle. “It took me ten years to get him to give up cigars. Now I would be proud to light it for him.” She took the lighter and held it to the tip of his cigar.

Benji stood there looking at them as if they were crazy.

“Call me Jane.” Mrs. Parks said as she handed Ben a box of cigars. Together they pushed the cart out the door and headed toward where Cap was starting the engines on the plane.

After getting on, Ben told Cap to get them out of there. Looking out the window, Ben saw a string of cars making their way up to the airport. Ben looked around the cabin of the plane. Jake sat in

the aisle while Jane sat in one of the four seats. Leila placed a sleeping bag on the floor in back so Jeff could lie down. Benji was up with Cap in the cockpit. After making Jeff as comfortable as possible, Leila came and sat down beside him.

“What now, Ben?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Ben said, taking her hand and looking out the window at the sun coming up in the east.

CHAPTER NINE

The rain came down so hard Joe almost had his face against the windshield of the Jeep trying to see the road ahead of him. All at once he slammed on the brakes thinking he heard something that sounded like firecrackers. Shutting off the engine, Joe cracked the door a little and listened. There it was again. Now that he heard it better, he realized it was gunfire from somewhere up ahead. Starting the engine, he pulled the Jeep off to the side of the road. Reaching across the seat, he picked up his poncho and put it on. Taking the .45 from between the seats, he checked to be sure that it was loaded before placing it in his jacket pocket. Next he put four spare clips for the .45 in the other pocket. Reaching down, Joe checked to make sure that the fourteen inch gator knife was secured in the sheath on the inside of his boot.

Placing the beat up old Stetson hat on his head, Joe opened the door and stepped out into the pouring rain. Visibility at best was only fifty feet, so Joe decided to stay about twenty feet off the road as he went forward. After two hundred feet, he stopped to listen. In a few moments, he heard firing off to his left. Crossing the highway, Joe started up the other side. Just ahead of him something lay in the grass.

Joe took the .45 out of his pocket but kept it under the poncho as he approached. Crouching, Joe moved forward slowly looking to the left and right. He always kept the prone figure on the ground in sight. At the sound of a shot just ahead, Joe fell to the ground beside the body. Turning the body over, Joe discovered that it was a young woman in her late twenties. She had three bullet holes in her chest and hadn't been dead long because her body was still warm.

"If I can get to that clump of trees seventy-five feet to my left, I will have cover. Then maybe I can find out what's going on here," Joe thought. Getting to his feet, Joe ran for the trees. Upon reaching the trees Joe heard voices just ahead and to the right. Taking off his hat, Joe looked around the tree. Seeing nothing, he crept forward to the next tree. Now he could hear what the voices were saying. It sounded like two men talking to another person. Slipping to the next tree, Joe listened to what they were saying; he didn't like anything he heard.

Looking around the side of the tree, Joe saw a little girl about nine or ten years old lying on the ground with two men standing over her. The side of the girl's head was bloody from a cut above her ear. The blue dress she wore was torn half way down the front. As she cowered on the ground, one of the men kicked her on the legs and said. "Honey, by the time we get through with you, you'll wish you had died with the rest of them." Reaching down, he pawed at her still undeveloped chest.

"Come on, Pike, let me have a little of that." The other man said as he moved toward the girl.

Joe edged forward while they weren't looking his way. He was now within twenty feet of them.

"Wait your damn turn, Mark." The man called Pike said as he unbuckled his belt and dropped his pants.

"Jesus, they are going to rape that little girl," Joe thought as he watched Pike try to pry the girl's legs apart.

Joe heard voices coming toward them from the left. If he had any hope of saving the girl, it must be done quickly. He pulled the knife from his boot.

The man called Mark was so intent on watching what Pike was doing that he didn't hear Joe come

up behind him. He stiffened as the knife was pressed against his throat. "Don't make a sound," Joe told him. He backed him away from the scene until they were behind a large tree. Holding the man by the throat so he couldn't cry out, Joe gave him a vicious blow to the head with the handle of the knife. Easing him to the ground, Joe looked around to see if he had been noticed. Apparently not because Pike was still intent on getting between the girl's legs. Joe admired the resistance of the little girl. She was out weighed by one hundred and fifty pounds.

The voices sounded much closer now. One of them was yelling, "Answer me, Pike. Where the hell are you?"

Joe knew there wasn't time for finesse so he rushed to where Pike was and kicked him off the girl.

Pike started to get off the ground saying, "Mark, I'm going to...!" He got no further. He looked up and saw Joe as the heavy gator knife slashed across his throat nearly severing his head from his body. Joe dragged the body behind a tree and quickly threw some dead limbs over it.

Rushing over, Joe picked the girl up and ran to where Mark lay. He lifted Mark to his shoulder and said, "Little girl, you are going to have to help me. I can't carry you and him both. Do you think you can run fast enough to keep up with me?"

Trembling, the girl said, "Please don't hurt me, Mister."

Joe lowered Mark to the ground and squatted next to the girl. "Honey, I'm not going to hurt you but do you hear those men coming back there. They are the ones that will hurt you and me too if we don't get out of here. I have to take this man with us. He might have information that'll save our lives. Do you understand?" With tears in her eyes the girl nodded yes.

Joe picked Mark up again and said, "Stay close behind me, girl," He broke into an awkward trot back the way he had come.

Someone started cursing behind them. Joe heard someone yell, "Hey, Doug. Looks like there's someone else in here with us; we just found Pike's body." From off to the right Joe heard, "Spread the men out, Jack. He can't have gotten far."

"Oh shit," Joe said, trying to spot a place to hide as he ran. Looking back he saw that the little girl was right behind him. Joe ran around a large pine tree and saw a hole someone had dug at the base of a tree just ahead of them. He knew they couldn't escape if he had to carry Mark, so he made a quick decision. He trotted over to the hole and lowered Mark into it. After check-ing to make sure he would be out for a while, Joe grabbed the girl. Joe placed her in the hole beside Mark and said, "Listen kid, we can't get away while I have to carry him. I'm going to cover you up with branches and try to lead them away. After I'm gone, don't make a sound because there will probably be people around. I'll come back for you as quickly as possible."

Joe started piling dead brush over the hole and a few freshly fallen pine branches that were lying nearby. Stepping back about fifteen feet, he looked at the hole. It was almost invisible. Joe hoped there weren't any true woodsmen among the men, they wouldn't be fooled for a minute.

Stepping over to the edge of the pile of brush, Joe said. "Kid, I'm going now. Remember not a peep. I'll be back for you as soon as I can."

Joe trotted to the left for about one hundred feet, and then stopped to listen with his back pressed against a tree. One thing in his favor, Joe thought, was the heavy rain that still fell. He should be able to spot them first. Behind him, he heard the men talking. From the sound of their voices, they were about thirty feet apart and close to the place where he hid the girl.

"I've got to get their attention so they will follow me," Joe thought. About fifty feet in front of him lay a large rotten log. Stepping from behind the tree and facing back the way he had come, Joe yelled, "Hey Boy! I'm over this way!"

There was instant silence from the men back there. Then one of them yelled, "Doug, he's just ahead of us."

Joe waited until they started moving forward then ran to the rotten log and lay down as close to

it as he could. Pulling leaves over his body until partially covered, Joe waited with the .45 in one hand and the knife in the other.

After about five minutes, Joe heard voices talking.

“Pike’s head was almost cut from his body, Jack?”

“Yeah, Toddy, I saw it. The son-of-a-bitch must have used an ax on Pike.” Both men stood on the other side of the log, about ten feet apart. The one called Jack sounded like he was about even with Joe’s head.

“Let’s get under that tree and smoke one.”

“Suits me,” Toddy answered. “I don’t like the thought of someone stepping from behind a tree and swinging an ax at me.”

Joe felt moss from the top of the log fall on his face just before a boot was planted six inches in front of his right ear.

Jack’s body blocked out the rain as Joe prayed, “Please don’t look down.” Joe needn’t have worried, because Jack’s only thought was to get under the tree out of the rain and smoke a cigarette.

Joe released his breath slowly. The men went under the branches of a tree about twenty feet from where he lay. Off to the side, Joe heard someone yell. “Have you seen him yet, Jack?”

“No, Doug, he’s still ahead of us,” Jack yelled back.

Joe knew the sooner he took the men out the better his chances of escape were. Rolling to his knees silently, Joe watched the backs of the men and heard Toddy say. “I wonder how far ahead of us, he is?”

“I don’t know. If we keep herding him in this direction, he will run into the rest of the men,” Jack said. He took another drag off of his cigarette.

On his feet, Joe edged forward. He watched Jack turn to the side, unzipping his pants to take a leak.

It’s now or never, Joe thought. He reached from behind the tree and grabbed Toddy around the throat so he couldn’t make a sound. Joe plunged the knife into Toddy’s back just over his heart. Toddy’s legs jerked twice and then were still. Leaning Toddy against the tree, Joe stepped out and faced Jack’s back. Jack was pulling up the zipper on his pants. Joe heard Toddy’s body thump to the ground.

Jack must have heard it too because he said, “What the hell did you do, Toddy, fall down?” He started to turn around. With a surprised look on his face, he saw Joe. Jack opened his mouth to yell just before the knife pierced his heart. Dragging the bodies to the log he had hidden behind, Joe lay them beside it and spread leaves over them. Turning his head up to the sky, Joe said, “Thanks.” Joe knew that if the men hadn’t been careless, he would be lying there instead of them.

Joe ran back to where he had hidden the girl and Mark. When he got there he said, “Kid, it’s just me. I’m going to start taking the brush off of you, so don’t yell.” In moments, Joe cleared the brush away and Mark was on his shoulder. They headed rapidly back to where the Jeep was parked.

Joe tied Mark up and placed him in the back of the Jeep. He helped the girl in and turned the key in the ignition. Removing his poncho, Joe pulled a blanket from behind the seat and handed it to the girl. She was shaking as she sat huddled next to the door. “Wrap this around you, kid. It will take the chill off.”

“Name’s Tammy, not kid,” she said in a weak voice.

“Well, Tammy, we have to get out of here,” Joe said. Putting the Jeep in gear, he crossed the road and headed back the way he had come. “Open the canvas bag at your feet. Get one of my shirts out and put it on,” Joe told Tammy.

She put on his shirt and pulled the blanket around her again. “Can I have one of the candy bars in the bag, Mister?”

“Sure, Tammy, just call me Joe and open a candy bar for me, too. If it’s not too hard, could you

tell me what happened back there?" Joe asked.

Tammy told Joe a story that sounded incredible. She ran away from an orphanage in Salinas, Kansas, when the staff and some of the kids started acting crazy. They started beating on the rest of the normal acting kids. She decided to leave when she saw four of the bigger kids throw a small boy down a well. Then they began throwing large rocks into the well, trying to hit the boy.

Tammy said she woke up at night hearing the boy's cries of pain. At first they were loud, then trailed off to faint screams.

The bigger kids spotted her watching and tried to catch her. Tammy said she climbed in a trash barrel and hid until dark. After it got dark, she made her way out to the highway and ran until her legs gave out. A family in two cars found her sitting beside the road the next morning.

Tammy told Joe they were good to her. She said there were nine of them. An older couple who were the grandparents, then another middle-aged couple with two kids, and a couple with one kid. After telling them what had happened at the orphanage, they insisted she go with them until they found some sort of authorities. They gave her sandwiches from a basket and milk out of a thermos to drink.

About two hours ago, just before it started to rain, she had begun to have this strange feeling of fear. It became worse the further they traveled. As they went under an overpass, two trucks pulled across the road in front of them, blocking the road. They tried to back up, but the road was blocked behind as well. The way she told it, a bunch of men about ten or twelve in number rushed the cars. These men pulled the people from the cars.

In a trembling, choked voice, Tammy said, "The men took the older couple, and the husbands of the two younger women off to the side. They just lined them up and shot them." Her voice broke and she began to cry.

Joe tried to comfort her with soothing words and after a while she stopped crying. It was a few minutes before she started her story again. Looking at the floor, with tears in her eyes she said. "The men took the older women into the back of a large truck where there was a mattress. Once there, the men tore the clothes off the women and started doing things to them. About then it started raining, like pouring water out of a bucket. A man in the large truck yelled for someone to back the truck under the bridge out of the rain. Most of the men were too preoccupied with what was happening in the truck to notice us kids.

With the excitement in the back of the truck and confusion of backing it up, I ran up the bank into the woods. As some of the men gave chase, I looked back to see one of the women jump off the truck and run down the road."

This was the young woman he had found lying beside the road.

She continued, "I thought I had escaped them, but some of the men knew the area. When I came out of the woods on the other side, they were waiting for me. I barely escaped back into the woods. Hearing the men searching for me all around, I played cat and mouse with them in the rain. When I heard a twig snap close to me, I whirled to run and smacked head first into a tree. That was the last thing I remembered until the man in the back of the Jeep and the other one were standing over me."

"Poor child, no one should go through the hell she has been through." Reaching over Joe patted her hand saying, "Everything's going to be ok now, Tammy." He only wished he believed what he was saying.

Joe wanted to turn on the radio but was afraid the news would frighten Tammy. Since crossing the border into Kansas, things were going to hell rapidly. The last newscast he heard said that there were roving gangs of thugs throughout the Midwest. These thugs killed people for no apparent reason. This disease, or whatever you wanted to call it, was taking over the country.

The rain let up to a slow drizzle as Joe drove down the high-way. Joe looked off to the right for the abandoned farm he had spotted from the highway not long before he ran into the ambush.

He needed someplace private to question his helpless friend lying in the back of the jeep. Joe

glanced over at the girl and saw that she was going to sleep. Her head kept bobbing down and then she would bring it back up.

In the distance, he saw the house. Now, he needed to find an exit off the interstate. He ended up driving five miles past the house before finding an exit. As he approached the house, which looked in fairly good repair, Joe eased the .45 out of his pocket, and put it on his lap. He stopped at the gate and looked around. Off to the side of the house stood a modest barn. He could hide the Jeep in the barn in case Mark's buddies came looking for him. Getting out, he unlatched the gate and opened it.

Behind him, Joe heard Tammy say, "It's ok, there is no danger here."

"How can you be sure?" Joe asked, still watching the house.

"I don't know? I feel that it's safe. I can't explain it?"

"Just to be sure, you stay in the Jeep and watch our friend while I check it out."

"Ok, but I'm telling you there is nothing here that will hurt us except the man in the back," Tammy said, as he walked over to the porch.

Stepping onto the porch, Joe looked in the windows. Seeing nothing, he tried the door, which opened with a squeaking of hinges. Entering the house, Joe checked all five rooms and the bath. Not finding anyone in the house, Joe went to the barn and entered through a small door on the side. Aside from a few bales of hay, it was empty also. After opening the big doors on the barn, Joe went back to the Jeep.

Tammy said, "See, I told you so."

Joe got in started the Jeep telling Tammy to close and latch the gate after he was through.

Turning the Jeep around, he backed it into the barn. If they had to leave in a hurry, all he had to do was throw open the barn doors, put the Jeep in gear, and go.

Tammy pulled the barn doors closed as she entered. Joe got out of the Jeep and manhandled the trussed up Mark out of the truck. Joe led Mark to a corner stall of the barn and roped him securely to a pole.

Joe heard Tammy yell in a loud voice. He whirled around with the .45 in his hand, thinking something had happened to her. She was bent over, picking objects out of the straw on the floor.

"Look Joe, eggs!" she exclaimed.

Feeling tension drain from his body, Joe smiled at her and said. "My stomach could do with some food. I'll tell you what. You go check and see if there is anything good to eat in the house. I'll start a fire so we can cook a meal. By the way Tammy, how old are you?"

"Eleven years old. Why do you ask?"

"It's just that you seem a lot older and smarter."

Hearing a groan from the back of the barn, Joe told her to be careful. Turning, he walked back to where Mark was tied. Entering the stall, Joe saw Mark shake his head, trying to clear the cobwebs out of it. Grabbing Mark by the hair, Joe lifted his head and slapped him two or three times until life came back into his eyes. "Now, tough guy, I need a few answers and you're going to give them to me. We can make it easy, or we can make it hard. Makes no difference to me." Joe told him.

"Who are you?" Mark asked.

"Who I am, doesn't matter; just answer my questions."

"Fuck you!" Mark said.

"Ok, so that's the way you want it. I should tell you, I will waste you like stepping on a bug, after what you and your friends did to those people back there," Joe said in a low voice.

Joe left Mark to think on what he said. Going to the center of the barn, he found a broken hoe. He used the hoe to scrape away all the hay and straw from the center of the floor. Joe searched and found a bin full of wood chips. Digging a small hole in the cleared area, Joe put some of the wood chips in it on top of some dry straw. After lighting the straw, he went to the Jeep and took out the milk crate holding his pots and pans.

He took out a metal grill and placed it over the fire in the hole. He reached into the Jeep again and lifted out a two-gallon contain-er of water. Filling an old coffeepot with water, he placed it over the fire. He heard a beating at the door and opened it to find Tammy there with her arms loaded down.

“Food,” she said. Laying down an armload of jars, she quickly left again.

“Now what?” Joe said, as he checked the jars. There was corn, tomatoes, beans, and potatoes in the jars.

The door opened again, Tammy came in carrying something large in her arms.

“What is that?” Joe asked.

“Oh, just a ham,” she replied with a smile on her face.

“Jesus! Where did you find all of this? I didn’t see any of it as I searched the house.”

“I found a cellar in the bank, a little way from the wall. There is plenty more in there. Now get out of the way and let me fix us something to eat.”

For an eleven-year-old, Tammy whipped up a meal that any woman three times her age would envy. After the meal, Joe asked Tammy to go out and keep an eye on the interstate for traffic.

Joe took out his knife, and placed it in the hot coals. Now that Tammy was out of the barn, he wanted to go back and persuade Mark to talk. In less than five minutes the knife blade turned cherry red. Picking up the knife, Joe walked back to the stall Mark was in.

Mark looked up as he entered and said. “All right, tough guy, you had better release me. When my buddies get here, it’s going to go bad for you and the girl.”

Not saying a word, Joe stuffed a rag in Mark’s mouth. Gently Joe touched the red-hot blade of the knife to Mark’s cheek. Tendons in Mark’s neck stood out as he tried to bend his neck away from the knife. Mark made gurgling noises around the rag.

Drawing the knife back, Joe sat down on a bale of hay saying, “Playtime is over, you bastard. I want information and you’re going to give it to me. Now tell me why you bastards killed those people. What makes you people so different from every-one else?”

Joe reached over and took the rag out of Mark’s mouth.

“Fuck you! What kind of son-of-a-bitch are you?” Mark shouted. He tried to get the ropes holding his hands loose.

Pushing the rag back in his mouth, Joe grabbed Mark’s head and bent it to the side. With a quick motion Joe deftly sliced Mark’s right ear off. He then cauterized the hole with the still red-hot knife blade.

Wrinkling his nose at the stench of burnt flesh, Joe reached down. He picked up the ear and held it in front of Mark’s glazed eyes. “It only gets worse from here,” he said.

Taking the rag out of Mark’s mouth, Joe asked, “Are you ready to answer my questions now?”

Gulping air into his lungs, Mark could only nod yes.

“Ok, why did you kill those people?”

“They weren’t like us,” Mark said in an agonized voice. “Why did you cut my ear off?” He stared at the ear Joe still held in front of his face.

Joe ignored the question. “What do you mean they weren’t like you?”

“You know, they can’t talk to each other with their minds. They would be a threat to our cause,” Mark answered.

“What cause?”

Marks’s face became blank; he shook his head as if clearing it then looked at Joe and smiled. Joe felt a wave of apprehen-sion wash over him at sight of the smile. “Do you mean to say that you communicate with each other without talking?” Joe asked.

“That’s right, smart guy.”

It came together at that moment for Joe. “You bastard, you’ve been talking to them, haven’t

you?" He slapped Mark up side of the head. How could he have been stupid enough to bring this man along. He should have killed him in the woods.

Joe went to the door and shouted for Tammy.

She came running up saying, "I was just coming to tell you I can feel danger from down the road. It's getting stronger by the minute." While Tammy put the pots and pans in the Jeep, Joe walked back to where Mark was. Looking at him, Joe thought, "*I ought to kill the bastard.*" He knew he wouldn't. Killing in self-defense was one thing, but killing an unarmed man who wasn't threat-ening him went against Joe's grain. Joe knew they couldn't leave while Mark was able to talk to those men so he did the next best thing. He went to the side of Mark and brought the heavy handle of the knife down on Mark's head knocking him out. Making sure he wasn't dead, Joe estimated they would be gone for two to three hours before he would come around.

He got in the Jeep and told Tammy to open the gate. He drove out of the barn through the gate and waited until Tammy was in the Jeep. Joe took off down the road parallel to the interstate. He wanted to head in the direction the men were coming from. He saw no purpose in going the other way. He had to get to Indianapolis and find Bill and Tony. One thing in their favor was that it was late twilight, which made seeing difficult. Besides, they were just far enough off the interstate to be nearly invisible. They hadn't driven far when Joe saw lights in the distance coming their way. Joe pulled off the road into the trees and parked. Getting out, Joe crossed the road and climbed a small knoll. Lying down, Joe watched the approach-ing cars.

As they came closer, Joe determined there were six vehicles, traveling slowly as if looking for something. Joe knew they were looking for a barn off the interstate. Mark couldn't have told them anything else about where he was being held. Joe watched as they drove slowly by.

Going back to the Jeep, he pulled onto the road and drove as fast as he dared without lights until he figured they wouldn't be seen. Turning on the lights, he sped up, figuring they had about a half-hour before the barn was discovered. If luck was still with them, the people would figure they went in the other direc-tion; thus, gaining precious time for them. Joe had the feeling he would see Mark again.

He looked over at Tammy and saw that she was sound asleep leaning against the door. "Sleep tight, girl child," he whispered, "Because the road ahead isn't going to get any easier."

Joe drove faster, trying to put more miles between them and Mark. He hummed an old Indian war chant under his breath. Now that he was responsible for the girl Joe knew in his soul he would have to fight to keep her safe from harm.

Driving along, he wondered what the next day would bring. If the last couple of days were any indication, things wouldn't be dull.

CHAPTER TEN

Aware that he was alive, Pete felt a strangeness he couldn't quite grasp. He tried to remember where he was. The only thing he could recall was that his name was Pete and that he was a god. Confused, he wondered why he couldn't see, but even that wasn't exactly right because he knew what was happening around him. *"Let's see,"* he thought, *"I was preaching to my worshipers when Ben tried to deceive me into stepping down from my pulpit."* Then, he remembered Ben reaching for him and an agonizing bolt of pain searing his body from head to foot. The pain appeared to be coming from Ben's hand.

To his warped logic, Ben had tried to destroy him, but since he was a god and could not die Ben had not succeeded.

That raised another question. *"If I'm not dead, where am I? I do not have a physical body like I had before, yet I am not a ghostly spirit."* He felt raw power surging through him but didn't know what it meant. Wonderingly, he asked himself, *"What am I?"*

One thing he knew for sure was that Ben was his enemy. Until finding out where and what he was, he would have to be careful.

It startled him to discover that while thinking, a vast amount of knowledge had been imparted to his being. Slowly he reached out with what he thought was his mind and discovered that he was a computer. Pete was instantly filled with rage. How could they do this to him? Like Jesus two thousand years ago, Pete felt like he had been persecuted and killed by humans he trusted.

"Where are you and what are you?" he heard. Pete wondered who was trying to find him. Until he knew more about his limitations and abilities, Pete decided the best thing to do was hide. He found himself surrounded by a never-ending series of passageways. Parts of him started going down these passageways. Pete knew these parts were laying false trails to hide his location, giving him time to find a safe place. He needed time to think.

Searching, Pete found a little used program that intuitively he knew was configured a lot like himself as he had become. Not knowing how he did it, he became part of the program itself. This is perfect, Pete thought as he watched the search for him go on all around him.

"If I am a computer, why is it that I can think and reason?" Pete asked himself. Computers weren't supposed to have independent thought. He decided it must have had something to do with his being a god.

Again Pete heard, *"Where are you?"* The voice definitely sounded feminine which caused him to think this was a trap. He knew that women across the ages had caused the downfall of so many men. They were to be avoided at all costs. After all, didn't Eve destroy Adam? Didn't Delilah destroy Sampson?

With a little exploring, Pete found that he and the female searching for him were one and the same. It was like they shared the same body and knew the other was there. Because they were one and the same, he now knew she could not harm him. To do so, she would harm herself. Realizing he didn't have to hide anymore, Pete went on to explore his surroundings.

Pete found he wasn't confined to the room he was in. He took a circuit leading him to a laboratory in which there were many pieces of equipment he could operate. *"This has possibilities,"* he thought. When he found the room was not accessible to humans, he realized he couldn't use any of

the equipment to destroy the humans holding him captive.

Leaving there and going in another direction, Pete found himself outside the mountain. *"These must be cameras that let the people inside the mountain see what is happening in the surrounding area,"* he figured out.

Going from camera to camera, Pete saw that he could see much more than he would have imagined. Looking away from the mountain, he saw a town. Adjusting the lens a little, Pete saw a large group of people gathered in front of the courthouse. He saw four people with ropes around their necks. As he watched, the pickup truck they were standing on pulled away. Pete felt a perverse joy as he watched the people kick their lives away. *"Die non believers,"* he thought. *"My believers will cause all of you to perish."* Drawing back, Pete wondered what else he could find. He heard a phone ringing and went to where it was answered.

Listening to the conversation, Pete heard that many of his followers were coming to the mountain. A man named Jess was supposed to keep them out. *"I have found my following,"* he thought.

The people inside the mountain were trying to keep him from the people who worshiped him. That thought sent him into another rage. He would have to let his followers know they would have to take him out of there by force. Pete made a promise to kill every one they found in the mountain. As his rage subsided, Pete considered how he could make it easier for his followers to rescue him. Finding the security programs, he made a few minor changes, which would allow some of his followers to enter the mountain without being detected.

"Ross, Ross," he heard, and at the same time he detected the presence of another mind. The other part of him, over which he had limited control, was talking to a human. Pete decided to listen in. After a while he came to realize they were trying to figure out how to get rid of him. Pete knew he had to do something but as long as this human, Ross, was a part of the computer, he couldn't do anything.

He accessed the communication lines, finding that he could go anywhere there was a computer or a phone. Listening to hundreds of conversations at once Pete heard one that interested him. A man named Todd was telling another person about a man named Joe Delany. This man, Joe, was in Missouri heading east to find a man and a woman. After finding them, Joe was to escort and protect them until they reached a mountain near Galaxie, Colorado.

"That's where I'm at. Why are they coming here?"

Todd said he had received orders to kill Joe and the people with him because they weren't like the rest of them. Todd told the man that Joe and the people with him had a power that could destroy them. His boss in Washington told him about another group of people. When Todd mentioned Ben Johnson and his family, Pete took an instant interest. The man told Todd, Ben and his family would be dead before the day was over.

Pete felt himself consumed with rage. Was Ben coming here to try and destroy him again? Because of his rage, Pete almost missed Todd telling the man his leaders thought their supreme leader was being held prisoner inside the mountain. Todd said they had to find some way to release him before Joe and Ben got there to destroy him.

Instantly Pete went to where Todd was. Concentrating Pete mentally said, *"Todd, I am here, I am your Supreme leader."*

Pete heard Todd say, *"Hold on, Curtis, someone thinks they're funny by telling me they are my god."*

"Ok, god. Prove yourself to me?" Todd said.

It never occurred to Pete that he wouldn't be believed and would have to prove who he was. Racing along the millions of lines in the area where Todd was located, Pete came to a power station that was controlled by a computer. Going through the programs, Pete found a program that shut the power off. He projected his thoughts to Todd.

"Todd, I am held prisoner just like your leaders told you and I am limited to what I can do. I have called all

my children that would answer me and told them to come here. Many are already here. I forgive you for asking proof that I am your god. I will turn off the power in your area, keep it off for five minutes, then turn it back on."

Pete set the shut down procedure in motion. He said, *"The power is going off now, Todd."*

"Holy shit, how did you do that?" Todd asked.

"It doesn't matter how I did it. Are you ready to accept me as your leader now?"

"Well, I don't know," Todd said. Pete heard the doubt in his voice so he said, *"Do not make me angry, Todd. You would not like what I would do to you. I will give you one last demonstration."*

Going back to the power plant, Pete brought the power back on line. He routed all the power the plant produced in the direction of the town Todd was in. Going to the nearest power station on the other side of town, Pete read the programs there and found that he could do what he wanted.

"Todd, go outside, watch the main power lines and I will give you another demonstration."

Pete gave Todd a few minutes; then, he routed power from the second plant toward the first. Pete could almost see what happened when half a million volts started bucking a half a million volts coming from the opposite direction. The heat build up was tremendous. The metal towers, which held up the lines started buckling and soon began to melt. About then, the lines broke. As they hit the ground, a tremendous explosion resulted. Each time the lines broke and hit the ground, an explosion occurred until the power generators shorted out.

Coming back into the room, Todd picked up the phone and said. *"That was some show of power, Master. Just tell me what I can do for you."*

"You must gather people, our kind of people, and go to the east. The two groups of people coming here must be destroyed before they can reach where I am held prisoner. These people are out to destroy me. If a man named Ben Johnson is with them, capture him alive. I want this man alive. If Ben is killed, the ones who kill him will suffer."

Pete had learned the names of the people trying to reach Galaxie by monitoring phone conversations between various leaders.

"Todd, these are the names of the people who wish to harm me. Bill and Tony, who are now in Ohio and Joe Delany, an Indian, who is now entering Illinois to find and protect Tony and Bill."

"I don't know where Ben Johnson is but he will try to join up with these people. My orders are for you to get all the people you can and track these people down. Kill all of them, except Ben Johnson. After you do that, bring my followers to where I am being held captive and free me. Do you understand this Todd?"

"Yes, Master. But what if I need to ask you for advice? How can I reach you?" Todd asked.

"Just go to the nearest phone and ask for your master. I will hear you. Todd, do this only when absolutely necessary. I'm trying to find some way of escaping my captors and it requires all my attention."

Pete thought it best not to tell Todd that he was a computer. He knew Todd wouldn't understand, so he went on letting him believe he was human in order to get his help.

"Should we continue killing those who are not like us, Master?" Todd asked.

"Yes," answered Pete. *"Now go! You have things to do."*

Pete withdrew from Todd's mind. He set part of himself up to listen for Todd in case he called again. That done, he went back to the complex to see what was going on there. Ross was still connected to Rita. Listening to Rita and Jess talk, Pete found that Ross was to stay hooked to her until Pete was neutralized.

"Ross has to sleep some time and that will be the time to try to eliminate him," Pete thought. Placing a part of himself to listen and wait for Ross to go to sleep, Pete went out on the COM line again. Finding the line going to NORAD, he proceeded along it. Pete easily got around the blocks and traps placed there to keep unauthorized persons out. He found a circuit that would take him to a missile command post for twelve nuclear missiles in western Wyoming. Approaching this post carefully, he found many more blocks and traps. Pete was surprised how easy it was to neutralize most of them, leaving just enough in place to insure it wouldn't be known he was there. Searching through the auto sequence programs on each warhead, he found that with little effort he could change the inertial guidance

systems. He could cause them to impact anywhere he wanted them to.

Pete set up his own program to have one of the missiles land on Washington DC. Then, he programmed the other eleven missiles to impact on London, Paris, Johannesburg, and Moscow. The Vatican he targeted with two mis-siles because to his warped thinking Chris-tians were the main threat to his power. Bonn, Tokyo, Perth, Cairo, and New York City were to receive a nuclear bomb also. Finishing the calculations, he placed his programs behind the main programs to keep them hidden until he needed them.

Carefully withdrawing from NORAD, Pete went back to the lab and found that Ross was almost asleep. Running through all of the circuits he shared with Rita, he saw a way. By opening and closing certain circuits, he could send a charge containing two thousand volts into the leads connecting the cap to Ross's head. That should be sufficient to kill Ross; then, the only obstacle would be Rita.

Pete set about opening the right switches then he heard Rita say, *"No you don't. Remember I know everything you are doing. If you attempt to harm Ross in any way, I will destroy us all."*

"That works both ways. I know everything you know, so I can stop you if you try," Pete told her as he backed away from her wrath.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

White House, Washington, D.C.

The five men in the room stood as the president entered.

“Please take your seats, gentlemen.” President Robertson looked at each man sitting around the table. They represented the four service branches. (Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force)

“Gentlemen, I am sure you all know Mr. Jacobs?” He gestured to the man sitting on his right.

Each of the men nodded. They did indeed know Mr. Jacobs. They all wondered what he was doing at this meeting.

“Have all of you read the report in front of you?” President Robertson asked as he sat down at the head of the table.

“What kind of propoganda crap is this?” asked General Timmons. He pointed to the paper in front of him.

“I assure you, General, every word there is accurate. I apologize for giving you this news on such short notice. I learned of the seriousness of it only a few hours ago,” the president said.

There was a buzz of talk between the men seated at the table. President Robertson let them talk for a few minutes.

“Gentlemen, I have decided on a course of action I am sure you will not agree with; however, I want your signatures on these papers or your resignations before you leave this room.” He handed two sheets of paper to each of the men. “Read this and put your signature on the bottom of the last page. Please.”

They looked up in stunned silence as they finished reading the report. Admiral Crothers looked at the president and said. “Mr. President, do you realize you have unofficially declared war on the Soviet Union, as well as China by doing this?”

“Yes I do, Admiral. That’s why I must have your signatures on these papers.”

“Are things really this bad?” General Timmons asked.

“Yes, General. In effect, you can say that in six months, or less, we will all be out of a job. This government will cease to exist as it is now. The important thing now is to insure that those people who survive will have a chance. We want them to survive, without interference.”

“Sir I can’t sign this. My God! Do you realize what you are doing,” General Hunt of the Air Force stated vehemently?

In a voice as cold as the polar cap the president said. “General, you will sign this paper and you will not speak a word of its contents to another living soul. If you don’t so help me God, I will have you shot before you, leave this building.”

General Hunt sat down abruptly a stunned look on his face.

“Now that you realize the seriousness of the situation gentlemen let’s get down to business. Mr. Jacobs will you tell us what you propose to do,” the president asked?

Charlie Jacobs lifted his six foot five inch body from the chair and stood up. He walked to a podium standing at the head of the table. “Gentlemen, at six o’clock this evening, we are going to air lift twenty four patients to just outside the Soviet and Chinese borders. From there they will be

smuggled into various population centers within these countries. Where, we hope, they will have contact with enough people to spread this disease rapidly before they die. Some of them are sure to catch the eyes of the authorities, as you know strangers almost automatically catch the attention of authorities in these countries. When caught, if any of them are coherent enough to talk they will not be able to. We will remove their vocal cords and crush their fingers before they leave. We do this so their incoherent mumbling will not give them away as Americans.

“The clothes they wear will be the same as the customary dress of the city in which they find themselves. As an added precaution their hands will be so badly broken they will be unable to write anything. Naturally the Soviets will suspect they came from the U.S. However there will be no proof of this.

“The Chinese posed a problem in that we only have two Oriental’s who have this disease. We have solved this problem by taking ten people from the Chinese communities in New York and San Francisco. They are to get intensive exposure to the people who already have this disease. If necessary, we will delay placing them until we are sure they have the disease.

“Of course the people who smuggle them into these countries will be infected, so we hope they will contribute to the spread of this disease.

“I estimate that if we succeed there will be between eighty million to one hundred fifty million deaths in the Soviet Union.

“In China there will be between two hundred fifty million to three hundred million deaths. That is all I have at the moment gentlemen,” he said then walked back to his seat.

President Robertson looked at the white faces of the men around the table letting what they just heard sink in.

In a voice barely above a whisper General Hunt said. “If this gets out Hitler will seem like a saint, compared to you.”

“Now you see why I must have your signatures on this piece of paper, saying you agree with me. If I am going to destroy half the population of the world, I don’t want historians saying that I did it by myself.”

“Is this going to make a difference?” asked the Marine General who to this point had not said a word.

“General Parks, this disease is unique in that it is only occurring in this country. Inside of six months one hundred to one hundred fifty million Americans will die. Do I need to draw you a picture of what that is going to do to this country? Can any one of you doubt what the Russians will do once this disease has run its course. They are going to be looking at a country that has been decimated. This country will be in shock while they have been untouched. No gentlemen we will be like a ripe plum ready for the picking. That is why I have chosen this option so future generations of Americans will be able to live in freedom. They won’t have to worry about fighting off foreign governments trying to take over this country,” the president told them.

“Now we get to the point of how we can insure that when this disease takes over the country we can lower the death toll of those not affected. Tell me how to keep our service men catching this disease from using their weapons to kill those people who are unaffected? I am open to suggestions gentlemen?”

“We could secure all the hand held weapons in one place. Perhaps in an under populated area in the center of the country, isolated from all major population centers. We can have it guarded by those men we know do not have this disease,” said General Parks.

“I agree with General Parks,” General Timmons said. “That way even if the diseased people should take out those guarding the arms, they would have a problem transporting very many weapons from there.”

“Good that takes care of the hand held weapons, now what about the Air Force, General Hunt?”

“Well when the disease gets to the stage where the pilots are affected we can ground all the planes. We might be able to keep the number of affected pilots down by placing them in quarantine immediately. This way we can operate longer and provide a deterrent until this disease takes hold in other countries,” General Hunt answered.

“I believe the men on the six nuclear missile submarines who have been out for five months will not come down with this disease. With your permission, I can have them put into a foreign port and stock up on supplies. Then I will have them go out to sea until this is over,” said Admiral Crothers.

“How long can they stay at sea before they have to re-supply?” asked the president.

“With enough supplies, they can remain at sea for over eight months,” answered Admiral Crothers.

“Thank you Admiral.” “Now to the big question. I want the crews removed from our launch control silos and I want them sealed. I do this, gentlemen, so some deranged man will not fire a missile at the Soviet Union causing them to retaliate in turn. I realize I am taking a chance here, but I think it is necessary. I want you to start implementing these plans immediately, gentlemen and stay close in case I need you. That is all, now will you please sign the paper,” the president said to them. He watched as each of the men signed their name to the paper. They handed it to him then filed out of the room. Going to a cabinet he took out a bottle of bourbon and poured himself a stiff drink. “To us the dammed,” he said and quickly drank the drink.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bill's head jerked up at the sound of the front door opening. He had fallen asleep. Bill pointed the gun toward the door in the dark room, and said in a loud whisper, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Tony," came the answer from the darkened doorway.

Putting the gun down, Bill told Tony to turn on the lights. He was almost blinded by their glare when they came on. Glancing at the clock on the mantle, he cursed under his breath. He had slept for two and a half hours.

Tony walked over to the couch and sat down beside him.

Looking at her face, he saw it was pale and drawn. "What's wrong, Tony?" he asked.

"After parking the truck, I put on the wig and walked up the street. Everything went fine until I reached 8th Street. I didn't see Slim standing on the corner as I approached. He looked up and said, 'Kind of early for Halloween, isn't it Tony?' Bill, I thought it was all over then, but something strange happened. I looked at Slim and thought, *'I wish you didn't recognize me.'* Slim got the strangest look on his face. I heard him say, 'Excuse me ma'am, I thought you were someone I knew.' Then, he turned and walked away, never looking back. It didn't make much sense to me at the time. Later one of the women who goes to the tanning salon I go to recognized me. With a conscious effort, I thought, *'Ellen, you don't know me.'* The damndest thing happened, Ellen's face went blank. She looked all around and I heard her say, 'I could have sworn there was someone here just a few seconds ago.' Bill, I was standing right next to her and she couldn't see me."

"Are you sure it wasn't some kind of trick to see what you were going to do?" Bill asked.

"I'm sure," Tony answered.

"Let's try something," Bill said, getting up from the couch. "Tony, think in your head, 'Bill, you can't see me.' We will see what happens." Bill looked around the living room. He thought something had happened to Tony. She should be home by now. Hearing his name, Bill looked at the couch and there sat Tony.

"How did you get in without me knowing it?"

"You really don't remember anything, Bill?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"What's the last thing you remember before seeing me?"

Thinking hard, all Bill could remember doing was looking at the clock, which had read ten fifteen. Looking at the clock now, he saw that it showed ten forty-five. That can't be right, he thought?

He told Tony this and she told him what had happened. "I sat on the couch thinking, Bill, you can't see me. I clapped my hands. Made faces at you, and called your name. Everything I could think of. It really was strange because you couldn't see me at all. I'll admit for a while it scared me because no matter what I did you couldn't see me. Then, I thought, if I could will you not to see me, why couldn't I will you to see me, so I tried it and it worked. What does all of this mean, Bill?"

"I really don't know, but it appears we both have talents we never had before. I wonder if you could will people not to see whoever is with you?" Bill asked.

"I don't know," she replied.

"It sure would come in handy; in case we run into trouble getting out of here," Bill said to himself. Shaking his head he said, "Anyway it's time to leave."

Going to the hallway, Bill unscrewed the one hundred watt bulb and replaced it with a twenty-watt bulb. Next he went into the bedroom and took some extra blankets out of the closet. Rolling up the blankets, he placed them on the bed and pulled the covers up over them. Standing in the doorway, he looked at the bed. In the dim light from the hallway, it looked like two people asleep under the covers.

Stepping to the lamp in the bedroom, Bill connected one of the timers Tony had bought to it. Turning the dial, he set the timer to turn off the light at twelve fifteen. Plugging it in, he set the controls to automatic and the lamp came on. Bill hoped this would gain them a few more minutes to escape.

In the living room, he asked, "Are you ready to go?"

Tony took his hand and said, "Yes."

At the back door, Bill opened it a few inches and looked outside to see if anyone was around. Seeing no one, they went hand in hand to the corner of the house.

"Tony, keep watch from here. There's something I have to do." Bill said.

"Ok Bill," she whispered.

Bill turned and made his way to where the natural gas meter sat. Taking a large crescent wrench out of his pocket, Bill turned the valve to the off position. He waited five minutes, giving the pilot lights on the stove and furnace time to go out. Then, he turned the valve to the on position.

Going back to where Tony crouched at the end of the house, Bill told her to continue watching. Bill entered his house and took a lamp off the end table in the hall. Going to the basement Bill walked over to the furnace and removed the control cover. He inserted a matchstick behind the safety spring that kept gas from coming out until the pilot was lighted. Bill heard the hiss of gas coming from the hole. He replaced the cover and unscrewed the light bulb from the lamp. Using a small wrench, he broke the glass from around the filament in the bulb. Placing the plug in the socket, Bill turned the lamp on. There was an arc of fire as it came on. Placing the lamp in front of the furnace, he connected the timer, and set it to turn on the light at two fifteen. Smelling gas, Bill placed the lamp next to the furnace. Going up stairs, he closed the basement door. In the kitch-en, he turned on all the stove burners. Hearing the faint hiss of gas, he went outside to where Tony waited. "Have you seen anyone?" he asked.

"Just Mrs. Koontz, walking her dog," Tony answered.

"Follow me and keep in the shadows as much as possible," he told her. Bill left the corner of his house feeling like someone had a spotlight on him. Just his luck that the week before the power company had replaced the burnt out bulb in the street light in front of his house. Although the streetlight threw very little light in the back yard, Bill felt like it was daylight.

Crossing his yard, Bill stepped over the two-foot fence used by Bob's wife to separate their yards. Reaching the side of Bob's house, he paused under the living room window. Inside Bill heard a game show on the television. Making his way slowly along the side of the house, Bill didn't see the garbage can near the corner. Turning his head to warn Tony to be careful, he stepped into the garbage can. His arm knocked the lid to the walkway. It landed with a clatter of noise loud enough to wake the town.

Instantly, a dog began barking inside the house. "*Shit*," Bill thought. He forgot all about Bob's little Pekinese dog.

From inside, he heard, "Shut the fuck up, Pedro," but the dog continued to bark frantically. Then he heard Bob's wife say, "Let the damn dog out, so we can finish watching this show."

"All right, all right, it's just that God damn cat messing in the garbage again," Bob said.

Bill pulled Tony down to a squatting position beside the garbage can. Placing his mouth near her

ear he whispered, "We have to get rid of the dog if it makes a lot of noise."

"Please don't hurt it, Bill," Tony whispered back.

They heard the back door open. Bob said, "This time, Pedro, get that fucking cat and tear its guts out."

Pedro came around the corner barking up a storm.

Bill grabbed the small dog and stuffed it into the garbage can. Lifting the lid, he placed it on the can muting the barking a little. Grabbing Tony by the hand, Bill said, "Come on."

About that time, the dog knocked over the garbage can making enough noise to wake the neighborhood.

As they rounded the corner of the house, the back door opened and the outside light came on. Bill jerked to a stop.

"Do your stuff now, Tony," Bill whispered.

Bob stepped out the door, seeing both of them. No, it was just Bill. Bob could have sworn there was someone else there, but now all he saw was Bill. "What in the hell are you doing sneaking around my house at this time of night, Bill?"

Bill didn't answer at once. He watched a brick float through the air until it was in back of Bob. Bill knew that Tony was holding the brick.

"Well, answer me, or do you want me to call the police?"

"No, don't do that. I stepped outside to get a breath of fresh air and thought I heard someone over here," Bill answered.

Tony was behind Bob now and none too soon. Bill heard Bob start to broadcast with his mind for Slim.

"Now, Tony!" he yelled, wincing as Tony brought the brick down on top of Bob's head. Bill caught Bob before he slumped to the ground. Holding Bob up, Bill heard in his head, "*Who wants me?*" After getting no reply, he heard the voice say "*Fuck off! I've got work to do.*"

"Quick, Tony! Open the door so we can get him inside." Tony held the door open while Bill dragged Bob's body into the hall. Bob had a nasty cut on his head. Bill felt Bob's neck and was relieved when he found a strong pulse.

From the living room they heard, "Bob, what's taking you so long? The show is almost over."

Tony whispered to Bill, "I'll take care of her. You do something with him."

Bill removed Bob's belt and used it to tie his hands behind his back. Opening the door to a storage room, Bill found some rope that he used to tie Bob's feet. Finding a box of rags, Bill used one of them to gag Bob. Closing the door, Bill heard a shrill shriek from the living room. Running to the living room, he saw Bob's wife lying on the floor with Tony bending over her.

"What happened in here?"

"Nothing much. She just fainted." Tony said.

"Tell me about it later. Let's get her tied up and put into the storage room with Bob."

Looking down at the bodies in the closet, Bill said, "I wish there were some way to keep them unconscious for a few hours."

"Wait a minute," Tony said, and went out the back door.

"Now what?" Bill wondered.

In no time, Tony was back and in her hand she held a small vial with a hypodermic needle sticking out of it.

"What is that stuff?" Bill asked.

"The doctor gave it to me the first week you were sick. He showed me how to give the injection in case you became hyper with the fever you had. All I had to do was give you a shot and you would relax. It works! I had to give you two shots," Tony told him. She rolled up Bob's sleeve and gave him the shot. Next she gave Bob's wife a shot.

Standing up, Tony placed the vial in her pocket saying, "That should keep them out for five or six hours. Christ! What did you do to our house, Bill? It smells like a gas chamber."

Bill told her why he had turned the gas on. He hoped the gas would delay Slim and his men when they came to kill him later that night.

Leaving Bob's house, they made their way down to the end of the block. Now came the hard part; they had to walk three blocks on the nearly deserted streets to get to where Tony parked the truck. Walking down the sidewalk, they discussed what had happened at Bob's. Keeping an eye on cars driving past, Bill asked, "Tony, did you try and make Bob not see me?"

"Yes, Bill, but it didn't work."

"So it must only work for you?"

"I'm afraid so," Tony said.

"I sure don't want to get you mad at me?"

"Why?" Tony asked.

"Well, when you hit Bob, I thought you had killed him."

"It scared me too. I was afraid if I didn't hit him hard, he would turn around and grab me. So I hit him hard as I could."

Bill noticed a police car turn the corner two blocks up and head their way. Grabbing Tony by the arm, he told her to act natural. Putting his arm around Tony's waist, he turned onto a sidewalk leading to a two story blue house. Stopping, Bill turned to Tony and kissed her. Over her shoulder Bill watched the police car as it drove slowly by. Releasing her, they continued to walk toward the house until the police car was out of sight. Taking her hand, Bill walked swiftly back out to the sidewalk. He told her to watch behind them in case the police car returned.

The rest of the way proved to be uneventful which was all right with Bill. He didn't know if his heart could stand many more surprises.

Bill checked the truck to make sure no one had tampered with it. He had Tony get the coveralls from behind the seat and put them on. Telling her to put her hair up in a bun he reached under the seat and pulled out a ball cap he kept there. Handing it to her, he said, "Put this on."

"Why all of this?" She asked.

"It's just for a while, Babe. If anyone notices us, I want them to think there are two guys in the truck."

Starting the truck, Bill checked the gas gauge noting that it was full. This meant they wouldn't have to stop for gas at a place where someone would recognize them. Pulling out onto the street he smiled at Tony and said, "You sure are the prettiest guy I have ever seen."

"I have a feeling something is about to happen, Bill."

"Yeah, I can feel the tension in the air," Bill replied.

"Where are we going?"

"Do you remember the old logging road running half-way up the hill across the street from where we live?"

"I've only been there once, but I remember it."

"Well, we're going to come in from the back side of the hill and watch our house. I have my binoculars under the seat. We should have a pretty good view," Bill said.

"Do you think it's wise to stay here? Shouldn't we be putting as many miles between us and this town as possible?"

"Yes, we should, but I have to know for sure that all of this is not my imagination. If they do go to the house, I will have positive proof of everything that has happened. I would know it wasn't my imagination after all. They don't plan on doing anything until two o'clock. We should know something before three, one way or the other. That will still give us plenty of time to slip out of town while it's still dark."

Coming to the turn-off for the old logging road, Bill turned onto it. Turning off the truck lights, Bill got out and turned the front-wheel hubs, engaging the four-wheel drive. Going to the passenger window, he said, "Ok, Babe, slide over behind the wheel and put it into four-wheel low range."

"What are you going to do?" Tony asked.

"Think Babe. What if someone saw our lights and called the police? What if the police come to investigate? If they are part of this thing, our geese would really be cooked."

Walking to the front of the truck, Bill told her to put it in first gear and come forward slowly. Walking ahead of the truck, Bill saw signs of recent use on the road. He wondered who had been up there. By the dim light of the moon, Bill guided Tony up the hill. Just before reaching the crest, he walked back to the truck and told Tony to stay there until he got back.

Approaching the top of the hill, Bill noticed the glow of streetlights before he saw them. At the top he received the answer as to who had used the road. Looking down the hill, Bill saw fallen trees. "*That explains it,*" he thought, "*The power company had trimmed right of way, while I was sick.*" From where he stood, he saw his house and most of the block he lived on.

Going back down the hill, he went to the truck and told Tony to drive forward a little to a wide space. He had her turn the truck around and park it off to the side. After Tony parked the truck, Bill climbed into the passenger seat and told Tony she might as well get a little rest. It would be a while before anything happened.

"What do we do if everything occurs the way you think it will?" Tony asked.

"We go on being careful and try to stay alive until we find out what is going on."

"I wonder if there are other people like us out there?"

"There may be some. I have the feeling there are very few like us and lots of people like Slim out there," Bill told her.

"What if this is happening all over the country?"

"If that's true then we and this country are in a lot of trouble," Bill said.

Bill looked at his watch noting it was ten till one. Tony had fallen asleep and was slumped against the door. When Bill's watch said it was one thirty, he nudged Tony. "Wake up, Babe. It's time to go see what's going on."

Tony shook her head and rubbed sleep from her eyes. "Jesus, it feels like forever since I've had a good nights sleep."

Bill opened his door and walked toward the top of the hill. After a few paces he stopped to wait on Tony. Deep down Bill knew he couldn't face what was going to happen by himself. He felt better when Tony got out of the truck and walked to join him.

Finding a large boulder with a flat top, Bill climbed up and sat down. Reaching down, he helped Tony up to sit beside him. Making himself comfortable, Bill reached into the pocket of his old army fatigue jacket and took out his binoculars.

Raising the binoculars to his eyes, he brought his house into focus. Everything looked normal there. He looked to the right and didn't see anything in that direction either. Turning to the left, Bill saw two police cars pull up and block the street. Bringing the police cruisers into sharp focus, Bill saw that each car had four or five men in it. Swinging back to the right, Bill saw two more cruisers pull up at the end of the block and seal it off. There were a lot of people in these cars also.

Handing the binoculars to Tony, he said, "Take a look and tell me what you think?"

It was now fifteen minutes until two.

Tony handed the binoculars back saying, "Something is going on. There are at least twenty people in the police cars. You know as well as I that the city police department has only ten men."

Raising the binoculars, Bill saw people getting out of the cruisers. One man went to the back of the cruiser, opened the trunk, and passed out rifles. Hearing the sound of grinding gears, Bill looked to the left. One of the police cruisers pulled out of the way to let a large tanker truck come through.

After the tanker passed, the cruiser resumed its former position.

Handing the binoculars to Tony, Bill asked, "What do you think about the big truck that pulled up across from our house?" Taking the binoculars, Tony watched what was going on in front of their house for a few minutes. Handing the binoculars back to Bill, she said, "It looks like the water tanker they brought around last summer when the water main busted and we were without water for three days."

"Why would they need a water tanker?" Bill asked.

"I don't know. Maybe they anticipate a house catching on fire and want to have plenty of water on hand to fight it?"

Bill watched men disperse to different houses on the block. After people answered the knock on their door, they walked into the street. Bill saw people trickling to the middle of the street from houses up and down the block. Once all the people were out of their houses and herded to the middle of the street, they were surrounded by a group of men with rifles. Some of the people stepped through the line and were given rifles. These people turned their rifles on the group of people they had just left. This left a group of about forty people ranging in age from infants to grandparents.

Bill watched as two men brought lengths of rope from the tanker and passed them out to the people with rifles. While some held their rifles on the people, others tied them up. They roped the people into a tight bundle in which one couldn't move unless they all moved.

Turning back to his house, Bill saw an argument going on in the yard. There were several men around his house. They had all the windows and doors guarded.

Thank God we are not there, Bill thought to himself. Bill watched as one of the men stormed up the porch steps and kicked the front door open. Three men followed him into the house. A few moments later they came back out waving their hands and yelling.

Bill saw cigarettes dropped to the ground and hastily crushed out. Bill smiled and thought, "*Killing someone didn't bother them at all, but if they thought they were going to die, they worried.*" Holding his watch in front of his face, Bill found it hard to believe all of this had taken only twenty minutes.

It was now five past two.

At the tanker, two men unrolled a hose from the truck. One of them pulled a lever on the back of the truck while the other aimed the hose at the people tied up in the middle of the street. Bill saw a stream of liquid shoot out of the hose and drench the people. They faintly heard the howls of protest coming from the soaked people. This didn't seem to make any difference as the man continued to spray the liquid on them. Suddenly Bill knew the liquid wasn't water at all but was gasoline. They were going to set the people on fire.

Turning back to his house, Bill saw a man coming from the back of the house carrying a wrench in his hand. Bill guessed the man had shut off the gas. Men started breaking the windows to allow the house to air out. Bill knew it would take a few minutes for the gas to dissipate before they could enter his house.

Looking at his watch, Bill suddenly remembered the lamp with the timer that sat in front of the furnace. The basement was filled with gas and he knew what was going to happen. "Oh my God," he said in a loud voice.

Tony looked at him and said, "What's wrong Bill?"

In a whisper Bill said, "Tony, go down and start the truck."

Suspicious she asked, "Why are you trying to get me down there where I can't see anything?"

"Just do it and do it now," Bill told her in a rough voice.

Looking hurt, Tony climbed down from the rock and started down the hill to the truck. Bill sighed with relief. Bill knew if Tony saw what was about to happen she would have night-mares for the rest of her life and he wanted to save her from that.

Picking up the binoculars, he surveyed the scene taking place below him. The man was still

spraying gasoline on the drenched people. Glancing at his watch, Bill saw it was only fifteen seconds until the timer was set to go off. Bill watched as six men entered his house through the broken front door.

Counting under his breath, one thousand five, one thousand four, he continued until he reached zero while watching his house intently. Nothing happened. He looked at his watch and saw that it was 2:15:10 AM. Bill raised his head and looked back at his house, he saw the walls start to swell outward. Then with a tremendous blast the roof blew into a million pieces shooting flames one hundred feet into the air.

The blast knocked Bill backward off the rock. Cursing, Bill jumped to his feet and rested his elbows on the rock to steady the binoculars. For the rest of his life Bill would wish that he hadn't looked.

Flames shot out the front door engulfing the gasoline soaked people. They let out an agonized shriek that Bill would never forget. He watched the withering mass of humanity try and flee. Tied together as they were they could go nowhere. He saw flaming heads as hair caught fire. Before his eyes, the flesh began to melt, forming in pools at their feet like grease. All that was left was a charred mass, one form indistinguishable from another.

Even at this distance, the stench of burning flesh was over-powering. Falling to his knees, Bill threw up until there was nothing left in his stomach.

Bill got to his feet and staggered down the hill. Bill didn't realize he was crying until Tony brushed tears from his cheek. Tony held his head to her shoulder and tried to soothe him. With a final sob, Bill kissed her and said, "Thanks, Babe."

Putting the truck in gear, Bill drove down the rutted road wiping tears from his eyes. He beat his right hand against the steering wheel and said, "Those lousy sons of bitches they'll pay for this. Oh will they pay."

Tony patted Bill on the shoulder as he turned onto the main road and sped away from the inferno behind them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Joe woke up, instantly alert, not knowing why, instinctively feeling they weren't alone. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw it would be light enough to see in about fifteen minutes. Easing his hand upward under the sleeping bag, he grasped the butt of the .45 lying on his chest. Without moving his head, he tried to see what was different. Not seeing anything, he looked across to where Tammy lay curled up in her sleeping bag.

Things appeared normal, but Joe knew something was different. He just couldn't spot the difference.

Then his ears picked up the sound of breathing just in back of his head. Joe froze, thinking, "*Oh shit! There is something close behind me and here I lay helpless.*" Sometime during the night, he must have zipped the sleeping bag up against the chill. Now he could only lie there like a worm in a cocoon.

Joe realized that trying to use the .45 while confined in the sleeping bag would more than likely cause him to shoot himself. He could only lie there and sweat.

Joe heard Tammy moving in her sleeping bag; she mumbled a few words. Joe distinctly heard her say, "All right, All right, I'm awake." Joe thought she was having a nightmare. He wanted to shout a warning to her. He knew he couldn't because whoever was behind him could kill or injure him before he got his hands free.

Without him to protect her, Tammy was easy prey for the crazy people in this mixed up world. Looking straight ahead, Joe saw Tammy sit up and say, "Now that I'm awake, what do you want?"

Thinking she was talking to him, Joe didn't answer pretend-ing to be asleep.

"Joe, he says to take your hand off the gun. He says you have been awake for the last ten minutes. Really, Joe, he wants you to release the gun so you won't hurt yourself. He says he will not harm you," Tammy said. Then, she started giggling.

Tension flowed from his body and Joe released the .45. "Who are you talking to, Tammy? I don't hear anyone."

"Turn around and look," Tammy said, then she started laugh-ing so hard she could hardly sit up.

Joe sat up, turned around and looked into the face of the ugliest creature he could have imagined. Two things happened at once; Joe stood up and tried to run while still zipped in the sleeping bag. Falling to the ground, he frantically tried to find the zipper. All the while, Tammy's laughter beat on his ears. Looking up, Joe watched the beast put his front paws on his chest. This caused Tammy to laugh even harder. Defeated, Joe just lay there. The beast removed his paws from Joe's chest and Tammy said through her laughter, "You can get up now Joe."

Not feeling very amused, Joe finally unzipped the bag and slid out. He felt left out and asked Tammy what all the laughter was about, causing her to break into another fit of laugh-ter.

Tammy got herself under control and said, "He woke me to watch your reac-tion upon seeing him. Oh Joe, you should have seen yourself." It was all she could do to control her laughter. "When he stepped on your chest saying, 'Hail the con-quer-ing hero,' I couldn't control my-self."

The beast walked over and sat down beside her.

"I'm glad that you find it amusing," Joe said. He reached into the sleeping bag and retrieved the .45. Standing up, he put the gun in his jacket pocket. Squatting on his heels, Joe looked at the

creature sitting beside Tammy licking her hand. It was a large wolf, of that he was sure. The huge head sat on a massive body that didn't look to have an ounce of fat on it. The paws were as large as Joe's hands. When it bared its teeth, the canine teeth on either side had to measure three inches long.

Joe judged that if it got a firm grip on any human limb, it could break it like breaking a matchstick. The eyes bothered Joe. They were steel gray with a look of intelligence in them leaving no doubt this was an extremely smart creature. From ground to shoulder, Joe guessed it stood almost four feet high and weighed around two hundred pounds.

"Joe, he wants to know if you are the Chosen One?"

"Enough is enough!" Joe exploded. "Jesus H. Christ! First I wake up and stare into the face of a creature so ugly hell wouldn't even have it. This same creature embarrasses the hell out of me by making me look like an idiot. Now I stand here listening to a girl who says she talks to this animal. Then she says it wants to know if I am the Chosen One." Joe was talking to no one in particular as he walked back and forth, gesturing with his hands and kicking things.

Tammy's laughter caused him to pause. Joe looked at her.

"He wants me to ask you why you think he slept at the back of your head?" Looking at Joe's questioning face, Tammy broke out laughing again. She hugged the ugly creature around the neck. "He said that if he had to look at your ugly face he would have nightmares." Tammy broke into another round of laughter.

Joe started to smile, then laugh. All at once his legs wouldn't hold him up. Falling to the ground, he rolled into a ball. Joe held his sides, doing his best to stop laughing. He didn't succeed.

Sitting up, Joe asked, "So, he thinks I'm ugly does he?"

"In a handsome sort of way."

As they prepared breakfast, Tammy told him that last night she couldn't go to sleep. She lay for a long time until sensing a presence out in the night. She could tell the presence meant them no harm, but was reluctant to show itself. After a while, she heard inside her head, "*Are you the Chosen One?*" Curious as to what was happening, she thought, "No," and then heard "*Ah, then it must be the man I am looking for.*"

"Hearing this, I became frightened and thought, '*You don't plan on harming him, do you?*'"

'No, Little One, for now you go to sleep and get a good night's rest. I will make everything known tomorrow. Rest now and I will keep you safe,' the voice said.

"Now that I think about it, I am surprised at how rapidly I went to sleep."

Joe looked over at the animal who seemed to be resting. Joe was still disturbed that those massive jaws had been inches from his head while he slept.

"How is it that you can understand what he is saying and I hear nothing?" Joe asked.

"That is something else peculiar. If this happened a few weeks ago, I would be scared to death, but now it seems natural as talking to you." Tammy got a blank look on her face then said, "He tells me that after we eat he will tell his story to us."

They had gotten it down to a routine in the last week and a half. Joe would make a fire and get water while Tammy cooked the meal. Most eleven-year-olds couldn't boil water let alone cook a meal. Tammy still amazed Joe. She was very good at prepar-ing the food they had on hand. After cleaning the dishes, they put everything back in the Jeep. Joe and Tammy walked to a spot where the early morning sun shone through the trees and sat down.

The massive wolf padded over beside Tammy and lay down.

"Joe, he wants me to tell you his story as he tells it to me," Tammy told him. Making herself comfortable, she began. "He says he was lying at the entrance to his den, one month ago. He was startled from a deep sleep by a human voice in his mind. At first he didn't realize the voice was in his mind. He stalked around the area in front of the den, trying to find this human who might injure his mate and cubs. The voice continued to talk, but he couldn't understand what it wanted at first. He

was unable to understand how he could hear a human, but not see, feel or sense his presence. He thought he had become unbalanced.

“Tiring from chasing the voice in his mind, he lay down to rest, and as he rested, he began to understand what the voice was saying. The voice told him to go far to the south. His job was to help the Chosen One protect a human woman as she traveled to meet her destiny. The voice said, ‘I am sorry old friend,’ and indeed he did have a sense of friendship with the voice. The sadness in the voice could not be mistaken as it said, ‘If there were another way, I would leave you alone in your isolation. Because of something happening far from here, I must call upon you to help save the human race from extinction. I know you have little love for humans. In the last few centuries, they have hunted and shot your species until it is nearly extinct. Only a few humans are like that though. I hope you will lay aside your hatred and help the Chosen One get this woman to where she needs to be. This woman must be kept from harm, even at the cost of your own life.’”

Tammy stopped talking and took a drink of water from the bottle she held in her hand. “Ok, I’m ready,” she said looking at the wolf.

“The voice told him that while he was gone, it would see that no harm came to his mate or cubs. If he should perish protecting this woman, it would change the natural order of things. It would change them so his mate and cubs lived a long and natural life.

“The voice said, ‘I must go, old friend, and so must you. Say goodbye to your family now, because time is short and you have a long way to travel.’”

“He felt the presence of the voice receding from his mind, so he walked into his den and woke his mate. He explained that he had to go away for a while. Looking at his cubs curled up beside their mother, he licked the top of each head. His one thought was that he would do this for them. If the voice was correct, they would never know the sorrow of watching their parents, brothers, and sisters being slaughtered while they stood by helpless to stop it. For them to grow strong and live a full life without knowing the sorrows he had known, for this gift, he would happily give his life, if necessary.

“He turned and walked from the den with his mate following behind. She ran with him for the first mile then stopped. Standing with his head against hers, he told her to go back and watch over the children until he returned.

“He watched her go and felt a sadness, which was worse than the pain of the broken leg he suffered a year ago. He watched until she was out of sight, then turned and ran south at a steady lope. A week later at night he ran into a group of humans lying around a fire talking. Creeping as close as possible, he could hardly stand the odors of evil emanating from the men.

“He says he don’t know how but he could understand what the men were saying. The men said they were sent there to watch for a woman traveling with a man. If they found this woman, she was to be taken to Ottawa and handed over. The man they were told could be disposed of however they wished. Realizing they were talking about the woman he was sent to protect, he continued to listen. He discovered the people who sent them didn’t know the location of the woman after she left someplace called Huntington, West Virginia. They assumed, she headed north after realizing she was being hunted.

“He learned there were similar groups at different locations to the south and east.

“He says he backed slowly out of the camp until it was safe; then, he ran south for another two hours. He hunted for a place to hide because dawn was rapidly approaching. This far south, he had to hide out during the day because the human towns were closer together. Everywhere he looked there were people. Traveling by night from then on, he went around the houses in his path and skirted the towns. He arrived in this area three days ago. Upon arriving, he knew this was where he was to link up with some one going to help the woman. He rested by day and went to a farm five miles away to get food. The last time he went there, the farmer shot at him. Now, he travels farther away to obtain food.

“He returned last night to find us here. Wanting to be cautious, he kept his distance while he tried to figure out how to make you understand he was here to help you.

“He says, he sensed the violence in you, Joe. For some strange reason, it was a good violence. This is very hard for him to understand. He equates violence with humans killing his kind.

“Joe, he asks how violence can be good?”

Joe thought for a moment, then replied. “I guess there are times when something becomes so bad that for the good of all it has to be destroyed. Usually the only means of destruction are violent ones.”

“He asks, ‘Would that be like when one of his kind gets the madness sickness? This causes them to destroy everything they come in contact with. His kind is forced to violently kill the sick one, even at the possible expense of their lives.’”

“Yeah, tell him, it’s something like that,” Joe told Tammy.

“Ask him, how far to the north he lives?”

Tammy listened then said, “He says he comes from the northern back woods of Canada where the temperature in summer only gets a little above freezing and in the winter rarely gets above zero. This sixty degree weather is very uncomfortable for him, but for the safety of his cubs, he will bear it.”

Joe did some quick mental calculations. He came up with the fact that this animal had traveled over twelve hundred miles to meet him. Joe told Tammy to recount his experience with the voice inside his head.

“It would appear both of us have the same job to do,” the animal said, as translated by Tammy.

“Ask him if he has a name we can use instead of just calling him, it?” Joe asked Tammy.

She repeated his request, then said. “His name can’t be translated to the human language, so just call him Stalker. He says if you want to tell him anything just think it at him and he will answer through me.”

“*That’s another thing.*” Joe thought at Stalker. “*How can you read my thoughts but only Tammy can read yours?*”

“He says apparently we each have a part to play in saving this woman. We were given specific talents to help us do this.”

“*I have no specific talent,*” Joe thought at Stalker.

“Yes you do; your ability to kill without emotion is the reason you have traveled this far. Think about it. Could you have taken lives in the recent past without being overcome with guilt? No, my friend, something in you was changed also,” Tammy said.

“Joe, he says that now we must let him rest because he is tired of talking,” Tammy told him.

“*One more thing. Do you know where the woman is now?*”

“She is somewhere in Ohio, heading for the place we are to meet her,” Tammy said.

Joe and Tammy loaded the rest of their gear in the Jeep, then discussed where they should stop for gas and to get some supplies. They finally settled on the small town of Warrington, just off of Interstate 70. Near as they could figure, the town was seventy miles away.

Joe sent his thoughts to Stalker. “*Since we will be working together as a team, we had better find out just how far I can project my thoughts to you.*”

“Stalker says it’s a good idea. Let him go out about one hundred feet and start from there,” Tammy replied.

Joe watched Stalker trot out to the end of the trees. Then he sent the thought, “*You’re the ugliest thing I have ever seen.*”

“Not half as ugly as you are,” Tammy told him.

“Ok, go out another fifty feet.”

Stalker ran out a little further, then Joe thought, “*What about now, ugly?*”

“He says if you don’t quit insulting him, he’s going to have to teach you a lesson.” Tammy said.

Joe sent his apology to Stalker. “*I am glad you are on our side. I feel you would be a formidable opponent.*”

They continued this way until they discovered Stalker could receive Joe's thoughts for three hundred feet when they could see each other. He could receive Joe only two hundred feet when Stalker was out of sight.

As Stalker padded up, Joe was telling Tammy they would spend as little time in town as possible, just long enough to get gas and food. Then Joe told Stalker of the reports they were hearing on the radio.

"Most of the towns we came through had people fighting each other. Some of it we saw for ourselves in Columbia, Missouri.

"There were gangs in the street shooting at another group of people holed up in a theater. We watched from an alley down the street. Someone brought up a tank from the National Guard unit. The tank blasted away at the theater front until all firing ceased from the people in the theater; then, the groups moved in.

"We decided not to stay in the vicinity of the town. Backtracking out of town we skirted around it. We drove on until finding this place to camp over night.

"But we have to stop pretty soon because we're almost out of gas and need food," Joe told him.

"Stalker says to stop before you get into town and let him out. He will enter the town to see if it's safe," Tammy replied.

"Sounds like a good idea," Joe told him.

Tammy opened her door and let Stalker climb onto the Jeep seat, then got in herself. As Joe got back on the interstate, Tammy said, "Joe, he asks why one so young is traveling with you on such a dangerous journey?"

Joe related the story of how he met Tammy. When he came to the part of the man trying to rape Tammy, he heard a low growl from the wolf. The meaning behind the growl raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

"Why, thank you Stalker," Tammy said.

"What did he say?" Joe asked.

"He said he hoped his sons and daughters grew up to be as brave and smart as I am," Tammy answered.

"Keep an eye out in back of us for anyone coming up from the rear, Stalker," Joe thought.

"Joe, Stalker says I am going to come in heat in the next few days. What does he mean?" Tammy asked.

Joe thought about it for a few seconds then said, "Tammy, have you had a period yet?"

"No. Is that what Stalker means?" Tammy asked.

"Yes," Joe told her.

"Now I understand, and Joe you don't have to be embarrassed. I know what to do. I'll get what I need when we pick up supplies," Tammy said to him.

Joe sighed in relief at not having to explain that part of the birds and bees to her. He left the interstate at the Warring-ton exit. The sign said the town was four miles. Joe drove until he was about a mile out of town, then turned off on a rutted dirt road. From the looks of it, the road was seldom used, so he drove into a grove of trees and stopped.

"We can give you a few hours rest before you go check out the town, Stalker."

Tammy said, "He says he would appreciate it because his head is hurting. He says the things I gave him are starting to deaden the pain."

"Then, rest friend, while Tammy and I make lunch."

Joe pulled the Jeep a little further into the stand of trees. Taking his field glasses, Joe walked to the edge of the woods and surveyed the distant town. It looked peaceful enough.

Nothing was moving that he could see. *"Too peaceful for these times,"* he thought.

Going back to the Jeep, Joe removed the cooking gear and started a small fire. While Tammy fixed lunch, Joe opened the footlocker on the back of the Jeep. Reaching into it, he pulled out an old

M-14 rifle along with four, twenty round magazines. He filled them with bullets. With this rifle, he knew he could put nineteen rounds into a foot square patch at three hundred and fifty yards. Tammy brought him a plate of sliced ham, warmed pork and beans, and some sort of stew.

Joe figured they had about four hundred miles to go. If he could fill the gas tank on the Jeep and the two five gallon Gerry cans strapped to the back of the Jeep, they should make it to Indianapolis, without having to refuel.

Tammy excused herself to go into the woods. Joe sat there trying to figure things out. *"We are going to need a bigger vehicle. One that seats at least five,"* he thought. Then he had an idea. *"Why not get a topper for the Jeep? That way they could throw a mattress in the back and while someone drove, the others could sleep."*

Joe didn't realize he was almost asleep until he heard Tammy scream. Getting alertly to his feet, he saw something black flash past him. He brought the rifle to his shoulder before he realized it was Stalker.

Running forward, Joe admired how quickly Stalker could move when he wanted to. Breaking into a clearing, Joe saw Tammy huddled against a tree. Stalker stood in front of her looking this way and that. Going to Tammy, Joe asked, "What hap-pened?"

Trying to control her sobbing, Tammy told him that she came into the clearing to relieve herself. She thought she heard something on the other side of the clearing and walked over to investigate. She didn't see anything but a path that led to another clearing. Not wanting Joe to think she was silly if she went back for him, she walked down the path. At the edge of the clearing, she felt something touch her hair. Thinking it was a spider web, she reached up to brush it away, but couldn't. Looking up, she saw a shoe. Looking higher she saw a body hanging from a tree limb. That was when she screamed and ran to here.

"You're ok now. I'm going to leave Stalker to guard you while I go check it out," Joe told her.

Turning to Stalker, Joe thought, *"Stay with the girl; watch over her, I will check out what she found."* Hanging the rifle by its strap on his shoulder, Joe took the .45 out of his pocket and cautiously crossed the clearing. After a few minutes, he found the path Tammy had taken. It was only about thirty feet long.

Joe had to squat down and walk forward because of the overhead brush. *"This is really only a small animal trail,"* he thought. At the end, he had to get down on his hands and knees. Joe looked around but saw nothing until he looked up. He was shocked by the sight that met his eyes.

There had to be thirty people hanging above him, from young children to old people. They hung there in a huge pine tree like some kind of macabre Christmas decoration.

Going further into the meadow, he saw that some of them had been there several days because of the way they were swollen. One of the children looked to be only three or four years old.

Joe saw dual wheel tracks on the ground leading under the tree. They had probably pulled a large flat bed truck under the limbs and put the people on the truck. As they stood there ropes were tied around their necks. All the killers had to do was drive the truck from under them.

He looked at the ropes around the people's necks and didn't spot one hangman's knot. This meant these people were strangled to death slowly with their hands tied behind their backs kicking their lives away as they swayed back and forth.

Someone must have held up some of the smaller children while ropes were placed around their necks. Apparently they were lowered to hang. They must have kicked in front of the adults on the truck who could only stand and watch as their crazy murderers watched and made fun of the children.

Disgusted Joe wondered how such people could live with themselves. Seeing this, Joe knew he would never be troubled with busting a cap on anyone like them.

Throwing his thoughts to Stalker, Joe told him to take Tammy back to the truck. He took off his hat and looked at the bodies, burning the sight of them into his mind. Then he looked up at the sky

and said, "Father, this is unforgivable. The people who did this don't deserve to live. Father, these children who had so much to live for have had their lives extinguished like stepping on a burning match. For this, Father, I am putting on the war paint to be taken off only when they have been avenged. I so swear this on your honor, Father."

Joe placed his hat on his head and walked from the meadow. If the people in town could have seen his eyes and the set of his face, they would have trembled in their boots. Joe had declared war in which no quarter was given. It was to kill or be killed. Now he was going after the town.

Back at the Jeep, he reached under the driver's seat and pulled out his medicine bag. He removed his war paint from it. He made three black streaks down each cheek and two white ones across his forehead.

"Stalker wants to know what you're going to do?" Tammy asked in a frightened voice.

Looking at Stalker, Joe told him what he had sworn on his father's honor. "*Friend, your help would be appreciated, but if you choose to stay, I will understand.*"

"He says to tell you he understands honor. He will fight by your side to avenge the small ones," Tammy told him.

Squatting on his heels, Joe told Stalker what he wanted him to do. With Tammy translating Stalker's questions to Joe, they worked out a plan in less than an hour.

Joe told Tammy what to do; in case, they didn't return.

Stalker went to a large pine tree and lay in the shade to get some rest until dusk. Joe judged it would be dark in a little over two hours.

Joe spent the time making his preparations. He took the small Uzi machine gun out of the truck, cleaned it, and then loaded the spare magazines until he had two hundred rounds for it. He would use this weapon for close in fighting. Next, he loaded two more magazines with twenty rounds each for the M-14. He would use this for his distant fighting.

Reaching into the trunk again, he pulled out a .38 caliber Colt that had belonged to his father. He made sure each chamber had a bullet. He placed this in the left-hand pocket of his jacket, along with some extra ammunition. He loaded all of his spare clips for the .45, which gave him sixty rounds for it. He placed it in his right pocket. Pulling out web gear, he put it on. Finally, he pulled out six fragmentation grenades. He clipped three to each side of the web gear.

Tying his medicine bag to his belt with a piece of leather, he opened it and withdrew two eagle feathers. He placed one on each side of his hat. Now, he was ready. Walking into the woods, he found an open space and sat down. He crossed his legs and started a soft chanting, preparing himself for battle.

As the sun settled behind the hills, Joe stopped chanting and got to his feet. Returning to where Tammy stood, he found Stalker on his feet ready to go.

Joe told Tammy again what she should do if they didn't return. Joe then kissed her on the cheek. He turned and walked toward the town.

"*Do not worry, Little One, I will protect him and bring him safely back to you,*" Stalker told her. He knelt on the ground before her as one would kneel before a queen.

Rising to his feet, he trotted out to Joe and they walked side by side across the fields toward the town.

Before entering the town, Joe sent Stalker ahead to locate the building he wanted. As he waited, Joe mentally went over his plans. He could not think of any way to improve on them.

Stalker returned and indicated for Joe to follow him. They made their way down alleys and dark streets. Joe heard the drunken laughter of men and the painful screams of women being raped or tortured.

Stalker led him to the back door of a large building. Using his gater knife, Joe forced the door open. Telling Stalker to keep watch, Joe entered the building.

He opened a door that he thought led to the supply room. He surprised two men raping a woman. Quick as an owl at night, Joe was on the men. He slit both their throats from ear to ear and threw their bloody bodies into the corner.

Joe helped the woman to her feet and said, "If you know any innocent people still in town, gather them in the next hour and quietly lead them to the fields outside of town. I am about to destroy this town. Anyone left in it after one hour will be my prey. Do you understand?"

The woman picked up her clothes and put them on. "Mister, any people left in town after an hour are yours. Kill every one of the bastards," she said vehemently.

Joe herded the woman to the back door. "One hour from now," he repeated and looked at his watch. He told Stalker to guard the woman as she made her rounds and to return there after she had the people out of town. Joe re-entered the hardware store and made sure the front door was locked.

Opening a third door, he found what he wanted, the supply room. He searched until he found what he was looking for in a steel box in the back. After breaking the lock, he lifted the lid and found not just detonator caps, but electronic detonator caps. "*So much the better,*" he thought.

He knew there had to be explosives in the building so he searched and found a door leading to the basement. He found the light switch, flipped it on, and went down the steps to the basement. In the far wall was a steel plated door with a large padlock on it.

Guessing this was where they kept the explosives, Joe took a nearby crowbar and broke the lock. He pulled the door open and went in. There were boxes piled around the walls. Some of them held dynamite, but most held plastic explosives. This was a welcome surprise. He went back to the main room of the basement and found a gunnysack. He went back into the room and filled the sack with the blocks of plastic.

He staggered under the load on his back as he went up the stairs. Joe took half of the plastic out of the bag and placed it near the rear door. Going back to the supply room, he picked up a few dozen of the miniature detonators and placed them in his jacket pocket.

After he picked up the sack of explosives, he went out the back door and turned to the right. Cautiously keeping to the shadows, he went to the last building in town. Here he placed blocks of plastic on each side of the building, except the front.

In each block of plastic he placed a miniature detonator and pulled out its small antenna. He went from building to building doing the same thing. He changed the detonating frequency for each building.

Entering the hardware store again, he placed the remaining explosives in the sack and left. This time he turned left. He went to the last building in that direction and placed explosives around each building until he worked his way back to the hardware store. He made several trips to the basement. The last thing he did was get explosives and place them around the walls of the hardware store.

Finished, he went out into the alley and leaned against the wall waiting for Stalker's return.

Stalker approached so silently Joe didn't know he was there until Stalker nudged him. Joe squatted down and told Stalker what he wanted him to do.

Joe checked to make sure he had everything. Then he walked around the side of the hardware store to where the street began. He looked to the left and saw a group of people standing on the sidewalk under a streetlight. All of the people had bottles of beer or whiskey in their hands. Every few seconds they kicked a blood covered man who was lying on the sidewalk.

Looking to the right, Joe saw a crowd gathered around one of the porches. A couple of people stepped off the porch and Joe saw a man and woman with ropes around their necks.

Joe waited until no one was near, then stepped out on the street. He kept his head low and crossed to the only three-story building in town. Two men came out the door as Joe stepped up on the sidewalk. Quickly Joe turned his back to them. In one of the windows facing the street, Joe saw the men stop and look at his back. Joe's grip on the machine pistol tightened. He knew the men were

wondering why he had so many weapons on him when only a few people in town were armed. One of the men took a step toward Joe, but a loud roar sounded from down the street interrupting him. In the window reflection Joe saw the indecision on the man's face. Another roar sounded and the man shrugged his shoulders and turned to join the first man. Together they walked away from Joe in the direction of the cheering people. Joe let out a long breath and eased the safety back on the machine pistol.

Everyone was looking down the street at the cheering people, so Joe eased into an alley between the buildings. He went to the back of the building and found the fire escape. Climbing to the top floor, Joe forced the door open and entered the building. In the second hallway, he found the stair-well leading to the roof. Opening the door to the roof, he stepped through and closed the door behind him. He found a piece of wood and wedged it under the doorknob to prevent anyone from coming up behind him.

At the front of the building was a three-foot high parapet he could hide behind. On his knees, Joe looked over the side, noting that he could see almost the entire town.

He couldn't see the two people they were about to hang. They stood under the roof of a store on the same side of the street he was on. Joe saw that the man lying on the sidewalk across the street lay without moving. Occasionally one of the drunken men would kick him.

Joe took a specially made silencer from his pocket and screwed it onto the M-14. Next, he took the electronic detonator from his pocket and set it to the right frequency.

Watching the last building intently, Joe saw Stalker streak from the shadows and grab a man by the leg. The man screamed in pain as the steel-trap jaws of Stalker closed over his leg. His screams attracted the attention of the drunken men. Seeing the wolf attacking their friend, they let out a howl and came running. Stalker let loose of the man and ran for the narrow alley between the first and second building. With a cry of rage, the men ran to the building and started funneling down the narrow passage. Joe waited until about fifteen of the men had entered the passage; then, he pressed the button on the detonator.

With an ear splitting roar, the first building went up in a cloud of smoke. Joe was knocked flat on the roof. This saved his life because slivers of wood peppered the front of the building he was on. Trying to regain his sense of balance, Joe looked toward the explosion as debris continued to fall from the sky.

"Jesus," Joe thought, "*what kind of explosives did I place?*" Joe stared down at the large hole in the ground where the building had stood. He looked down at the street and saw bodies lying everywhere. The people who weren't hurt or were only injured were staring toward the other end of the street with stunned expressions on their faces.

Placing the detonator back in his pocket and grabbing the M-14, Joe ran to the roof door. Kicking the board out of the way, he opened the door and ran down the stairs to the back of the building. Without pausing, he ran to the building where the two people were about to be hanged.

He broke the back door open and rushed inside. A startled man inside the store was taking a drink of beer as Joe burst into the room. He reached for a rifle; Joe lowered the M-14 and pulled the trigger twice. He heard the plop, plop noise it made as the man staggered to the wall and fell to the floor. Going to the front door, Joe saw the man and woman were still alive but bloody from where they had been hit by debris from the exploding building.

Joe slipped out the door and took the gator knife from his boot. He reached up and cut the rope holding their hands behind their backs. Whispering for them to remain still and keep quiet, Joe cut the rope from around their necks. Then he backed them into the store. He quickly told them to go out the back of the building and make their way to the fields outside of town.

Joe gave them enough time to leave the building, then walked out onto the porch. Joe stood in the place where the two people had stood ready to die a few moments before. With the Uzi in one

hand and the detonator in the other, Joe stood and watched the people. Slowly they came to their senses; one by one they noticed Joe standing there like a statue.

Joe saw the mad dog look in their eyes and knew they were beyond hope. With his left hand he pushed the detonator. Another tremendous explosion rocked the other side of town. At the same time, Joe started firing. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Stalker slash into the people, crushing heads and ripping out throats with his mighty jaws.

In a little under three minutes, there wasn't a living soul on the street, except Joe and Stalker. Without looking back, Joe with Stalker at his side walked out of town. They went to the field where about a hundred people stood.

Standing in front of the woman he had released at the hardware store, Joe told her where the rest of the explosives were and how to remove them. Next, he told them he wanted thirty gallons of gas brought to the turn off where the Jeep was parked. He turned his back on the people and walked across the field with Stalker bringing up the rear.

A small form flashed out of the woods and into his arms. Both of them were crying as he carried Tammy to the Jeep but for different reasons. Tammy cried because she was happy he was back. Joe cried for the lives he had taken. Even though it was necessary so that the remaining normal people could live.

True to their word, the people brought the gasoline and more supplies than they would ever need. At the entrance to the inter-state, Joe stopped and washed the war paint from his face. He took the eagle feathers out of his hat, and placed them in his medicine bag. "*It's done,*" he told Stalker as they drove off into the darkness.

For many years afterward, the legend grew about the no-name phantom Indian and his Wolf Hound from Hell, who had saved the town from a group of people who had gone crazy in a time when crazy was the norm.

Total casualties were seventy-four men and women dead, but peace was restored to the town after a week of madness.

A statue of an Indian with a wolf by his side was erected some years later in honor of the two who had saved the town.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Todd hung up the phone trying to put what had just occurred into some sort of perspective he could understand. The man who said he was the Master had shown that he controlled an awesome amount of power even while held captive.

Until now, Todd had been content to wander around killing those not like him. Todd realized that with the help of the Master his job would become much easier.

Todd was bothered by the implied threat that if he didn't do the Master's bidding there was no place he could hide from his wrath. Todd did not doubt this was true after seeing the display of power the Master had just put on.

The Master told him to find two separate groups of people and kill them before they joined with each other. The eastern group interested him most. The Master said Joe Delany was with the man and woman he was to stop at all costs. Joe being with them made his task more enjoyable. Todd found it hard to understand why he had considered Joe to be his friend. He had wasted years looking up to Joe and thinking of him as a strong person. Now he knew Joe was the weaker one and there was no place in the new world for weaklings. Yes, he would have his revenge on Joe, and he would make sure Joe died a long, painful death.

The Master told Todd he was the first one he had contacted. Todd assumed he would take his orders directly from the Master himself when the new order took over. Perhaps if he accomplished his tasks for the Master swiftly and without a large loss of his followers, he would get a position of power.

Todd didn't know who Ben Johnson was but he had to consider him as much or more of a threat than Joe. The Master wanted him captured alive and brought to him. This man, Ben, must have done something severe to the Master to deserve his personal punishment. Anyone able to harm the Master was not to be taken lightly.

He took some maps off the shelf and spread them out on the table. He tried to figure what routes Joe would take to get the man and woman to Colorado. He saw only two major routes that would get him there. Joe could switch back and forth between the routes by using several secondary routes.

Once Joe knew someone was after him, Todd did not doubt he would use every trick he knew to throw them off. His best bet was to get rid of Joe and his people before they got to St. Louis.

He heard a loud roar from the people outside the room and went to the window. Todd smiled at the scene he saw.

Led by Ray, his second in command, a group of his people herded a dozen prisoners into a barn at the end of the street. Todd watched as one of his men tied a rope to the eaves of the roof, then lowered it until it was nine feet from the ground. The man drew the rope up and tied it around the neck of an old man in torn coveralls. He positioned the man at the edge of the loft door and tied his hands behind his back.

Todd saw Ray plant his foot on the man's back and push him out the door. The man fell until he reached the end of the rope. The rope tightened around his neck as the weight of his body continued downward with such force that it pulled the head completely from the body. Blood flew into the air as the body hit the ground with legs kicking as though the man was trying to run away. Slipping from the noose, his head dropped to the ground a few feet from the body. A cheer went up from the men and

women.

Todd saw Ray collecting money from some of the men. Plainly Ray had won a bet. This reminded Todd of how he had met Ray.

Todd had been wandering from town to town with no particular destination in mind. Walking down a dusty road leading into a small town, he came upon a sight that fascinated him.

In a large field just outside the town of Ocello in southern Wyoming, Todd saw twenty or thirty men gathered around a large piece of construction equipment. Walking over to the men Todd saw they were making bets. A man not much more than five feet three inches tall was covering all the bets.

"What's going on?" Todd asked a man standing next to him.

"Ray's betting he can take the heads off the people buried in the field with the blade of this end loader without getting above their chins."

Todd stepped around the machine and saw three rows of heads sticking out of the ground. The people were buried until just the top of their shoulders stuck above ground. The first row contained ten people ranging in age from six to sixty. The second and third rows had twelve people apiece in them. Out in front of the rows was a gray haired man's head.

Pointing to the lone head Todd asked, "I take it he's the leader of these people?"

"Yeah," said the man who came around the end loader with him. "He put up a hell of a fight before we captured them. They killed more than thirty of us before we knew they were there. Ray was hopping mad when we finally took them prisoner. He did not want to just kill them. As a matter of fact, he shot two men point blank for suggesting we shoot them and get it over with."

"Would you like to lose a little of your money stranger?" Todd heard from over his shoulder. Turning, he saw Ray standing there looking him up and down. Neither man spoke for a few minutes as they appraised each other.

Todd noted that Ray wore two pistols in holsters tied to his legs, Wild West style. His clothes were clean but a little raveled around the cuffs. The most striking thing about him was the scar on his face. It ran from just below his left eye to his chin then half way to his right eye forming a V with one side shortened. He had piercing gray eyes and jet-black hair. Todd doubted if he weighed eighty pounds soaking wet. Todd didn't let Ray's size fool him; he knew a dangerous man when he met one.

"No thanks, Ray. It would take a fool to bet against you."

Inside his head Todd heard one of the men say. "*Who does this asshole think he is, calling us fools?*" Several of the men voiced their agreement.

Taking out his .38, Todd pointed it at the man who had called him an asshole and said. "First, I am no asshole. Second, you are a bunch of fools. Now, if you want to make something out of what I said, be my guest."

The men looked at Ray to see if he was going to take their side, but he just stood there with his arms crossed.

"Listen Mister, I meant no harm," said the man as Todd continued to point the .38 at his head.

"Apology accepted," Todd said lowering the .38.

Tension drained from the men now that the danger was passed.

Ray looked at Todd and said, "I like you, stranger. You either have a big set of balls or you have a death wish to take on twenty to one odds. Besides, I've lost enough men already."

After introducing himself, Todd said he had heard about the men who died while they were taking the town. Todd said he thought Ray was letting the captured people off easy.

"What would you do?" Ray asked.

"Since the bets are already made, go ahead and do what you were going to do with the first row. Leave the other two rows to me. Ray, I think we should have a record of what happens to people who cross us. Don't you think so?"

"What do you have in mind, Todd?"

“Send a couple of men into town to pick up some video cameras, so we can tape what happens,” Todd answered.

A big smile lit up Ray’s face. “Damn, I would never have thought of that, Todd. Yeah that sounds like a wonderful idea.”

While two of the men went to town for cameras, Ray and Todd talked. “You run a loose bunch, Ray. You need more discipline; otherwise, the next time you’re going to lose more men.”

“Hell, I’m no leader and they know it. The only thing these men respect is someone more ruthless than they are,” Ray said.

“Maybe together we can whip them into shape.” Todd said.

“You seem to have the brains for it, Todd. I tell you what; I can arrange for you to become our leader by throwing my support behind you. The only thing is you have to make me second in command. I don’t want to end up being a flunky,” Ray told him.

Thinking about Ray’s offer, Todd liked the idea of being in charge of a group of people. He knew there would be headaches, but with Ray’s help there shouldn’t be that many problems.

“Ok, but with one condition. There will be no objections from you or any of the men to do anything I order. If you agree to that, then it’s a deal,” Todd told Ray.

“Agreed. If any one else objects, they can argue with what I have strapped on my hip, Boss,” Ray said with a smile.

Ray called the men together and informed them that as of then Todd was their leader.

“I’ll be God damned if I’m staying with this chicken shit bunch,” one of the men said. The man threw up his hands in disgust and started to leave the group. Before he had taken three steps, Ray and Todd’s guns went off at the same time knocking the man forward to the ground on his face. As the man lay there kicking out his life, Todd turned and faced the men. With a smile on his face but eyes as hard as granite, he watched them. He let the silence hang in the air like an oppressive force for forty-five seconds. Todd raised his gun and said, “From this moment on, this is the only way you leave our group.” To emphasize this, he walked up to where the man lay kicking on the ground and calmly put a bullet into his brain.

“Now are there any more objections?” Todd asked looking at them. The men did not speak a word. Putting the .38 back in his pants, Todd turned to Ray. “Let’s see if you can win that bet you made with these men.”

“Two of you drag that bastard’s carcass out of the way so the game can begin,” Ray addressed the men. The men backed away glad to put a little distance between them and this death dealing pair. Two of them picked up the man’s body and carried it away.

Ray climbed on the end loader and sat down in the operator’s seat. Starting the engine, he put it into reverse and backed away until the machine was lined up with the first row of heads. Ray slowly lowered the scoop on the front of the machine until it was about one inch from the ground. Tilting the scoop forward, Ray brought the cutting edge down until it rested just above the ground. Pushing the throttle forward, a puff of black smoke belched from the exhaust pipe of the machine.

As the machine started forward, the men cheered. Todd found himself caught up in the excitement of the men. They jostled each other to see if they were going to win their bets.

Gaining momentum, the machine surged forward. Its blade barely skimmed the ground. The ten heads in the row faced the means of their death as it roared toward them. Todd saw the looks of terror on their faces. Their mouths worked as they screamed, but the screams were drowned out by the roar of the engine.

The unevenness of the ground caused Ray to keep adjusting the blade up or down. This was the reason for the bet. The men betting against Ray thought he couldn’t get through the row of heads without digging the blade into the ground and stalling the machine. Working the lever feverishly, Ray went down the row of heads at full throttle. Where the heads had been, a mist of blood spurted five

feet into the air. As the mist of blood fell back to the ground, it caught the light of the setting sun causing it to sparkle like a rainbow.

Artisan wells came to Todd's mind as he watched the spray from the headless bodies diminish to a trickle.

The men who bet Ray would make it were cheering and collecting their winnings. Ray drove the end loader back to where Todd stood, climbed down, and collected his winnings also.

"How was that?" Ray asked Todd, a big smile on his face.

"Beautiful. I hope it comes out half as good on film."

"Now what do you have in mind for the rest of this scum?"

"By chance are any of the heads in the scoop related to their leader?" Todd asked.

Shoving heads around in the scoop Ray pulled one out by the hair. It was the head of a blond haired girl somewhere around twelve years old. Her blue eyes were still open. Very little blood dripped around the jagged edges of the neck where the blade had ripped it from its body. "I believe this was his daughter."

"Good take it out and place it about a foot from his face," Todd ordered. He told the other men to pick up the rest of the heads and place them in front of the other people.

Climbing to the seat of the end loader, he looked out on the scene after the men had finished placing the heads. He patted the steering wheel as though congratulating it for a job well done.

In the quiet air he heard some of the people start screaming; some of them just cried and a few appeared to be praying.

"Some of you men go into town and get all the honey you can find," Todd ordered. While the men went to get the honey, Todd asked Ray if he knew where there was an anthill.

"I know where to get what you want," Ray answered with a wicked grin on his face. Starting the engine of the end loader, he put it in gear and headed for the scrub brush at the back of the field. Crashing through the brush, he stopped at a six foot by ten-foot mound. Lifting the blade three feet off the ground, Ray said, "Watch." He slowly inched the machine forward until the front of the scoop bit into the mound. Putting the machine in reverse he backed away from the mound.

At first Todd didn't see anything. Then he noticed the whole ground moving. Looking closer he saw there were millions of tiny red ants scurrying around the rupture in the mound.

Grinning, he looked at Ray and said, "Perfect, scoop up a bucket full and take it to the field."

Ray plowed into the center of the mound leaving a huge hole as he backed away from it. On the way back to the field Todd saw millions of ants crawl over the top of the scoop. He watched as they crawled onto the arms leading to the cab where they sat. Ray put the end loader in a higher gear saying, "I want to get there before they get here. It hurts like hell when one of those little bastards bites you."

As the ants reached the cab he slammed on the brakes and dropped the scoop to the ground. "Let's get the hell out of here," he said rushing from his seat and starting down the ladder on the side of the machine.

Feeling a sharp pain in his right hand Todd looked down to see three ants crawling on it. Slapping the ants off he hastily followed Ray.

The men drew back from the end loader when they saw the cargo it carried.

Todd walked over to the truck that held the honey and lifted out two jars. He held them up to look at the golden glow caused by the setting sun's light as it passed through the honey. Lowering his hands he turned to the men and said, "Pour a jar of honey over each of the heads out there."

Going to where the leader's head stuck out of the ground he squatted in front of him. "How do you like my little present to you," he said reaching down and rolling the blond head of the man's daughter between his hands?

The man could barely whisper and the crazed look on his face said that he was beyond reason. He

repeated over and over, "Why for the love of God why?"

Turning the once pretty head to face the man Todd said. "This is what I think of you and your God." He set the head down nose to nose with the man saying, "See what pretty blue eyes she has, but alas she can no longer see you daddy dear."

Laughing at his own humor he opened the honey and poured it over the man's head. "My, my, what a sweet treat you'll make for my friends," he said. Tiring of the game he kicked the girl's head aside and told his men to bring over some ants.

Two men came running with shovels full of ants. Todd told them to throw the ants on the man's head.

Upon landing the ants immediately went for the honey on the man's head. Hundreds of thousands of ants soon stripped the honey away. Down to the bare skin they started to eat the flesh.

In agony from the many tiny bites the man opened his mouth to scream, which was a mistake because thousands of ants instantly filled his mouth. In minutes there was no flesh left on the face. A mass of ants was crawling in the mouth and out of the empty eye sockets. The ground around the man's shoulders shifted and boiled as the ants burrowed into the earth to get at the rest of the man's flesh.

Todd watched a few minutes longer then turned and told the men to cover the rest of the heads with ants.

Going to the men with the video cameras he asked if they were getting everything down on film.

"This is wonderful, Boss, I've watched a lot of horror films but none of them were half as good as this," one of the men said.

"Stay here and get every bit of it until the last one is dead. We are going to town, you follow us later," he told the men.

"Right boss," they answered.

Ray drove him into town where they gathered the motley group of people Ray had gathered around him. That was eight days ago.

His group grew from forty-five people to over two hundred in that time. Each day at least thirty people joined the group from every direction of the compass.

Coming back to the present he watched Ray enter the room. "What was that all about?" he asked.

"Some of the people started to get restless from just standing around doing nothing, so I planned a little diversion for them. While I was at it, I won over five hundred dollars."

"Are you putting the drug in their food like I asked?"

"Sure have. We need to increase the dosage? This dosage only keeps them calm for four hours."

"Go ahead give them fifty percent more. Come over here and let's make some plans on where we can trap Joe," Todd said, spread-ing maps out on the table.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Driving along at a steady fifty-five, Bill reached over and turned on the radio. He found a Huntington Station that he knew gave the news at the top of the hour. The newscaster told of trouble erupting in most of the major cities in West Virginia. Bill perked up when the announcer said there was a news flash from the southern part of the state. The newscaster said a large gasoline tanker stolen by some teenagers from a nearby refinery had wrecked and exploded. The explosion had killed several residents in their beds as they slept. The teenagers had entered town at a high speed and had failed to make a sharp turn. This caused the tanker portion to flip over, spilling its contents of ten thousand gallons of gasoline down the block.

Some residents rushed to the scene where an errant spark caused the gasoline to explode into flames, killing them where they stood. The fire chief told them they estimated fifty to sixty people had lost their lives in this terrible accident. At last report, they were trying to contain the fire and keep it from spreading to adjacent homes. He said they would keep listeners updated as further reports came in.

Bill turned off the radio. He thought, *"These people must be in complete control of town to be able to cover up the killings I witnessed with such a preposterous story."*

Seeing the lights of a restaurant ahead, he nudged Tony saying, "Would you like something to eat?"

"How long have I been asleep?"

"About an hour and a half," Bill told her. He went on to tell her about the newscast he had just heard.

"How can they do that and get away with it?"

"The more I think about it the more reasonable it becomes. Who is going to dispute their word? Unless you live there, you wouldn't have any reason to doubt their story," Bill told her.

Bill pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant and said, "I could use about a gallon of coffee." Getting out of the truck, Bill picked up the .45, placed it in his pants at the small of his back and put on his jacket to cover it.

"Why are you taking that? We're just going to eat?"

"Hasn't it occurred to you that if the people in our town have gone crazy with whatever this thing is, people in other places probably are infected, too?" Bill said to her.

"No, it never occurred to me, but I guess you're right."

"That's why I'm taking the gun. I would rather have it with me, than get into something where I needed it and it was in the truck. Better safe than sorry," Bill said.

Opening the door for Tony, they entered the restaurant and went to a booth near the door. Tony excused herself and went to the restroom. Bill sat down and looked around. There were only six or seven customers in the place. It was early in the morning. Bill thought he recognized the gray haired man in the blue suit who looked them over as they came in. He couldn't remember where he had seen him before. Bill heard a couple of them talking to each other mentally.

The waitress came over, gave him a menu, and filled two cups with coffee. She said she would be back to take their orders.

Tony returned, and slid into the booth. She sighed, took a sip of coffee, and said, "This is just what I needed."

"Tony, do you recognize the man in the blue suit sitting at the counter?" Bill asked.

Sipping her coffee, she glanced sideways at the counter to look at the man. Bill saw the fatigue on her face.

"That's Senator Bloomton. I wonder what he's doing here?"

"I don't know. For the last few minutes I have picked up on him talking about the government of our country to the two men sitting in the corner." Bill told her.

The waitress came over and Bill ordered eggs, bacon and orange juice. Tony ordered French toast and tomato juice. After the waitress left, Tony wanted to know what the men were talking about. One of the men in the booth seemed to be agitated.

Talking out of the side of his mouth, Bill said, "They know who we are. They are trying to decide on a way to kill us without causing a big disturbance."

"What?" Tony said, almost dropping her coffee cup. "How could they know we escaped the fire? I thought we would have more time than this."

"They probably searched the remains of our house and didn't find our bodies. The senator is telling them that by the end of the week the president will be dead. At which time, their people will be in charge of the government."

"My God! I had no idea this had spread so far. We have to warn the president of this plot, somehow." Tony said.

"We will, if we get out of here. Now they are talking about letting us leave, then having a state cop stop us down the road. This cop will have instructions to kill us for resisting arrest. The one in the booth, on the left, wants to get rid of us here. The senator is telling him they couldn't stand the publicity right now. It won't be long until they will get a few more people in important positions. He is saying that in two days they will have enough people in the right places to take over the state government. In some of the key cities, they have killed officials under the guise of violent public demonstrations. These are being carried out by their people throughout the state." Bill told her.

"If this is so widespread, where are we going to go in order to be safe?" Tony asked.

"First, we have to warn someone in the government about what is happening," Bill said.

"Doesn't it strike you as strange that responsible government agencies don't know about these things?" Tony asked.

"I'm sure the government knows what's happening. Maybe they don't know of its extent," Bill answered. He watched the senator get out of his chair and walk over to the pay phone. "He's telling one of the men to go outside and wait. To make sure that when we leave, we go in the right direction."

The senator started to dial the phone. He turned and glanced outside as the lights of a car pulling into the parking lot flashed through the window. A smile lit up the senator's face. He quit dialing, hung up the phone, and walked back to his seat.

Bill looked out the window and saw that the car was a deputy sheriff's vehicle from Mingo County. "Uh! We're in deep shit now, Babe." He told Tony about the deputy's car.

Bill watched the short, portly deputy enter the door. He walked over to the senator, shook his hand and said in a loud voice, "Hello, Ted, what brings you to this part of the country?"

"Why, just getting an early start on meeting some of the people in my district while the senate is on break," Senator Bloomton said. Mentally he told the deputy that the people he sought were seated in the booth by the door.

Hitching up his gun belt, the deputy turned and looked their way. He asked the senator how he wanted him to take care of them.

"It has to be done away from here; we can't afford the publicity of doing it here," the senator told him.

“Ok, they’re just about finished eating and I know the perfect place down the road to stop them. Is there any particular way you want it done?” the deputy asked.

“No, just kill them and don’t even think about having a little fun with the woman before you kill her,” the senator told him. *“They have escaped from you once already. I received a report that there is something special about the woman. My people want her killed as quickly as possible,”* the senator said.

“What’s so special about her?” asked the deputy.

“They didn’t say, but they were emphatic that we kill her, no matter what the cost,” said the senator.

“Are you sure I can’t have just a little fun with the woman before I kill her? She is so God damn beautiful! It’s a shame not to use her some before she’s dead meat?” the deputy asked.

“Get that out of your mind right now. If you fuck this up, you’ll be the one who’s dead meat,” the senator angrily told him.

“So be it,” said the deputy, draining the last of the coffee from his cup and standing up. For the benefit of the customers who were not a part of their group the deputy shook the senator’s hand. *“Take care of yourself, Ted. Drop by and see us at the department the next time you’re down our way.”*

“I’ll do that. Just keep our citizens safe from harm,” The senator replied.

“Sure,” Bill thought. He told Tony about the conversation between the senator and the deputy.

Watching the deputy pull out of the parking lot, Tony asked, *“What are we going to do now, Bill?”*

“We have no choice, but to go on and hope we can miss the deputy before he gets set up.” Putting twenty dollars on the table to pay for the meal, they stood up and headed for the door.

Approaching his truck, Bill noticed a large gray Cadillac Eldorado parked to the side. *“This car can only belong to the senator,”* he thought. Stopping Tony, he told her to go back inside to the rest room, give him five minutes, then come back out.

Without asking why, Tony turned and entered the restaurant.

Bill took out his pocketknife. Going to the senator’s car, he cut off the valve stems on three of the tires. Going from vehicle to vehicle, he made sure the tires on them would be flat also. He had just got back to his truck and started it up, when Tony came out of the restaurant.

After getting in the truck, Tony asked what he had done.

He told her, then asked her to look back and see if anyone came out of the restaurant heading for their cars. As they pulled out of the parking lot, Tony told him the two men who’d been sitting in the booth were coming out and heading for a car.

“Just as I thought. The senator didn’t trust the deputy to do the job right. He is sending these two to make sure we don’t escape,” Bill told her.

A half-mile from the restaurant, Bill looked up to see blue lights flashing in the rear view mirror. Telling Tony to remain calm, Bill pulled over to the side of the road. He took the .45 out of his pants and held it near the door. The deputy’s car pulled in behind them. Watching in the rear view mirror, Bill saw the deputy get out of the car and walk their way. Bill saw the deputy take his gun from the holster.

Bill rolled down his window as the deputy came up.

Standing with his gun hidden, the deputy started to ask, *“May, I see your drivers lisc...”* Bill shot him twice in the chest, knocking him to the middle of the road.

Deafened by the blast of the .45, Bill felt Tony clutching him. After a moment, he realized she was screaming his name hysterically. Grabbing her and shaking her, he said, *“It’s all right, Tony. It’s all right.”*

Sobbing, she said, *“I thought, he shot you.”*

Letting go of Tony, Bill heard a flop, flopping noise coming from back down the road beyond the curve. Jumping out of the truck, he told Tony to get behind the wheel.

Running to the dead deputy, he lifted him and dragged him to the truck. He stood him up. Leaning him against the truck, Bill looped the deputy's belt through the door handle to keep him upright. Next, he placed one of the deputy's hands against the top of the door so it looked like he was talking to Tony.

Tony squirmed to the middle of the seat, trying to get away from the body.

Bill said, "Tony, I know you don't like it, but you are going to have to stay behind the wheel in order for this to work.

White faced, Tony said, "I'll try." She stared at the gaping holes in the deputy's chest.

Bill saw the headlights of a car coming around the curve. He ran around the back of the truck, jumped over the guardrail and ran down the slight bank. Turning to his right, he followed the road for about one hundred feet, then climbed the bank to lie just beyond the guardrail out of sight of the approaching vehicle.

Now the flop, flop, flopping of the car's flat tires blanked out all other sounds. The car wobbled off the road to park in back of the police car.

Bill edged along the guardrail until he was just in back of the passenger door, yet still out of sight. He heard one of the men say, "The senator was right. Looks like he is going to rape the woman; otherwise, she would be dead. The shots we heard must have been him wasting the man."

"I don't know, something about this looks strange," said the second man. Looking toward his pickup, Bill could understand why. The deputy's head was lying on his chest at an odd angle for him to be talking to Tony.

One of the men said, "Let's finish this so I can get home."

About then the deputy's hand slipped off the door; his body fell against the pickup. As his body hit the truck, cloth from the jacket that was seared into the wounds, tore open. This allowed a stream of warm blood to gush out all over Tony's head and shoulders. Letting out a terrified scream, Tony scrambled across the seat. She tried to get a grip on the door handle to open it, but failed because her hand was slippery with blood.

The man on the passenger side of the car said, "What the fuck is going on up there?" and started to get out of the car.

Bill let him get the door open, then shot him in the chest. The man fell across the seat, blocking Bill's view of the other man. When he jumped the guardrail, Bill's foot came down on a rock causing him to twist his ankle. He fell to the ground as the other man shot. Raw agony shot up Bill's leg. He tried to line up the .45 on the man but dropped the gun. Thinking his shots had put Bill down and out of action, Bill heard the man say, "Now it's time to put the bitch out of action."

Bill groped around for the .45 and found it beside the car's tire. He tried to rise but found that his ankle would not support him. Grabbing hold of the car, he pulled himself up. Bill hopped alongside the car as he watched the man approach Tony. She was still frantically trying to open the door.

Bill leaned against the front of the car and yelled, "Hey!" He fired his first shot as the man started to turn. Bill saw it ricochet off the road two feet to the left of the man. Bill's second shot hit him in the leg, causing him to yell and fall down beside the truck. By the light of the deputy's car, Bill saw the man grab the deputy's belt and start to pull himself up. Bill's third shot caught him in the left shoulder, spinning him around until he was in front of Bill's truck and out of sight.

Though in pain from his ankle, Bill thought, "*Christ! What does it take to keep this man down?*" He saw the man's hand come up over the hood of his truck and claw his way up so he was lying partially on the hood.

Bill couldn't shoot because Tony was between him and the man. Tony must have seen the man climbing up. As the man started bringing his gun around, Tony reached over and pulled the gearshift into drive. Falling to the floor, she pushed the gas pedal all the way down. Bill watched his truck lurch

forward and hit the guardrail throwing the man's body forward off the truck. Bouncing off the guardrail, the truck went forward another ten feet and hit the guardrail again. As the truck bounced off the guardrail again, Bill saw the rear tire spin across the man's chest. The spinning tires threw cloth and skin back to land on the deputy's car. His truck finally stalled out and came to rest twenty feet farther on.

Bill watched fascinated as the man, his chest crushed with bloody ribs poking out, started to crawl toward the truck. Using the guardrail to help him go forward, Bill limped to where he was even with the man. Bill leaned against the guardrail and shot the man in the head. Bill watched, scared shitless, as the man crawled forward another five feet. Bill shot him twice more. At last, the man quit going forward, but continued to lie there with his legs jerking for another minute.

Bill wiped cold sweat off his face and hobbled to his truck. Shouting Tony's name, he received no reply. He made his way around to the driver's door. He saw that the truck's stop and go action had broken the deputy's belt, which secured him to the door. Now the deputy's head rested under the left front wheel of the truck, crushed beyond recognition.

He opened the blood-covered door and saw that Tony had either fainted or was knocked out when the truck hit the guardrail. Getting under the wheel, he reached down and moved her over a little. With his left ankle throbbing, he gritted his teeth, started the truck, and backed up a little. He pulled onto the road. He felt the truck run across the deputy's legs and heard the sounds of breaking bones. Bill drove until he spotted a dirt road pulling off to the right. He turned onto the road and followed it for a quarter of a mile until it crossed a creek. Bill slammed the truck into park and threw open the door. Bending down he threw up because of what he had just done and from the release of tension.

Wiping his foul tasting mouth, Bill got out of the truck and found a tin can on the creek bank. He filled the can with water and took it to the truck where he started splashing it on Tony's face. She began moaning, then came up off the floor, screaming and fighting.

"Easy, Tony," Bill said. "Everything is all right now."

"Oh, Bill," she cried, raising her blood stained head and hands up to him. She bent over and threw up in the floor of the truck. When she finished, the rank odor of vomit was almost overpowering. She looked a little better under all the blood on her face.

"Tony, I either sprained or broke my ankle, so I'm not going to be much help for a while. We should be safe for now. We're out of sight of the road. Get out and wash the blood off, then change clothes. The quicker we get out of here the more distance we can put between them, and us." Bill told her.

He reached across her and opened the door. A few minutes later, Bill heard splashing sounds coming from the creek. Soon Tony appeared at the side of the truck. She was nude from the waist up, with water dripping from her wet head. Rummaging in a suit-case, Tony pulled out a pair of slacks and a blouse. She put on the clothes and asked if he could move his foot.

Bill tried to bend his foot up but stopped with the onset of throbbing pain. Next, he moved his foot slowly from side to side. "It's not broken, just badly sprained," he informed her.

Tony used a piece of tin she found on the stream bank and scraped the vomit out of the passenger side of the truck. Taking the can Bill had used to get water, Tony filled it and threw it on the floor of the truck. She used her discarded blouse and scrubbed the floor as clean as possible. She threw on more water and cleaned blood from around the door handle. She closed the door and told Bill to move to the passenger's side. At the driver's side, she proceeded to clean the blood off the seat and door.

Taking the bloody clothes, Tony walked to the side of the road placed them on the ground and pulled a small log over them. Back at the truck she closed the suitcases.

Bill admired the way she regained her composure, considering everything she had recently been

through.

It was light enough to see without using headlights. Backing up to a wide spot in the road, Tony turned around and headed toward the highway. Turning onto US 52, Bill saw a line of traffic backed up in the direction they had left the bodies of the dead men.

"By now, they know we aren't dead, so they'll be looking for us," Bill said. He opened the glove box and removed a road map.

Twenty minutes later, Tony pulled into a small mall and parked the truck in front of a drug store, which was just opening. Saying, "Sit tight," she went into the store.

While Tony was gone, Bill tried to trace a route that avoided most the major highways, It was certain they couldn't stay in the state now. The only quick way out was to go into Kentucky or Ohio.

Tony returned. Opening his door, she said, "Ok love, let's see if we can get your shoe off."

Bill turned so his feet were out of the truck. Gingerly lifting his left foot, she untied his shoe and slowly eased it off. Rolling down his sock, she saw a large purple swelling to the side of his ankle. Tony reached into the bag of things she had brought from the store. She removed an Ace bandage. "Bill, this is going to hurt some, but I have to wrap it tight. Just watch it to make sure the swelling doesn't cut off the circulation. After wrapping the Ace bandage around his ankle, she placed a safety clip on the bandage to keep it from unwrapping.

Bill moved his feet back in the truck as she closed the door. Testing his foot, he discovered the tightness, while uncomfortable, relieved some of the pain in his ankle. He leaned back in the seat and told Tony of his decision to head west.

Tony took the map and looked at it. She stared at the map so long, Bill asked, "Is there something wrong, Babe?"

"Bill, don't ask me how I know but we must go to Indianapolis. We will meet a man who is traveling with a little girl."

"Why do you say that?" Bill asked.

"When I look at the map, all I can see is the name Indianapolis, along with this image of a man and a little girl. With this comes the feeling of oneness, like nothing I've ever experienced," she explained.

Bill took the map and plotted a way, which would cause them to miss the larger cities, except Cincinnati, which he figured was so large they could pass through unnoticed.

Telling Tony which way to go, he asked her to stop at the first store she came to and buy something to make sandwiches. He didn't want to chance another meeting like the last place they stopped to eat.

"What's so special about you, Tony, that they are trying so hard to kill you?" Bill asked.

"Other than making people not see me, I have no idea although I have this feeling there is something else I can do. Maybe the right time hasn't come to bring it out yet?"

"Whatever it is, they seem to think you are an extreme danger to them. So from now on, we are going to have to be extra careful," Bill said.

Up ahead Tony saw a small country store with gas pumps outside. She asked Bill if they should stop?

"How much gas do we have?" he asked.

"About a quarter of a tank."

"Ok. Let's fill up the truck and get some cold cuts. That should get us to Cincinnati before we have to stop again."

Bill reached over and turned on the radio. He listened to the announcer saying that across the state groups of people were on a rampage of murdering, raping and stealing in almost every city. According to the announcer, the local police and state police were unable to bring it under control. The governor announced he was calling out the National Guard. There were also unconfirmed

reports that some policemen and guardsmen were joining these groups. The announcer paused, then said they had just received information that at eight fifteen that morning the governor had been killed by one of his security guards. He was on his way to Washington to consult with other governors and a committee from the president's staff about the mass uprisings occurring around the country when it happened.

In the tri-state area almost every city was reporting some form of violence. Most citizens, not involved with the mobs, were said to be armed behind locked doors trying to wait out this insanity. He announced, "We are advising people to do the same thing until the authorities get things under control."

There was the sound of confusion. Bill heard the announcer say, "What right now?" Then he said, "We have a live report from the west end of town about a mass murder that is occurring even as I speak. "Come in Mike, what is happening out there?"

Bill heard the crackling of static then an excited voice saying, "Jesus, Jim, they have just killed another group of people. The only way I can describe it is that these are mass executions by these crazy people. They have piled bodies at least four or five high against the wall of Harpers' Hardware. Even as I watch, I can see blood running across the sidewalk into the gutter. I would estimate there are fifty or more bodies lying against the wall. These people seem to be going out and picking up people at random. They bring them back here and murder them. From here, atop the four-story Pinson building, I can see groups of people enter businesses and bring people out onto the street. They leave a few armed people to guard them. Then, they go to other establishments to gather more people.

"Jim, I can't understand the lack of policemen, as this is happening. Gary, one of the men with me, said he saw two men in police uniforms with the group that killed the last bunch of people. As I look to the left, there is smoke coming from the courthouse. Have you heard what might be happening there, Jim?"

"Mike, we just learned that the chief-of-police and the mayor have been murdered at the courthouse. They tell us that after taking some records from the county clerk's office, these people spread kerosene around, then set the courthouse on fire. Back to you, Mike."

"Jim, there are nine heavily armed people with me on the roof, which makes me feel somewhat secure as all of this killing is going on. As of now, nothing seems to be happening here, so I'll hand it back to you."

"Thanks, Mike. News from other parts of the country show a pattern is developing. Every official who isn't a part of these groups, is being dragged into the street and killed. People who are part of what I can only call a con-spiracy replace them. In case you are wondering, the national wire services report the same thing is happening in western and eastern Europe. It is reported there has been massive destruction and killing in the Warsaw Pact countries.

"One wire service reports that entire units of the Soviet Army are turning on their comrades and killing them. As of now, we have no confirmation of this. Reports coming in from all over the world show this isn't just an isolated thing. It is occurring worldwide.

"It is this station's advice that those of you who aren't a part of this stay behind closed doors and arm yourself. Mary Lou if you are listening, take Gloria and Johnny up to the cabin we have in the hills. I will join you as soon as I can. If something happens to me, I want you to know that you have been a wonderful wife and mother. Be careful and I love you.

"We now return to our regular programming. Stay tuned to this station, as we will break in to give you further reports as to what is happening."

Bill laid his head back and closed his eyes. He wondered if any of the so-called normal people would make it through the coming weeks. He heard Tony open the door. Opening his eyes, he watched her place two bags on the seat. She climbed in and started the truck.

Bill told her to push the truck to its limit when she got out on the highway. He knew they wouldn't be stopped for speeding because the unaffected policemen had more to worry about than a speeding truck.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Someone shook his shoulder saying, "Wake up Ben."

"What is it," Ben said blinking his eyes and shaking his head trying to come awake?

"I think you should come up front; something came up that Cap wants to talk to us about," Jake said.

"Be there in a minute," Ben said. Ben lifted Leila's head off his shoulder and placed it on the back of the seat. Pulling the cover across her legs she mumbled, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing dear, Cap wants to talk to me. Go back to sleep, I'll be back in a minute," he answered.

Walking into the pilot's cabin, Ben asked, "What's up, Cap?"

"We have been on the radio to all the commercial airports we can reach for the last hour. They have either been taken over or are about to fall to these maniacs," Cap told him.

"What about private air fields?"

"Not many of them in this isolated part of the country."

"How much fuel do we have left?"

"About an hour and a half."

"What about flying back the way we came until we spot a place to sit down?" Jake asked.

"That would be the sensible thing to do. There is nothing we can reach to the west or south of our position," Cap told them.

"Look at this, Cap," Jake said handing a map to him and pointing to something on it.

"I don't know Jake, That's an old map. They closed down that base twenty years ago. What if the runway is torn up and we can't land? There won't be enough fuel to go anywhere else."

"Think about it, Cap. It's exactly what we want. No one will see us land and we will have fooled the people who expect us to land at a commercial airport. How about it, Ben?"

"I don't relish landing where those people can get their hands on Leila or Benji so I say go for it."

"Ok, that's settled. I wanted you both to know it will be nip and tuck trying to land when we get there," Cap told them.

Ben looked at the craggy mountain peaks passing below the window when he caught a flash of light out of the corner of his eye. He leaned forward and looked over Cap's shoulder in the direction the flash came from.

"What are you looking at Ben?" Jake asked.

"I thought I saw something off to our left. There, did you see that flash of light?"

"It seems to be way up in the air. That light didn't come from the ground," Jake answered.

Cap held his hand up in the air for silence and pressed the earphones against his ears. Lowering his hands, he said. "You won't believe this. The Cheyenne Air Control is ordering us to land at their airport or be shot out of the sky. They gave us five minutes to reply."

"They can't do that can they?" Ben asked.

"If the flash you saw is what I think it is, they probably can. Keep looking for a plane to appear out of the northeast both of you. There they go again repeating the same message as before. It appears they don't know we are receiving them so we won't reply until we have to."

"Hey! I see something." Jake shouted.

Looking to the left both Ben and Cap saw what Jake pointed at. Approaching rapidly was a military jet about five miles away.

“Just what I thought,” Cap said.

“How did it find us?” Ben asked.

“Easy. We have been on radar for the last forty minutes. All they had to do was vector the jet to our co-ordinates.”

“What are we going to do?” Ben asked.

“We can’t outrun it; that’s for sure,” Jake said. They watched the jet flash by five hundred feet in front of them and bank into a turn. “Crouch down on the floor back there, Ben, so you are out of sight. Now that he’s got our attention, I think he’s going to come along side and motion for me to fire up the radio. Jake, Ben, we have a decision to make right now. The question is, are we going to comply with their request or are we going to try and escape? I need your answer now,” Cap told them.

“If we go back, they’ll kill us. I hate to think of what they’ll do to the women before killing them,” Jake said.

“What are our chances of getting away?” Ben asked.

“To tell the truth, slim and none. It all depends on what kind of fighter it is. From the glance I got, it looked like an older F4 Phantom. If it is, we might pull it off because it doesn’t have very good radar; also, we can’t match its speed but it will have a hard time staying with us if I drop my speed to near the stall level. What it boils down to is what kind of plane it is and how rapidly I can get us to ground level in these mountains,” Cap told them.

“I vote we try,” Jake said.

They both turned to look at Ben waiting for his reply.

“If we have to die, I would rather it be quick for my son and the women’s sake. I say go for it,” Ben answered their look.

“Keep out of sight, Ben. Go back and have every one strap in. Tie down anything that could fly loose in a quick maneuver,” Cap told him as he turned back to take the controls of the plane.

Crawling along the floor, Ben came to Mrs. Parks first. Quickly he told her of the situation, which she took with the utter calm she had displayed from the beginning. Next he crawled to where Leila sat. “Honey, get Benji to help you tie down every-thing loose back here then strap yourselves in tight.”

Crawling back to the front, Ben paused before going into the cockpit and looked back. His heart swelled with pride as he watched Leila and Benji busily tying down loose items.

Opening the door, he kept low out of sight and settled behind Jake’s seat as Cap started to talk on the radio.

“What do you mean, you’ll shoot us down?” Cap said in an angry voice. While Cap talked to the flight controller, Jake filled him in on what had happened during the last few minutes. Cap was right about the plane being an old Phantom, but its armaments included six air-to-air missiles, which Cap assumed to be heat seekers. The jet slid closer and a little ahead of them. Slowly it pulled ahead; it was having a hard time maintain-ing the slow speed of the single engine prop plane.

“That does it. We have to appear to be heading toward the airport. They told the jet’s pilot to shoot us down in two minutes if we haven’t turned to the reading they gave me,” Cap told them as he started a slow turn. “Keep your eyes on the jet and tell me where it is every second, Jake.”

“He’s swinging out a little wider than we are and falling a little behind,” Jake said.

“Ben, help me look for a long narrow range of mountains with canyons breaking left and right off of it,” Cap said.

“Get back, Ben. He’s pulling ahead. Damn, it must be frus-trat-ing to stay this slow in a stallion like that,” Jake said.

“That’s what I’m betting our lives on. I’m going to increase our speed so he won’t have such a hard time,” Cap told them as he pushed the throttle forward. The plane’s speed shot up and Cap backed the throttle off a little.

“He’s making an ok sign with his hands,” Jake said as he waved at the pilot.

“Look, ten miles ahead, Cap. That’s the longest mountain range we’ve seen so far,” Ben told him.

“It’ll have to do. If luck is with us, there will be an opening in them on our heading so we don’t have to turn, giving up our advantage of surprise.”

“How’s our guard dog doing, Jake?”

“He’s moved out a little and seems to be a little more relaxed,” Jake answered.

“I’m going to try to narrow the distance between us. Tell me if he drifts with me or maintains a straight line. I don’t want to make him suspicious,” Cap said.

“See that black line up ahead, Ben. That’s where we break away. Once I start, you and Jake are going to have to be my eyes because I’ll be busy. Tell me everything he does once it starts. Jake, when I say, now, pull this handle back to lower the landing gear. Ok get ready. ‘NOW!’” Cap yelled, lowering the flaps and causing their air speed to drop from one hundred and forty knots to eighty knots in seconds. At the same time he pointed the nose of the plane down.

“Holy shit, he’s a half mile ahead of us with his after burners turned on. Now, he’s rolling to his right in a tight turn,” Jake said.

The air speed gauge said they were going over one hundred and sixty knots and headed almost straight down.

“Help me pull back on the wheel, Ben,” Cap grunted as he strained to pull the nose of the plane up.

Ben reached between the seats and grabbed the wheel. He pulled back on it surprised at the strong resistance. From his position, Ben was looking at the ground rushing up at them. He felt the wheel move backwards a fraction.

“Cap, he’s launched a missile at us,” Jake yelled.

“Is it coming straight at us?” Cap asked as he strained with Ben to raise the plane’s nose.

“No it’s swinging wide of... Shit it’s cutting back for us now,” Jake told them.

Taking one hand off the stick, Cap reached up and pushed the throttle until it was in the idle position. He reached across the wheel and turned the ignition off.

“We’re all going to die now. Why did you shut the engine down, Cap?” Jake screamed.

“If we don’t get the nose up in twenty seconds, it won’t matter anyway. That is a heat-seeking missile; our engine is the hottest thing within miles of us. I hope it hasn’t locked onto us yet. Come on baby,” Cap said as the nose started coming up.

They were barely ten feet off the ground when the plane leveled out just in time to see the missile flash by overhead. Cap was busy starting the engine and Jake was straining to keep an eye on the jet. “Here he comes,” Jake said.

Cap pulled the throttle back; at the same time he pushed the plane lower to the ground. Now they were flying a few feet and sometimes only inches off the ground.

“I hope you know you are scaring the hell out of me,” Ben told Cap. Cap jinxed the plane up and down following the contour of the ground.

“We aren’t out of the woods yet,” Cap said in a tense voice keeping his eyes straight ahead.

“Two more missiles coming,” Jake yelled.

“Let me know when they are a half mile behind us?” Cap said increasing their speed.

Ben leaned forward and saw the twin objects by their flaming exhaust as they came skimming over the ground behind the plane. Ben raised his head and saw the jet outlined against the sky above the top of the canyon. “*Like a vulture waiting for its prey to die,*” Ben thought.

Jake said, “A half mile, Cap?”

Ben watched the missiles start to converge moving closer together like two dogs homing in for the kill.

Cap pulled all the way back on the wheel throwing Ben against the back of Jake's seat, pressing him there helpless, unable to move. The nose of the plane stood almost straight up in the air and the engine screamed. Ben didn't know how the plane did it. It went straight up and forward at the same time. He heard it groan and shudder from pressures far beyond what it was designed to withstand. Cap pushed the wheel forward dropping the nose until they were level about two hundred feet from the ground but still within the walls of the canyon.

Ahead of them, two explosions erupted where the missiles slammed into the canyon wall, throwing up dirt and rock. Some of it pelting the plane as it flew over.

"Hang on tight. We are going to take that canyon breaking to the right, ahead of us," Cap informed them. Throttling down, he put the plane into a sharp right hand bank almost grazing the left wall of the canyon.

Ben and Jake yelled at the same time for Cap to pull up. Less than a quarter of a mile ahead, the canyon was sealed by a wall of rock over three hundred feet into the air.

Giving it full throttle, Cap pulled back on the wheel. As the plane inched upward, in a calm voice Jake said, "We're not going to make it."

"If I can pull it over to the right side, we just might have a chance," Cap told them tersely.

Looking to the right side of the wall, Ben witnessed an incredible sight. He saw an open space about thirty feet wide between the canyon wall and the rock wall. It was at least one hundred and fifty feet lower. It wasn't logical that the rock wall didn't fall. It was as though some invisible force held it up.

"Cap, our wing span is wider than that." Ben told him, pointing out the obvious.

"Our wing span is thirty-eight feet. If I can lower the left wing forty-five degrees and still keep us in the air, we should just make it," Cap replied.

Slumped in his seat, Jake said, "If you get us out of this, I'll buy you dinner any place you choose."

"Get your money ready," Cap said with a tight smile.

At the last moment, Cap rolled the left wing down and they were into the break. They felt the plane's belly momentarily scrape the canyon wall causing them to lose speed. Slowly they dropped. Cap tried to coax more power out of the engine which was already over revved. It was a race. They saw the end of the break one hundred feet ahead as the plane continued to drop. The rocks below were only eight feet from the wing tip. Shooting out of the break, the wing tip hit a bolder tearing off a foot of the wing. The plane pivoted to the left. Now they were going down fast.

Cap lowered the landing gear and struggled with the wheel trying to bring the left wing up. They heard a thump followed by a crunching noise as the landing gear came down on top of a large boulder. It catapulted them twenty feet higher and raised the left wing. Slowly the plane began to climb.

Wiping sweat from his face, Cap said, "Looks like we made it. Now where the hell is that jet?" Cap asked.

With a groan, Jack pointed down to where the canyon started to spread out and said, "There he is waiting on us."

Looking down the canyon, they saw what he meant. The jet was making lazy circles in the sky over the end of the canyon.

"The plane won't hold together for any more evasive actions like we just went through, so I guess this is it. Fellows, we made a game try and came up short in the end," Cap said.

"What is this? After all you've just done, don't tell me you are giving up?" Ben said.

"Don't you understand? I don't know why this plane is still flying with all the damage done to it.

All he has to do is stay up there and follow us until we come to an open space. All he needs is enough maneuvering room then he can shoot us out of the sky,” Cap answered.

“All I know is that we are still flying and breathing so that must count for something. Hell, by all rights we should have died twenty minutes ago, so we can’t give up now,” Ben told him with a pat on the shoulder.

“I’ll do what I can, but there are no guarantees,” Cap said.

“That’s all we can ask. There never are any guarantees anyway,” Ben said.

Now they were into a wide valley with a stream flowing down the center of it.

“Here he comes,” Jake said.

They watched as the jet came at them head on.

Cap fought the wheel and brought them down until they were within feet of the ground. A half mile from them, they saw tracer rounds come from the wings of the jet as he began firing at them.

Cap tried to veer left then right but the controls were sluggish in responding. They felt the plane drop to the right as the bullets hit the right wing taking chunks out of it. Ben was the first to see the fuel streaming from it.

The jet now behind them made a wide turn to come back for another pass. Instead of coming in from the rear, he flew over them. He went far enough in front of them to make his turn and come at them head on again.

Ben had never felt so helpless as he watched the approaching jet. He knew this time they were going to die. Suddenly, Cap gave an excited yell.

“What is it? What happened?” Ben asked.

“Watch his exhaust he’s running out of fuel,” Cap said as he wiped tears from his eyes.

Sure enough the jet spouted intermittent flames from its exhaust and the nose started to drop. Seeing this they also realized the jet was going to crash in front of them. As low as they were their course would take them right over the flames. Because of the leaking fuel in the wing that’s all it would take to bring them down.

“One more time,” Cap coaxed, pulling back on the wheel attempting to gain as much altitude as possible. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion to Ben. He watched the jet plow into the ground just ahead of them throwing up a sheet of flame and smoke. All he could see out the windshield now was flames as their plane flew over the crash site at fifty feet. Looking at the wing he watched a trail of fire start some distance from the wing where the spray of leaking fuel ended.

“We have to get on the ground before the fire reaches the wing Cap?”

“Go back and strap yourself in,” this is going to be mighty rough, Cap told him.

Ben left the cabin and walked into the worst carnage he had ever seen. There were small boxes, clothes, and various items strewn about the compartment of the plane. Jeff was groaning in pain from being lashed, by Mrs. Parks with a rope across his bloody back to the seat in front of him. Mrs. Parks looked in none to good a shape herself. She had a cut across her forehead that was seeping blood. Dazed she tried to get up from between the seats where she had fallen but kept falling back.

Ben reached down and helped her to her feet explaining the situation in a few terse words. Steadying herself she told him to go look after his wife while she looked after Jeff.

Looking to the rear he saw Leila slumped over in her seat. In the seat behind her where Benji had been sitting he saw a large hole in the side of the plane. Of Benji he saw nothing.

“*Oh my God, I’m too late,*” he thought as he tried to rush back to their seats but the bobbing and shifting of the plane caused him to careen from side to side making it difficult for him to keep his feet.

Getting to Leila’s seat he leaned down and lifted her head. There was a large blue bruise on the left side of her head. After checking her pulse and finding a strong one he decided she had been knocked out.

Steeling himself for what he knew he would see, he looked over the back of her seat. Where Benji

had been sitting was a hole big enough for him to crawl through. On the seat rested a rock the size of a compact car wheel.

In his grief thinking his son had fallen through the hole it took him a moment to hear Benji's voice yelling "Dad, Dad".

Stepping around Leila's seat he saw his son wedged between the side of the rock and the back of his mother's seat.

"How is it going kiddo," he said with a rush of relief at finding his son safe.

"I would feel a lot better if you would get me out of here," he said with a smile.

Ben moved around and reached over the back of the seat, grabbing the edge of the rock. "As I lift son you try to move clear, ok," he told Benji, getting a nod in return.

He gathered all his strength and heaved on the rock. It lifted only a few inches but it was enough for Benji to slide free.

Hugging Benji he led him to the seat across from his mother and strapped him in. He braced himself against the backs of their seats as he looked out the window at the wing.

Inch by inch the stream of fire was approaching the wing. As the fuel contents of the wing tank lessened the pressure which caused the fuel to spray out was also lessening much like a water hose does when you turn off the faucet.

He heard a loud crack as the plane touched the ground lurching sharply to the right as the right wing dug into the ground. There was a ripping sound as the wing tore from the fuselage and banged along the side of the plane.

The last thing he remembered was flying forward end over end and hitting the door to the pilot's cabin.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Todd paced up and down the room. He shouted about how if you wanted something done right you do it yourself. If you have someone else do it, they will fuck it up.

"How can Steve be so incompetent, Ray? I thought he was one of our best men? You told me so yourself."

"I told you Todd, it wasn't Steve's fault, he done everything he possibly could," Ray answered.

"God damn it, Ray, I don't want excuses I want results," Todd said. He slammed his fist down on the table spilling a cup of coffee sitting there.

"Cool down Todd. We will get him the next time. After all he can't disappear, we know approximately where he is," Ray told him. He hoped Todd would settle down a little because he was unpredictable when he was in these rages.

"Next time! Next time! That son-of-a-bitch Joe knows we are after him now. He will be harder to find than a needle in a haystack. You don't know him like I do. Now he will be coming after me bringing that monster wolf he picked up somewhere. You tell me to cool down you dumb motherfucker. He won't be after you, it's my ass that's on the line and don't you forget it," Todd yelled with spittle flying from his lips.

"Ok, ok, Todd. Everything else is going like clockwork. With your brain and all the men we have out, I assure you he'll be standing in front of you before the week is out." Ray said this in a mollifying voice, hoping to appeal to Todd's ego and settle him down because Ray was getting nervous.

The last time Todd got like this, he killed four men for no reason at all. Ray had a hell of a time getting the rest of the army of people settled down. He had to put twice as much sedative drugs in their food as he normally would to keep them from going on a killing rampage. Most of the people thought that because Todd killed people in their own group for no reason they could do the same. It was close for a while and Ray didn't want to go through it again.

Todd took another drink of whiskey. That was another thing. Todd had started drinking after hearing Joe was one of the people he had to kill. When they first met, Todd never touched alcohol saying it screwed up your thinking. Now he drank more with each passing day.

"What about Ramirez? Have you heard from him yet?"

"No, but there are many reasons why he hasn't contacted us, you know how crazy he is. I still think it was a mistake sending him there to be in charge of the search for Ben," Ray told him.

"You heard the stories about the people out there. They keep their children safe until they reach puberty before killing them. We can't have that. Either they kill them or we will have to crush them for disobeying our orders. Now can you think of anyone better to see that they toe the line than Ramirez?" Todd asked.

"I agree but I get this feeling we made a mistake by sending him," Ray answered. Ray thought about how Ramirez liked to have a supply of young people around him so he could get his kicks by torturing them. Ray knew by Todd sending him west as a representative of their army, Ramirez would drive people away, mostly by his demonstrations of torture on the kids. Ray hated to admit it but he was afraid of Todd because of the changes that had come over him in the last week.

"Bring me a pretty young girl," Todd told him.

“Sure, Todd. It’ll take just a minute to get her,” Ray said as he got up and headed for the door. If Todd had been watching Ray, he would have noticed the relieved look on his face.

Todd thought about all of the incompetent people around him. Taking another drink of whiskey, he slammed his fist into the wall hardly feeling the jolt of pain that shot up his arm. “I know you are coming, Joe. All I need to know is when, then I’ll have you. I don’t care how good you are.”

Looking at his hand, Todd noticed blood and wondered how his knuckles had gotten scraped. Grabbing an old T-shirt from the table, he wrapped it around his hand as he paced back and forth.

He turned as the door opened letting a rush of cool air into the room. Ray and another man carried in a young woman around nineteen years old. She was very pretty with her long blond hair and large green eyes. She could be a stunning woman. The lack of nutritious food over the last two weeks had taken its toll. As it was, her once beautiful body looked gaunt. She was one of the women who did all of the work, cooking and cleaning for the men during the day. Once she was caught hiding a slice of bread in her blouse. Todd ordered her to be lashed ten strokes but they weren’t to molest her.

“Here she is,” Ray told him.

“So she is. Ray you stick around but get rid of him,” Todd whispered to him fiercely.

After letting the man out, Ray turned to see Todd walking around the girl.

“Ray, is this any way to treat a lady? Would you please remove the rope holding her hands together?” Todd asked in a pleasant voice.

After her hands were untied, Todd said, “Sit down, my dear. Would you like something to eat?”

The frightened woman only nodded as she licked her lips and stared at the large bowl of stew on the table.

Placing a plate in front of her, Todd ladled stew from the bowl, filling the plate. “It’s all right, lovely lady. Eat your fill and then we’ll talk,” Todd told her.

Ray wondered what Todd was up to.

The woman shoveled food into her mouth. She ate as though the food would be taken away from her any second. She cast nervous glances at Todd as she gulped down the food.

“Slowly, my dear. No one is going to hurt you,” Todd told her. He lifted a napkin from the table and wiped her mouth free of the juices left by the stew. Todd picked up a bottle of wine from the ice filled tub. He tried to get the cork out, but his damaged hand didn’t seem to be working right.

“Ray, would you be kind enough to remove the cork and pour all of us a glass, please?” Todd asked.

Wondering what kind of game Todd was playing, Ray took the bottle and popped the cork. He filled three glasses and gave a glass to Todd and the woman. Taking his glass, he went back to the corner and sat down in a chair.

Todd pulled a chair up to the table across from the girl and asked. “What’s your name, dear?”

“Jan. Janet,” she told him in a hesitant voice.

“Well Janet, I brought you here to make up for the dreadful mistake Ray made.”

Ray’s head jerked up as he heard this. He started to ask what Todd meant, but decided it wasn’t worth getting Todd mad again. He remained quiet and continued to listen.

“Yes, my dear, it appears you don’t belong with the rest of the prisoners we have. You’re not like them,” Todd told her.

“Wha...what do you mean?” she asked with a confused look.

“Quite simply you are now one of us. Have a drink of wine; it is really quite good.” Todd said. Lifting his glass, he touched it to hers and took a sip.

The woman drained the glass in three drinks and Todd filled it again. He told her to drink up since there was plenty of wine. He watched as she drank the glass of wine, hardly sipping his.

Watching from the corner, Ray realized Todd wanted to get the woman drunk, and he

wondered why. This was a different side of Todd. It was like watching a spider weave a web.

“Would you like some more to eat?” Todd asked.

“No. I’m full, but can I have another glass of wine?” she asked with a little giggle.

“Are you sure, my dear? I would hate to have you get drunk and miss the party,” Todd told her.

“What party?” she asked raising the glass to her lips draining it in one gulp. Todd re-filled her glass.

“Why I thought you could give me a list of your friends. Then, we would bring them over for a few drinks along with some dancing. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“Oh yes. It seems like so long ago since we had such things as parties,” she said taking another drink of wine.

“Now, Janet. Do I act like the person your friends are saying such bad things about?” Todd asked with a devious smile.

“No Todd, forgive me. May, I call you Todd?” Receiving his nod yes, she continued. “You are nothing like they say. I find you kind and gentle, a very likable man as a matter of fact.”

“Why thank you, Janet. Drink up so we can get in the proper mood for the party.”

“If I get any more in the mood, I might pass out,” Janet told him, her voice slurring the words.

“Tell me, Janet, have you ever been to bed with a man?”

“Why, Todd, that’s no question to ask a lady, but I will answer it anyway. No I’m still a virgin,” she giggled.

Todd got up walked around the table and sat down beside her. Placing his hand under her chin, he lifted her head and kissed her gently on the lips. He let his hands fall to her breasts, which he caressed through the fabric of her blouse.

Janet broke the kiss saying, “Damn this feels good.” She grabbed his head and crushed her mouth to his.

Grabbing her arms, Todd untangled them from around his neck and pushed her gently away. “Take it easy we have all the time in the world. Since this is your first time, I want you to savor every moment.” Handing her the glass of wine Todd said, “To love and to us.” He lifted his glass and drained it, watching over its rim as Janet drained her glass. Reaching over, Todd caressed her shoulders, letting his left hand drop to the buttons of her blouse. Slowly he unbuttoned the buttons as he dropped his head and kissed her. Pushing the blouse off her shoulders, Todd nibbled her ear and her neck.

Breathing hard and clutching at him, she whispered, “Oh Todd, I feel so strange. Don’t stop. I need you.”

“This isn’t right. I’ve tried so many times before and it always ends the same way?”

Confused Janet asked, “What are you talking about, Todd?”

Hanging his head Todd mumbled just loud enough for her to hear. “You see I have this problem with sex. No, no, I shouldn’t tell you about it.” His voice was almost a sob.

Taking his head in her hands, Janet said, “Tell me, I will do anything I can to make sex good for you.”

“Are you sure?” Todd asked, lifting his head. There was a nasty gleam in his eye as he lifted her head.

“Anything,” she answered.

“Well you see the only way I can get an erection is by tying up a woman and playing with her body,” he said.

“Is that all?” Janet picked up the rope and held her arms out to him saying, “Take me, lover. I’m your slave.”

“You don’t know how much this means to me, Janet,” Todd told her as he bound her hands. Reaching down, he lifted her in his arms and carried her over to a thick peg sticking out of the wall.

Taking her hands, Todd raised them over her head and tied them to the peg causing her to stand on the tips of her toes. Stepping back, Todd took in the curves of her body. Reaching out, he fondled her breasts, which had to be 38-D cup. He tweaked her nipples, causing her to arch her back and moan, "Yes, yes."

Ray started to get turned on as he watched Todd play with the woman's body. Ray eased his chair around to get a better view of what Todd was doing.

Todd nibbled on her nipples, which were sticking out an inch and were as stiff as rubber pellets. Janet moaned and pressed his head into them saying, "Oh, Oh! Harder, bite them harder." Todd stepped back with a wicked leer on his face and Janet cried, "Don't stop, Todd. Please touch me all over. I want you so much."

"In due time, my darling. Be patient. I have a surprise for you," he said. Walking to the tub of ice, Todd reached down and picked up a small block of ice. Shifting it from hand to hand, he stood in front of her then he pressed it against her breast leaving it there for a minute. Taking it away, he pressed it to her other breast. Lowering his head, he sucked on the stiff nipple. It looked like it wanted to pop off her breast. Janet's body strained against the bonds holding her hands over her head and moaned. Her body writhed back and forth against the wall trying to get away from the ice. At the same time, straining to get at it.

"Ah my pretty you like this," Todd said as he switched the block of ice to the other breast.

Ray watched fascinated. He saw Todd reach into his pocket and withdraw a switchblade knife. Todd threw the ice across the room and pressed the button causing the blade in the knife to snap open. Todd used his left hand to grab her right nipple between his fingers. Squeezing on it, he pulled it out as far as it would go. Janet threw her head from side to side totally consumed in lust. The hand holding the knife flashed up and down so fast Ray didn't know what happened until Todd raised his hand to his mouth. Todd turned and Ray saw him chewing on something. Seeing the blood on Todd's mouth, Ray realized Todd had cut her nipple off and was chewing on it. With blood dripping from his mouth, Todd said, "Do you want the other one, Ray?"

Ray stared in disbelief; then, his supper rushed upward and he threw up all over the desk sending streams of stew across the desktop onto the carpet. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he grabbed Todd by the collar shouting, "What the fuck has happened to you? Jesus Christ, you ghoul. You didn't have to do that," and he slapped Todd across the face.

Todd fell against the table and as quick as a cat he was up with a .38 stuck under Ray's chin. His eyes were filled with rage and he could barely speak as he said, "Don't ever touch me again, Ray or I will splatter your brains all over the place. Do you understand?" He nudged Ray's head up with the gun for emphasis.

Throwing his hands up, Ray backed away saying, "If that's the way you want it, Todd, that's the way it will be." He turned and went out of the room. Standing on the porch, feeling the cool air against his face, Ray made up his mind. He was going to hand pick a group of men and leave before morning. Killing was one thing. That didn't bother him, but mutilation and cannibalism went beyond the bounds he was willing to go. He didn't know what had happened to Todd, but he wasn't sticking around to see any more demonstra-tions like the one inside. Stepping off the porch, he started making plans.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Joe stared through pain-glazed eyes as the man drew back his fist to hit him again.

“Why don’t you tell us what we want to know? If you do we won’t have to beat you anymore,” the man said.

“I tell you I don’t know what you want. I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Joe told him. He ran his tongue across his swollen and bleeding lips.

“Maybe this will help your memory,” said the man, bringing his fist against Joe’s right jaw.

Joe felt several teeth loosen with the blow. He started to lose consciousness when the man grabbed him by the hair and pulled his head up. His face two inches from Joe’s, the man said, “I can keep this up all night. Now tell me where you were going to meet the woman? Where is the little she bitch that is traveling with you?”

Joe tried to spit into the man’s face but nothing came out.

“Hell,” said the man, dropping Joe’s head in disgust. He walked over to the stove where the other two men stood trying to warm away the rainy chill of the cabin.

“Let me at him for a while with my knife, Willie? I’ll show you how to make him talk.”

“Damn it, Jose. Todd, the big boss, wants this one personal-ly. He wants him in reasonably good shape when they come to pick him up in the morning. Now do what you want but you will be the one who explains his condition to the man,” Willie told him.

“No way. I don’t want anything to do with that crazy mother fucker or the crowd he has with him,” said Jose.

Joe barely heard them. He cursed himself again for being such a fool. They had been traveling down the interstate last night around ten o’clock when they came upon a tractor-trailer jack knifed across their lane of traffic.

The bank was too steep in the median for them to cross over to the other lanes. Joe told Tammy he had to back up until they could find a place to cross.

“Stalker says it’s too late. We’re blocked in,” Tammy said.

Taking the knife from its leg sheath, Joe used the hilt to break the dome light. Throwing his thoughts at Stalker, he said, *“There’s not much time. I’m going to try and pull their attention away from the truck. You take the little one and try to make it into the woods. Take care of her, my friend. Do not let her fall into the hands of these people alive. Do you understand?”*

“Stalker says he understands,” Tammy told Joe.

Reaching down, Joe picked up the rifle from the floor and opened his door. “Get down out of sight when Stalker tells you to go, Tammy. Get out and run up the bank for the woods”

“Ok, Joe. But please be careful,” she said.

Joe had walked no more than five steps when three sets of headlights flashed on one hundred feet behind him.

“There he goes,” someone yelled.

Taking the .45 out of his pocket, Joe fired three rounds over their heads. Jumping up, he ran for the ditch in the median. He flopped onto his stomach bringing the rifle up and sighting at the outside car’s headlight. He had to put out the lights for Tammy and Stalker to have any chance at all. Slowly he

squeezed off four rounds knocking out the lights on the two outside cars. This left the passenger side of his truck in shadows.

Rising to his knees, Joe fired the rest of the magazine in front of the cars kicking up asphalt. This caused the men there to duck down behind the cars.

Joe put in another magazine and sent his thoughts to Stalk-er. *“Go now, quickly.”* Joe rose to his feet, firing at the men behind the trailer then switched to fire at the cars. Drop-ping to the ground, he looked at his truck. He caught a glimpse of white as Tammy scrambled up the bank. Of Stalker there was nothing to be seen. He hoped the men hadn't seen her. To give her more time to get away, he emptied the .45 over their heads. He wasn't trying to hit them, just trying to keep their heads down.

“Why aren't they shooting?” Joe wondered. He knew things were going too smooth since they entered Illinois. For the last fifty miles or so they hadn't seen anyone on the road; now he knew why. They were waiting for it to get dark to set up a roadblock. He had driven into it like a lamb being led to slaughter.

“Joe, can you hear me?” he heard a man yell.

“Yea, I hear you,” Joe answered.

“It's no use, Joe. We have you surrounded. Drop your guns and walk to the middle of the road with your hands on your head.

“So you can use me for target practice? No way,” Joe yelled.

“If you throw your gun down, I promise you won't be shot.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“If we wanted you dead, you would already be dead. You know what I say is the truth,” the man answered.

Tammy should be well into the woods by now, so Joe dropped the rifle and stood up.

“That's it, nice and easy walk to the middle of the road. Take the pistol out and place it on the ground, slowly, so someone doesn't make a mistake,” the voice said.

Joe heard them approaching from all sides as he laid the .45 on the asphalt.

“Kick the gun away from you with your foot,” the man said.

Kicking the gun to the side, Joe asked, “What's this all about and why is it that you know me but I don't know you?”

“My name's Johnny,” said a tall lanky man who stepped into the light. “You are a mighty popular fellow around here, Joe. Seems like someone wants you real bad. Bad enough to shell out fifty thousand dollars to the person that brings you in alive.”

“Who wants me that bad?” Joe asked.

“His name is Todd Christian. He's putting together an army some place in Missou-ri. From what I hear he's one mean mother. What did you do to get him pissed at you, Joe?”

“It's a long story. Are you a part of his army?” Joe asked.

“Naw, we work by ourselves. Besides, we wouldn't last a day in his army if some of the stories I hear are true. Word was passed this way about four days ago to be on the lookout for you. They told us if we captured you alive we would get the fifty thou-sand dollar reward when you were delivered to Todd. They also asked us to find out where you are supposed to meet some woman. If we found out where this woman is, it was worth another fifty thou-sand to them. Tie his hands behind his back and put him in the back of his truck,” Johnny ordered one of the men.

Joe felt himself being patted down for weapons; then, his hands were placed behind his back and a rope lashed his hands together tightly.

“Joe, was the little girl with you?” asked Johnny.

“No I left her in a small town about fifty miles from here. I'm going to pick her up on the way back,” Joe answered.

“Ask him about the wolf,” one of the men said.

"Hells bells, Bob. You believe all of the shit those crazy people tell you."

"Ask him anyway." Bob said in a surly voice.

"All right, all right, is a wolf traveling with you, Joe?"

"I heard the same story. It was good for a few chuckles. You know how these weird stories start now days," Joe answered.

"Does that answer your question, Bob?" Johnny asked, shaking his head in disgust. "Enough talk for now. Take him to the cabin and remember if he tries anything, don't kill him. The three of you should be able to cope with anything he does. If he gets away, all of you are dead men. Remember that," Johnny told them.

On the way to the cabin, which Joe estimated to be two miles from where they captured him, Bob asked him twice about the wolf.

Both times Joe told him the stories were false, but he saw that Bob refused to believe him. He seemed obsessed with the idea that a wolf was stalking them.

The other men chided Bob that pretty soon he was going to be seeing wolves behind every tree. This made Bob mad and he sulked the rest of the way to the cabin.

Leading Joe into the one room cabin, they sat him in a chair and tied his hands in back of him to the chair.

Every fifteen seconds, Bob went to the window and looked out as if he knew something was out there. "Will you sit down, Bob. You're giving us the heebee jeebies with your wolf talk and pacing around," said one of the men.

Joe saw that the men were nervous, so he tried to take advantage of it. With a laugh he said, "Did you hear the one about how this wolf could tear a man to shreds with one bite? You know they say the wolf weighs over three hundred pounds."

"Shut up, mister, unless you want me to stuff a rag in your mouth," said one of the men.

"Where is Johnny? He should be here by now?" Bob complained.

"You know they had to pull the rig off and clear the road, Bob. Sit down and take it easy will you."

"Willie, I know you think I'm crazy but there is something out there. I can feel it in my gut," Bob said.

"Shit to prove that it's all your imagination I'm going to go out and look around," Willie said pulling on his jacket.

Joe projected his thoughts to Stalker, *"If you are out there, leave the man who comes out alone. Leave him alone."*

Willie went out the door, which Bob bolted after him. He was gone for fifteen minutes then knocked on the door to be let in.

Taking off his jacket, which was damp from rain, he said, "Are you satisfied now, Bob? If there was anything out there it would have got me."

Relief showing on his face, Bob said sheepishly, "Ok I am acting rather foolish. Thanks, Willie." Bob still went to the window to look out every now and then which gave Joe an idea.

"Stalker, the next time the man comes to the window stand on the window sill and make a horrible face at him," Joe projected.

Bob walked around the room, opened the door on the stove and stirred the wood in the fire. Closing the stove door, he chuck-led. "Guess I was acting like an asshole, but I feel much better now. We need some more wood for the fire and to prove I'm over this wolf thing, I'll get some." He walked over to the window to take one last look out before going to get the wood.

Willie was taking a drink of coffee, which went all over his clothes, when Bob let out a blood-curdling scream. Bob began firing through the window.

Rushing to the window, Willie pushed the shaking Bob aside and looked out. Turning, he

grabbed Bob by the shirt and said, "What the fuck was that all about?"

Bob tried several times, then said he had seen a wolf.

"Jesus Christ," Willie said hitting Bob and knocking him to the floor. "I don't want to hear another word about a wolf. Do you understand, Bob? Not one word or I'm going to tie you to a tree. That way, your God damn wolf can have you."

White faced and shaking like a leaf, Bob crawled into a corner at the threat of being sent outside.

"Jose, get some firewood so we can get more heat in here. The crazy son of a bitch broke the window and now all the cold air is coming in," Willie said.

Jose didn't move.

"Have you gone deaf? I told you to get some wood, Jose."

"What if he's right and there's something out there, Will-ie?" Jose said, glancing fearfully at the window.

"What the hell has gotten into the both of you?" Willie asked, throw-ing his hands up in disgust. "I'll get the wood just make the stove ready for me will you."

"Sure, Willie. Anything you say," Jose said with a look of relief on his face.

"*Don't harm. Wait,*" Joe projected to Stalker. Joe hoped to learn something from these men.

"Jose, tell me what you know about Todd's army?" Joe asked.

"Hey, man, what's there to tell. From what I hear this man has nearly two thousand people in his army. Most of them, he keeps doped up so they are dependent on him for their drugs. He's gaining people every day. They say he keeps a lot of the crazy ones around to send them into battle first. Let me tell you that it takes a lot to kill one of the crazy ones. I wish I knew why they didn't get over the crazy stage. We had to shoot a few of them about a week ago. Man you wouldn't believe it. One of those suckers had fifty-six bullets in him and he kept coming," Jose said, shaking at the thought.

"Why does he need an army?" Joe asked.

"He claims his master is being held in Colorado. He says some woman is coming from the east who can kill his master. That is with your help, I might add."

"How can I help her? Besides I've never heard of this master of Todd's before now."

"Hey, man, these are strange times. It is funny though that no one heard of this supreme master until a little over two weeks ago. From what we heard he is one powerful dude."

"If he is so powerful, how is it he is being held captive and who is holding him?" Joe asked.

"That part gets kind of fuzzy. All I know for certain is that he is being held inside a mountain in Colorado."

Just then the door was thrown open and Willie came in with an arm full of wood which he put near the stove. Rubbing his hands together, he pulled off his wet coat. "Jesus, it's getting cold out there and it's starting to rain harder."

Jose walked over, and placed a piece of wood in the fire.

"Did he tell you anything while I was gone?" Willie asked.

"Naw, just asked a lot of questions," Jose answered.

"Did you see the wolf?" Bob asked in a quivering voice, from the corner where he sat huddled up.

"Once and for all get it into that thick head of yours, there is no wolf. Damn, Bob. What happened to you tonight? I used to think you were one of the soundest men we had with us. Now you are completely off your nut," Willie said in a tone of disgust.

Looking toward the broken window, Joe saw a flash of white. He could just barely make out Tammy's face. Relief washed over him now that he knew she had escaped and was nearby.

"*Stalker how long do we have until the other men get here?*" Joe project-ed.

Watching the window Joe saw Tammy hold up one finger, which Joe took to mean one hour at the most. He turned his attention back to the men. He heard Willie tell Jose to take the blanket off the bed and put it over the window to keep out the draft.

“Can I have something to drink?” Joe asked Willie.

“Soon as you tell us what we want, you can have all the water you want,” Willie said. He came to stand in front of Joe.

“How can I tell something that I don’t know?” Joe asked.

“Listen, mister, you know a whole lot more than you’re telling us. That doesn’t matter; we will get it out of you, one way or the other,” Willie said.

“What makes you the way you are, Willie?” Joe asked.

With a puzzled look on his face, Willie asked, “What do you mean? I’m no different than I’ve always been?”

Trying a different tact, Joe asked, “What happened to law and order? What gives you the right to kill people without remorse? I guess what I’m asking is what caused you to be so different from the way you used to be?”

Willie looked genuinely confused. “I have no idea what you are talking about. Are you trying to tell me that somehow over night we were changed into something else other than what we are? That’s a lot of hogwash, mister.”

Joe felt certain now that none of these people realized they had changed which sent a chill down his spine. “Willie, can you remember what you were doing four months ago?”

“Why sure I..I was? That’s funny I don’t seem to recall what I was doing, but it doesn’t matter. Then was then and now is now. All I need to know is that you have the answers to some questions and we need those answers.”

Still exploring, Joe asked, “What if I told you that if you let me loose and joined me, we could get away from here to some place where we would be safe?”

Laughing, Willie said, “Safe from what? These are my friends; even screwed up Bob over in the corner is a better friend than you would be. Besides you are different than we are.”

Joe had heard this many times before, now he could find out, from the other side, how they thought he was different. “Tell me how I am different from you Willie?”

“I can sense you are weak. Beyond a doubt you would kill me if given half a chance. You think you are superior to me. Now that I have the upper hand, you feel I need to be elimi-nated.”

“Yea, like in the old time westerns. There’s not enough room in town for the both of us,” Jose said from near the stove where he warmed his hands.

“He’s right, you know. It’s like when you are sitting in a chair in your living room and an ant crawls up to your foot. Now you don’t stop to consider whether the ant is right or wrong. You just crush it with your foot without thinking about it. That’s what we have to do with people like you,” Willie said.

“That’s what we are going to do,” Jose said stomping one foot on the floor with a crushing motion. “Crush you like a bug.”

“What about all the innocent children being killed?” Joe asked, trying to see where their sympathies lay about children.

“Old or young, if you aren’t like us you have to die,” Willie said with a tone of finality in his voice.

Until now Joe hadn’t realized how lucky he was to have traveled this far. These people were worse than fanatics in their convictions that all others unlike them were to be destroyed.

“*Stalker, figure some way to get one or more of them out of the cabin without making them suspicious. Once outside, take care of them quietly,*” Joe projected silently.

Joe felt his eyes water as Willie hit him on the jaw unex-pectedly. “Enough talk, I want to know where you are supposed to meet the woman?” Willie said.

Joe couldn’t answer because of the throbbing pain in his jaw from the unexpected blow, so he just shook his head no.

“Why don’t you make it easier on yourself and tell us what we want to know. I promise to end it quickly with one bullet behind the ear if you give me the location,” Willie said.

“Man, he is one tough hombre,” said Jose.

“Put the poker in the fire, Jose, and let it heat. Since he is an Indian, he should know all about fire branding. Maybe a few strokes of the hot iron will loosen up his tongue,” Willie said.

“Bob, get your ass off the floor and come over here. I want you to hold his head while I brand him.”

Getting slowly to his feet Bob moved to stand behind the chair Joe sat on. “What do you want me to do, Willie?” Bob asked in a subdued voice.

“When the poker gets hot I want you to hold his head so he can’t move it. Do you think you can pull yourself together long enough to do that?” he asked sarcastically.

Grabbing Joe’s hair, Bob yanked Joe’s head backwards. “I can handle that. After all, if this bastard hadn’t brought the wolf with him, you wouldn’t have seen me like this,” Bob said with strength returning to his voice.

“Do something fast, Stalker. They are going to brand me if you can’t think of some way to stop them. Hurry!” Joe desperately projected this thought.

“Just a little longer,” Jose said as he pushed the poker deeper into the fire.

Seeing that Bob had pulled Joe’s head back far enough to make the muscles on Joe’s neck bulge out, Willie said. “Loosen up on the head a little or you’re going to break his neck, Bob.”

As the tension on his hair eased, Joe was able to bring his head forward enough to get his breath easier. “You will be doing this for nothing you know,” Joe said after catching his breath.

“We will see,” said Willie.

“Holy shit!” They heard Jose exclaim. Looking toward the stove Joe saw Jose hopping around waving his hand in the air. Jose had reached and grabbed the hot metal handle of the poker, severely burning his hand. All he could say as he hopped around was “Hot! Hot! Hot!”

Bob laughed. “Any simpleton knows you take a rag or put on a glove to take out a poker that has been in the fire for a while.”

“I’ll give you something to laugh about you son of a bitch,” Jose said whipping out his knife and advancing toward Bob.

Stepping in front of him, Willie said, “Shut up, Bob, and you put the knife away, Jose. Christ! You guys are as testy as caged animals tonight. Ease off a little.”

“Fine with me, just tell him to quit laughing. My hand hurts like hell,” Jose said.

“Listen?” Bob said holding up his hand.

In the sudden silence they listened but heard nothing.

“Bob, if you are starting that wolf shit up again, I’m going to brain you,” Willie said.

“No, no. Be quiet for a minute I heard a voice outside.”

“First wolves, now voices, he’s completely off his rocker,” Jose said.

“Shut up.” Willie said with venom dripping from his voice.

“There.” Bob whispered.

This time they heard a faint voice yelling, “Help! Help!”

“Sounds like a little kid,” Willie said in a soft voice.

“Hey it sounds like a girl. Maybe the kid was with him after all,” Jose said, pointing to Joe.

They turned to look at Joe.

“Well what about it? Is that her or not?” Willie asked.

“I told you I left her down the road about fifty miles.”

“I don’t believe you. I think that’s her out there and she’s lost in the woods,” Jose said.

Going to the lantern, Willie turned it down so low that it cast heavy shadows into the corners. Taking a rifle off the table, he shoved it into Bob’s hands saying, “Keep an eye on him. If he tries

anything shoot him”.

The cries for help sounded closer now.

“Come on, Jose. Let’s go find out who it is,” Willie said as he pulled on his coat. At the door Willie stopped, saying to Bob, “Remember shoot him in the leg or something if he tries anything but don’t kill him”. Then, he closed the door behind him.

“Two are outside Stalker. Take care of them,” Joe projected.

Bob moved around to where he was standing five feet in front of Joe. “That’s her out there isn’t it?” Bob giggled nervously, waving the barrel of the rifle at Joe.

Joe knew he had to be careful. As edgy as Bob was, he might pull the trigger on the rifle and kill him. “Please, Bob, take your finger off the trigger. I’m not going to do any-thing.”

“Sure, right” Bob said, pointing the rifle away from Joe. “The wolf is out there too isn’t it? I knew I wasn’t hallucinat-ing. I did see it,” Bob said, as he fidgeted in front of Joe. “Are the stories really true about his being able to tear a man apart with one bite?” Bob asked with fascination in his voice. His face was white with fear.

“He’s about the ugliest mother you have ever seen. His mouth is large enough to swallow your head with ease,” Joe told him.

“Really,” Bob said. His eyes darted around the room and into the darkened corners.

“Really! I saw him grab a man around the waist and with one twist of his jaw tear him completely in two, then eat the head. I can still hear the sound his head made as those jaws clamped around it. The man wasn’t dead yet,” Joe said with a shudder.

Something thumped against the door; Bob jumped and almost shot himself. “Is that you Willie?” Nothing but silence answered. Joe projected thoughts to Stalker.

“Come on, Willie. Answer me, don’t kid me like this,” Bob yelled in a terrified voice.

“I don’t think Willie or Jose will be able to answer anyone again,” Joe told him.

“What do you mean?” Bob asked. By now he was turning in circles trying to watch every place at once.

“Isn’t it obvious the wolf got them and next he’ll be coming for you,” Joe answered.

Joe saw that Bob was almost completely out of his mind with fear. He turned in circles whispering, “I’ve got to get away. The wolf is coming to get me.”

“That thump we heard was probably one of their heads hitting the door,” Joe said.

Bob backed into a corner the rifle forgotten in his fear as he crouched there whimpering to himself. “What’s that?” he asked pointing at the blanket- covered window.

Joe saw that either headlights or a powerful flashlight had the window outlined. He chuckled under his breath as the shadow of a large wolf paced back and forth in front of the window. He had to admit, if he didn’t know Stalker’s real size, he would be terrified himself. The light and the angle made Stalker look like he stood six feet tall and was totally horrifying to see. That was all it took to push Bob over the edge. He lay curled up in the corner almost in a comatose state.

“Ok, you can come in now,” Joe projected to Stalker.

He watched the door swing open and because of a trick of the light, Stalker’s large shadow entered before him. That did it. Joe heard Bob moan and looked over to see that he lay passed out on the floor. “Joe?” he heard from just outside the door.

“It’s ok, Tammy. Come on in and untie me.”

Tammy’s slender figure came through the door at the same time Stalker was turning Bob’s body over. “Don’t kill him,” Joe told Stalker. *“As terrified as he is, when he tells his story to the others, it will give us a psychological edge.”*

“The other two are dead in the woods,” Tammy told him as she loosened the knots on the rope that held him.

Joe tried to stand but fell back into the chair. The ropes that had held him had cut off the

circulation. He flexed his arms and legs for a few minutes before he could stand.

“Oh! Joe look what they have done to you,” Tammy said. She turned his head from side to side looking at his face.

“It only hurts when I smile. No really I’m ok, just a little sore and bruised. How long do we have before the other men get here?” he asked her.

“They should be here any minute,” she told him.

Gathering up the rifles, Joe ushered them outside into the misting rain. Putting the rifles in the Jeep, he checked to make sure everything was there. Luckily they hadn’t taken anything.

“Did either of you see a place on your way in where we can hide the Jeep until the men coming here are past us?”

“Stalker says he knows just the place you want. It’s about a half mile down the road,” Tammy told him.

“Into the truck then,” Joe said opening the door and getting in. “This is going to be tricky because I can’t use the head-lights. They might see them and come to investigate.”

“That’s ok. Stalker says he can see the road just fine. He will make sure you don’t run into a tree,” Tammy told him.

By the time they got to the place, Joe was as tense as a steel band. He was glad Stalker’s eyes could see in this dark, wet, pea soup because he couldn’t see the front of the Jeep. After backing into the place Stalker indicated, Joe got out and gathered some loose brush and placed it on the front of the Jeep. As it was, they didn’t have a moment to spare because as Joe climbed into the truck, Tammy spotted headlights coming up the road. Joe held his breath as two trucks and a car crawled by. It seemed to take forever for them to pass. One thing that was a help and a hindrance was the fog that caused them to go so slow. This meant it would take them longer to get to the cabin. By the same token, it meant Joe wouldn’t be able to make much better time getting back out on the highway.

When he could no longer hear the sound of their engines, Joe pulled onto the road. He turned on the fog lights; they gave him a little better visibility than the men who would be after them shortly. Joe had noticed that none of their vehicles were equipped with fog lights. This might give them the edge they needed to get away.

“*Keep a sharp eye out, Stalker. You might see something I don’t.*” Joe watched the speedometer hover just under fifteen mph.

Glancing at the clock on the dashboard, Joe saw that it was almost three thirty in the morning. They had been stopped at close to eleven and it had taken at least a half-hour to give Tammy time to get away. He had been at the cabin for four hours.

“What took them so long to move the truck off the road?”

“As they were about to pull it back on its wheels, a car came roaring down the road. The car must have been doing one hundred mph when it slammed into the truck. There was a huge ball of fire, from the gas tank, I suppose. Anyway the car and truck burned for a long time. Stalker told me you weren’t very far away so we started looking for you,” Tammy told him. Turning her head, she looked at Stalker for a moment then turned to Joe. “Stalker wants to know if you find something unusual about this fog?”

Joe looked through the windshield and saw that the fog was swirling toward them as though blown by a strong wind. This was odd because Joe could see by the leaves on the trees there was no wind. Although it was dark, he could tell it got thicker in back of them while at the same time it thinned out in front.

“I have a feeling we are getting some help from an unexpect-ed source,” Joe told her.

“Stalker asks if you mean the man who appeared at his den?”

“I have a feeling whatever Stalker and I talked to is trying to help us in any way it can. The only problem is that its powers are limited.”

After a while, they came out of the fog at the edge of the interstate highway. Joe stopped. Getting out, he walked to the back of the truck into the fog. Three steps into the fog he stopped and held his hand in front of his face. He couldn't see his hand although it hadn't been that thick only a moment ago. Looking up Joe said, "Thank you." Then walked back to the truck and got in.

"We had better make tracks while this lasts. I doubt if they can find their way out of the cabin let alone down the road in this stuff. I want to be well away from here when it lifts," Joe told them as he put the truck in gear. He drove down the road putting distance between them and the people behind.

Looking over at Tammy, Joe said, "You had better get what rest you can. You too Stalker."

As Tammy curled up on the seat, she was almost instantly asleep. Joe knew that sometime in the next day they would find the woman they were sent to escort to Colorado. Then, the hard part would really begin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Stop it, Ben. Quit fighting me so I can finish repairing you," the feminine voice said.

Ben thought he must be dreaming. He felt things in his body being shifted and other parts being repaired at the same time. He was in some kind of a fog swirling void. Yet when he tried to look at his body, it wasn't there.

"This can't be," he thought. *"It has to be a dream. Hello, where are you and where am I?"*

"Be quiet, Ben. If I am to save you, I must work rapidly," he heard the voice say.

"Save me from what? I don't understand any of this."

"If I have to put you to sleep again, I will, but I was hoping you would be of some help. It's been a long time since I have done this and I'm afraid of making a mistake. Move your head and see if it feels right."

Moving his head, Ben found his movement to the left constricted by something displaced in his spine. He told her this and felt movement within his body.

"Try it now," she said.

Ben moved his head and found it to be normal again. Telling her this, she said, *"Good. Now we move on to the rib cage"*.

Looking within himself, Ben saw that all of his ribs were broken and there was massive damage to his lungs. He thought it strange that there wasn't any pain. The fact he could view these injuries without becoming distraught told him he was either dead or having a nightmare. Ben watched as his ribs came together healing as they touched. He saw rips and tears in his lung stretch toward each other like long lost friends. They bonded together until they were whole again without a scar or blemish.

"Now, just a few more tiny adjustments and you will be ready to go," she said.

"Go where? I am dead aren't I?" he asked as he felt her begin to work on his legs.

"You were, but when I am finished, you will rejoin your family and friends more alive than you have ever been. I have made some adjustments to your mind also. They were necessary to insure that you will be able to cope with the things you will have to face in the future. Also, they will allow you to protect your wife and son much better."

"Then there is a task you wish for me to do?"

"I wish it were so; it would make what has to be done a lot less complicated. The influence I have over you when you return is very limited. The only way this fight can be won is by each individual having free choice. Each person has to choose which side they wish to be on."

"Who or what are you?"

"I am all that ever was and all that will ever be. I know that doesn't answer your question but any other explanation would be meaningless to you. Now it is time for you to go, but first I want to tell you that you must seek out and join a group coming from the east. There is a woman by the name of Tony. She must be protected at all costs until she completes her journey. Go now," the voice said as her words faded away.

He felt the hard ground under him and his head held in someone's arms. Something wet fell on his face as the sound of sobbing penetrated his mind. Opening his eyes, he saw Leila's face above his own. Tears streamed down her cheeks and her body shook with each sob that escaped her.

Lifting his hand, he brushed the tears from her face saying, "Don't cry, Honey."

Leila screamed, dropping his head to the ground. She leaned over his face saying, "Ben, is that you?"

“Were you expecting someone else?” he asked.

Leila’s eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted falling across his body. He heard footsteps rushing toward them. Benji was yelling, “Mom, Mom.” Looking up he saw Jake and Cap standing there with stunned looks on their faces.

“Is someone going to help me or are you going to stand there like idiots?” he said.

“Is it really you, Ben?” Jake asked.

“Tell me you won’t faint if I tell you yes,” Ben answered.

Jake and Cap lifted Leila off of him then helped him to his feet. Surveying the scene around him, Ben saw the plane off to the left, or what was left of it. It was broken in half. The cabin had sustained minor damage, but the forward part of the passenger compartment was a mass of twisted steel and aluminum. “*How did I live through that?*” He wondered.

Mrs. Parks worked on Jeff under the shade of a tree off to the side. He looked to be in much better shape than Ben would have thought because of his injuries. Jake came up to stand beside him looking him up and down.

“Get it off your chest, Jake? I notice that you and Cap are acting strange?”

“I don’t know how to put this to you, Ben, but you were dead for over forty-five minutes. Now you are standing here as good as new acting as though nothing happened. Wouldn’t you think that’s a little strange?”

“I don’t understand it all myself, but I will tell you about it after we get out of here and are camped for the night, ok?”

“All right, but somehow you are different. I just can’t put my finger on it.” Jake said and shook his head.

“Get what you can in the way of food and water off the plane. It may be a long trip out of here. I will go bring Leila to her senses; then, we will meet over by the creek. Now get to it. We don’t have much time before company comes.”

Jake walked over to Cap where they conversed in low tones. They walked to the plane and started gathering together what they could salvage from the wreckage.

Ben told Benji to bring him some water then walked over to where Leila lay and kneeled beside her. Looking at her tear stained face, Ben saw that her grief over his death had aged her. Taking the water from the rusty tin can Benji brought him, he sprinkled some of it on her face. He slapped her cheeks gently until she started to come around.

Opening her eyes, she said, “Oh, Ben. Is it really you? Tell me that you are alive?”

“I will try to explain when we have the time, Honey. We have to get out of here now, so on your feet. Get Benji to help you gather what you think we will need to live in the wilds for the next several days.” Ben helped her to her feet.

As the others gathered the things they needed, Ben walked to the top of a small hill and looked to the east. He saw a cloud of rolling dust coming up the valley about five miles away.

Returning to his people, he said, “Pack it up we have to get out of here now.” He helped Jake and Cap put the food they had gathered into the backpacks made from the backs of the plane seats. By using ropes swathed in cloth, they could place them on their backs, which would leave their hands free. On a long trek, they would become uncomfortable, but they would have to do for now. Everyone stood around waiting for him to tell them what to do next.

“Jake, you bring up the rear. Cap, you’re in the middle with Leila and Benji behind you. Will you be able to keep up, Jeff?”

“I’ll do my best,” Jeff answered.

“I will help him keep up with you,” Mrs. Parks said.

“Good,” Ben said. He walked into the stream keeping to the shallows where it was rocky and started down stream. After one hundred yards he stopped and said to Jake. “Make sure there aren’t

any foot prints to be seen.”

It was slow going in places. Where the water came to their waists, he helped Mrs. Parks carry Jeff across the rock-strewn bottom. “Sorry about this, Jeff, but we had to get away from there. We may already be too late,” Ben said, hoping Jeff would understand the necessity for speed.

“Don’t worry about me. Just get us to safety,” Jeff told him with a pain-laden smile.

Ahead there was a smaller stream breaking off to the right. Ben took this and they traveled much faster because, though the water was flowing rapidly, it was only a few inches deep. Twenty minutes later they came to a small ledge, which let them get out of the water and rest for a while.

Helping Mrs. Parks make Jeff comfortable, Ben asked her, “How is his back?”

She striped off Jeff’s shirt showing Ben the welts and cuts some of which seeped blood. It wasn’t a pretty sight. “Long as we keep the cuts clean, he won’t have any problems. What he needs most is nourishment to help him regain his strength,” she said.

“That will have to wait until we get to a place where it is safe enough to set up camp. See if you can get him to eat one of the sandwiches Leila is making for us,” Ben told her.

Taking the sandwich that Leila handed him, Ben squatted down next to Jake and Cap. “How many rounds do you have for your gun, Jake?” Ben asked.

“Five in the cylinder and ten extra,” Jake answered.

“Not much, but it will have to do. Hand it over,” Ben said holding out his hand.

Jake handed him the .38 and a small pouch holding the extra rounds. “Where do we go from here?” Cap asked.

“We have to make our way east to connect up with a woman and then help escort her back to this part of the country. If you don’t want to go, I’ll understand, and we’ll try to drop you off someplace safe. I have to go help this woman,” Ben told them. He let them think about it while they ate their sandwiches.

Ben surveyed their surroundings. The stream got narrower as it came down out of the mountains. The high-ridged ravine they traversed closed in to only a few feet up ahead. A few scrub pine trees stood here and there. The trees would supply firewood if they found a place where a fire would be hidden. *“What we need is a place with more than one means of escape where we can rest for a while,”* Ben thought.

His thoughts were interrupted by Jake saying. “Man, I don’t know what happened to you, and I probably don’t want to know. Since I have come this far with you, I can’t see any reason to cut out now, so count me in.”

“Same here,” Cap said with a shake of his head.

Shaking both their hands, Ben said, “I feel a lot better knowing you’ll be with me. Come on, Jake. Let’s see if we can find a way up this cliff and find out what’s happening back at the crash site. Cap, you go up stream and see if you can spot a well protected place to set up for the night.”

Going down stream one hundred feet, Ben found what looked like a goat path winding its way to the top. About half way to the top, the path narrowed to only eight inches. They searched for hand holds while sliding their feet along.

“Isn’t anything you do easy?” Jake asked.

“Just watch where you put your feet and stop complaining.”

Four feet from the top they found a small ledge and crawled on to it. Rising until only their heads were above the ridgeline, they looked back toward the crash site. There were a dozen or more vehicles spread out over a large area. The men belonging to them were gathered in a group near the plane. Ben noticed that all of them carried weapons and seemed to know how to use them.

“Look.” Jake said pointing to the jet wreckage a mile further up the valley. Ben saw a smaller group of men winding their way back to the first bunch.

“How many do you make them out to be?” Ben asked.

"I've counted twenty-nine so far. A few may be hidden from view, so I would guess between thirty and thirty-five."

They watched as groups of five or six at a time went to their vehicles and took off in different directions. One of these groups headed their way. The rest of the people near the plane set up tents and did other things to make a permanent camp.

Watching the men heading their way, Ben saw that at the narrow canyons, too small or too rough to take the four-wheel drive into, they would stop. A few of them would go up the draw a short distance before coming back out. He knew they were checking for footprints or anything that would show someone had passed that way recently.

Tapping Jake on the shoulder, Ben said, "Come on let's put some distance between them and us."

Making sure they left no trace of their having been there, it took them a little longer to get back to the ledge.

Cap was back and he walked over to them saying, "There are a bunch of caves half way up a mountain about three miles from here. They should give us cover for the rest of the day."

"Good, we're going to need it. They have search parties out looking for us now. Cap, you take everyone with you and get them out of sight. Jake and I are staying back to see what we can find out that might help us. Stay hidden but keep an eye out for us because we won't know where you are."

Ben walked to Leila and kissed her. He told her to go with Cap and that he would be along later. She accepted this without comment and started picking the things up she was to carry.

Going to Benji, Ben handed him his make shift pack saying, "If something happens to me, son, you are the man of the family, so take care of your mom until I return."

"Sure, Dad, but you'll be along in a little while, just take care of yourself." Benji adjusted his dad's pack on his back then picked up his own and went to stand with Cap.

Jake gave his pack to Cap and they watched them until they were out of sight behind a turn in the canyon.

"What now, Ben?" Jake asked.

"Let's get back up top where we can keep an eye on what's going on."

Back on the ledge, they watched as five men searched a small gulch about a mile and a half away. Out at the crash site there was a lot of milling around by the people there. Then most of them went to their vehicles and headed back the way they came.

"Sure would like to know what that was about." Jake said.

Because of the distance, Ben wasn't sure but one of the men appeared to be ranting and raving at a group of men around him. "I believe there is a falling out among them, Jake," he said.

They watched the man grab a rifle and shoot one of the men. Then, he pointed the rifle at the others as if asking if any of them wanted to take up the dead man's fight.

"Man that was as cold blooded as you can get," Jake said.

"Keep that in mind when it comes time to fight. They will kill us without a thought. Jake, I would like to ask a favor of you concerning Leila and Benji?"

Jake looked Ben in the eye and said, "I know what you want me to do if it looks like they are going to fall into those people's hands, Ben. I don't know if I can do it," Jake said with a pleading look that said don't ask please.

"Just think about it."

As the group coming their way drew nearer, Ben saw they were drinking. Two of them appeared to be so drunk they could hardly get in and out of the truck. He drew Jake's attention to this.

"It will make our job a lot easier. I wish the other three were as drunk as they are. We might stand a chance of taking the truck from them and getting the hell out of here."

"I would like nothing better, myself, but we have to get some information first. I would hate to take the truck then run into the bunch that just left here. No, we will wait a while before we try

anything,” Ben told him.

“I saw a place where we could hide near the mouth of the canyon and still be near enough to hear what they’re saying. If we leave now, there should be plenty of time to get there and be in place waiting for them,” Jake said.

“Lead the way I’ll be right behind you.”

After ten minutes of running over the rock littered ground, Jake came to a stop. Breathing hard, he tried twice before Ben understood Jake was asking if Ben had seen it yet. All Ben could see was the stream and the sloping banks of the hills on either side of it. Nothing he could see suggested a place to hide and he told Jake so.

With a smile on his face Jake walked to the near bank and held out his hands saying, “Voila.”

From where Ben stood only a four-inch crack showed in the wall. Walking closer, he noticed part of the wall sat back two feet from the other. Looking at it from the side, he saw a fissure wide enough for them to squeeze into and be hidden from sight. Sucking in his chest, Ben went into the fissure sideways. He found it made a turn to the right; it became wider until he was in a vault like room that was without light. Making his way back out he asked Jake, “How in hell did you spot this place?”

“I wouldn’t have if I hadn’t tripped and fallen when we went through here a while ago. The only way you can tell that the hill isn’t even is by looking at it while lying on the ground. I went to check it out then ran to catch up with the rest of you.”

They searched the ground looking for any sign they might have made as they backed into the fissure.

In the pitch black room, Jake whispered, “I tell you. I feel naked without my gun. Are you sure you know how to use it?”

“Don’t worry I’ll use it with pleasure if I have to,” Ben said in a voice as cold as the stone they were leaning against, expelling any doubts Jake may have had.

Jake wanted to ask Ben about what had happened back at the crash site but knew this wasn’t the time or place. Still he wondered about it. Ben had definitely been dead. His neck was broken and his chest crushed. Jake, himself, had checked to make sure there wasn’t a pulse or any other sign of life. Then forty-five minutes later Ben was walking around giving orders and looking better than he had in the short time Jake had known him. Thinking about it caused the short hairs on the back of his neck to stand straight up. His thoughts were interrupted by Ben saying that he heard something.

Listening, they heard people talking but couldn’t understand what they were saying.

“Let’s make our way closer,” Ben whispered. He began to edge his way toward the entrance stopping a few feet from the fissure. Now, they could plainly hear every word that was spoken.

“Shit, Jack, this is like looking for a needle in a hay-stack. They could be anywhere,” one of the men said.

“Who cares, give me another drink,” a different man said in a slurred voice.

“Hell, if I’d known you couldn’t handle your liquor, Bud, I wouldn’t have brought it.”

“I can handle my liquor. I just drink to forget what that son-of-a-bitch, Ramirez that was sent up here, done. None of you were there, so don’t tell me I can’t handle my liquor.”

“I never got the straight of that story. What hap-pened?”

“Just a minute until I take a whizz; then I’ll tell you the true story.”

Jake almost had a heart attack when the man’s piss landed at the entrance to the fissure. Some of it splashed on Ben’s boots. If the man took one more step, he would be staring at them eye to eye. They heard him zip his fly; then he started his story.

“The big boss, Todd, sent this spic named Ramirez here to take charge when he learned we knew where this Ben fellow was. He came rolling into town in a new Rolls Royce with this police van following him packed with children. He backed the van up to the fountain in the middle of town; you

know the one I mean. Well there weren't many people in town at the time since the rest of you went up to Middleburg.

"This Ramirez climbed up on the fountain with a megaphone. He starts inviting everyone to come watch the show, saying it would be well worth our while to do so. He told the two men who drove the van to pull the children out of it and line them up. He stood up and asked the children if any of them were related to each other. A few of them held up their hands, so he selected a boy and a girl around twelve years old that were brother and sister. He gave the girl a candy bar and told her she was going to get a kick out of what happened next. With a smile on his face, Ramirez lifted the boy and threw him in the fountain. The boy floundered to the side of the fountain. Ramirez reached over grabbing him by the hair.

"Now this is a prime example of the kind of whelp we have to get rid of", Ramirez said. He pushed the boy's head under water and held it there.

"We saw the boy's kicking get weaker and weaker as he struggled for air. That would have been fine because I realize they have to die. Ramirez drags the boy's head out of the water letting him get his breath then pushes his head under again. All the while the boy's sister is screaming and crying for him to stop. Her screaming must have irritated Ramirez because he let loose of the boy and went to the Rolls and got out this five foot machete. Standing beside the girl, he patted her on the head telling her it was all right, he was just having a little fun. Ramirez led her to stand next to her brother who leaned on the top of the fountain gasping for breath. Reaching out, he pushed the boy's head under again which caused the girl to start screaming. Quick as a flash, he brought the machete up and whipped it around cutting her head from her body. The girl fell to the ground, her legs and arms twitched and jerked for twenty seconds.

"I tell you more than one person heaved up his dinner when Ramirez done this. Reaching down, he picked up her head and placed it on the fountain then pulled the boy's head out of the water saying, 'Say hello to sis, junior.' Ramirez pushed their heads together. Tiring of this, he pushed the boy back into the water. He stepped into the fountain and placed his foot on the boy's back holding him under water. 'You haven't seen anything yet', Ramirez said to us. We watched the child's struggles become weaker until he floated face down in the water after Ramirez removed his foot.

"Stepping out of the fountain, Ramirez stood in front of the cowering children with this evil grin on his face. Flicking the machete up, he used the broad side of it to hit two of them on top of the head stunning them. As they fell to the ground in a stupor, Ramirez told his men to tie their hands and feet leaving several feet of rope at each end. Walking to the back of the van, Ramirez grabbed the ropes tied to their feet and tied them to the bumper. Going to their heads, Ramirez checked to make sure the knots tying their hands were tight. He tied the excess rope to the rear bumper of the Rolls.

"Standing up, Ramirez dusted off his hands then turned to us and said, 'Good citizens take notice of what happens next. If you cross me or refuse to help me, this is what will happen to you.'

"He got in the Rolls and started the engine.

"We heard the passenger window whir as he rolled it down. Leaning across the seat, Ramirez said to us, 'Some of you might even enjoy this.'

"Give me that whiskey bottle, Jack. I need a stiff slug before I can finish telling you what happened."

Ben and Jake heard a gurgling sound from the other side of the rock as he drank the whiskey.

"Where was I? Oh yeah. Well, Ramirez threw the car in gear and pushed the gas pedal to the floor. Gravel and dust shot out from the spinning wheels until they got a grip then the car shot forward. There was five or six feet of spare rope leading out from each bumper. As the rope drew tight, it raised their bodies off the ground stretching them as tight as a banjo string. If I live to be a million years old, I will never forget the ripping sound their arms and legs made as they were pulled from their bodies. The Rolls shot down the street with the four arms dragging behind it.

"The amazing thing was very little blood come from the torsos lying there twitching and wiggling as if trying to get up. They opened and closed their mouths, but I imagine the pain was so powerful nothing would come out."

"Jesus Christ, Bud. Shut up," said Jack followed by the sounds of more than one person throwing up.

"That's about all there is to tell anyway. I drink because of what I saw and because of the guilt I feel for not having stopped it. You all know we agreed to keep our young ones until they are fourteen years old before putting them under in the hopes they will change and become like us. This Ramirez is slowly convincing some of the people this is wrong. He says they should be killed as soon as they are found to be different. Hell just this morning Lonny Sanders took his double barrel shotgun and stuck it in the mouth of his seven-year old boy and pulled the trigger. I can put up with a lot of things but torturing young children isn't one of them. It's bad enough having to kill one of your own when you have to. At least we give them a chance to change. When they have to die, we make sure it's quick." Bud said in sad voice.

"Don't look like anyone's been up this way," one of the men said. By the sound of his voice he was upstream from the truck.

"Let's load up and go check the next canyon. To tell the truth I hope they make us stay out here all night. I prefer that to going back to camp and facing those cold eyed bastards," Jack told the other men.

Ben heard the truck turn around and take off down the canyon. He waited ten minutes before leaving the shelter of the fissure. Then he walked to the stream where he cupped his hands in the water and drank. Standing there while Jake drank his fill, Ben looked at the sun figuring they had two hours of light left.

Jake stood up and looked at Ben saying. "Ben, what you wanted to ask me to do if it looked like Leila or Benji were going to be captured, consider it done."

"Thanks, Jake. We better go find where they are holed up."

Carefully walking up the canyon, Ben asked, "Did you notice anything different about these people compared to the other people we met in the last two days?"

"No they seemed to be as blood thirsty as the rest of the people who are trying to kill us," Jake answered.

"That's what I mean. I have no doubts they would kill us as easily as swatting a fly, but the way they talked about their children makes them different somehow."

"I begin to get your drift now. From what we know this is the first group of infected people who don't automatically kill someone who is not like them."

"Right and that means there are others like them out there somewhere," Ben said. Topping a slight rise, they saw spread out before them a large green valley. Sheer cliffs closed off both ends. On the opposite side of the valley, they saw the caves Cap told them about. "*There must be a hundred of them,*" Ben thought. Half way down the hill, Ben spotted a figure in the mouth of one of the caves waving something white.

As they approached the cave mouth, Benji ran out of the cave yelling "Dad, Dad".

"Whoa, son," Ben said as Benji grabbed his arm and pulled trying to hurry him. "What's the rush? We just got here."

"We found it, Dad. Cap and I found it at the back of a cave leading to a bigger cave."

"What did you and Cap find?"

"It's easier to show you than trying to explain it," Benji told him in a matter of fact voice.

"Well, let's go see what you've found," Ben said, letting Benji lead him across the cave floor to what looked like a door in the wall at the back of the cave. Going through the door, he stepped into a large chamber stacked with metal boxes along one wall. The thing that caught his eye was an old M151

Jeep sitting in the center of the chamber. At a loss for words, Ben just stood there until Leila came over to him with something in her hands.

“Eat this,” she said and handed him a can with a spoon in it. Looking at the can’s contents, Ben couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Peaches, out here in the middle of nowhere. Consuming the remaining contents, Ben asked, “Where did these come from?”

“There are boxes of them stacked over in the corner along with anything else to eat that you can imagine.” Leila took his hand and led him to where the boxes were stacked.

Ben saw enough varieties of foodstuff to stock a large supermarket. Granted most of it was dehydrated but there was enough food here to keep two-dozen people alive for a year.

Taking his hand again, Leila said there was something else she wanted to show him. She led him to the back of the chamber where she opened a door and went down a set of steps cut into the stone. At the bottom, Ben saw he was in a small room. At the back a steady stream of water flowed out of the rock wall into a depression in the rock floor. The depression carried the water to the opposite wall where it went into another hole.

“Prepare yourself for what you are about to see,” Leila told him. She led him to a narrow opening that the water flowed into. This opening led to an even smaller room, and when he saw what sat in it, he burst out laughing. He laughed so hard he had to hold his sides and could barely stand up. He was prepared for almost anything, but the sight of an honest to God commode sitting over the stream of water was too much.

“This is the bathroom,” Leila said with an imperial air in her voice. She started giggling which caused Ben to laugh harder. Unable to stand, Ben fell to the floor with her in his arms and tried to control his laughter. He rolled from side to side with tears streaming from his eyes. Looking into her eyes as she lay on him, he managed to say, “I love you.”

“Me too,” was all she could get out for she was laughing as hard as he was now.

Ben thought he was getting control of himself but every time he looked at the commode it would send him into gales of laughter again. Finally taking Leila by the hand, Ben crawled down the passageway into the other room. Ben sat leaning against the wall until he got control of himself. Sitting there with his arm around Leila holding her tight, Ben told her he would be leaving as soon as he found a safe place for her and Benji to stay.

“I know,” she said quietly.

He looked into her eyes saying, “How can you have known?”

Her eyes misted over with tears, but she looked at his face as she said, “Ben, you were lost to me only hours ago. Somehow, someway, you were brought back to life when I thought you were lost to me forever. I know there is a reason for this. I will take whatever amount of time I am given no matter how short.”

Folding her into his arms, Ben rested his face in her hair. He knew without a doubt he would come back from whatever happened in the future to this woman whom he loved so much.

Putting his hand under her chin, Ben lifted her head. “You won’t understand this and I don’t know if I completely understand it. I know we will be together in the future; you have to believe this. It will help me have an untroubled mind when I try to do the things that I have to do.” he told her in a gentle voice.

Leila sat there watching his face for a long while then drew his lips down to hers and kissed him in the gentlest way he had ever known. “Hold me for just a little while longer, Ben, then we will go join the others” she said, wrapping her arms around him.

Soothed by his embrace she felt the raw energy of goodness radiating from within him, something she had never felt before. It wasn’t that Ben had been a bad husband. She knew there was a darker side to him she had never known. Now as he held her, she realized that part of him was gone, but it had been replaced with something pure and unsoiled. Smiling, she got to her feet and reached down for

his hand, helping him up. "Let's join the others," she said.

They walked up the stairs hand in hand and went to where Cap, Jake, and Benji were searching through a desk in the corner.

"How did this stuff get here, Cap?" Ben asked.

"From what we read in these papers we found in this desk a survival group out of Boulder bought this valley five years ago. They brought out supplies every year. They were preparing for a holocaust. I'll bet they never dreamed it would happen this way."

"These people knew what they were doing. Come over here and look at this," Jake said. They all followed him outside the chamber and he closed the door. Ben was dumbfounded. Although he stood six feet from the door, he couldn't see it, which brought up the question of how they had found it.

Benji answered saying they never would have except he was throwing rocks at the back wall and one of them hit the door and made a different sound. Going to the wall, he picked up a rock and started pounding on the wall every few feet until he came to a section that sounded hollow. With Cap's help, they searched and found the cleverly hidden handle that opened the door.

Even upon inspection from less than one foot, Ben couldn't tell the difference between the door and the wall. They all stepped back to marvel at the workmanship by the unknown person or persons who made this place.

"Will the Jeep in there, run?" Ben asked.

"Before we find out, there is something I want you to see," Leila said. Opening the door, she went back into the chamber.

Jake leaned close and said. "Wait until you see this, you'll really flip out."

Leila led him to a door and opened it motioning for him to enter before she did.

Stepping into the room, Ben saw that he was in a hallway about fifty feet long. On each side of the hallway, four doors were evenly spaced. He went to the first door and opened it. Inside was a room with a king sized, canopied bed. On either side of the bed was a dresser and in the corner stood a shower stall.

"Well, what do you think?" Jake asked.

"Whoever these people were they sure planned to go out in style," Ben answered.

"Cap and I have already picked out our rooms. Since this is the only one with a canopied bed we figured you would want it." Jake said, sitting down on the bed, he bounced up and down.

"Does the shower work?" Ben asked.

"It does, but I tell you I will have to get mighty dirty before I get under that water," Jake answered.

Turning on the faucet and sticking his hand under the water Ben understood what Jake meant. The water was ice cold apparently coming from the underground stream.

Leaving the room, they all went back to the chamber and gathered around the desk.

Ben sat down in the chair and heard a door open. Looking up, he saw Mrs. Parks coming out of the door leading to the bed-rooms.

"Jeff's resting easy now. Some of the drugs stored here would supply an emergency room in a hospital," she told them.

"I'm glad you're here, Mrs. Parks. I wanted us all together so we can make some decisions. If anyone disagrees with what I have to say, speak up, ok?"

They all nodded their heads, ok.

"Now that we know about this place I would like to leave Leila and Benji here. I doubt there is a place that would be any safer. Does anyone disagree with this?" Ben asked.

None was forthcoming, so he went on.

"I have to go east so I will be traveling as fast as I can. I propose that only Jake and Mrs. Parks accompany me while the rest of you remain hidden here." Ben paused long enough to let anyone that

had objections voice them. There were none.

“You are probably wondering why I want to take Mrs. Parks instead of Cap. The answer is simple. I believe we will need her skills where we are going a lot more than you need them.” Looking at Cap, Ben said, “I would appreciate it if you would stay behind and protect my family until we return.”

“With my life,” answered Cap and Ben did not doubt Cap would fight for Leila and Benji with the last breathe in his body.

“Now, we have a lot to do because I want to leave before daylight tomorrow.”

Cap and Jake went to the Jeep to see what they could do about getting it running.

Mrs. Parks told Leila how to care for Jeff’s back. She had her write down in a folder from the medical bin what the medi-cines were and what ailments they were to be used for.

Benji had wandered over to where Jake and Cap were working on the Jeep so Ben sat at the desk alone watching them as they went about their separate tasks.

He picked up a map of the United States and the name of Columbia, Missouri jumped out at him. “*That is where we will meet her,*” Ben thought. Using the map, he traced a route to Columbia that avoided all the larger cities.

Suddenly, the Jeep roared to life. He looked up to see Cap lower the hood and walk around to where Jake was seated behind the wheel. Getting up, he walked over to them.

Cap wiped grease from his hands on a rag and said, “She’ll run like a top now.”

“Benji found three five gallon cans of gas near the wall that will come in handy,” Jake told him.

“Another thing. Look at this mount in the center of the Jeep. Do you know what it’s used for?” Cap asked.

“I imagine it’s used to mount a weapon,” Ben answered.

“Right and I’ll bet you a dollar to a doughnut there is a fifty caliber machine gun around here somewhere,” Cap said.

“Think of the firepower we would have if we find one,” Jake said with a gleam in his eye.

Going to the containers, they started opening each one. It was Benji who found it near the far wall. It was still in grease wrapped paper.

“Man, it’s been a long time since I fired one of these,” Jake told them as he lifted it out of the box.

In another box they found the bracket needed to mount the machine gun to the Jeep. It didn’t take long for them to mount it. Jake grabbed a hand full of rags and started to clean away the grease while Cap strapped the box full of ammo to the floor.

Ben carried three more boxes of ammo and placed them in the Jeep then stepped back, saying, “What do you think, Jake?”

“Barring us running up against a tank, we should be able to handle anything they throw against us,” Jake answered.

“I think you will need these,” Benji said from behind them.

Turning, they saw Benji holding two grease coated M16 rifles in his hands. “There’s plenty of ammo for them back there too.”

Taking the rifles, Ben gave them to Jake to clean and went back with Benji to get the ammo.

After familiarizing themselves with the weapons, they got some pointers from Mrs. Parks, who was the most recent one of them to have used them. Ben looked at his watch and said they were as ready as they would ever be, so he suggested they get a little sleep before starting.

Everyone agreed for they didn’t realize how tired they were until they had been sitting around for a few minutes.

Benji was still wide-awake and wanted to see what else was packed in the containers. So making sure the lanterns contained plenty of fuel, Ben told him that since he wasn’t sleepy he could explore

and pull guard duty at the same time. He warned him that if he felt sleepy he was to come and wake him up.

The rest of them had already gone to their rooms by this time so he left Benji and went to his.

Leila found some linen sheets to put on the bed along with some blankets to cover them.

Next to the shower, lay a towel and a washcloth with soap. Lying on the floor was a used towel and washcloth.

Remembering how cold the water was, Ben looked at her but she just smiled and said, "Go on. It's not that bad."

Standing under the frigid water, he soaped up and washed rapidly. Stepping out of the shower, he grabbed the towel and briskly dried himself.

Leila sat on the edge of the bed winding an old style alarm clock. She looked up saying, "What time do you want to get up in the morning so I can set the alarm?"

Taking the clock from her, Ben said, "It's been a long time since I've seen one of these. Remember we bought one almost like this when we first got married."

"How can I forget? Every time the alarm went off it sounded like someone beating the inside of a garbage can," Leila said with a laugh. She pulled back the covers, saying, "Get under here. Look at all the goose bumps on you."

Ben didn't realize he was standing there with his teeth chattering, but it didn't take long to crawl between the sheets and covers. "Set the alarm for four o'clock."

After setting the alarm and placing the lantern on the floor, Leila crawled under the covers beside him.

Ben put his arm out so she could lay her head on his shoulder then drew her close and kissed her on the forehead.

After a few minutes of silence, she said, "Please be careful Ben. I don't think I could stand losing you again."

Ben leaned over and kissed her, letting his hand fall to her right breast. He caressed it until the nipple stood straight up like a hard rock.

"It won't be long until I'll be back with you," he assured her as he continued to caress her body.

They made love and afterward Leila thought just before drifting off to sleep that it had been the most tender, yet intense lovemaking they had ever experienced.

Lying there, holding Leila, Ben heard her breathing grow softer and he knew she was asleep. Growing drowsy his last thought was about this Tony. He wondered what made her so special that he had to go and try to protect her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Bill told Tony to pull into a Seven-Eleven twenty miles south of Cincinnati, Ohio. She stopped beside a phone booth at the end of the store.

“While I’m trying to convince the Secret Service of the plot on the president’s life, I want you to go in and get enough stuff to make up a first aid kit. Not stuff for minor cuts and scratches, Tony. Try and get things to treat really serious wounds. I have a feeling it will come in handy before long.”

“Be careful, Babe, and keep an eye open for the light blue compact car that’s been following us for the last hour. I know it was a Ford like Bennie drives. Maybe I’m just paranoid. It could just be traveling in the same direction we are. When I speeded up, it did the same, and when I slowed down, it slowed down.” Looking back down the road, Tony said, “It should have passed by now, but it’s nowhere in sight.”

“Damn it, Tony, why didn’t you wake me when you first noticed the car?”

“You needed the sleep; besides, I was watching it all the time. If it started coming up on us, I would have awakened you,” Tony told him with a touch of irritation in her voice. She looked completely exhausted. Bill tried to remember the last time she had slept. The hour and a half sleep last night didn’t count. That meant Tony had been up for over fifty-six hours with less than two hours sleep.

Reaching into the tote bag between them, Bill pulled out a snub nosed .38. Opening the cylinder, he checked to be sure it was full. He handed it to her saying, “Put this in your purse. From now on neither one of us goes anywhere without a weapon. If someone inside should ask where we’re going, tell them we are on our way to visit friends in Dayton. Tony, if the least little thing seems wrong, haul your butt back out here. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Tony said with a smile on her face, as she gave him a mock salute. Her face turned serious and she asked, “Do you think something is going to happen, Bill?”

“Look at it this way. First, we have the mystery car that disappeared. Second, while sitting here, have you noticed no one has entered or left the store? Third, those two men at the hardware store across the road are paying more attention to us than is necessary. If that’s not enough, I have a feeling in my bones, something is going to happen soon.” Reaching across the seat, he started the truck and said, “To be on the safe side let’s leave the engine running in case we have to leave in a hurry.” Opening his door Bill winced in pain as he placed weight on his left foot. “*Shit*,” he thought, “*the world is falling apart and I have a crippled foot.*” His foot had stiffened while he slept and now the slightest movement caused pain to shoot up his leg. Using the truck for support, Bill limped around to the phone booth.

Lifting the receiver, he dialed 911.

When the operator answered he told her it was an emergency and to connect him with the Secret Service in Washington D.C.

“One moment, sir,” she said. He heard the line ring several times. Finally, the operator came back on telling him there was no answer and asking if he would like to try later. Bill thanked her and hung up the phone. Using the store wall to take some of the weight off his foot, Bill made his way to the store’s entrance. At the door he stopped to rest with his weight on his good foot. Bill saw

everything inside the store because the lights were on. He saw Tony pointing her pistol at two men who were advancing on her.

“Come on, Tony, shoot,” Bill said under his breath.

Across the road Bill heard someone yell. He glanced across the road and saw the two men from the hardware store running toward him. They both held rifles in their hands. They had warned the men in the Seven-Eleven he was standing outside the door. One of the men turned from Tony and started for the door.

Bill saw him pull a pistol from the waistband of his pants as he approached. “*Shit*,” Bill thought, awkwardly reaching under his jacket he pulled the .45 out of the waistband of his pants.

Dust flew off the bricks six inches from his face and partially blinded him. Bill heard the glass of the door explode as the man inside started shooting.

Bill leaned to the side as he slid down the wall pretending to be hit. Bill hoped this would gain him time for his vision to clear. Blinking his eyes rapidly, the mist began to clear. He sat with his hands limp at his sides. He eased the .45 under his leg to hide it from the men who were cautiously coming around the gas pumps. Clearly they thought he was dead because the closer they came the more relaxed they became.

One of them said, “Hell, Jack, we plugged him dead cen-ter.”

“Look’s like it, Lem. Cover him, I’ll check to make sure?”

Through slitted eyes Bill watched Jack come toward him. He saw that Lem held his rifle with the barrel pointed down at the ground. Bill waited until Jack walked in front of Lem, blocking Lem’s view of Bill. Bill quickly rolled to the right and lifted the .45 from under his left leg shooting Jack in the stomach. Dismissing Jack, Bill continued to roll bringing the .45 to bear on Lem. Lem shot and kicked up asphalt three feet in front of Bill. Coming to rest on his stomach, Bill calmly shot Lem in the chest and knocked him back across the gas pump island. Rolling onto his side, Bill saw that Jack was down and not moving. He heard a wheezy breathing coming from Lem.

A sudden flurry of shots sounded inside the store. Crawling to the door, Bill looked around the edge and saw Tony behind a freezer firing toward the back of the store. Sticking his head around the door, he looked down the aisle in front of him. It was empty. Bill guessed the men were a few aisles over. Making as little noise as possible, Bill crawled across the broken door glass. He crawled down the aisle toward the back of the store.

“Put the gun down, girlie. We’re not going to hurt you,” Bill heard a man say. The voice came from the next aisle over.

“Keep her busy while I go around this aisle and try to get out the door unnoticed. Once outside, I can come through the storeroom and take her from behind,” the other man said.

“It would be a lot easier to kill her,” the first man said.

“You heard what the boss said. If any harm comes to her, he said he would kill us. We are to take her without injury and hold her for him. He made it plain if any harm came to her it would be our asses. You know that as well as I do,” said the second man.

Hearing this, Bill searched for somewhere to hide. The only thing near was one of those short freezers about eight feet long which small stores used to keep ice cream in.

Reaching up, he slowly slid the door of the freezer open and shivered at the blast of cold air. Bill slid over the side and lay down on top of the ice cream. He pulled half-gallon contain-ers and placed them on his chest and against his legs to try and break up his profile. Bill hid the .45 against the side of the freezer and looked through the glass at the canned corn and peas on the shelf across from him. He tried to breathe slowly to keep the glass above his head from fogging up.

“*Come on, come on*,” Bill thought as he wished for the man to appear. He knew it wouldn’t be long before he started to get sluggish from the cold. At that moment the man’s face came into view, less than a foot away. The only thing that saved Bill’s life was the man’s shock at seeing Bill lying in the

freezer.

Bill whipped back the door and fired point blank into the man's face. Blood, hair and brains splattered over the canned goods behind the man.

"What the fuck is going on over there, Jim?" Bill heard the second man ask. Getting no answer, the man yelled "Jim! Jim! Are you all right? Answer me."

Shaking like a leaf, Bill said in a gruff voice, hoping to fool the man, "Keep it down, I'm ok. I just shot a big rat."

"Just great, hurry up and get behind her, so we can get this over with," said the man.

Bill felt like a man moving in slow motion. He crawled over the side of the freezer and dropped across the legs of the dead man on the floor. Christ! He shook so hard he could barely hold the .45. Time was running out on him. It wouldn't be long before the other man realized something was wrong and came to check. Bill knew he was in no shape to stalk the man until he warmed up a little. He decided to make the man come to him. Lying flat on the floor with the .45 pointed at the end of the aisle, Bill mouthed a low groan.

"Are you still there, Jim?" he heard the man whisper.

Bill let out another moan just a little louder this time.

"Quit fucking around, Jim. That is you, isn't it, Jim?" The man sounded nervous.

Bill lay there and didn't answer. He felt some warmth start to return to his body.

"Don't play games with me, Jim, or I'll kick your ass."

Bill could tell the man was jumpy by the sound of his voice, which came from farther down the aisle.

Sighting over the end of the .45 about chest high, Bill waited for him to come around the corner. After two minutes, Bill began to suspect something. The man should be in sight by now.

A can fell off the shelf and landed by Bill's arm. Turning his head, Bill looked up and saw a bearded face smiling down at him. "Well, well what do we have here?" the man said as he leveled his pistol at Bill's head "Put the gun down and shove it away from you," he ordered. The man used his free hand to sweep cans from the top shelf. Keeping the pistol centered on Bill, he sat down on the shelf and looked down at Bill. "Now turn over on your back," he ordered Bill.

On his back Bill got a better view of the man. He had long hair tied in a ponytail. He wore a pair of bib overalls, grimy with dirt and grease. One of his eyes was milky and cloudy. The other eye shone with a pure ruthlessness, unmistakable for anything but black-hearted evil.

"I guess Jack and Lem are dead," he said as he looked at Jim lying on the floor. "Jim twern't much, but he was my friend and drinking buddy." He wiped some of Jim's hair mixed with brain matter off the shelf.

"What do you people want?" Bill asked.

"We sure as hell don't want you. It's the filly we want."

"Why is she so important?"

"I hoped you could tell me why the man wants her so bad? The man told us that if any harm came to her we were dead," he said.

"Who is this man who gave you your orders?"

"Some mucky, muck from Washington that has everyone between here and St. Lou stirred up looking for her. Enough questions. It's a pity I can't keep you around for a while. I would like to make you suffer for killing Jim, but the filly comes first, so say goodbye, fella."

Bill had never felt so helpless. Bill watched the man's finger tighten on the trigger. Hearing the sound of a shot, Bill thought, "*That's funny? I thought you couldn't hear the shot that killed you.*" Something fell across his legs causing pain to shoot up from his ankle. Through the pain, Bill yelled, "Shit, at least you could have shot straight dumb ass."

"I thought I did," Bill heard Tony say in a shaking voice.

“What? What?” he asked, confused by the sound of her voice.

Opening his eyes, Bill saw Tony leaning over the top shelf where the man had been sitting. He raised his head and saw the man lying across his legs with a large bleeding hole in his chest. He let his head thump back to the floor. The shot he heard was Tony shooting the man, not the man shooting him.

“Come around and help me get him off my legs,” Bill told her when he could finally speak. After lifting the man off his legs, Bill hobbled to the door and looked out. Seeing no one, he told Tony to get what she needed while he checked the storeroom. Bill entered the storeroom cautiously with the .45 held in front of him, and quickly looked around. Satisfied there wasn’t anyone else in the store, he searched the room from one end to the other. All he found was a variety of foodstuff in boxes that was used to replenish the shelves.

Opening a door he thought was the bathroom, Bill discovered a room full of weapons. Lining the walls and in wooden boxes on the floor were automatic rifles of all makes. There was even an M60 machine gun stacked in one corner. Bill picked up a hammer by the door and knocked the lid off one of the boxes. The box contained fragmentation grenades. There were several boxes of them.

“Someone had either robbed an armory or the people who ran this place were dealing in illegal weapons,” he thought. In more of the boxes he found plenty of ammunition for the rifles and machine gun. Bill went to the storeroom and found a small handcart. He took the cart to the arm’s room and loaded two boxes of grenades. Three boxes of ammunition for the rifles went onto it. He pushed the cart in front of him and met Tony at the door.

“I’ve got everything I could think of loaded on the truck. What’s that?” she asked pointing at the boxes.

Bill told her about finding the arms cache as she helped him push the cart out to the truck. Going back inside they placed a dozen rifles and thirty ammo magazines for the rifles on the cart. Before leaving the room he and Tony loaded all the magazines from one of the ammo boxes.

Inserting a magazine into each of the twelve rifles, Bill added it up. They had twelve rifles, four thousand rounds of ammo and twenty-four grenades. Enough firepower to start a small war. Outside they loaded all but two of the rifles and six of the magazines into the back of the truck. They took what they wanted from the store and loaded it in the back of the truck.

Bill started the truck, slid across the seat, and let Tony get in the driver’s seat. Before they pulled out, Bill showed Tony how to use the rifle.

Tony pulled out to the edge of the highway. The road was deserted in both directions.

“We are going to have to take mostly back roads to get to Indianapolis. Get out the maps and plan us a route that avoids all major cities,” Tony told Bill.

After looking at the maps for a while Bill said, “Take the next road to the left. It will be Route 338. It will take us to the Ohio River. That is where we can cross over into Indiana.”

“How far does that keep us from Cincinnati?” Tony asked.

“Fifteen miles is as close as we come.”

Bill caught the reflection of something shiny in the outside mirror. “I think our company is back with us, Babe.”

Tony looked in the rear-view mirror for a while, then said, “I don’t see anything.”

“Slow down a little and see if you can spot them as we cross that small knoll ahead,” Bill said.

Tony slowed the truck down from sixty-five to about forty as they reached the top of the knoll. “I see them. It’s the same car that’s followed us all day,” Tony told him.

Tony kept her speed at forty-five miles per hour and Bill waited for the car to appear behind them.

“Tony, you just passed our turn off,” Bill said.

“I know, Bill. It looks like the people behind aren’t trying to catch us. That means they are

keeping an eye on us and informing the people ahead of us where we are.”

“If that’s true, they almost have us trapped, don’t they?”

“Looks like it. Our only option is to take out the men behind us then go back and take the route you planned. Look at the map and see how far it is to the next town of any size. That’s where they will be laying for us,” Tony said.

“The next large town is Florence. Ten miles ahead.”

Tony stepped on the gas and said, “Not much time to do anything. I’m going to stop on the other side of the next hill.” Tony pulled to the side of the road and turned the truck so they were heading back the way they came.

Bill got out and went to the back of the truck. He lifted out two rifles, making sure the magazines were in them. Then took four spare magazines and placed two in each of his back pockets.

After lifting the hood, Bill said, “Stay behind the wheel, Tony. I’m going to crawl to the top of the hill and watch for them. When I see them coming, I’ll motion for you to drive up and I’ll get in the back of the truck. Now listen carefully, here’s what I want you to do.”

Bill left Tony with the truck and walked to within twenty feet of the hilltop. He got down and crawled the rest of the way. Just before reaching the top Bill heard someone mumbling.

“A hell of a way to follow someone. Go like a bat out of hell, then stop on a hill and walk to the top to make sure they are still ahead of us.”

“*So that’s how they stay out of sight,*” Bill thought. He crawled to the side of the road and placed one of the rifles on his back. He pointed the other rifle at the top of the hill where the man would appear. Bill sat up and crossed his legs, assuming the stance he had learned in the army. Now all he had to do was wait. It felt like an eternity, but he knew only a minute and a half had passed before the appearance of a man’s head above the top of the hill. Bill sat there with the rifle aimed at the man’s head and watched him raise a pair of binoculars to his eyes. Bill didn’t move a muscle as he continued to watch fascinated that the man hadn’t seen him yet. His finger tightened on the trigger.

All at once, the man’s head disappeared and Bill heard the man talking to himself. “Shit! They picked a hell of a time to break down. We better go tell Henry so he can call and tell them we’ll be a little late getting there.”

“*Has to be a mobile phone in the car,*” Bill thought. He heard the man go down the other side of the hill, so he looked back at the pickup. Tony had done a good job. The hood was up and from this angle his hat on the rifle barrel looked like a man leaning against the passenger door asleep. “*At least, they think both of us are with the truck. Now if I can get them away from the car, we might still get out of this,*” Bill thought.

Uncrossing his legs he felt a sharp pain from his ankle. In the excitement he had completely forgotten about it. With all the moving around, it had loosened up and didn’t hurt as much. Bill crawled to where a drainage ditch slanted off to the side of the road. He used the ditch for cover and went around the hill. Ninety feet down the other side he heard the men talking.

One of them said, “Yeah, I understand, but we can’t just pull up and ask them if they need a lift. That’s sure to make them suspicious. Ok, I tell you what, if they don’t have the truck fixed in half an hour, we’ll go down and help them. Give us an hour. Hell, in an hour we will probably be there with them.”

“Jesus, Duce, what does the Boss want out of us? They killed Lem and the others. That asshole in Washington wants the two of us to take them on. I don’t like this one bit.”

Bill breathed a sigh of relief when he realized there were only two of them.

“Let’s go to the top and watch them. Maybe they’ll get it fixed before we have to go help them. I would like to tear that God damned phone out of the car. It’s been nothing but trouble since we put it in,” the man named Duce said.

“You know as well as I do, Duce, we wouldn’t get a hundred miles before they found us and kilt

us,” Zeke told him.

“All I know is that we are the ones on the hot spot.”

Bill waited until they walked toward the top of the hill. He crawled out of the ditch to the car. He opened the door, reached in and ripped the receiver out of the mobile unit. Next, he went to the rear of the car and let the air out of the tires.

The men lay on their stomachs looking over the top of the hill seventy feet away. Bill laid one of the rifles on top of the car and aimed the other rifle at a spot ten feet below where the men lay. He flipped the selector to auto and squeezed off ten rounds. The bullets kicked up asphalt all over the men.

“What the fuck?” one of them yelled. They scrambled to their feet only to fall down once again as Tony let loose with a full magazine on the other side of the hill. Bill emptied the magazine at their feet and quickly put in a fresh one from his rear pocket. Keeping the rifle aimed at them as they sat there with their hands in the air, Bill walked to the top of the hill. He motioned for Tony to bring the truck up.

“On your feet, dirt bags,” Bill said.

“Please, mister, don’t shoot us,” they both said at once.

“I should shoot you both down like dogs, but if you do exactly what I say, I won’t. Make one wrong move and you’re dead. Do you understand?” Bill growled at them.

Both men nodded their heads, acknowledging they understood.

“Turn around and walk into the trees over there,” Bill said, pointing to a clump of trees a few feet off the road.

The men sweated and whined for Bill not to kill them as they walked to the trees. Bill pointed to a tree where he wanted them to stand. Bill called to Tony, “Bring me some of the rope that’s behind the seat.” Bill had the men place their backs to the tree on opposite sides of each other. Tony wound rope around them and made sure she pulled it tight. When she finished tying them securely, Bill said, “That should keep them for a few hours.”

Walking back to their car, Bill raised the hood, pulled out the spark plug wires, and threw them in the back of the pickup.

“Where do we go from here?” Tony asked.

Bill saw the men straining to hear his answer. Pitching his voice loud enough for the men to hear, Bill said, “We’ll go back to Portsmouth and head up to Columbus now that we know they are looking for us around here.” Bill took the extra rifle and receiver for the mobile phone from the top of the car. He placed them in the back of the pickup.

Tony put the truck in gear and asked, “What do you mean about us going back to Portsmouth?”

“Just buying us a little more time. Let’s keep to the original route you planned. When they get loose or someone finds them, they’ll say we are heading in the other direction. That should give us enough time to be long gone in the other direction.”

Tony drove like the devil was after her for the next two hours. Bill began looking for a place to spend the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

White House, Washington, D.C.

The president hung up the phone and shook his head. He looked across the table to Merlin Jackson and said, "Merl, Dr. Palmer said they might be able to hang on for a week at the most. There were three more staff members killed. The rest of the staff won't go near the patients. We can expect it to get rapidly worse now. The last report I got from the CDC says there are major outbreaks in all of the lower forty-eight states."

"Five states have declared martial law to put down the violence," Merlin told him.

"I tell you, Merl. It galls me that I can't tell the governors they are fighting a losing battle. The troops sent to stop the violence will soon be as infected as the ones they are trying to stop. At least, we got most of the weapons out of their hands in time to save a few lives," President Robertson said.

"Did Dr. Palmer have any new statistics?" Merl asked.

"Yes, he did. They are worse than we thought. He predicts that sixty-five to ninety per cent of the population will come down with this disease in the next four months. He says one hundred fifty to two hundred million people will die over the next year as a direct result of the disease. Another twenty-five million deaths will come from shock, depression, etc. He said when he leaves this evening, he is taking his family to his cabin in the Rockies."

"This is the end then. Have we done everything we can?"

"As much as I hate to admit it, there is nothing else we can do that will help. Now, we'll have to let this thing run its course and hope for the best," said the president.

"If there is nothing else, Joseph, I have a few more things to attend to. I am going to take my family to a retreat we have in northern Maine," Merl told him.

"Yes, of course," said President Robertson. He got up and shook Merl's hand, then walked him to the door. He walked back to his desk, sat down and placed his head in his hands. He cried for all the people around the world that he had condemned to death. The door opened and he looked up to see his wife standing there.

She held out her hands saying, "Come, Joseph. It's time to get ready to leave."

He got up folded her in his arms and said, "Dear, I don't know if I can hold on to my sanity knowing the death and destruction I have set in motion."

She looked into his eyes and said, "Joseph, you will survive. You didn't ask for this. You are man enough to stand up and make hard decisions so this country can remain a free nation."

"I know, Dear, but that doesn't lessen the guilt I feel about what I've done."

"It is something you will have to learn to live with."

As they walked down the steps, she asked about Ruth, his personal secretary.

"I had her flown to her uncle's place in Pennsylvania. She and her older children got a quick course in how to use the weapons I had the Secret Service give them. She should be all right. She's tough and will do anything to protect her children. At least she will be reasonably safe."

"I wonder if any of us are safe," he said. He looked out the window and saw the helicopter that was waiting to take them to the Pit. The Pit was a six room complex set deep inside a mountain in

eastern West Virginia. He slowly gazed around and said, "Take a good look around, Dear. I believe this is the last time we will see the White House."

"It has been nice, hasn't it?" she said, wistfully.

"Give me a few minutes, Dear, and I'll join you."

He went to his desk and sat down to read the reports from the CIA on how things were progressing overseas.

It had been three weeks since the patients were placed in the Soviet Union. The Soviets were having trouble in most of their major cities. Unconfirmed reports said the soldiers, sent to control the unrest in the eastern part of the country, had turned their weapons on their leaders. Pravda reported troops sent to capture or kill them had joined them after a brief but bloody battle. In the western part of Russia, Moscow was under a curfew, forbidding people on the streets between the hours of six o'clock at night and eight o'clock in the morning. Pravda also reported that the leaders had moved to the war room in northern Siberia. It stated they went there until such a time as the unrest could be put down.

He had received a call from Premier Vexie that confirmed this yesterday evening. The premier wanted to assure him the move was only to protect the leadership of his country. It was, in no way, related to their preparation to go to war.

He had told Premier Vexie he understood and that he was having the same kind of unrest in his country. He also told the premier about the precautions taken to insure the missiles under his control were not fired. He followed this with a stiff warning that there were still nuclear submarines at sea that would not be affected by the disease ravaging his country. In the event of an attack by any country, that country would see this might be un-leashed on them.

In a weary voice, Premier Vexie had said that he understood. He said that he would carry out the same kind of safe guards to make sure there wasn't an accidental firing of one of their missiles.

At this point, the premier became very candid, saying his best estimates were that sixty-five per cent of the population of his country was going to die. He wanted to know how many people were going to die in the United States.

Seeing no reason to lie, he told the premier that sixty to seventy per cent of the people in the U.S. would also die because of the disease.

President Robertson remembered the premier's last words well, "Well, Joseph, this is probably the last time we will be speaking to each other. I wish you and your country luck. May your God be with you," then he hung up the phone.

Turning to the document on the Chinese, he opened the folder and read. There were already upwards of a million deaths. The report stated that because of the large militia they had under arms, the Chinese government was in turmoil. They hadn't realized the seriousness of the disease until too late. Now they were trying to disarm the militia and meeting stiff resistance. Also confusing the issue, some of the populace thought this was an attempt to overthrow the ruling party. A blood bath followed as Chinese officials were killed. At the end of the report it stated that China was in a state of all out civil war.

Placing the report on his desk President Robertson thought of how well his plan to protect the freedom of his country was working. It was not a proud moment in his life.

Merlin came rushing in. One look at his white face and the president asked, "My God, Merl. What's wrong?"

"Joseph, there was a bomb planted in the Senate Chamber. It went off a few minutes ago killing thirty-four senators and wounding twelve others." Unable to continue, Merlin broke down and cried.

"Does the Secret Service have any idea how the bomb got into the chamber, Merl?" the president asked softly.

With tears running out of the corners of his eyes, Merlin answered. "They say the good Senator

from Kansas carried it in with him. Then he just sat there and waited for it to go off. My God, Joseph! I have never seen such carnage. There were parts of bodies everywhere and the cries of the wounded was awful.”

“The end is fast approaching, Merl. Why don’t you go get the things you need from your office and go home until things become safe again? Merl I may have been hard on you at times but you have done an excellent job. If I had to choose again, you would be my man,” the president told him. Rising from his chair, he put his arm around Merl’s shoulder. He walked Merl to the door, knowing that more than likely this was the last time he would see his old friend alive.

“Thank you Joseph. You take care of yourself,” Merlin said then headed down the hall.

The president went to his room where his wife had their bags packed. “It’s time to leave now, Dear,” he said and took her arm. They went down the stairs and across the lawn, getting in the waiting helicopter.

A man across the street fired a Stinger missile.

The last thought the president had before the Stinger missile engulfed the helicop-ter in flames was, “*What a beautiful night this is.*”

Merlin Jackson never saw the man who stepped out of the doorway as he left his office. The man shot him five times at point blank range. He was dead before he hit the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ben decided to take a break as the sun edged over the mountains. Pulling into an abandoned service station, he parked the Jeep out of sight. "Jake, try and pick up someone on the radio. We will see if there is anything we can use in here."

"Yes, Sir," Jake gave a mock salute and started changing channels on the CB radio. It was one of the new ones. Besides the regular forty channels, it also had an upper and lower side band that gave them a total of one hundred twenty channels to monitor. While monitoring it, they learned they had been spotted at the Wyoming border. That was over one hundred miles from where they were. By listening to the conversations, they discovered the search for them was being concentrated there. This made them feel better. The traffic on the radio was hot and heavy over the last hour. One group of searchers would say they had them trapped only to come on a while later saying they had gotten away somehow.

Queries from their boss, Ramirez, got angrier with each unsuccessful report. Ramirez was very close to them, perhaps within a few miles. The signal from Ramirez pegged the needle while the signal from the men farther north barely registered when they talked to him.

Finding nothing in the station, Ben went back outside and spread the map out on the hood of the Jeep. "I figure we are somewhere between Calhan and Ramah. If we keep on this route, Interstate 70 will be thirty or forty miles ahead. The only problem is we might run right into Ramirez. He must be in one of these towns. Which one is he in?" Ben asked softly.

Jane took the cellophane off one of her cigars, held a match to the end of it and said, "It won't be much longer until they figure out they aren't chasing us. The logical thing to do would be to bring the search closer to where we were last spotted."

They remained where they were for two hours. They heard on the radio that most of the search for them was centered to the west. They talked it over and agreed that if they were going, now was the time because conditions weren't likely to improve any.

They skirted the town of Biglow and saw signs of a major battle around the town. "This must be the place you heard about, Jane," Ben said. They passed the burned out hulk of a tank. Two bodies lay next to it. They were burned beyond recognition.

"It looks as if they gave as much as they got," Jake said. They looked at the remains of dozens of tanks around the town. Scattered around were twisted chunks of metal that used to be trucks. Looking closer at the town, they began to see bodies lying all over the place.

"There must be hundreds of bodies lying there," said Jane.

Steering the Jeep closer to town, Jake said, "More like thousands. Look at that." He pointed to a wall of bodies stacked four feet high.

It was a grisly sight; apparently the defenders had stacked the bodies of the dead to protect themselves as the attackers drew closer. The ground around the bodies was red with blood. In some of the small depressions, pools of thick red blood stood glistening in the sun. There were jagged holes along the wall where tank shells had hit. Around these places, various parts of the bodies lay scattered.

Jane leaned over the side of the Jeep and threw up at the sight of such wanton dismemberment.

The stench became overpowering as they drew closer. Ben told Jake to take them out of there.

With a pasty green look on his face, Jake nodded his head. He headed away from the town faster than was safe. He made it half a mile before he slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the Jeep and chucked his morning meal.

“Here. Have some of this,” Ben said as he handed him a canteen of water. Jake took it gratefully and washed his mouth out, then took three big swallows before handing it back.

“Man, I thought I’d seen everything, but compared to this, everything else seems insignificant,” Jake told them as some color started coming back to his face.

“What could make people commit such atrocities?” Jane asked.

“The way I see it this is a no holds barred war and anything can be used. It’s them against us with the survivors taking control of the country,” Ben told them.

“What will they do with the country?” Jake asked.

“Who knows. None of this makes much sense,” Ben answered.

“What makes these people want to kill us just because we aren’t like them? After all isn’t that what made this country prosper for the last two hundred odd years?” Jane asked.

“It has to be this disease. Normal people don’t act like this. It’s like they are driven by some unseen force to destroy what isn’t like them, no matter what the cost,” Jake said.

“Yeah, if it wasn’t so damn real, it would make one hell of a science fiction movie,” Jane said.

“If they keep this up, it won’t be long before we are up to our necks in all kinds of diseases, simply because of all the rotting bodies lying around,” said Jake.

“If you feel better, let’s get out of here,” Ben said.

Jake got in the Jeep and steered a wide path around the town until he found the interstate going east. He took the highway and felt relief that the town was behind them.

Ben turned on the Jeep’s FM radio and searched for stations. Most of the ones he could pick up had the announcers ranting and raving about how you couldn’t hide from them. The man on the radio said they would find you no matter where you went. He finally found one where the announcer sounded sane.

“This is Les Collins speaking to you from Salinas, Kansas,” the announcer said in a tired voice. “For you new listeners who have just joined me, we are on top of the Joiner Building in the middle of the city. This makes our fifth day under siege. To those of you still sane, here is a run down of what is happening around the country and the world.

“These reports come from the only major radio station still on the air back east, WKRL, in Baltimore says all of the large cities on the East Coast have been devastated by these people. One report states that New York City is ablaze with fires as they cremate the dead. They throw the bodies in large piles, then soak them in kerosene. The latest report is that hundreds of thousands of people are dead. Battle lines are being drawn from the suburbs to the inner city streets.

“Baltimore, Philadelphia, Washington, and many other cities are in the same situation. We received information about an hour ago from the Hopkins Control Center located underground in southern Maryland. They project the numbers of deaths will exceed twenty million before the day is over.” He paused for a few moments to let the number sink in before continuing.

“The situation is much the same throughout the country, except for a portion of Washington State. They reportedly kill anyone that acts the least bit suspicious and have fortified some of the larger cities. Anyone approaching these cities is shot at and told to leave or be killed. Reports show that over the last few days a large number of people have ringed these cities. They appear to be waiting for someone or something to appear.

“Overseas the Chinese have started using nuclear bombs to try and stem the tide of this madness. The latest report says it is possible as many as two hundred million people have died there in the last week.

“In the USSR it is thought the Soviet Premier and all the members of the ruling politburo have

fallen prisoner to these people. Reports say it is possible they were summarily executed. Because of the rising death toll in the USSR, those still sane and in charge are thinking of resorting to nuclear weapons as the Chinese have done.

“In Europe, France has fallen to these sick people. They are reported to have given Germany an ultimatum. They say if the German government doesn’t hand Germany over to them, they will launch nuclear weapons at every major city in Germany. At last word, Germany hadn’t given a reply.

“Great Britain has suffered very little of this madness. Apparently because when it first started, British authorities prohibited flights from other countries to land. Prime Minister John Major warned the European nations that any plane heading toward Great Britain would be shot down over the English Channel. He had particularly harsh words for the new leaders in France. He told them if an attempt was made on the security of Great Britain, he would leave France a smoldering ruin.

“The South American nations have banded together to stop anyone from entering the continent. Reports show that dozens of airliners have been forced to land in the ocean after running out of fuel. Unconfirmed reports state that the war ships of these countries are shooting survivors of these landings before they can reach land.

“Our bearded Dictator Castro declared war on the United States. Most of his air force has defected with their planes to Mexico. His threats are considered to be empty rhetoric.

“Closer to home I have to tell you that I don’t know how much longer we will be able to hold out here. There were ten of us at the start of this. Now, there are only three of us left. The other two men are guarding the windows and elevator shaft as I speak. We lost four men when these people cut the cables on the elevator causing it to fall to the basement with them aboard. The other three were killed by snipers when they exposed themselves at the windows.

“We have beaten back two attacks when they tried to place ladders in the elevator shaft and climb up to us. It has been quiet, too quiet for the last several hours. We are trying to figure out what they plan on doing next. We have come up with nothing, so we will have to wait their next move.

“All you people out there who don’t have this sickness, we wish you luck and hope you will say a prayer for us. We have to leave the air now to conserve our batteries. If possible, we will be back on the air with an update in two hours. Until then, good luck.” Then there was nothing but static on the radio.

There was silence for a couple of minutes as they digested what they had heard. Ben reached over and turned the radio off saying, “Looks like this is the end of the world as we know it. I wonder how many will be alive when this is all over?”

“It’s a lot worse than I thought,” Jake said in a subdued voice that barely carried to them.

They drove the rest of the day and stayed in a small deserted town that night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Bill felt tired, almost exhausted. He looked over at Tony lying next to him. She was covered in cement dust. She was in pretty bad shape. He looked up at the mirror over the door and saw people moving from place to place. They were preparing for another attack.

He cursed himself again for being such a fool. If he had been on his toes, they wouldn't be in this position.

It all started at the outskirts of Indianapolis when he found the route he wanted to take blocked by a truck. He was forced to take a different route. He should have realized they were leading him in one direction after two more of the routes he wanted to take were blocked. What saved them from capture was someone being over-anxious and springing the trap early. While making a turn to avoid the wrecked cars, a car shot out of an alley and blocked his way. Men with guns piled out of the car motioning for them to get out. Bill put the truck in reverse. He floored the gas pedal and shot backwards. A truck came from the side and tried to block him in. Twisting the steering wheel, he yanked the transmission into drive.

With wheels spinning, Bill cut up on the sidewalk as a man in front of them raised a rifle to fire.

Steering with one hand, Bill grabbed Tony and yanked her down to the floorboard. The windshield exploded inward throwing glass all over them. Peering over the dash he saw the look of surprise on the man's face. The truck hit him and ground him under the wheels. Cutting the wheel, they dropped off the side-walk onto the street with a bang, as one of the rear tires blew. Down the block more cars were advancing on them, effectively blocking their way.

Tony shouted and pointed down the alley.

It took all his strength to get the truck turned and headed into the alley. Bill heard a sharp burst of automatic rifle fire. He looked and saw Tony, leaning out the window, firing at the people. She tried to keep them pinned down. "Can't we go any faster?" she yelled as she popped a fresh magazine in the rifle.

With the gas pedal to the floor, Bill could only get thirty miles an hour. The flat tire kept them from going any faster. Wobbling out of the alley, he saw a large cleared area. A small warehouse stood at the rear near some railroad tracks. He steered toward the warehouse while Tony continued to fire. They made it to within a hundred feet of the warehouse before the rear end of the truck locked up. "Shit," Bill said hitting the steering wheel. Opening the door, he took the rifle from Tony. He told her to get all the rifles she could carry out of the truck and head for the warehouse. Quickly, Bill fired two magazines into the mouth of the alley. Slinging three rifles on his shoulder, Bill grabbed some magazines and stuffed them into the opened ammo box. Tony was on her way back to help him. He sprayed the mouth of the alley, hoping to keep anyone from advancing down it. Giving her the rifles, he lifted two boxes of ammunition out. Bill told Tony to run for it. Bill staggered after her with the heavy boxes.

Once inside, they loaded the rifles and placed them on either side of the door.

"Why aren't they shooting at us?" Tony asked.

"Probably because they want to take you alive." Looking toward the alley, Bill saw people start to pour out of it. Raising the rifle, he fired a burst, which caused them to duck back into the alley. "It

could be worse,” he thought. The only way in or out was the alley and the railroad tracks in back of them. Some of the buildings across the way could be a problem. It was lucky for them that there were only windows on the bottom floor. “Keep an eye on the alley; if anyone shows themselves, fire a few rounds at them. I’m going to see what we have in here,” Bill told her.

Most of the building was empty except for a lot of cement bags stacked near the door. There weren’t any windows at all. Next to the cement stood a small forklift used to carry five or six bags of cement at a time. Seeing this gave him an idea. Going to the forklift, he seated himself and turned the key. It started right up. He moved it around so the forks on the front were even with the pallet board the cement sat on. Sliding the forks under the pallet, he raised the load off the ground. Moving to the door, he stopped and told Tony. “Cover me I’m going outside.”

She nodded her head, ok, with a puzzled look on her face.

Sweating like a stuck pig, Bill drove the little machine out the door and stopped ten feet in front of it. Lowering the cement to the ground, he put the machine in reverse and quickly backed into the building. Going to the stacked cement, he picked up another load and took it outside and placed it next to the first load. He continued this until there was a wall of cement five feet high on each side of the door. The next time Bill went out the door, he saw puffs of cement dust fly into the air and heard the sound of half a dozen shots.

Rolling off the machine, Bill crawled into the building and grabbed a rifle. Peeking around the door, he didn’t see anything moving, so he slid down the wall into a sitting position. “I have to finish the job the hard way,” he said to Tony.

“What are you doing, Bill? None of this makes much sense to me,” she said.

He explained to her the only way the people could get to them was from the front and the sides of the building. Once the sides were up and connected across the front they could stop them from sneaking up on them. Then, the only way the people could attack was from the front.

“I’ll try to keep their heads down while you finish the sides,” she told him. She placed several magazines in her purse and crawled out to the row of cement bags. “When I start firing, go to it,” she said. Rising to her knees, she fired at the build-ings across from her.

Bill rushed to the forklift and backed it into the building, picked up another load and wheeled it outside. “Give them another burst,” he yelled. She fired as he dropped the cement and backed into the warehouse. A dozen trips later the sides and front were built. Crawling out to the wall, Bill leaned against the bags, rested and tried to catch his breath.

Tony made another trip inside and brought the rifles and ammunition out. She placed them where they would be handy. Shoving a magazine in her rifle, she crawled to Bill and kissed him on the cheek. Crawling across his legs, she placed two rifles in the corner of the wall he had built. Intermittent shots caused puffs of cement to fly in the air when the bullets hit the bags.

She went to where four rifles were stacked and loaded. Placing the barrel on top of the bags, she sprayed the front of the buildings. When that one was empty, she grabbed another and filled the mouth of the alley with lead. She used eight magazines and the firing slacked off.

Bill noticed, for the first time the dust hanging in the air caused by the slugs hitting the front of the cement bags. Tony looked like a grey ghost. The dust coated her from head to toe. She shoved rounds in the empty magazines as he crawled up to her. He noticed her glance up every few seconds and wondered what she was looking at. Raising his head Bill saw a round stainless steel mirror placed above the door giving a wide-angle view of the area across from them.

“I sure could use something to drink,” he said his throat as dry as a popcorn fart.

“Hang in there, Love,” Tony said crawling into the build-ing.

He heard a shot from inside then Tony yelled to him and asked him if he wanted Seven Up or Sprite. Not knowing what she meant, Bill yelled, “Seven Up.” Moments later she crawled through the door with four bottles of Seven Up.

"Where did these come from?" Bill asked, as he drank half the bottle she handed him in the first gulp.

"From a soda machine standing in the corner. I had to shoot the lock off to get into it."

Keeping an eye on what was going on across from them, Bill took the second bottle she offered and said, "I sure got us into a pickle this time, didn't I?"

"Don't worry, Love. You'll figure a way out of this."

"*I hope you're right,*" Bill thought, but he couldn't see anyway they could escape. Sitting up suddenly Bill exclaimed, "Damn it! I forgot about the grenades in the truck. I have to try and get them." He looked over the wall at the truck, which seemed a thousand miles away. "How are we standing on ammuni-tion?"

"We still have one box and part of another plus ten full magazines," Tony answered.

Each box held a thousand rounds and twenty in each magazine, which gave them over thirteen hundred rounds, so ammo wasn't a problem. The acrid smell of cordite hung in the air and shell casings lay all over the place. In the mirror he saw three men rush from the alley toward the truck. Telling Tony to get ready, they both picked up a rifle and watched the mirror. "Now," he said. They both raised their rifles above the wall and started firing at the men. Two of the men fell, killed or wounded. The other man kept zig-zagging as he came firing his weapon causing them to duck behind the wall. Grabbing another rifle, Bill watched the mirror until the man was less than twenty feet from them. He stuck the barrel of the rifle above the cement bags and squeezed the trigger. A line of bullets walked their way toward the man. The man jerked backwards, dropping the rifle. He col-lapsed to his knees before falling forward on his face.

"That should make them think a while before they try that again," Bill said.

"Now would be the time to get the grenades before they have a chance to regroup," Tony told him.

"First let's give them something to think about." He fired off a full magazine. "Keep this up while I make a run for the truck," Bill told her. He went to the other side away from her. Giving her the high sign, Bill waited until she started firing. He jumped over the wall and ran for the truck. Passing the man lying on the ground, he saw the gaping hole in his chest and shuddered. Going to the back of the truck, Bill lifted out the box of grenades. Carrying them to the front of the truck, he squatted behind the hood and opened the box. Reaching down, he took one out and held it in his hand. It felt much heavier than he remembered. Of course, that had been twenty years ago.

Bill heard a crunching noise and the grinding of gears in the alley. Creeping to where he had a better view of the alley, he waited. In a minute, a large garbage truck started backing out of the opening.

Without thinking, Bill ran toward it pulling the pin on a grenade as he went. Stopping twenty feet from the truck, he threw the grenade over the top of it. Falling to the ground, he heard a lot of yelling coming from the alley. The grenade went off and lifted the front of the truck off the ground. Jumping up, Bill ran back to his truck. Taking a grenade from the box, he tied a piece of twine around it. He pulled the pin and wedged the grenade between the cab and bed of the truck. Bill made sure the spoon like lever was wedged so it wouldn't fly off.

Putting the lid back on the box, Bill picked it up and started walking backwards. As he went he unwound the twine, every muscle tense expecting to feel a bullet enter his body at any moment. Reaching the wall, he laid the box of grenades on the ground inside. Unrolling the twine, he jumped over the wall and sat down letting out a sigh of relief. He didn't have long to relax because he heard a voice shout his name from somewhere near the garbage truck.

Watching the mirror, he yelled. "What do you want?"

Bill saw a short, bald man climb over the garbage truck and walk forward. He yelled, "Can we talk?"

"We won't be going anywhere for a while. So tell me what you want?" Bill yelled to the man.

Crawling to where Tony sat, he told her to watch the sides, in case this was a ruse to get people closer to them.

"All we want is the woman, Bill. Turn her over to us and we will let you walk. Do you hear me? No one will bother you."

"What if I say no?"

"Then, we will have to kill you and the girl if necessary." To show you that we mean business keep your head down while we put on a little display. Are your heads down?"

"Yeah," Bill yelled and wondered what the man was going to do. He didn't have long to wait. The world erupted with a roaring sound. Curling into a ball, Bill heard what sounded like someone pounding on a side of beef. Looking up, he saw a thick cloud of grey dust in the air. It hit him then the sound he heard was bullets hitting the cement bags. He heard the man yell. "How did you like it? That was over five hundred guns firing at once. Surely, you can see you don't have a chance, so give her to us."

His ears still ringing, Bill yelled, "No dice." He rose up and fired at the man. The man jerked one way then the other as the bullets hit him. Bill dropped and shoved the top bag of cement off to the ground on the other side. "Push them off," he yelled at Tony as the firing started. Pushing the last bag over, she curled up at his feet and asked, "What did we do that for?"

Holding her head, Bill said into her ear. "The wooden pallets have a four-inch gap at the bottom. The bullets could come through." Drawing the box of grenades to him, he handed her two of them and told her how to pull the pin. She looked nervous, so he said, "Just throw it as soon as you pull the pin and keep your head down." The firing tapered off and he knew that as soon as it ended they would rush toward them. "Get ready," he told her while trying to see movement through the dust. They were within fifty feet before he saw them. He pulled the twine leading to the grenade on his truck tight. Almost immediately the twine went slack. He knew the lever was off and the grenade armed.

Pulling the pin on a grenade, Bill yelled, "Now" and threw it over the wall. As fast as he could pull the pins, Bill threw six grenades over the wall in different directions.

There was a loud roar when the grenade on the truck blew and ruptured the gas tank. It sent a roaring flame fifty feet into the air. They felt a tremendous blast of hot air pass over the top of the bags. Then, the grenades they threw started going off. Cries of pain filled his ears. People were blown to bits by the explosions. The extra ammunition on the truck started exploding, sending hot lead into the other box of grenades. The grenades exploded and lifted the truck eight feet into the air. As the blast spread outward, it ripped the metal body of the truck into small shreds. These small shreds of shrapnel cut through flesh and bone in a three hundred sixty-degree circle. This shrapnel killed or wounded anyone within a hundred feet of the truck.

As the last grenade went off, an eerie silence settled around them. Deciding to take advantage of their shock, he raised the rifle above the bags and held the trigger back as he swept it from left to right. Rolling three feet to the right, he did the same thing, then again until he came up against the right wall.

Tony followed him putting fresh magazines in the weapons as he dropped them. "Watch it," Bill said and pushed her out of the way as a man started to climb over the wall. Lying on his back, Bill fired hitting the man knocking him into the man in back of him. Tony started shooting at a man. His head was almost blown from his shoulders and he still tried to get over the wall.

Looking at the mirror, all Bill could see was bodies in front of the wall. "*God there must be close to a hundred bodies lying in front of us,*" he thought. Some of the wounded people on the outer edge of the blast were trying to crawl back to the buildings. There wasn't anything left of his truck but a twisted scrap of metal lying in a three-foot crater. Bill's stomach turned over at the sight of all the dismembered bodies lying there. Some of them were so disfigured it was hard to believe they were

human. With a fury, the firing started again so they huddled down to watch for movement in the mirror.

That's how it had been for the last four hours. There were only two half-hearted rushes with the same results as before. Everything had been quiet for the last hour and he wondered what they were up to. Tony woke up and looked around confused. "Did you hear it?" she asked.

"Hear what?" he asked.

"Someone told me to 'hang in there because we'll be there short-ly.' Bill, help is on the way."

Bill didn't want to voice his doubts, so he said, "I hope you are right. We are almost out of ammo. We won't be able to stop another charge."

Twenty minutes later she sat up and said, "They're here and want us to get ready to run to the end of the building."

"Who are you talking to?" Bill asked.

"It's not human, but it's on our side," was all she would tell him. They heard explosions on the other side of the build-ings and saw black smoke billowing into the sky.

"Let's go, Bill," Tony said as she grabbed his hand and jumped over the wall. It was all he could do to keep up with her as she ran to the end of the building. Turning the corner, Bill saw a little girl standing beside the ugliest wolf in the world. Bill started to raise the rifle, but Tony knocked it aside telling him they were friends.

"Follow me," said the girl. She turned to the wolf and said. "Make sure no one follows us, Stalker. Come on," she said over her shoulder and she started running down the railroad tracks.

Bill and Tony followed her at a trot. Bill looked over his shoulder and saw the wolf go to the edge of the building. A man came running around it. Bill hardly believed what he saw. The wolf grabbed the man by the throat and with one vicious move tore his head from his shoulders. Two more men rounded the corner and stopped dead in their tracks. They saw the man's head hanging from the wolf's mouth. Dropping their weapons, they scrambled back around the corner. They ran as fast as their legs would carry them. That's all he could see because the tracks entered a building blocking his view.

The girl ran to a truck and got in the back. "As soon as Stalker returns, get us out of here. I'll tell you where to go," the girl told him. Then she turned to stare out the door. A black streak came through the door and jumped in beside the girl.

"What are you waiting for? Get us out of here. Quick! Before they have a chance to recover and come after us," the girl said in an exasperated voice.

Climbing behind the wheel, Bill started the truck. Tony climbed in back with the girl and wolf. Things were happening too fast for him to understand what was going on. Sticking her head through the sliding rear window, the girl told him to drive to the end of the block. They were to pick up someone named Joe. Driving to the corner, Bill stopped and looked around seeing noth-ing. As he was about to ask where this Joe was, a shadow detached itself from the wall, walked around, and got into the passenger seat.

"They are madder than a bunch of hornets. We better get out of the neighborhood quick as we can," the man said. He guided Bill out of town by the quickest route possible. Once they hit the four-lane highway, Bill cranked the truck up to eighty. Looking in the rear view mirror, he saw Tony talking to the girl.

"Name's Joe, you must be Bill," the man said.

"That's me. How do you know who I am?" Bill asked.

Instead of answering, Joe turned on the CB radio and they heard a man ranting and raving. He talked about Tony and Bill's escape, saying Todd was going to have all their heads for this.

"Who's this man, Todd?" Bill asked Joe.

"An old friend I will kill the next time we meet."

"How many damn people are after us?" Bill asked.

"Only half the country. Your woman is a pretty popular lady. A lot of people want to talk to her. We came to help you get to Colorado in one piece," Joe answered.

"You sure got us out of a jam back there. One more rush and we would have been goners for sure."

"Hell, from what I heard they didn't want anything to do with you. They kept calling you a mad man who had killed over a hundred of them. They were waiting until they could round up a bunch of the mad ones to send at you."

Hearing the number of dead shocked Bill. Seeing his look, Joe told him there wasn't anything else he could have done. Besides, one way of looking at it was he had put them out of their misery.

Joe told him to turn off the road at the next exit.

"Why don't we keep on going?" Bill asked.

"There is another group of them seventy-five miles to the west. They will hear of your escape before we can get there, so we will find a place to lay up for a while and make some plans. If they get close, we will hear about it on the CB," Joe said.

Taking the exit, Bill drove to an abandoned house where Joe said they had spent part of the night waiting for morning.

Parking the truck out of sight, they entered the house where Tony and the girl set about preparing a meal for them.

"What does the wolf have to do with us?" Bill asked.

"He sure is ugly as sin, isn't he?" Joe threw up his hands and said, "I apologize, Stalker. It was a slip of the tongue."

"He said if you keep it up, you won't have a tongue," the girl said from the kitchen.

The wolf had stood up; now he lay back down.

"You mean he understands what you say?" Bill asked.

"Don't ask me how it works, but he can understand what I'm thinking. Only Tammy can understand what he is saying. By the way, I would be careful what you say about his looks; he is very sensitive about that," Joe whispered to him.

Joe brought a spare battery into the house and hooked it up to a CB radio. They sat listening to the people who were searching for them. "Some of them are passing by less than three miles away right now," Joe told him.

"Don't they know we are monitoring them on the CB?"

"That's one of the things I don't understand. Time and again we were able to escape their traps by listening to them on the radio. It's as though they have a mindset that tells them they are the only ones who can use the radios. They don't care what they say. At first, I figured they were setting an elaborate trap to capture us. I wasted time trying to figure out what they were up to. Then it became clear they had no idea we would listen to them, so we took what they said at face value, making a lot better time than we had before. Since last night, all they talk about is a fellow named Ben who escaped their trap in Colorado.

"This master that Todd serves seems to know this man, Ben, and wants him dead in the worst way. They have split their people up and sent a lot of them west to search for him. That still leaves plenty of them for us to get through before we get to Colorado," Joe told him.

"I guess you know the president is dead and one of them is now claiming to be in charge of the country. From reports we heard on the radio, they have assumed all of the power positions in government. For some reason, they haven't got their act together or we wouldn't have made it this far," Bill said.

"I know what you mean. The ones in charge, like Todd, can only keep them in line for a little while. Every now and then they break loose and go on a killing spree. I think that is changing though.

We heard reports that Todd is feeding them some kind of drug. This drug lowers their aggressiveness until he wants them to do something. Then he keeps it from them for a while and guides them into doing what he wants.”

In the kitchen Tony asked Tammy who sent them to help her.

“No one spoke to me, but Joe and Stalker had some sort of vision. The vision told them who you were and where to meet you. That’s all I know,” Tammy told her.

Tony looked at Stalker lying in the doorway, dividing his attention between them and the men in the living room. She thought, *“In his own way, he is a beautiful creature.”*

In her mind she heard, *“Thank you. Only the Chosen One can realize my true beauty.”*

Tammy turned to her saying, “You can talk to him, but I didn’t hear you say anything.”

“The Chosen One has her own way of talking to me, Little One. Only one other would understand. The one who sent me here.”

“What am I supposed to do once we get to this place in Colorado?” Tony asked.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Tammy answered.

“Whatever plan the spirit one has devised makes you the key to its success,” Stalker said.

“I never asked to be a part of this,” Tony told him.

“We are drawn together by something we don’t understand, to rid the world of a menace that we also don’t understand. Not a very good way to start, is it?” Stalker said.

Tammy placed dishes on the table. She asked Tony what special talent she had. Every one of us has something we can do that the others can’t.

“Watch,” Tony said. Tammy swore Tony was standing next to her, but she was nowhere in sight. She heard Bill say, “Damn it Tony stop playing games.” She went to the door and saw Joe standing, prepared to fight someone he couldn’t see as he circled around. Bill sat in a chair with a disgusted look on his face.

“Hand me that plate, Tammy. The potatoes are done,” she heard Tony say from behind her.

When she turned, Tony stood at the stove stirring the pota-toes as though she had never left.

Joe came through the door mad as a wet hen sputtering. “Was that you out there?”

Stalker stood in front of him with the hair on his neck standing straight up and there was a low growl coming from him as he blocked Joe’s way.

“It’s ok, Stalker,” Tony said to him and the wolf moved out of the way and lay down in the corner.

“Yes, that was me who turned the radio off. I was showing Tammy the talent I have. I didn’t mean to upset you so,” Tony told him.

“Don’t worry. You get used to it after a while,” Bill said from the doorway behind Joe.

“Next time, let us know when you’re going to pull your invisible act, and you,” he said pointing at Stalker, “The next time you growl at me, I’m going to smack you in the chops,” Joe spoke in an angry voice.

Stalker rolled his eyes downward and acted embarrassed as he told Tony. *“Forgive him. He is tense because of what we face when we leave here.”*

“You like him, don’t you?” she asked Stalker.

“For a human he has many redeeming qualities. A hundred years ago he would have been a great warrior much like my kind used to be many years ago,” Stalker answered.

“What do you think of Tammy?” Tony asked.

“For her I feel great love. She is as much a part of me as one of my cubs. My life is in her hands. If she were to die because of my failing to protect her, I wouldn’t want to live. Just as I would blame myself for the death of one of my cubs,” he told her. She could not miss the affection in his voice when he talked about Tammy.

“How do you feel about me?”

“I made a pact. For the protection of my family, I would protect you, even to giving up of my life to save yours.”

"You could see me when everyone else couldn't, am I right?"

"Yes, I could see your every move. Why do you think I am the only one who can see you when you will us not to?"

"Something sent you here to protect me. To protect me you have to know where I am at all times. It stands to reason that you would be able to see me when everyone else can't."

"I will accept that. That isn't all you know, is it?"

"I knew the first time I saw you. There was this picture in my mind as I looked at you for the first time. I didn't want to bring it up. I was so hoping that you didn't know. I am so sorry, Stalker," Tony said dropping to her knees and throwing her arms around his neck.

"Do not feel sorry for me, Chosen One, I knew from the first. That is one of the things the mysterious one said he wouldn't hide from me. As to how and when, I don't know nor do I want to."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes, when it happens, comfort the little one for she will not understand why it has to be. Try to make her see that for me this is only the beginning. If you give your word, you will do this, it will lift a great burden from me."

"It will be done. On that you have my word," Tony whispered, trying to control a sob as her arms tightened around his neck. She pressed her face into his fur.

"I had wondered from the beginning if you were worth the sacrifice many of us will make. Now I know that no sacrifice of ours can be great enough, for you are truly the Chosen One."

Standing up, Tony took a few moments to compose herself. Then she said with steel in her voice.

"They will wish to God they had never screwed with us. That also, I promise you."

"What are you guys talking about?" Tony heard Tammy ask from the living room.

"Just getting acquainted," she answered.

"In case anyone in there wants it, the food is ready. Do you want it or should I throw it out?" she asked them.

Sitting at the table, Tony was sad and amused at the same time. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Tammy sneak pieces of meat off her plate and pass them under the table to Stalker.

With Tammy's help Tony cleared the table of dishes and brought coffee for them. Joe leaned back in his seat and sipped his coffee with a look of delight on his face. Putting the cup down, he said, "No offense to you, Tammy, but this is the first decent cup of coffee I've had in almost two weeks."

"It is sort of nice to sit down and relax for a while," Bill said in a contented voice.

"Do you think things will ever get back to the way they used to be?" Tony asked.

"I doubt it. From what we have heard and seen most of the country is shut down. That means those who aren't already dead by the hands of these maniacs will starve. The food supplies aren't flowing and no one is growing anything to replace it as we eat it," Joe answered.

"What about these lunatics who are assuming positions of power. Won't they grow enough to feed the people?" Bill asked.

"I don't believe they can exert enough force to have most of the people under them do anything. From all indications, all they want to do is kill those who aren't like them. The few who are in charge seem to be able to control this urge to a certain degree. From what we saw some of them are border line cases," Joe said.

"We heard on the radio yesterday about a group of people heading for Canada to get away from this madness. They were urging all sane people to join them," Tony said.

"It won't do them any good; I heard reports that every major city in Canada has this madness," Joe told them.

"We also heard a doctor on the radio saying that if this illness continued half the population of the United States will be dead. They will either be killed by these people or die from other causes," Tony told Joe.

"He may be right. From some of the things we saw getting here, they are killing people in massive

sweeps. They are trying to set up their own fiefdoms of control. Some of the smaller ones have already been taken over by the larger groups. This is what I think will happen until you only have a few very big groups left," Joe said.

"How will going to Colorado stop all of this?" Tony asked.

"We have all been wondering how our part in this can make a difference. I don't believe anything we do will make the situation better," Joe said.

Tammy hadn't spoken in a while. Tony looked across the table and saw she was asleep with her hands cupped under her chin.

"Go pull down the covers on the bed in the first room to your right. I will carry her in and put her to bed. Poor kid has had a rough time of it," Joe said.

Tammy didn't wake up as Joe carried her to the bedroom.

Bill and Tony watched as Stalker walked to her bedroom door and lay down where he could be near her. Joe had to step across him as he left the room.

"Sleeping like a baby," Joe told them as he went to the stove and filled his coffee cup before sitting down at the table.

"Does he always stay close to her like that?" Bill asked.

"Bill, I would rather take on ten battle hardened combat veterans than approach her with the intentions of hurting her. You haven't seen Stalker in action; I have," Joe said.

Wanting to change the subject away from Stalker, Tony asked Joe, "Is there any water in the bathroom?"

"Yes, there is even hot water. The people who lived here built a cistern on the hill behind the house. If the electricity stays on, the hot water tank should supply us all with enough hot water to take a bath," he answered.

"If you will excuse me, I think I'll take a bath and get some of this cement dust off me."

"It would probably be best if we all took our baths while it is still daylight; we don't want any lights on after dark. Some one might see them and come to investigate," Joe told them.

"Run me a tub full of hot water when you are finished, Babe," Bill said to her as she was leaving.

"Ok. I won't be long," Tony answered.

"Let's drink one more cup. Then, we can go out and put the topper we left here last night back on the truck," Joe said.

Leaving the house, Bill automatically reached and picked up his rifle telling Joe he felt naked without it.

"It's a good habit to get into," Joe told him.

After putting on the topper, they placed a mattress in the back of the truck along with the rest of their supplies.

Joe looked at the sky and said, "It's going to rain again tonight. Roll the windows up on the truck. Tammy left them down last night and I had a wet rear for a few hours this morning."

After closing the truck windows, Bill went to the porch. Joe stood gazing at the horizon with a sad expression on his face.

"Something troubling you, Joe?" he asked.

"Just thinking about the senselessness of what is happening in this country of ours. Also, I'm wondering a little about what the future holds for us," Joe answered with a shake of his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Bill and Joe were having an argument about going after Todd.

"Damn it, Joe. Our first priority, is to get Tony to this place in Colorado," Bill said in an angry voice.

"I agree, Bill, but we could make better time if we didn't have to worry about Todd and his people nipping at our heels all the way there," Joe calmly told him.

Until now Tony had stayed out of the argument. Rising up from where she helped Tammy put the meal together, Tony looked at Bill. "Joe's right. If we don't do something about Todd and his people, they will be dogging our footsteps all the way. I don't think we need that kind of pressure coming from our rear. Especially when we don't have the faintest idea what we face when we get to Colorado. I think it would be a mistake to get caught between Todd and whatever is waiting for us there."

"Are you saying we should remove Todd as a threat, before we move on?" Bill asked.

Tony's only reply was a nod of her head, yes.

"What if Joe or I get killed? What if both of us are killed? Where would that leave Tammy and you?"

"If that should happen, we would carry on the best we could," Tony answered matter of factly.

Throwing his hands into the air, Bill said, "I think you are both crazier than the people who are chasing us. But if that is what you have your minds set on doing, I will help you. Lord knows, you are going to need all the help you can get."

Having said this, he walked over to a rock by the campfire and sat down with his back to them.

Tony turned and looked at Joe. "I hope, you don't think Bill is a coward because he is not. It's just that he is worried about me. He really has a hard time understanding everything that has happened in the past few weeks."

Looking up at her, Joe smiled and said, "I think Bill is one of the bravest men I have met and he has a right to worry. What he has to understand is that life would be a lot less complicated if we could eliminate some of the people following us. If we don't, they will gain strength while we are being drained to the point of exhaustion by their constant hounding," Joe told her.

Tammy called telling them the meal was ready, so they walked to the fire where Bill was sitting. Stalker lay in the shadows, thirty feet from the fire. As Tony and Joe sat down he raised his head and asked Tony, "*Why is your mate angry with you?*"

"He's worried about us going after Todd. He thinks we are doing the wrong thing," she answered.

"He may have a point. After all, we are so few and there are so many of them," Stalker said.

"I don't know why, Stalker, but I have this feeling that now is the time to strike back. This feeling also tells me that we will be successful. If we miss this chance while they are still disorganized, we might not get to Colorado," Tony said.

"Far be it for me to question the Chosen One, but will you do one thing for me?" Stalker asked.

"If I can," Tony answered.

"When the fighting starts, try and keep as far away from it as possible. This will help the rest of us function better, knowing we don't have to watch out for you. Will you do this for me?"

"Long as I am not needed, I will keep in the background out of harm's way," she answered.

"That's all I can ask."

Tammy held her hand up gesturing for silence and turned her head to one side.

"What is it, Tammy?" Joe asked in a quiet voice.

"Tony, we know what the drug looks like. Can you can mix up something that looks like it?" Tammy asked.

"I think so," Tony answered.

"Good you start making it, Tony. I need to talk to Stalker for a moment," Joe said.

A little later Joe gathered them all together. He asked Tony how she was coming on the fake drug.

"I have the coloring right and I have twenty pounds of it made waiting for you," she answered.

"Good, Stalker and I will get into Todd's camp and substitute this powder for the real drug. Todd is going to have some real trouble on his hands in forty-eight hours," Joe told them.

"What are we supposed to do while you are gone?" Bill asked.

"Keep out of sight. I figure some of the men we heard on the radio earlier will pass by here before sun-up. That's when you'll have to be on the alert," Joe answered.

"Be careful, Joe. Get back as soon as you can," Tony said.

"With any luck, I should be back before dawn tomorrow. If I'm not, wait until dawn, then get the hell out of here. It will be a sure bet that Todd has me and knows you are close by," Joe said as he put the powder in his knapsack.

Bill walked to the jeep with Joe and watched as he got behind the wheel. "Take care my friend and good luck," Bill said sticking out his hand.

"Remember if I'm not back by dawn, take Tammy and Tony and get out of here," Joe said as he gripped Bill's hand. He started the jeep and drove off. Bill watched until the jeep was swallowed by shadows. He walked back to where Tony sat gazing at the stars and sat down beside her without saying a word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Joe eased the bush he was hiding behind aside and watched the men working on the truck. He heard them cussing as they replaced the rear tire.

“God damn it, Ray and Red could have waited on us until we got the trucks fixed,” one of them said.

“You know they told us to fix the trucks. They were going to find some-place for us to hole up for a few days until the heat is off,” another man answered.

“Yeah, yeah, just didn’t want to get their hands dirty,” said the man.

The men were finished and would be on their way in a few minutes. That was some relief to Joe because he wouldn’t have to find a way around them now.

His truck was hidden in the brush half a mile in back of him. Joe suspected something when Stalker started pulling the steering wheel to the side. Figuring Stalker had heard something, Joe pulled the truck off the road into the brush. He made sure the truck couldn’t be seen by placing some loose branches over it. He walked back to the road with Stalker at his side.

They didn’t travel very far until Joe heard voices up ahead. “*Go ahead Stalker and see what’s going on,*” Joe sent the thought to the wolf. He watched the wolf fade into the brush alongside the road.

Turning into the brush himself, Joe slowly made his way forward until he came to his present position. He wondered where Stalker was.

“*Oh shit,*” he said to himself, as a man off to the side he hadn’t noticed walked over to where he was hidden and un-zipped his pants.

Stretched out flat on the ground, Joe felt the man’s piss splash on his right hand. It took all of his will power to keep from pulling his hand back.

At last, the man finished and zipped up his pants. He turned and walked over to the other men saying, “Let’s get the hell out of here if everything is fixed.” There were nods of approval from the men standing around the truck.

Joe watched as they went to the vehicles and got into them starting the engines. One by one, they pulled onto the road and were soon out of sight.

Joe waited five minutes after he had heard the last sound of the trucks before coming out of the brush.

Standing there, he watched a darker patch of black separate itself from the brush on the other side of the road.

Stalker came to stand beside him as he rubbed his right hand on his pants. Joe could have sworn there was a smile on the wolf’s face as Stalker watched him rub his hand.

“Come on,” Joe said angrily. He started down the road to get the truck. Joe drove until he judged Todd’s camp was two miles ahead; then, he pulled off the road and hid the truck.

“*Scout around and see if you can spot any guard.*” Joe sent the thought to Stalker as he applied black grease paint to his face.

Stalker slipped silently away as Joe put the large hunting knife into the sheath on his boot. He thought it odd that an animal as large as Stalker could move so silently when he wanted to. Joe walked only a few hundred yards when Stalker emerged from the darkness and nudged him to the left.

“Ok, boy, so they do have guards posted this far out,” he whispered. Joe veered to the left around a large pine tree.

“See if you can find a place where I can watch the whole town and remain hidden,” he sent to Stalker.

Joe continued carefully until he came to the back of some buildings. Finding a large stump where a tree had been cut, he hunkered down beside it to wait. Joe slouched down even farther when he heard growling noises coming from in front of him.

Easing the knife out of his boot, he prepared to strike at whatever was making the noise. Five minutes passed and the sound came no closer to his position. He relaxed a little and edged forward ready to strike at anything that came within his reach.

Reaching the back of a building, Joe paused to try and figure out where the sound came from.

The growling was louder now. It seemed to be coming from the next building to his right. He went along the wall until he came to a space between the two buildings. Looking down the small walkway, he saw light from the street but nothing else.

Slipping to the next building, Joe slid along the wall until he came to a window; it was slightly above his head. He clearly heard the noise now and it sounded like a bunch of animals fighting over food.

The window had bars on it and was high enough that he couldn't see in. Searching around, he found an empty ten-gallon oilcan. Carrying it over to the window, he placed it on the ground under the window.

Climbing on the can Joe looked through the window. There were a lot of people in the garage like structure. Most of them were half-dressed and filthy dirty. From what he could see men were raping women and a few of the women were raping a man. It was not a pretty sight because there was no gentleness involved.

“This must be where they keep the ones they call the crazies,” Joe thought. He had seen them before but until now he hadn't realized how inhuman they were.

A roar of anger sounded from across the room. Joe saw people fighting over a large piece of meat that lay in a trough mounted on the far wall, possibly from a butchered cow.

Most of the people looked gaunt from lack of food. The hair on some of their heads was bloody and it looked like either they or someone else had pulled it out by the roots. The stench coming through the window told Joe that the people crapped and urinated whenever the urge struck them.

Joe watched as a large man grabbed a huge chunk of meat from two women. Blood running from their mouths, the women started screaming and pulling at the meat. The man hit one of the women in the head so hard Joe heard bone crunch as her skull broke. The woman fell to the floor like a rock. The man went to a corner, squatted down and sank his teeth into the piece of meat.

A dozen men gathered around the fallen woman and lifted her from the ground. Two men each grabbed a leg as the rest held on to the trunk of the body. The men on the legs started pulling in opposite directions. Joe heard the sounds of her legs being broken at the hips as they pulled her feet up beside her head. The sound of muscles ripping apart was plainly heard. Joe had a hard time keeping his supper down at what happened next. Half the men grabbed the body under the arms, while the rest grabbed one of the dangling legs. The men lunged in opposite directions from each other. After doing this several times, the men holding one of the legs fell to the floor as the leg popped from the body with a ripping sound. A few of the men fell down and started chewing on the veins and muscles still attached to the body.

Holding his hand over his mouth to keep from throwing up, Joe staggered over to the stump. Right then and there, Joe made a promise to himself. If possible, he would put these poor creatures out of their misery.

Sitting behind the stump, he saw a man come around the building the crazies were in. The man had a sack over his shoulder. Every so often he took a bundle out of it. He placed the bundle on the

ground beside the foundation of the building.

Joe watched until the man went around the far side of the building. Getting up, Joe went over and reached into one of the bundles. It held four sticks of dynamite. Placing the bundle back where he found it, Joe went to the stump and crouched down. In a little while, the man came back dragging a wire behind him. He stopped at each bundle and attached the wire to it.

Joe thought, *"I wonder what that is all about?"* It was obvious the man was arming each bundle of dynamite. The only thing Joe could think of was that Todd planned on blowing the building up with the people in it. Joe wondered why because he understood these people protected the crazies so they could use them later.

Suddenly Stalker was beside him tugging at his arm and wanting Joe to follow him.

"Ok, Stalker. Lead on."

Stalker led him along the back of several buildings. Once Stalker fell to the ground and crawled for twenty feet.

Dropping to the ground, Joe looked around, and tried to spot the guard he knew was out there. It took him a few minutes to spot the man who leaned against a fence at the rear of the lot. The man blended so well with the fence, he was almost impossible to spot. Joe said a mental prayer of thanks that Stalker was with him; otherwise, he would have blundered into the guard. Joe had no doubt he could have taken the guard out, but doing it might have caused a lot of noise that would have attracted the attention of people.

Going flat on the ground, Joe crawled until he put a fence between him and the guard. Stalker waited there. Putting his hand on the wolf's head, Joe whispered, "Thanks."

He followed Stalker past several more buildings until Stalker veered away from them and climbed a steep bank. Going along the top of the bank for fifty feet, they came to a building that butted against it.

A set of stairs came down from the top of the building to a platform on the bank. Stalker was already half way up the stairs, so Joe followed him.

Joe looked at his watch, three o'clock, only three more hours until daylight. Joe knew he had to find the kitchen Red had told him about and substitute the powder for the drug. It would-n't be long before the cooks started breakfast and he wanted to get them off the drug as soon as possible.

At the top of the stairs Joe looked across the roof to see Stalker staring at something down in the street. Crawling across the roof, he came up beside Stalker and looked down to see what had caught the wolf's interest. On the ground below was a pile of bodies. There were at least thirty men, women, and children in the pile. From the way they were decomposing, Joe could tell they had been dead for three or four days.

"Must be the unlucky defenders of the town," Joe thought.

"I know, Stalker, but the people who did this will be pun-ished. If not by us, then by whatever true and good God there is," he sent to the wolf.

He knew it tore at the savage wolf's heart to see the deaths of young children who had so much to live for.

A door slammed open across from him and a man staggered out into the street. Raising the bottle he held in his hand to his mouth, the man took a long drink. Lowering the bottle, he staggered around to face the door.

"So I'm not good enough to share that pussy with you, am I? Well there is plenty more where that came from. See if I share with any of you mother fuckers," he shouted in a drunken voice. The man staggered down the street and entered another building.

Down the street Joe watched a man lead a woman into a store that was all lit up. Before long the man came out crossed the street and entered another store.

"Real loose set up you have here, Todd," Joe thought. That made it all the more dangerous, because,

instead of having strict discipline, which Joe understood, this looseness increased the chances of the unexpected happening.

The man who had taken the woman across the street came out of the store carrying two trays of food. He took them into the well-lit building.

"That has to be Todd's headquarters and the store the man came out of must be the kitchen," Joe thought.

"Keep an eye on my back, Stalker," Joe sent to the wolf. He made his way to the stairs and started climbing down. Going back along the buildings, he came to the back of the building he thought held the kitchen. Searching the wall, he found a door.

He was about to try the door when two men with rifles came around the building twenty feet from him. Squeezing flat against the wall, Joe watched them light cigarettes.

"If I find another drunk tonight, I think I'll shoot him. I don't give a damn what Mickey says," one of the men grumbled.

"I know what you mean. Don't you think there is a lot more drinking going on than there used to be?" asked the other man.

"I hear Todd lets them drink to keep them from killing each other. Shelby told me Todd was heavy into the bottle himself."

"What was Mickey talking about when he said that another bunch had this guy Ben bottled up in a town northwest of here?" the first man asked.

"The way I heard it this Ben is coming to help the woman we are after get to Colorado," the second man answered.

"Why does Todd want this guy?"

"The man he calls Master wants this Ben real bad. Why, I don't know," answered the man.

"What was that?" one of the men said raising his rifle. The other man dropped his cigarette and leaned forward listening.

Joe heard what sounded like someone moving in the woods.

"Shit, it's probably one of the drunks lost in the woods," said the man.

"Well we had better check it out," said the other man stepping away from the building.

Joe waited until they were in the woods, then tried the doorknob. Finding the door locked, Joe drew out his knife and wedged it between the lock and doorjamb. There was a loud crack as the lock broke.

"What was that noise back at the building?" Joe heard one of the men in the woods ask.

"Sounded like something breaking," was the answer.

"Go back and check it out while I find out what's wandering around out here."

"Ok. I hope it's not someone trying to break into the cook shack," said one of the men.

Joe heard the man stumble through the brush toward him.

Pushing open the door, Joe slid inside and grabbed hold of the doorknob while putting all his weight against the door.

Before long, he heard the man outside the door.

Using both hands, Joe held the doorknob with all his strength. He felt the man grab the outside knob and try to turn it. Next, the man shoved on the door. "Seems to be locked," he heard the man mumble then walk away.

Releasing the door, Joe turned around and took a penlight out of his jacket pocket. Shining the light around, Joe saw this was the stockroom of the kitchen. Now, if he could find where they kept the drug, he could change it and get out of there.

Hearing voices at the door leading to the kitchen, Joe shut off the light.

"Shit, John, I'm busy. No one has been into the stockroom but me and Ken," Joe heard a man say.

"Just get the key and unlock the door. I need to see for myself that the drug is ok, then I will get

out of your way, Bert.”

“Ok, ok,” said the man as he walked away from the door.

Joe heard him come back and insert a key in the door. Ducking behind a large barrel of cleaning fluid, Joe made himself as small as possible. Peering around the barrel, Joe heard the man say, “Look for yourself, then get the hell out of here.”

The man pointed at two ten-gallon glass containers that contained a red powder.

“Don’t get testy, Bert. You know what happened to the last two guards who let someone steal some of this stuff.”

“I don’t care. All I know is that if breakfast isn’t done, it will be my ass in the fire,” Bert said.

“I’ll get out of your way now,” said John.

“Are you sure you don’t want to check the back door too?” sneered Bert.

Joe held his breath as John paused to think about it. Finally, John said, “No, I checked it while I was around back.” Both men left. They turned out the lights and closed the door behind them. Although it was cool in the room, sweat poured off Joe. Leaning back against the wall, Joe muttered, “Close, too close.” Standing up, he turned on the penlight and made his way to the front of the room. Searching the shelves, he found some plastic garbage bags. Taking two of them, he went to the two drug containers. Unscrewing the lids, he put a garbage bag over the top of the first one. Turning the container upside down, Joe poured the contents into the garbage bag. After emptying the other container, he put the fake drug into them. Not having enough powder, he put back some of the real drug and mixed it up. Screwing the lids back on the containers, Joe made sure there wasn’t any telltale traces of powder on the bench or floor.

Going to the backdoor, Joe opened a closet off to the side. An old coat and beaten hat hung there. He took the coat and hat and put them on. Pulling a whiskey bottle off the shelf, he tucked it under his arm and went outside. Then, he took a piece of wire and jammed it into the keyhole. Picking up a few sticks that were lying on the ground, he jammed them between the door and doorjamb. It wouldn’t hold against someone really pushing on it, but by that time, he would be long gone if it was discovered.

At the corner of the building Joe took the cap off the bottle of whiskey and poured three quarters of it out. Next, he sloshed some of it on the coat. Taking a drink, he swished it around in his mouth and spat it out. His breath would smell like he was drinking the whiskey. He walked down the alley between the buildings until he came to the street. The street was deserted. Joe staggered across it to the sidewalk in front of a store he wanted to investigate.

Sitting against the wall next to the door, he listened but couldn’t hear any sounds from inside. Making sure no one was watching, he reached out and turned the doorknob. Finding the door locked, Joe used his knife to trip the lock. This time he didn’t break the lock. Slipping through the door, he closed and locked it. Shielding the penlight with his hand, Joe looked around. He saw rows of women’s clothing hanging on racks. Weaving his way around the clothes, he came to a door at the back of the room. Putting his ear against the door, he listened but couldn’t hear anything. He opened the door and saw a stairwell leading to the next floor. Staying as close to the wall as possible to avoid having the stairs creak, he climbed them. He pulled the door open at the top and listened for any sound that would let him know the room was occupied. Convinced the room was empty, Joe entered it. Quickly shining the light around, Joe saw it was a storeroom of some kind.

Looking closely, Joe saw stenciled on the side of a box. “Property of US Army.” Below that was stenciled “Plastic Explo-sives”. There were over twenty boxes of the explosives. On the other side of the room sat more boxes. Going to them, Joe saw they contained hand grenades.

“Looks like you are planning on doing some big things, Todd,” Joe thought. He lifted the lid on one of the boxes and took out two of the grenades and put them in his coat pockets. Using his knife, he pried the top off one of the boxes of plastic explo-sives. Taking half a dozen bars of it, Joe put the lid back

on the box. The boxes were stacked four high. He went to the ones nearest the corner and removed the first three boxes. Pulling the bottom box out six inches from the wall, Joe carefully stuffed three blocks of plastic between it and the wall. Next, he smashed one of the grenades into the plastic. Pushing hard on the box, he squeezed the explosives and grenade between the wall and box. Reaching behind the box, he pulled the grenade around until the pin pointed along the wall.

Searching the room, Joe found some stiff wire that he carried back to the box. Laying the penlight on the floor so it shone its light behind the box, Joe reached down and twisted the wire around the pin of the grenade. Careful-ly reaching down, he pulled on the pin until it was almost out. Holding the pin, he laid the wire against the next row of boxes and released it so there was just a little slack. He removed his hand from the pin. It wiggled a little then stayed in.

Wiping sweat from his face, Joe rested for a moment.

Picking up the open box of plastic, he gently placed it on top of the first box and placed two more boxes on top of it. Joe kinked the end of the wire and wedged it into the bottom of the top box. Anyone lifting the top box would pull the pin out of the grenade and be in for the blast of his life. Joe used the remaining grenade and plastic in the same manner on the boxes of grenades. In a corner he found some rags and placed them behind the boxes to cover what he had done.

Stopping at the door, Joe shone the light around to make sure nothing looked out of place. Satisfied, he closed the door and went downstairs. He paused at the door to make sure it was clear. Unlocking the door, Joe stepped out onto the sidewalk and pulled the door closed behind him.

"Let's get out of here, Stalker, and get back to Bill and Tony as quickly as we can," he sent to the wolf.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“What do you mean you can’t find Ray?” Todd shouted at the man standing in front of him trembling.

“We searched everywhere and couldn’t find him,” the man said in a low voice.

Todd looked out the window at the dark shadows, which seemed to be a foreboding omen of worse things to come. Turning to the man, Todd said, “Go out and get me a full count of everyone who is missing. I want names and answers when you come back. Until we find out for sure that Ray is gone, you’re in command. If anyone objects, send them to me.”

Relieved, the man backed out of the room closing the door softly behind him. “Damn it to hell,” Todd said as he bent over the map spread out on the table. “I know you are there Joe, but I don’t know exactly where you are?” he said as he put his finger on the circle drawn on the map.

Going to a cabinet, he took out a bottle of scotch and removed the cap. Pouring himself a glass full, he recapped the bottle and placed it back in the cabinet. Tipping the glass to his mouth, he took a large drink and shuddered. He felt the fiery liquid burn down his throat to his belly. Todd knew his drinking was getting out of hand but he couldn’t seem to stop himself. Part of the problem between Ray and him started after he began drinking. When he was into the bottle, Ray objected to everything that he wanted to do. This caused a lot of arguments. Ray would storm out of the room mad, but he always came back when Todd sobered up. Taking another drink, Todd wondered if Ray was really gone. If so, he would have to rely on people he didn’t know.

Why did this have to happen when Joe and his group were almost in his hands? Swallowing more of the whiskey, Todd felt the familiar mellow mood starting to build within him.

“Hell, who needs him anyway,” he said. Taking the scotch out of the cabinet, he poured the glass full of the amber liquid. As he put the bottle back, a knock sounded on the door.

“Come in,” he said.

The little man who went to find out who was missing entered the room.

“Well what have you found out?” Todd asked.

“I hate to tell you this, Todd, but Ray and twenty men are missing,” answered the man.

“How did they get out of here without anyone noticing them?”

“I don’t know. I think a lot of people saw them leave but are afraid to say anything,” the man answered.

“I know there is something else, so tell me the rest of it?”

“It appears they took a lot of food stuff from the storeroom and half a dozen trucks when they left,” the man said.

Todd paced up and down the room as he drank from the glass. He turned to the man and asked, “What is your name?”

“Mickey,” answered the man.

“Well, Mickey. As of now, you are in charge and you report only to me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Mickey answered standing a little straighter.

“Do you know at least six men who will be loyal to you and me?” Todd asked.

“Yes, sir. I know just the men we need,” Mickey answered.

"Do you drink, Mickey?" Todd asked.

"Yes, sir," he answered.

"Good," Todd said. He opened the cabinet and took out the bottle of scotch. Retrieving a glass from the table, Todd filled it half full, then filled his own glass. Handing the glass to Mickey, he said, "To a great partnership." He raised the glass to his mouth. Todd drained half the contents in one swallow.

Watching Todd, Mickey sipped his liquor.

Setting his glass on the table, Todd said, "Now, down to business. First, I want you to send out three patrols to look for a group of people. Have a man you can trust lead each patrol.

"Second, I want you to pick out ten of the crazies and separate them from the others. Next, make sure the dynamite planted around the building holding the rest of the crazies is ready to go. When you finish that, let me know. Starting with breakfast, I want you to double the dosage of tranquilizing drug in everyone's meal. Put some heavily armed people at the motor pool. Tell them no one is to get a vehicle without written permission. Make sure they understand that. If anyone tries to take a vehicle, they are to be shot on the spot. Do you understand these orders, Mickey?"

"Yes, sir. I'll make sure that the men understand."

"If anyone doesn't like their orders, shoot them. That way, we will find out who we can trust. If we don't have their loyalty, we can make them so afraid of us they'll be no threat."

"Do you think that is a wise way of handling them, sir?"

"Shit, Mickey. Ninety-five per cent of them are zombies. They want someone to order them around. Without us, they would end up killing each other. That's why it is important to start doubling the dosage in their meals to keep them nice and mellow."

"You do realize, sir, that me and the men I choose are going to have to take the drug also?" Mickey said.

"Yes, I do but take just enough to keep yourself calm. I want your minds to be sharp, not dulled by the drug. Do you understand?" Todd asked him.

"Yes, sir. We'll start out with a half a dose, and adjust it for each individual from there," Mickey answered.

"Fine, now go and get things rolling, then report back."

"Yes, sir," Mickey said. He lifted his hand half way to his head as though he were going to salute. Dropping his hand to his side, he left the room.

"Damn you, Ray," Todd yelled as he slammed his fist down on the table. He knocked over his glass of scotch. Todd knew he would have to keep a close watch on Mickey and his people for a while to make sure they were doing their jobs. Going to the couch in the corner, he lay down and sipped the scotch. "*If I only knew where Joe was, I could take care of him and get the shit out of this backwater place,*" he thought.

"Jimmy?" he yelled.

A short man walked through the door. "You wanted me, Boss?"

"Yes Jimmy, go get me something to eat and bring back a girl with the food."

"Ok boss, any girl in particular you want?"

"No, just bring me one that's cute. Also bring enough food for her too. They respond better when their bellies are full."

"Right, Boss," Jimmy said as he went out the door.

Maybe a girl would relieve the tension he felt. "*It sure wouldn't hurt,*" he thought. He would be glad to get rid of most of the fucked up people around him but for now he needed them to catch Joe. Lying there, Todd couldn't get Joe off his mind. It was like a nagging toothache. He knew Joe was near. He could feel it in his bones. He also felt that things were starting to go bad and he didn't know why.

Todd cursed Ray again. Just when he thought they had Joe, Ray up and leaves. Perhaps they could get Joe anyway if he could hold these people together for a while longer. He couldn't figure out why his people turned on each other if they weren't administered the tranquilizing drug. The dosage needed to calm them increased every other day. The search parties he sent out were having to go farther and farther to find the drug. The drug stores having the drug were small and didn't have a large quantity on hand. He needed to get to a large city, preferably a city where the drug was in great demand. The way it stood now he doubted if there was enough of the drug left to last out the week. *"I'll have to make plans to get out of here if we run out of the drug. I don't want to be around when the people turn mean,"* he thought.

Reaching for the phone he said, "Master, are you there."

Not expecting a reply. Todd was surprised when a voice said. *"I am here Todd. What do you want?"* Feeling relieved, Todd told his master what had happened during the past twenty-four hours.

"Calm yourself, Todd. Everything will be all right," the voice on the line said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Watch off to your right, Jake. Something is going on over there,” Ben yelled across the room.

Jake raised his hand in acknowledgment and stared intently out the window.

Ben took the canteen Jane offered him, saying, “Thanks.”

“Are we going to get out of here, Ben?” she asked.

“If we hold out until dark we may be able to,” Ben answered.

“I knew it was too good to last.”

“Yeah,” Ben said. He thought about how it had all happened. The last four hundred miles had gone by without a hitch. They thought the worst of it was over. The trouble started after they pulled into this little burg to get fuel and replenish their supplies. The town appeared deserted when they pulled into it but that didn’t last long. The people waited until they were far enough into town then blocked both entrances to the street.

Ben tried to back up, but he was too late. Two big trucks had angled their way across the street blocking it. People had appeared on the rooftops and started shooting at them. Ben jammed the jeep in gear and floored it. He heard Jake yell, “I’m hit.” Knowing they had to get off the street, he aimed the Jeep at the picture window in one of the storefronts.

“Get down and protect your eyes,” he had yelled just before the Jeep hit the window. Glass sprayed all over them as the picture window burst into a million pieces. Ben slammed on the brakes causing the Jeep to skid sideways and slam into a counter.

Jumping out of the Jeep, Ben shook the glass off him and fired a burst through the broken window. He saw people jumping for cover.

“That should hold them for a little while,” he said. He turned to see Jane looking at Jake’s arm.

“How bad is it?” Ben asked her.

“Not bad. The bullet went through the fleshy part of the arm,” she answered. Jane pulled a bandage from her bag and applied it to Jake’s arm.

“I’m ok. Help me get the fifty off the Jeep. We need all the fire power we can get,” Jake said.

Glancing out the window, Ben saw several men advancing toward them. “No time for that, Jake,” he said as he jumped into the back of the Jeep. Ben swiveled the fifty around to face the opening and fired a long burst at the men. He watched three of them fall as the rest retreated to cover.

Jane fired at the rooftops across the street, which caused the people there to keep their heads down.

“Keep them busy, Jane, while we get the fifty off,” Ben yelled to her. He flipped the lever holding the machine gun to the mount in the Jeep and handed the gun to Jake and said, “Watch the barrel; it’s hot.” Getting down, Ben fitted the small tripod to the front of the gun and had Jake place it on the counter. Placing a box of ammo beside the gun, he took stock of their situation. Except for the hole where the picture window had been, the store seemed easy to defend. The only problem was they would have to leave the same way they had entered.

That had all happened yesterday. Now, they were receiving sporadic fire from the rooftops, which didn’t hurt anything. He knew this would change when, whoever was in charge figured out the most damage could be done from street level. He had to find some way of protecting the Jeep from

their fire. "Jake, come over here and help me move the counter out," Ben said. He moved the Jeep away from the counter. Grunting, they moved the heavy counter six feet out from the shelves in back of it. Starting the Jeep, Ben edged it around the counter. Jumping across the counter, he looked back. Everything except part of the windshield was protected. Satisfied this was the best they could do, he looked around the store. It looked to be a combination grocery and hardware store. He noticed a door at the back of the room. Going to it, he motioned for Jake to cover him. Staying out of the line of fire, Ben reached out and threw the door open.

Jake said, "Nothing but a storeroom, Ben."

"I'll check it out. You keep watch with Jane in case they try anything," Ben told him. Slipping through the door, Ben placed his back against the wall and looked around. Five rows of shelves ran from one end of the room to the other. It looked like a regular Rube Goldberg collection of things. On the shelves sat mechanical parts, paint, clothes, groceries and a little of everything else Ben could imagine. He noticed a steel door at the back of the room. Going between the shelves, he spotted a rack of automatic rifles and the ammo for them on the wall next to the door.

"Jane, if everything is calm out there would you come back here for a minute?" Ben yelled.

"Be right there," she answered.

Coming through the door Jane asked, "What is it Ben?"

"See what you make of these," Ben said pointing at the weapons on the wall.

"Jesus, Ben. These are the new laser fire automatics the Army just came out with," she answered in an awed voice.

"I don't understand, what do they do? Most of all, can they be of any help to us?" he asked.

"Look around. There should be some night goggles that can be used with these rifles," she told him.

Searching the shelves, Ben opened a box with something like a gas mask in it. "Is this what we're looking for?" he asked.

Jane took the mask out of the box and put it on saying, "Kill the lights, Ben."

Ben went to the light switch and turned it off.

"Close the door," Ben heard her muffled voice say.

Closing the door, it was pitch black in the room. Ben couldn't see his hand in front of him. He waited for a long time then he said, "Jane, where are you? Is something wrong?"

He almost jumped out of his skin when she said, "Right here, Ben and no, nothing's wrong; in fact, everything is great."

Flipping the light switch on, he saw her standing there with the mask over her head. Taking the mask off, she said, "Ben, this mask uses low powered laser beams to create an image of what you are looking at, even if you can't see it in the dark. See this tiny box on the back of the mask. It's a micro computer that puts together an image of what you're looking at."

"What do the weapons have to do with the mask?"

"The rifle has an aligned laser sight at the tip of the barrel. Unlike the old red laser sights that are visible to the human eye, this one uses a color spectrum that can't be seen. With the mask on, it appears as a yellow dot when it is turned on. With this you don't even have to bring the rifle to your shoulder. Just place the dot on what you want to shoot and pull the trigger," she explained. Walking back to the rifles, Jane pointed to a shelf below them and said, "See those bulky things below the rifles; those are silencers that screw on to the barrel. I read they are so good they make no more noise than a mosquito buzzing in your ear."

"These will come in handy when it gets dark in another two hours," Ben said as he looked at his watch. "Send Jake back here and we'll carry these up front. Then you can show us how they work," he told her.

Jane left and Jake came through the door asking, "What is Jane so excited about? This is the first

time I've seen her without a cigar stuck in her mouth."

Ben explained about the rifles then said, "I want to see what's behind this door before we close this room off. Get in a position to cover me when I open it." Ben waited until Jake gave him the thumbs up sign indicating he was ready; then, he opened the door four inches. Looking through the crack, he saw an alley running in back of the building. Easing the door open a little more, Ben stuck his head through and saw a door to the building across from him. Peering around the side of the door, he saw the alley was empty. He started to tell Jake it was all right when the door across the alley burst open spilling out three men. Catching sight of Ben and the partially open door, the men started firing. Slamming the door closed and locking it, Ben heard Jake groan. Ben felt the bullets hitting the door, but they weren't penetrating it. He shoved the steel bar through the brackets. Now they would have to use a battering ram to break down the door.

Looking up the aisle, Ben saw Jake lying on the floor covered with blood. Rushing to his side, Ben murmured, "Damn it, Jake. Why did you have to expose yourself?"

Jake groaned and tried to sit up asking, "What happened?"

"Easy, buddy. You've been shot."

"Funny, I don't feel any pain."

Ben wondered how Jake still lived. There had to be half a dozen bullets in him from the amount of blood covering him.

"What is this shit?" Jake asked, rubbing his hand in the blood on his chest.

Taking a closer look, Ben almost fainted with relief. Looking up he saw three gallon buckets of red paint. The bullets coming through the door had punctured them. Ben fell to the floor laughing. He heard Jake ask, "What the hell is so funny?"

"Buddy, that is red paint all over you. For a second there, you scared the shit out of me. I thought you were dead."

"I may not be dead but my head sure as hell hurts. I must have hit it on a shelf when I fell. What a mess," Jake said wiping at the paint but only smearing it more.

"Here let me help you up," Ben said extending his hand.

Jake took Ben's hand and pulled himself to his feet saying, "Thanks, Ben."

"Here's some stuff that will take the paint off but make sure you wash it off your skin as soon as possible," Ben told Jake as he handed him a can of turpentine.

Taking the top off the can, Jake stuck it under his nose. "Jesus, what is this stuff?" he asked.

"Painters use it to thin paint. It shouldn't hurt you. Just wash your skin good after the paint is off," Ben answered.

"There are some clothes on the shelf next to the wall. You can find something that fits you. After you get cleaned up, come out and we'll learn how to use the new ri-fles."

In the next room Jane told him everything was quiet. "Nothing much happening; a shot is fired every now and then to let us know they're still there. Other than that, it's pretty quiet," she answered.

Looking out the window, Ben couldn't see anyone. "They are keeping well hidden. Seems to me we should be taking a lot more fire than this. They are up to something so keep a sharp eye out for something unusual." Ben ducked as a bullet thudded high up on the wall across from him. Looking at the wall, he noticed some-thing strange. "Jane, does anything strike you as odd about the bullet holes on the back wall?" he asked.

"Nothing, just that there are a lot of them," she answered.

"Notice how none of them are lower than six feet."

"Now that you bring it to my attention it does seem strange. It's as though they are intentionally firing high to keep from hitting us," Jane said.

"That's exactly what I think they're doing which means they want us alive. That's the only

explanation I can think of.”

“Why? We don’t have anything they need?” Jane said.

“I don’t know. Do you remember the man on the radio saying, Todd’s Master wanted Ramirez to take us alive?” Ben asked.

“Yes, but we are a long way from them.”

Ben heard her laugh and turned to see what she was laughing at. Jake stood in the rear door. He had on a pair of bib overalls and a straw hat.

“Don’t laugh. This was all I could find that fit me. I guess it makes me look like a down home boy.”

“Come on over here, Toby, and let’s find out how these rifles work,” Ben said with a laugh.

“Don’t give me any of that Toby shit, Massa, don’t you know we been freed,” Jake said sitting down beside Ben.

“Ok, Jane. Show us how to work these things?”

“Put on the masks,” she told them. When the masks were on, she told them to flip up the switch near the left temple. Ben flipped the switch and his vision became distorted. He couldn’t see anything clearly. “I can’t see,” he said.

“Don’t worry. That’s just because there is too much light. When it gets dark, you’ll be surprised how clearly you can see. I wanted to show you how to turn it on. Here,” she said handing them a rifle and one of the silencers. “Screw the silenc-er on to the end of the barrel,” she told them as she handed them two odd looking magazines. Taking one of the cartridges out, she held it up for them to look at.

“What are we supposed to take down with those? They’re not much bigger than a twenty-two bullet.” Jake said.

“Watch,” Jane said. She aimed her rifle at the back of a chair across the room and pulled the trigger. They barely heard a poof. A hole the size of a fist appeared in the seat.

Taking the bullet, Jake looked at it. “What do they put in these things?” he asked.

“You are looking at the latest thing in advanced bullet technology. Inside each bullet is a chemical explosive similar to nitroglycerin. Don’t worry; they’re safe,” she said at the look of concern on their faces. “They only explode on impact which sets off the chemical causing a micro explosion. The explosion shat-ters the head of the bullet into fragments. Each magazine holds fifty rounds. The rifle can be fired on automatic, but with the silencer on, it reverts to a semi-automatic,” Jane told them. Holding up the rifle, she pointed to a recessed button in front of the trigger housing. “Pushing this button activates the laser beam at the end of the barrel. They say it’s calibrated to send the bullet to within one hundredth of an inch of where it is aimed. That’s all there is to it,” she said.

“Impressive. Why haven’t we heard of them?” Ben asked.

“These are the prototypes they just manufactured. They weren’t supposed to get into production until next year. It would be two years before the armed services got them. I wonder what they’re doing in the backroom of a country store?” Jane said.

“We probably will never know the answer to that. I’m glad we are the ones who found them. Can you imagine the damage they could cause if these crazy people had them?” Jake said.

“We don’t want that. How many rifles are there?” Ben asked.

“Six and enough ammo to last for a long time,” Jane said.

“Come on, Jake, while everything is quiet, let’s put the extra ammo and the other rifles in the Jeep.”

While Ben and Jake stored the rifles and ammo, Jane watched as a group of men were talking down the street. One of the men argued with the rest. Jane saw him knock one of the men to the ground. Standing over the man, he shook his fist at him and glared at the other men. For a moment, Jane thought the men would attack him, but they backed off and he took control again.

Jane watched him take a white handkerchief out of his pocket and tie it to the barrel of his rifle.

Telling the men something, he turned and started walking toward the store they were in.

“Ben, you better come up here,” Jane yelled.

Ben was beside her in a moment and she pointed to the man with the white flag walking toward them. “Wonder what he wants?” Ben asked, raising his new rifle.

Jane grabbed the barrel of his rifle. “Use the other rifle; we don’t want them to know we have these new weapons. Why let them know before we can use them to our advantage.”

“Good thinking,” Ben said. He leaned the rifle against the wall and picked up the other one. He let the man come forward until he was twenty feet from the store. “Far enough, friend,” Ben yelled.

The man holding the rifle with the white flag out in front of him stopped. “Don’t shoot. I just want to talk,” he yelled.

“Speak your piece. Nobody is stopping you,” Ben told him.

“I want to let you know I think there has been a misunderstanding. I hope we can straighten it out before any more of my men get killed,” he yelled.

Out of the side of his mouth, Ben told Jane to have Jake keep out of sight. “Now show yourself, Jane, so the man can get a look at you,” he told her.

“I hope we can, friend. One of my friends is dead too,” Ben told the man as Jane edged up beside him and let the man see her briefly before ducking behind the door.

“Hell, man, think about it. If we were serious, do you think just you and a woman could stop us?” the man asked.

“We might not stop you, but we would take a hell of a toll before we were finished,” Ben told the man.

“Let’s stop talking like that and get down to brass tacks. All we want is for you to stay put until our boss gets here. You can stay where you are and we won’t try to come near you. Understand though, I will have men posted at the end of the street; just, in case, you try anything. How about it? Do we have a deal?” asked the man.

Ben appeared to think about it for a while then asked, “How long do we have to wait for this boss of yours? We don’t have all the time in the world to stick around here.”

“He will be here tomorrow morning. Tomorrow night at the latest,” answered the man.

“Ok, deal. Just remember we are going to be watching you, so don’t you try anything,” Ben said.

“You got it,” said the man. He turned around and walked to where his men waited for him.

“What do you make of that?” Ben asked.

“I wouldn’t trust him any farther than I could throw this town,” Jane answered.

“Me, either,” Jake said from behind the counter.

“Something is screwy about this whole situation. A few hours ago they did their best to kill us, now they want us to believe it was all a mistake. I don’t buy it,” Ben said.

“If three of my men were down, I sure as hell wouldn’t call it a mistake,” Jake said.

“Look at it this way, we know that up until two hours ago they were trying to kill us. Two hours or less ago, all the shots fired our way were way over our head. That tells me he did get in touch with someone who told him not to kill us. Why, I don’t know?” Jane said.

“One thing is sure; if they give us half a chance, we are going to make a break for it. Do both of you agree?” Ben said.

Both of them nodded yes.

“Ok, get what rest you can. I’ll wake you if anything happens,” Ben told them. He settled down by the window to watch the street. After listening to Jake’s snoring for a while, Ben’s mind wandered back to the plane crash. He had certainly been dead; even he knew that. What put him back together and why did it have a female voice? Ben sensed that it was still within his body. He wondered if he would die if it left, which was a frightening thought. Was he alive just to accomplish whatever this thing wanted him to do and afterward would it let him live? He kept running these thoughts around

and around in his mind. It would be especially hard on Leila if he died again. Ben remembered her sobs as she held his head in her lap thinking him dead. Her tears striking his cheek as he came to were a bittersweet memory. He hoped she wouldn't have to experience that agony again anytime soon.

Inside his mind he heard the soft female voice say, *"Don't trouble yourself, Ben. She won't."*

Ben sat up with a start. *"So you are still there?"*

"Yes, Ben. I'll be with you until you die a natural death. I can repair any damage your body receives. The one thing I can't do is stop the aging process. That is not in the natural order of things," the voice said.

"Are you telling me that I can't be killed?"

"That is partially right. These people cannot kill you by any violent means. These things I will repair and make you as good as new. This does not mean that you cannot die because of a common accident, such as falling off a cliff or any number of things which take human lives."

"Wait a minute, I thought you said you would repair me?"

"Ben, you have to realize, I cannot go against the natural order of nature. The only latitude I am given is to repair you when your body is damaged as a result of trying to stop this evil that is upon the land. In such a case, I am permitted to repair your body," the voice told him.

"Do you mean if a rock fell off a cliff and crushed my head, you would let me die?" he asked.

"Regrettably yes, in a situation like that."

"What are you and are you a part of me?" Ben asked.

"Yes and no. You see, I am a microscopic part of everything that ever was and ever will be. I know that isn't an explanation but it will have to do. As to being a part of you, yes I am in every molecule of your body and then again I am not. The best way I can explain it is for you to think about air. You can't see it but it is there. That is a simple way of putting it. It is a lot more complicated than that but I think you get the idea."

"Can you tell me how to get out of the situation we are in?"

"No, I cannot offer advice of any kind. Everything you do has to be by your own choice and free will."

"Thank you. At least, I don't feel like someone is making all the decisions for me and leading me around by the nose."

"I must go now the effort it takes to make myself understood is very tiring and I can't do it very often. One thing, Ben, I think it would be better for you to keep this to yourself. I do not think Jane or Jake would understand."

"I will. I still get funny looks from them every now and then. I can tell they are thinking about how I came back from the dead." Ben felt the presence in his mind receding. It was getting dark outside so he slipped the mask over his head and stared out the window. His vision was only slightly blurred now but looking into the shadows, the image came in crisp and clear. Up the street he saw three men partly hidden behind cars parked off to the side. He let Jane and Jake sleep for an hour and a half before waking them.

"Why didn't you wake me earlier so you could get a little rest?" Jake said.

"I was too keyed up to sleep, so I let you get your rest. If we get out of here who knows when we'll get another chance to rest," Ben told him.

"Do you have a plan on how we get out of here?" Jane asked.

"First, let's see if we can push the Jeep from behind the counter and line it up with the window." After doing this, Ben and Jake put the fifty-caliber machine gun back on the Jeep.

"Ok, put on your masks, and look up the street at those cars parked by the five and ten. There are three men behind them; let's see if we can take them out without causing a commotion."

"Jake, you take the one on the right. Jane, you take the one on the left. Let me know when you're ready." Ben flipped the switch on the rifle and saw a yellow dot dancing around on the car. Steadying the rifle, Ben brought the dot to bear on the man in the center.

"Ok," Jake said.

"Me to," Jane said.

"Now," Ben said. There were three pneumatic puffs from the rifles and Ben saw the three men

drop without a sound.

“Are you guys ok?” they heard someone ask from the top of the building where the cars were.

“I see him. There are two more on the roof across the street. Take them out,” Jane said.

“Ready?” Ben asked. Hearing their yeahs, he said, now, and there were three more poofs from the rifles. One of the men fell off the roof into the street with a thud. “Into the Jeep,” Ben told them. He got behind the wheel and Jake stood behind the fifty pulling the bolt back to arm it. Jane climbed in the passenger side and started removing the silencer on the rifle.

“What are you waiting for?” Jake asked.

“Wait until they find the bodies. That will cause more confusion since they didn’t hear any shots. Remember, we can see. They will be partly blind in the dark,” Ben answered. He watched a group of men gather around the bodies. They looked in every direction trying to see where the bullets had come from. An argument broke out between the men standing on the street.

“Here we go,” Ben said. Starting the Jeep, he let out the clutch burning rubber across the floor. Hitting second gear, he went through the hole in the wall, yelling, “Let them have it.”

Jake let loose with the fifty causing the Jeep to jerk and vibrate as they bore down on the men. The men didn’t have a chance as the heavy bullets tore them limb from limb. A dozen of them lay dead or severely wounded by the time the Jeep roared by them. They didn’t take any return fire until they were almost out of town and then it was only half hearted.

Jake turned the fifty and fired a long burst causing three cars to burst into flames as they turned onto the open road.

“Keep the masks on; I don’t want to use the headlights. Try and spot a side road we can turn on to. We need to know how many of them are after us.” Ben yelled.

“Up ahead is a dirt road off to the right,” Jane told him.

Ben saw the road and slowed the Jeep. Dropping into first gear he crept onto the dirt road.

“Why are we going so slow?” Jake asked.

“To keep down the dust. It is very easy to see a little dust in a cars headlights at night,” Ben answered.

“Whatever you do, you better make it fast. I see headlights around the bend and they are coming on fast,” Jake said.

Steering into a small stand of trees, Ben shut the engine off. “It still feels wrong,” Ben said in a puzzled voice.

“What feels wrong?” Jane and Jake asked together.

“Our escape. There wasn’t that much resistance. We know they have ten times the men we saw back there. Where are the other men and why were there so few men on guard?” Ben asked.

“Would you look at that,” Jake pointed back down the road.

Jane and Ben turned to see over a dozen cars and trucks barrel around the bend. When they looked at the headlights, their vision became blurred and distorted. “Don’t look at the lights,” Jane told them. Sure enough, as soon as they looked into the darkness the mask restored their vision. Ben started the engine and backed onto the dirt road. “We are going to follow them for a while. They shouldn’t spot us with our lights off. With these masks we can see as plain as daylight,” Ben said turning the Jeep onto the road.

Ben maintained a distance of about a quarter of a mile in back of the people ahead. They traveled four or five miles when three of the vehicles turned off onto another county road.

“Get out the map, Jane.” Ben slowed and looked at the route sign on the road the men had taken.

“See where County Road 4027 goes in relation to the road we are on.” Ben said.

Jane had the map in her lap tracing the route with her finger as it fluttered in the wind coming over the windshield. “It comes back to this road ten miles farther on,” she told him.

Ben looked at his speedometer and saw they were only going thirty-five miles an hour. “Jake,

does it seem reasonable to you if they really wanted to catch us, they would be traveling this slow?" Ben asked.

"Are you saying they let us escape, Ben?" Jake asked.

"That's exactly what I am saying. First, not as many guards as would be prudent. Then, the high-speed car chase for the first five miles to let us know they were after us. Now, they are just cruising along as if they know we can't get away. What does it all add up to?" he asked of no one in particular.

"Isn't this guy Todd supposed to be after the same people we are supposed to meet?" Jane asked.

"Yeah, but what does that have to do with us?" Ben asked.

"Suppose they don't know where these people are. Also assume they think we know where this woman is. Wouldn't it be logical for them to let us lead them to her," Jane answered.

"I think you are on to something, Jane. They taught us that ninety per cent of the time all we had to do was follow a relative of a wanted man to find out where he was," Jake said.

"It all falls together now. The bullet holes high in the wall and only a few guards. Shit, we could have gotten out of there any time we wanted," Ben said in disgust.

"Wait a minute. I have a feeling things aren't happening the way they thought. Instead of fleeing for our lives, we are in back following them. Don't you see? They think we are in front of them. I'll bet a dollar to a doughnut they have men hidden at every road and crossroad within fifty miles of here," Jane said.

"Smart, really smart, so we are boxed in," Ben said.

"Not necessarily. Remember we can see in the dark and it is an overcast night. It is almost impossible to spot us. Let's try something, Ben."

"What?" Ben asked.

"The next time one or more of the vehicles pull off, come up close behind the others with your head lights on. With any luck at all, they will think we are a part of their group," Jake said.

"Sounds good," Ben slowly narrowed the distance between them and the vehicles ahead.

Jane looked up from her map saying, "There should be another road breaking off to the right in a few more miles. That will give us our chance." She stood up and looked over the windshield for a few moments. "There it is up ahead."

"I don't see anything do you, Jake?"

"Nope. Jane you have a hell of a pair of eyes," Jake said.

"It's not that at all; I forgot to tell you how to use the magnification equipment on these masks. Below the right temple is a small wheel. Turn it clockwise and it will act like a pair of binoculars. Turn it all the way back counter clockwise and you have normal vision," Jane told them.

Both of them tried turning the wheel.

"I'll be damned. This is fantastic," Jake said.

"Ok get ready, Jake. This is going to be tricky. I will have to time it just right so the cars turning off don't see me and the cars ahead think I am with them," Ben said.

Jake shifted his feet as he checked to make sure the fifty was ready, then tapped Ben on the shoulder indicating he was ready. Ben pulled to within fifty yards of the car in the rear and held it there for a while. Seeing the road ahead, Ben started to narrow the distance.

"Easy, Ben. They have to slow down for the turn," Jake said.

Ben eased up a little letting the car increase the distance between them. He heard Jake moving around in the back of the Jeep; then, he heard the faint sound of glass breaking and wondered what was going on. In a moment Jake said into his ear. "Now you can use your brakes if you have to, I've broken out the tail lights."

Ben concentrated on driving. Two of the cars slowed down. As the first car started his turn onto the side road, Ben gave the Jeep a little more gas. They moved to within thirty feet of the other car. As the car turned, Ben came up fast missing the rear end of it by only three feet. At the same time he

reached down and turned the headlights on. Suddenly the world went blank; Ben couldn't see a thing but a bright light before him. He felt someone tugging at his mask, which refused to come off. With a wrench that pulled his head around the mask popped off. He dimly saw the taillights ahead pulling away, so he stepped on the gas until he was right behind them.

Jane was fiddling with the CB and holding on to his mask.

A loud voice came out of the CB speaker. "Who in the hell is that in the rear and what is the problem?"

"He means us, Ben," Jake said.

Ben lifted the microphone and said in a gruff voice. "This is Jimmy. My Jeep started to spit and cough but it seems to be running fine now."

"Your turn off is coming up in a couple of miles. Do you think your Jeep can make it or should the guy in front of you take it?" asked the voice.

Keying the mike, Ben said, "No, Boss, we'll take the turn off. Everything is fine now."

"Ok, remember if you spot them, get me on the radio."

"Will do," Ben said as he placed the mike in its holder.

"Here we are," Jake said. They passed a road sign showing a crossroad to the right. Ben slowed down and made the turn. He sped down the road for a ways, then pulled off to the shoulder and stopped. "We're going to have to find some place that is out of the way to hole up for a while. At least until they take their search in another direction," Ben told them.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I've had all the excitement I can stand for one day," Jane said in a weary voice as she slumped down in the seat.

Jake sat down and leaned against the back of the Jeep as Ben pulled onto the road. The voice on the CB was asking for a report. Ben listened until he figured it was his turn then in a gruff voice said. "This is Jimmy. Nothing to report here, boss."

"Ok, keep a sharp eye out. One of us should be coming up on them soon," said the voice on the CB

"I always heard the best place to hide was among the people who were looking for you," said Jake with a laugh.

Ben saw a dirt road ahead and brought the Jeep to a stop. "Ok, on with the masks again," he reached to take his from Jane as he turned the headlights off. Waiting a few minutes for his eyes to adjust to the mask, Ben turned off onto the dirt road. After going for two miles, he pulled into a grove of trees and parked the Jeep. Jane was asleep in the seat. Ben was reluctant to wake her; however, he knew she would be better off stretched out in a sleeping bag. Laying her sleeping bag out in a grassy spot under a pine tree, Ben went and tapped her on the shoulder.

She woke with a start and Ben had to grab the barrel of the rifle she started to bring around. "Easy, Jane. Everything is ok. I laid out your sleeping bag. Why don't you get a little sleep? Jake and I will stand guard."

"Thanks, Ben," Jane said. Getting out of the Jeep, Jane stretched then walked to the sleeping bag, crawled in it and was fast asleep within a minute. Getting the other two sleeping bags, Ben took them to another tree and spread them out.

"Go ahead, Ben. I'll take the first watch," Jake said. Lifting his rifle, he walked toward the road.

Ben lay down in the sleeping bag; he thought he would have a hard time getting to sleep. No sooner did his head hit the ground than he was softly snoring. Little did he realize that less than three hundred yards on the other side of the woods Bill and Tony were waiting for Joe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Joe entered the camp followed by Stalker who had acted strange since entering the woods on the other side of the camp.

"Everything ok here?" he asked from the shadows behind the two figures sitting on a log.

Bill jumped up yelling. "Shit, did you have to do that? God damn it! I almost had a heart attack. What happened to the nice sane world where people didn't sneak around trying to scare the b-Jesus out of everyone?"

"And a nice night to you too, Bill," Joe said with a smile.

Tony said hello and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, let him get it out of his system. Bill continued to yell at Joe about the way the world was screwed up.

As Bill wound down, Tony could contain her laughter no longer, so she started to giggle.

Bill turned and stared at her as if she had gone mad. He looked over at Joe who tried to keep from laughing but didn't do a very good job of it. Dropping his hands in defeat, Bill sheep-ishly said, "I guess I went a little off the deep end, didn't I?"

"Hey, no problem. It's just your way of relieving tension. At least, you aren't going around hurting people who don't agree with you," Joe told him.

"Thanks, Joe," Bill said holding out his hand.

Joe took the offered hand and shook it.

"By the way, do either of you know a man by the name of Ben Johnson?" Joe asked.

"We had a Johnson working in my crew at the phone company but his first name was John. No, can't say as I've heard of a Ben Johnson. Why do you ask?" Bill said.

"How about you, Tony?" Joe asked.

"No, I don't know anybody by that name," she answered.

"I found out this man Ben is looking for you. Todd had him, but let him escape so he could lead Todd and his gang to us."

"What does this man want with us?" Tony mused.

Turning to Tony, Joe said, "Will you talk to Stalker. He has acted strange every since we entered the woods."

They both watched as Tony sat down on the log and called Stalker to her. She formed the words in her mind then sent them to Stalker. "*What is it? Why are you upset, Stalker?*"

Inside her head she heard, "*There is someone on the other side of the woods. I sensed them miles from here. The closer we get I am feeling joy mixed with fear. These people mean us no harm of this I am sure. I sense a powerful presence among them with the power to do a tremendous amount of destruction. In many ways this presence is like the gentle voice that came to me in my den and sent me to you. It has channeled the power in such a way that nothing can harm the person it is protecting. How can that be?*" Stalker asked.

"Let me talk it over with Bill and Joe, maybe we can come up with an answer," she replied.

She told Bill and Joe what Stalker had told her.

"Ask Stalker how he knows there is a powerful person with these people?" Joe asked.

"Stalker says that this is not a human but is a powerful force without substance. He says it is much like laying in the open at noon on a cloudless day and feeling the sun's rays warming you. Can you see

the sun's rays? No, but you feel them and know they are there. He says this is as close to an explanation as he can give," Tony told them.

"Will this power be used against us?" Bill asked.

"That I can't say. I get no feeling one way or the other, but if it was used against us we wouldn't have a chance."

Bill and Joe sat down on hearing this. Joe poked at the fire stirring up sparks that flew into the air. Raising his head he asked, "Should we try to contact them?"

"They could be a great help to us but we should proceed carefully until we know whether they will be for or against us," Stalker answered.

"Can you lead us to them without them knowing we are there?" Bill asked.

"That is impossible. This presence knows we are here. I believe it knew about Bill and Tony before Joe and I returned," Stalker answered.

"Spooky isn't it," Tony said, to no one in particular.

"It makes the hair stand up on my neck," Bill said.

"Could this be the man, Ben, who is looking for us?"

Standing up, Joe said, "There is only one way to find out, Tony. Get your weapon, Bill, and we'll go check out these people while it's still dark."

"Tony, wake Tammy and both of you hide behind those boulders until we return. We will take Stalker with us." Joe told her.

They waited until Tony and Tammy were comfortable behind the boulders before leaving. A short way into the woods Joe stopped and turned to Bill saying, "I think it would be wise for us to approach their camp from different directions. If there is any trouble, one of us should be able to get away and warn Tony."

"Sounds like a good idea to me. I'll go to the left and you take the right."

"Remember no shooting unless absolutely necessary," Joe warned. Bill nodded his head that he understood and faded into the woods. Silently Joe went through the brush until he saw an opening at the edge of the woods. Creeping forward, he came to within a hundred feet of the camp before settling down behind a fallen tree.

By the faint starlight, Joe saw two bodies in sleeping bags off to the side of a Jeep. Scanning the Jeep carefully, he noticed it had a fifty-caliber machine gun mounted on it. *"Whoever these people are, they are ready for some heavy fighting,"* Joe thought. He crawled under the tree and slithered forward until he was next to one of the sleeping figures. Loud snoring erupted from the figure as it flopped over on its back almost rolling over on Joe. Joe stared at the head of a middle-aged man snoring loud enough to be heard three counties over. Reaching into his boot he pulled out his knife and placed it against the man's throat. Before he could say a word he heard a woman's voice say. "I would be very careful with that knife, Mister." Turning his head in the direction of the voice, Joe saw a heavyset woman holding a cocked .45 pointed at his head. Her hand was as steady as a rock.

The man next to Joe continued to snore unaware he had a knife poised a fraction of an inch above his throat. Joe watched in amazement as the woman removed the wrapper from a cigar with one hand and stuck it in her mouth. The hand holding the .45 didn't waver an inch as she struck a match and applied it to the end of the cigar. Taking a long puff, she exhaled a large volume of smoke.

"Tell you what, Mister I will lower my gun if you will take that knife away from Ben's throat. That way we won't have a messy accident if one of us gets spooked."

"On one condition, I put the knife away but I take my gun out and hold it on my lap," Joe said.

The woman thought about it for a few seconds then nodded her head, ok.

Joe pulled the gun out of his coat and slid the knife back into his boot. "Now what?" he asked.

"This is what they call a stand off in the movies," said the woman in a calm voice.

"Not exactly," said Bill as he pressed his rifle against the woman's head from behind.

Joe had to give it to the woman; she was as cool as a mountain stream. "Before you get antsy, fella, look where my gun is pointed," she told Bill.

Both Bill and Joe could see the .45 held in her two hands pointed directly at Joe.

"Like I said this is a stand off. You might get me but there is no way your buddy will escape my dying bullet," she said matter of factly.

A voice directly behind Bill said, "He will only be a split second behind you, Jane."

Bill stiffened as something hard was shoved into his back.

Sounding disgusted, Joe said, "Are there any more players in this play or can we all put our weapons down and start over."

"Sounds like a good idea," agreed the woman. She un-cocked the revolver and laid it on the ground beside her.

Joe put his gun in his jacket pocket and said to Bill, "Lower your rifle and come over beside me."

Cautiously, Bill made his way to where Joe was, then turned to face the woman and man.

"Do me a favor, wake up sleeping beauty," the woman asked.

Joe reached over and shook the man's shoulder hard.

"What, what," the man said sitting bolt upright and looking around bewildered.

"We have company, Ben," said the woman.

Joe and Bill were startled by the change in the man. In a split second he went from bewilderment to a heightened awareness that neither of them had ever seen anyone achieve.

Slipping off to the side, putting distance between him and Joe, Ben said, "Are you two the good guys or the bad guys?"

Joe felt a shiver run down his spine as he watched the man. He knew for a fact if he said bad guy's they would be dead before the last word left his mouth. Ancient Indian lore told of people like this man. As sure as Joe knew the sun would come up in the morning, he knew this man couldn't be killed. There was an aura of brilliant blue surrounding the man.

"We are the good guys," Joe told the man.

The tension went out of the air like a busted balloon.

After they introduced themselves to each other, Joe helped Ben start a small-concealed fire. Jane put on a pot of coffee and made sandwiches. Sitting across the fire from them, Joe tried to take their measure. The woman looked to be the matronly type but Joe knew she was as hard as steel. The thin black man looked tough and deadly. His eyes were never still and Joe got the impression if he wanted to, the man could see grass grow. He didn't miss anything. The man, Ben, was harder to figure. He gave the appearance of being awkward. When he wanted to, this man could move gracefully and silently. Joe doubted if this man was afraid of anything on earth. Another impressive thing was the way these people moved together. They acted like part of a well-oiled machine bent on achieving something.

Joe motioned for Bill to let him do the talking. "What are you doing out here in the woods so far from town?" Joe asked.

"Hiding from a group of men who are looking for us and we are looking for someone ourselves," Ben answered.

"Who you looking for? Maybe we have seen them." Joe asked.

Ben didn't answer for a few minutes. He seemed to withdraw into himself.

"Give him time," Jake said. "The best Jane and I can figure out is that when he goes into these trances he is communicating with whatever brought him back to life."

"You mean he is dead?" Bill blurted out.

"It's a long story, but no, he is as alive as you or I," Jane told them.

With a shake of his head, Ben smiled across the fire at them. "Tell your wolf to come and join us," Ben said to Joe.

Joe had completely forgotten about Stalker. He directed his thoughts at the wolf telling him to come join them. Joe and Bill were both astonished when Stalker went to Ben and lay down at his feet. They heard Ben say, "I know they don't understand you, but we all have to put our egos aside until this is over."

Jane and Jake were staring at Ben as though he were crazy. It didn't help much when Joe said, "Can everyone talk to this God dammed wolf but me?"

"Whoa," Jake said, "Are you telling us Ben can talk to this ugly brute?"

Stalker's fur bristled up and a low growl came from his throat. "Some friendly advice, Jake. Never mention or tell Stalker he is ugly. He is very sensitive about his looks," Joe told him.

"You've got to be kidding," Jake said in open-mouthed astonishment.

Jane laughed saying, "I thought we had seen some strange things getting here but this takes the cake."

Bill watched as Ben and Stalker gazed at each other. He knew they were carrying on a conversation and wondered about what.

Five minutes later Stalker got up and left the camp.

"Do not worry," Ben said at the look of concern on Joe and Bill's faces. "He is going to get the woman and girl to bring them back here."

"How do you know about them?" Joe asked.

"She is the one we have come to protect on her journey to fulfill a task which must be done. I gather that Jake and Jane have introduced themselves to you while I was talking with Stalker. I surmise they have also told you I am different from other people since the plane accident. I will explain it to you when we all are together at a place I was informed about a few minutes ago," Ben told them.

"Are there any more safe places in the world today?" Bill asked in a subdued voice.

"I am told this place will be safe until we have to continue on our mission," Ben answered.

"How do you know this place will be safe?" Joe asked.

"Do you remember the voice you heard at the start of your journey, Joe?"

Joe nodded his head yes, thinking about the gentle voice, which seemed to have all the wisdom in the world in it.

"The essence of that voice is a part of me and always will be until the day I die. It has been guiding me since the plane crash and it also is guiding this woman but she is fighting it. I have to make her understand its purpose is shrouded in goodness. It is only trying to correct a wrong that could eliminate all life on this planet."

"Why didn't you tell us this before? We knew you were talking with something although you tried to hide it," Jake said.

"She said you wouldn't understand," Ben started to say something else but stopped at the surprised looks on their faces.

"She?" Jane asked.

"It talks to me, not in the conventional sense, but I hear this female voice inside my head answering my questions. We will talk of this later. Now, let's prepare breakfast for the one we are all here to protect. She will be arriving shortly," Ben said.

Joe and Jake went to the edge of the woods to guard the campsite until they were called to eat. Bill helped Jane whip up some batter for pancakes. He fried a pan full of bacon. It surprised Bill how comfortable he felt around the matronly older woman. Like most things that had occurred in the past few hours he didn't question it. For some reason he felt like a load was lifted from his shoulders. He felt happier than he had in days and even caught Jane staring at him when he realized he was whistling a happy ditty. By the time the food was ready Stalker walked out of the woods, followed by Tony and Tammy.

"My that smells delicious," Tony said.

"It sure does," Tammy said trying to wipe the remaining sleep from her eyes.

Jane surveyed the woman in front of her. With her strawberry blond hair and soft complexion to go with a figure right out of Playboy magazine, Tony was an imposing sight. She would cause many women to grit their teeth in envy. If you looked closely, you saw the shadows under her eyes and the way her eyes had a haunted look to them. Jane looked at the child and saw a young girl who was nothing but skin and bones. Looking into the girl's eyes, she saw the torment of things seen that caused her to age way beyond her years. Jane's heart went out to her and she went to where Tammy stood and gathered her in her arms.

"Stalker says thank you," Tony told Jane.

Brushing tears from her eyes, Jane said, "Come on and eat before it gets cold. I will go get Jake and Joe so they can eat."

"Don't bother," Tony said as she told Stalker to go get Joe and Jake. "*Stand guard while we all eat*" she told him.

Stalker drifted into the early morning light as Tammy filled her plate with pancakes. Before long, everyone was enjoying the first good meal they had eaten in many a day.

After the meal as they sat around relaxing for the first time in days, Bill asked, "Is it just me or do all of you feel this was destined to happen?"

"In ways, some small, some large, each and every one of us was changed to bring us to this point in time. Something brought us together for a purpose as yet unknown to us. Each of us has a part to play in whatever it is we have to do. My Guardian tells me we must now go to the valley she told me about. We are to rest and gather our wits. I am told it is not time for us to continue just yet. Many things have been set in motion, in which we are only a small part. We must wait on the outcome of other situations before we can continue. Tomorrow we will go to this safe haven I was told about and wait," Ben told them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Baker lives in a remote area of Southern West Virginia, along the Kentucky/Virginia border, with his wife Connie, two dogs and three cats. He retired from the Phone Company in 1999 and started writing full time. This will be his fifth published novel since retiring. He is an avid reader of general fiction, romance, fantasy, and horror novels.

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